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Thursday 8 May 2025

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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 8 May 2025

[The Presiding Officer opened the meeting at 11:40]

General Question Time

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Good morning. The first item of business is general question time.

Diversity in Businesses

1. Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it is supporting and encouraging diversity in Scotland's businesses, including who leads, owns and works within them. (S6O-04624)

The Minister for Employment and Investment (Tom Arthur): We are committed to advancing diversity across Scotland's economy. Our fair work action plan and anti-racist employment strategy set out support for employers across the economy to address workplace inequalities and enable marginalised groups to enter, thrive in and lead organisations.

We are also implementing the recommendations of the pathways review, which was co-authored by our newly appointed chief entrepreneur, Ana Stewart. The South of Scotland Enterprise regional pathways pre-start pilot and the pathways fund have opened opportunities for entrepreneurship to women and people in other underrepresented and undersupported groups.

Emma Roddick: Last week, I had the pleasure of hosting OutBritain, the United Kingdom's first LGBTQ+ chamber of commerce, in the Parliament to discuss its recent report on the massive contribution that LGBTQ+ business makes to the economy. An issue that came up again and again was the lack of data collection, not only for LGBTQ+ owned, run and employing businesses but in relation to diversity more generally. Given that the evidence points to diversity in business being good for productivity internally and externally, what more can the Scottish Government do to identify and support diverse businesses?

Tom Arthur: Last week, the Minister for Business, Richard Lochhead, attended the launch of the "LGBTQ+ Businesses Count" report, which recognises the value of diversity in Scotland's business community and the contribution that LGBTQ+ business leaders make to our economy. It also highlights the challenges that many

LGBTQ+ people have faced in their business journey.

Mr Lochhead offered to meet OutBritain to discuss its research in more detail. Work is under way to arrange a follow-up meeting with officials to discuss in more detail the issues that Emma Roddick raises.

Transmission Impact Assessment

2. Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government when it last engaged with the United Kingdom Government, transmission operators and the National Energy System Operator, to explore the possibility of reviewing the transmission impact assessment, in light of reports that this limits Scotland's solar energy development. (S6O-04625)

The Acting Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Energy (Gillian Martin): The Scottish Government regularly engages with key energy stakeholders, including Ofgem, the National Energy System Operator and transmission operators, along with our counterparts in the UK Government, to ensure that transmission infrastructure delivers for Scotland. That includes exploration of the transmission impact assessment threshold and consideration of the impact that that has on energy users in Scotland.

Stephanie Callaghan: Solar Energy UK recently published a report that showed that solar and battery projects could contribute more than £5 billion in gross value added to the UK economy by 2035 if the sector continues to grow. For Scotland to secure its fair share of those economic benefits, it must remain attractive to investors. However, the current disparity in TIA thresholds—the threshold is only 200kW in Scotland, compared with the proposed threshold of 5MW in England and Wales—makes it easier and cheaper to connect projects south of the border. Can the cabinet secretary outline the steps that the Scottish Government is taking to ensure that solar is not left behind in Scotland, that it has a clear and growing role in our energy mix and that it can reach its full potential to help Scotland to continue to lead the way on clean energy and benefit fully from the transition to renewables?

Gillian Martin: We recognise the importance of energy that is generated from solar in contributing to the decarbonisation of our energy supply in Scotland and to our just transition to net zero. We have already removed several barriers to enable greater deployment of solar across Scotland, particularly on the roofs of buildings. We will shortly publish our solar vision, which will outline further work that we are undertaking.

Although matters relating to the regulation and operation of the electricity system are reserved, we continue to engage closely with the UK Government and NESO on their plans for the Great British Energy system.

Nursery Mothballing (National Guidance)

3. Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government, further to the First Minister's recent comments regarding the mothballing of nurseries, what systems are in place to ensure local authorities comply with national guidance. (S6O-04626)

The Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise (Natalie Don-Innes): Local authorities are responsible for the management of their early learning and childcare estate. Statutory guidance sets out the Scottish Government's expectations in relation to the mothballing of nurseries. Any mothballing must be temporary. Parents should still be able to make applications for children to attend mothballed nurseries, and councils should be able to reopen them if circumstances change.

As the First Minister stated last month, we are reviewing the guidance to provide greater clarity on whether mothballing is the appropriate action to take. Local authorities are responsible for complying with their statutory duties and are democratically accountable to their local electorate.

Alexander Burnett: As the minister knows, it was announced just before Easter that four nurseries in Aberdeenshire would be mothballed. When the issue was raised in the chamber, the First Minister and the minister stated that there was a requirement for local consultation. No consultation has taken place with any of the communities affected, and parents are experiencing poor communication with council officers. We have also received the impact assessment of the decision for one of the nursery closures, which was approved on 30 April, more than a month after the closures were announced on 28 March.

Will the minister outline what action the Scottish Government will take to ensure that the national mothballing guidance is followed? What can parents do when councils do not follow their own processes?

Natalie Don-Innes: I find the situation that Mr Burnett has brought to my attention very concerning. We expect local authorities to consult parents, carers and families to ensure that they meet local needs in relation to childcare. We want all families to have access to high-quality and flexible childcare that meets their needs. Of course, we understand that local authorities must

have a level of flexibility when it comes to managing their estate. The need for such flexibility might be prompted by, for example, demographic changes.

I have already alluded to the review of the mothballing guidance, but I am more than happy to discuss Mr Burnett's concerns in the context of the review.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): The minister has alluded to the fact that, two weeks ago, the First Minister said that the Government was reviewing the guidance. Given that Conservative-led Scottish Borders Council has already made decisions on nurseries—although it has compromised and does not intend to go ahead with what it originally decided to do—can the minister provide a timeline for when the revised guidance will be available to the public? If she cannot do so today, I ask her to do so as soon as is practicable.

Natalie Don-Innes: I appreciate Ms Grahame's and other members' concerns about the matter. As the First Minister highlighted, it is important that greater clarity is provided on whether mothballing is the appropriate action to take.

On the issue of the timeline, the review of the guidance is under way and ministers will consider the findings when they are available. I am happy to commit to providing Ms Grahame with a further update once those timings are available.

Galloway National Park

4. Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions the net zero secretary has had with the rural affairs secretary regarding the potential environmental and biodiversity impact of the proposed Galloway national park. (S6O-04627)

The Acting Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Energy (Gillian Martin): The Scottish Government received NatureScot's report on the Galloway and Ayrshire national park proposal on Monday 5 May. We will now carefully consider the outcome of the consultation and NatureScot's advice on the proposal before taking any further decisions. That will include full consideration of the potential environmental, social and economic impacts. The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands will update the Parliament on the next steps before recess, subject to parliamentary business.

Finlay Carson: Biodiversity, the natural environment and landscapes are, of course, key factors when it comes to designating any new national parks. Economic sustainability and growth are also critical considerations.

The designation process in Galloway has been less than satisfactory. There have been significant issues, including a perceived bias and a lack of any detail on how a Galloway national park would or could be different from the two existing national parks, given the area's hugely important dairy farming, forestry and renewables sectors. That has resulted in mistrust and divisions within communities, which will take years to heal.

We have heard that the Scottish Government has now received the consultation report from NatureScot and that it is currently considering it. The Government promised that the report would be published, but it has not been, and constituents will have to wait until the end of June for the Government to respond with its decision.

It is my understanding that there is not a majority in favour of the national park proposal and that a full designation order is unlikely to be made. On that basis, in her discussions with the rural affairs secretary, will the cabinet secretary ensure that the Scottish Government will not simply walk away without recognising and addressing the unique challenges and opportunities that rural businesses and tourism and hospitality businesses in Galloway face?

Gillian Martin: As Mr Carson knows, there was a thorough and comprehensive consultation process—5,000 consultation surveys were completed and more than 30 consultation events were held across the area covered by the proposals, with more than 1,000 people attending. The rural affairs secretary has to look at the results of the consultation and take them seriously. An awful lot of information is included in the consultation, and she will advise the Parliament when she is ready to do so.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): When the cabinet secretary looks at the responses to the consultation, will she impress upon NatureScot the importance of considering the postcodes of those who responded, so that we can tell whether those who live in the affected communities are those who are most opposed to the proposal?

Gillian Martin: As Mr Hoy knows, I am not the minister responsible for that decision, but I will pass on his comments to Mairi Gougeon, the rural affairs secretary.

The Presiding Officer: Question 5 has not been lodged.

Fife College (Funding)

6. Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the Scottish Funding Council's college indicative funding allocations 2025-26 and any impact this may have on the funding settlement for Fife College. (S6O-04629)

The Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans (Graeme Dey): Building on the direction that I provided to the SFC in this year's letter of guidance, the SFC has worked with the sector to bring about important changes in how funds are allocated. That has included responding to explicit asks from the sector that funds be distributed in a way that better reflects differences in the cost of delivering different courses in different places. Those changes are reflected in the publication of the college indicative allocations for the academic year 2025-26. The SFC has also put in place transition arrangements that mean that no college will see a funding reduction in the academic year 2025-26 compared with 2024-25.

Alex Rowley: I have to say that that is not the case. The overall increase of 2.6 per cent in funding from the SFC basically gives colleges a standstill budget. When we look further into it, we see that Fife College will receive a 1.26 per cent increase, which is a real-terms cut in its budget. That will result in a significant impact on college provision in Fife. Does the minister accept that colleges have a key part to play if the Government's policy to drive the economy is to be successful and that Fife College cannot take that cut?

Graeme Dey: As I indicated in my initial answer, the allocations reflect the SFC's response to a specific ask from the sector. In agreeing to that request, the SFC made it clear to the colleges that there would be winners and losers.

However, as I said, mindful of the financial challenges that colleges are facing, the SFC put in place transition arrangements to give colleges that are adversely affected a softer landing. That means that, once additional moneys are counted in, no college will see a reduction in 2025-26 compared with 2024-25.

As Mr Rowley pointed out, there is an increase in overall funding for Fife College of 1.26 per cent, and I understand that discussions are on-going between the SFC and Fife College. However, I say gently to Mr Rowley, since he talks about inflationary challenges, that one of the additional pressures that that college is facing is the employer national insurance contribution situation. I am sure that he knows full well from where that pressure has come.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): There is absolutely no way that Fife College asked for a real-terms cut in its budget. The Government, along with the Scottish Funding Council, needs to think again, because the potential in Fife is huge. We have oil and gas jobs that are fading out while there is huge potential in offshore renewables as well as all the other sectors. Surely the minister

understands that we cannot throw away that opportunity.

Graeme Dey: The changes in allocations reflect the number of high-tariff courses that each institution offers. That is what the institutions, as a collective, sought to have recognised.

Fife College is undertaking excellent work with the SFC on curriculum transformation, which has potential for the college. In addition, I am open to exploring whether we could add into the mix a further premium that recognises the delivery of courses that are linked to local and national economic need, which might provide a balancing mechanism in some instances.

Cruise Ship Levy

7. Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its plans to introduce a cruise ship levy, including the option for local authorities to apply a “point of entry” levy. (S6O-04630)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): On 27 February, the Scottish Government commenced a consultation on the potential to give local authorities the power to introduce a cruise ship levy. That consultation closes on 30 May and we will consider next steps in due course, after the responses have been analysed.

Liam McArthur: The cabinet secretary will recall, from the discussions during the passage of the visitor levy legislation, that I raised concerns about the ability of local authorities such as Orkney Islands Council to introduce a visitor levy without a similar levy applying to cruise traffic, as the administration costs of that would be significant. I was encouraged that the consultation that was launched in February included the possibility of a cruise ship levy but also the possibility of a point-of-entry charge. That option has been backed by Destination Orkney as a way of making it fairer, simpler and more equitable. I appreciate that the consultation is on-going, but will the cabinet secretary please give an undertaking to look very seriously at the option of a point-of-entry levy?

Shona Robison: I reassure Liam McArthur that the consultation provides a suitable opportunity to offer views on the idea of a point-of-entry levy, which has been raised with Scottish ministers. Further, detailed consideration of the potential impacts on local authorities, tourism bodies and visitors will be required before any decisions are made on whether to move ahead with any point-of-entry levy.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): Can the cabinet secretary provide an

update on what assessment the Scottish Government has made of the positive impact that cruise ships and their passengers have not just on Scotland’s tourism economy as a whole but on the economies of the local communities where the ships dock?

Shona Robison: There is some uncertainty about how much passengers and crews spend onshore per day. In the published business and regulatory impact assessment, the Scottish Government presents estimates of the overall passenger and crew spending onshore in Scotland in 2024, which range from £55 million to £102 million. The spending will generally be concentrated around the port where the cruise ship is docked, although passengers may travel further from some ports than from others. The BRIA highlights some local surveys that have identified benefits from increased visitor spending at local attractions, increased footfall in town centres and new employment opportunities.

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

Two Minutes' Silence

11:59

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

Eighty years ago, after years of people living with the brutality of war, the guns across Europe fell silent. We honour the generation that gave so much to secure our peace and freedoms. We owe it to them to strive for that peace, to remember and to encourage future generations to remember. Please join me in observing the national two minutes' silence as we reflect with gratitude, marking the 80th anniversary of victory in Europe day. Please join me in standing, if you are able.

Victory in Europe Day (80th Anniversary)

12:02

The First Minister (John Swinney): Presiding Officer, on this, the 80th anniversary of victory in Europe day, Scotland pays tribute to our second world war generation. We express our gratitude to the 57,000 individuals from Scotland who lost their lives in military conflict during the second world war and to the many civilians who were killed or injured at home. They gave of themselves so that we could enjoy freedom today.

We will all naturally think about how the lives of our own families were affected. I think of my uncle, Thomas Hunter, who was killed in Italy protecting his comrades 35 days before the end of the war and who was posthumously awarded the Victoria cross by King George VI. An inscription on the bible that was given to my grandmother in his memory has the words of St John:

"Greater love has no one than this to lay down their life for their friends."

The lessons and the suffering of the second world war must be remembered today, so that we all act to protect the freedom and the democracy that we have enjoyed as a result. Together, we give thanks and dedicate ourselves to building a better, safer and more peaceful world.

12:03

Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): Eighty years ago today, the guns fell silent across Europe. At 3 pm on 8 May 1945, Prime Minister Winston Churchill made a radio announcement to the people of our country. After six long and dark years of death and destruction, victory for Britain and our allies against Nazi Germany was secured.

World war two was the largest and deadliest conflict in history. It involved more than 50 nations and was fought on land, at sea and in the air. Globally, it is estimated that as many as 85 million lives were lost. Tens of thousands of Scots were killed at home and abroad.

For those of us who have only ever known peace and prosperity, the horrors of war are unimaginable. None of us here can truly appreciate the selfless sacrifice, duty and bravery of the greatest generation, who fought and died for our freedom. Today, on victory in Europe day, we remember them.

12:04

Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): Today, on VE day, we pause to remember the courage, sacrifice

and unity that brought an end to the war in Europe 80 years ago. We honour those who served on the front lines and those who kept life going at home. In Scotland, Britain and beyond, we remember those who gave everything for the fight against fascism—the greatest tyranny that we have ever faced. Their bravery shaped the democracy that we cherish today.

Remembrance must also inspire responsibility, first and foremost to those who served and those who serve our country today. We must protect our freedoms, stand up to hatred and division and build a fairer, more compassionate country, just as that generation hoped that we would. We remember them, we thank them, we pledge to carry their values forward and we continue to strive for a world at peace.

12:05

Lorna Slater (Lothian) (Green): On this 80th anniversary, marking the end of a dark chapter in history, we remember the sacrifices that were made by all who stood against the tyranny of fascism. Their courage and resilience ensured our freedom, peace and democracy. We will forever be grateful to them.

Peace is not merely the absence of war; it is the presence of harmony, understanding and co-operation among nations. Yet, currently, we are witnessing the horrors of genocide continuing in Gaza, and fascism has reappeared, threatening democracy and human rights as the far right rises around the world. We cannot be complacent in the face of growing threats of fascism, international violence, hatred and oppression. We must continue to strive to build a world where peace endures and the horrors of the past are not repeated. We must remain vigilant and united in our efforts to create lasting peace by supporting democracy, justice and human rights for all.

12:07

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): Today, we commemorate the moment when, 80 years ago, the high command of the allied forces received the unconditional surrender of the Third Reich. Although war still raged in the Pacific, across these islands, for the first time in six years, the tension, grind and privations of wartime gave way to lasting peace.

In a radio broadcast to the British people and the world, King George VI said:

“on this day of just triumph and proud sorrow”,

let us

“take up our work again, resolved as a people to do nothing unworthy of those who died for us and to make the world

such a world as they would have desired, for their children and for ours.”

His words ushered in the long peace that most of us have only ever known.

As we give thanks today for the sacrifice that was laid down by the generations that came before us, we must rededicate ourselves to the promise of that peace and its furtherance for our children and theirs to come.

First Minister's Question Time

12:08

Programme for Government (General Practitioner Appointments)

1. Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con):

This week's programme for government promises to deliver 100,000 more general practitioner appointments, but Public Health Scotland says that, over the past year, there have been 500,000 fewer GP appointments than in the year before John Swinney became First Minister. The British Medical Association Scotland says that the Scottish National Party's pledge is equivalent to just one extra day of appointments—an increase of less than 1 per cent—and that is only if the SNP delivers it. Public Health Scotland data reveals that, in the first three months of 2025, the number of GP appointments was the worst on record. The SNP's programme for government is a pathetic con. Is the limit of John Swinney's ambition just to undo a small amount of the damage that was inflicted by John Swinney?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The programme for government has set out the steps that we are taking to expand capacity within the health service to meet the demand for appointments with GPs. It will include the delivery of 100,000 additional appointments, which will be available through GPs, to examine particular high-risk factors such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol, obesity and smoking, but there will also be an expansion of the availability of the pharmacy first service, which is designed to meet the healthcare needs of individuals where it is relevant to their circumstances. It also includes the expansion of the availability of island health practitioners in front-line healthcare services, with a commitment to expand the funding available to primary care services as a greater proportion of new national health service funding. The combination of those factors will make an impact on access to GP services in Scotland.

Russell Findlay: After 18 years of failure, John Swinney is now desperately trying to clear up the mess that his Government has made. BMA Scotland says that the Government's rhetoric is

"failing to match the reality"

and the Royal College of General Practitioners Scotland says that it simply does not

"have the workforce capacity to deliver"

the 100,000 extra appointments.

The way to increase appointments is to increase the number of GPs. The SNP promised us 800 more, but that has not happened. The SNP

constantly makes big pledges about the NHS, but it always fails patients. It never keeps its word. Why should anyone believe that John Swinney will keep his latest promise when the SNP breaks them all the time?

The First Minister: First, the number of GPs has increased. In 2017, there were 4,904. According to the latest statistics, there are now 5,211. Secondly, the Government is putting in place arrangements for the 100,000 extra appointments as a consequence of negotiating that agreement with the self-same organisations to which Mr Findlay referred.

The people of Scotland know that my Government is absolutely focused on delivering on the issues that are of concern to them. That is partly about improving access to the national health service. As I set out to Parliament on Tuesday, the Scottish Government is absolutely focused on delivering on the people's priorities.

Russell Findlay: John Swinney says that he is focused on delivery, but he is focused on spin. Let us look at the SNP's record on the NHS. At the start of this session of Parliament, it published an NHS recovery plan, which it claimed would

"drive the recovery of our NHS, not just to its pre-pandemic level but beyond."

Quite rightly, my party condemned Humza Yousaf's plan as "embarrassingly thin" and "flimsy". It turns out that the SNP agreed with us. We now know what Nicola Sturgeon really thought of her Government's big plan. She said:

"My specific concern is that it's awful."

For once, Nicola Sturgeon was right. John Swinney was Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery at that time, so he must have had a view on it, too. What words would he use to describe it?

The First Minister: I do not think that it is a particular revelation for Parliament to hear that the Conservatives condemned something. They condemn absolutely everything. They have absolutely nothing—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Let us hear one another.

The First Minister: They have absolutely nothing constructive to contribute to the debate. Let me say to Mr Findlay that, during my term in office as First Minister, we promised to provide 64,000 extra appointments by the end of March 2025. We did not do that. In fact, we delivered 105,500 extra appointments and procedures in that timescale, and we will deliver more in the forthcoming parliamentary year. I say to Mr Findlay—just so that he is not worried about it in the future—that this Government will deliver more in the course of the next 12 months. I will be very

happy to answer parliamentary questions about that—not just before the election but after it, when I will remain as First Minister.

Russell Findlay: It was a simple question, but I am not surprised that John Swinney is not prepared to come clean about what he thought at the time, because this is a dishonest Government that is addicted to secrecy.

The Presiding Officer: Mr Findlay, let us carry out our business in a courteous manner.

Russell Findlay: We saw that when Nicola Sturgeon and John Swinney deleted their messages that should have been provided to the UK Covid inquiry. We see it with the SNP wasting taxpayers' money on a shameful cover-up about its NHS recovery plan. The SNP spent four years hiding the truth from the public about what Nicola Sturgeon really thought. Humza Yousaf's plan caused waiting lists to rise, not fall. It was flimsy rubbish, as we said. Nicola Sturgeon and John Swinney both knew that, but the SNP hid the truth from the public, so Humza Yousaf failed upwards. John Swinney helped Nicola Sturgeon's awful health secretary become an awful First Minister. If the SNP had been honest and transparent, would Humza Yousaf have become First Minister?

The First Minister: What an absolutely miserable contribution to parliamentary discourse—completely and utterly. That is all that the Conservatives have left. They are in such a—*[Interruption.]*

I do not know why Rachael Hamilton is laughing—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear one another. We have observers in the gallery and people tuning in online. Let us make sure that we can all hear what is being said.

The First Minister: The public cast a judgment on the Conservative Party last Thursday, and it was pretty damning indeed about the future of the Conservative Party.

What the public are interested in, and what I am interested in, is delivering on the priorities of the people of Scotland. Right at the heart of the Government's programme is investment to support increased capacity in the national health service, so that we deliver more GP appointments and better access to GP services, and get waiting lists down. That will preoccupy my thinking as First Minister. I will leave Mr Findlay to sit on the sidelines, as he does every week, throwing insults around and contributing nothing—I am going to deliver for the people of Scotland.

Programme for Government (Homelessness)

2. **Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab):** This week, after 18 years in office, the Scottish National Party

conceded that it has no plan, is out of steam and has lost its way. John Swinney announced a bland and unambitious programme for government that does nothing to address the issues that Scotland faces. There is no plan to fix the national health service crisis that the SNP created, no plan to deal with the falling standards and soaring violence in our schools that the SNP is presiding over, and no plan to end the scandal of 10,000 homeless children on John Swinney's watch.

When a member of this Parliament raised the issue of homeless children, John Swinney shamefully told them to

"find something else ... to moan about".—*[Official Report, 6 May 2025; c 29.]*

In a damning assessment, Shelter Scotland called John Swinney's plan "a programme for homelessness". Does he think that Shelter Scotland should find something else to moan about?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I may have used language that was particularly not worthy of me. If I have done that and used language that has not been appropriate for the way I go about my business and people are concerned about that, of course I regret it.

Let me come back to the facts of all this. Since 2007, when this Government came to office, we have delivered 47 per cent more affordable homes per head of population than in England and 73 per cent more than in Wales. In addition, in the past year, we have had more house-building completions per 10,000 people in Scotland than in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. We also just passed a budget, which Mr Sarwar did not support, that is investing £768 million in affordable housing in Scotland.

We are addressing the homelessness issues that we face in our society, and we are taking action to support local authorities in tackling void accommodation. We will continue to do that, and we will focus on making sure that we address the needs of people in Scotland.

Anas Sarwar: The fact is that we have 10,000 homeless children and John Swinney has no plan to deal with that. He said that the focus of his programme for government was fixing the NHS, which he and his colleagues in the Scottish National Party have broken. Yet again, the details prove that they have no idea of how to fix the mess that they created. It is so bad that Dr Iain Morrison, chair of the British Medical Association in Scotland, responded to the plan by saying:

"yet again, the rhetoric on this is failing to match the reality."

We agree that we need to end the 8 am rush for an appointment with a general practitioner, but

what is John Swinney's plan? One extra appointment for every GP every fortnight will hardly end the 8 am rush for GP appointments, will it?

The First Minister: That is only one part of the plan that we are taking forward, which I will come on to in a second.

Before I get to that, let us look at the issue of temporary accommodation. Because of the financial support that the Scottish Government has put in place, 20 local authority areas have reduced the number of children in temporary accommodation. In 2023-24, 12 local authorities reduced the number of households in temporary accommodation. Why is that happening? It is happening because the Government has put financial support in place to ensure that void accommodation can be brought back into use so that families can be accommodated. That is a change in Government policy that has been made under my leadership. Now—yes, right now; it is all happening as we speak—local authority temporary accommodation levels are coming down because of investment from the Government. That is investment in a budget that the Labour Party refused to support. Labour members should not come here and complain about housing when they were not prepared to press a button to vote in favour of £768 million. No wonder I complain about the Labour Party whinging about things.

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): He has done it again!

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear one another.

The First Minister: On GP appointments, the Government is taking a number of measures. We are delivering 100,000 additional appointments for GPs. We are also expanding pharmacy first services to reduce pressure and demand on GP services, and we are expanding the availability of allied health practitioners in front-line health services. Those measures will deal with the issues that have been raised about the 8 am rush by reducing pressure on GP services. That is the plan that the Government is taking forward, and that is what the Government will implement.

Anas Sarwar: John Swinney has just exposed himself all over again. On Tuesday, he said, shamefully, that we should

"find something else ... to moan about"—[*Official Report*, 6 May 2025; c 29.]

other than homelessness. He has stood up and apologised for the bad language, because that is not how he operates, but he has just complained that we are whinging about homelessness. [*Interruption.*] Shelter Scotland called the programme for government a "programme for

homelessness", and he should wake up and listen to what it has to say.

The deadly situation in our NHS, caused by the SNP, is vast, but whole areas were omitted from the First Minister's programme for government. I take just one example—our ambulance service. Today, Scottish Labour can reveal shocking new figures that show that ambulances are being left to queue up outside hospitals for hours on end, turning car parks into makeshift accident and emergency wards across Scotland. Sick patients are receiving life-saving treatment in parking bays outside hospitals. At Aberdeen royal infirmary, one ambulance was stuck outside for more than 15 hours. In Ayr, another ambulance waited nearly 15 hours. In Elgin, the wait was 12 hours. Car parks have been turned into A and E wards; corridor care is now a normality; 800,000 people are stuck on waiting lists; and a record number of Scots are being forced to go private. Is it not the case that the party that created Scotland's NHS crisis cannot be the one to fix it?

The First Minister: On performance in our hospitals, significant challenges remain in the national health service, which I have acknowledged in all my answers to First Minister's questions.

On the four-hour A and E targets, the latest data shows that there has been an improvement in performance and that it has strengthened over recent weeks. When we look at the delivery of pledges on waiting times in our national health service, as I indicated in my earlier answer to Mr Findlay, we pledged to conduct 64,000 additional appointments by the end of March 2025. We did not do that; we delivered 105,500. In addition, we have put in place investment, but the Labour Party could not bring itself to support that in the budget.

The point that I am making to the Parliament is that the Labour Party comes here to complain about issues, but it will not do the heavy lifting to support the budget that makes the investment possible. I point out to the Labour Party that it voted against record investment of £21 billion in the national health service, yet it comes to chamber to complain to me about different issues. That is the hypocrisy that I am highlighting from the Labour Party. We have set out that our investment in the NHS will be focused on addressing the priorities of the people, which is to reduce waiting times and improve access to GP services. The Government will deliver on those commitments.

Housing (Scotland) Bill

3. **Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green):** I first raised the need for rent controls well over a decade ago, to the complete disinterest of the Scottish National Party housing minister of the

day. By then, private rented housing had already been growing dramatically for years, and rents had continued to spiral. The situation now is far more severe. Even if rent controls had been in place just for the past five years, people renting their homes in places such as Glasgow and Edinburgh would be thousands of pounds a year better off.

I am glad that the Greens' efforts and the work of tenants unions have resulted in a housing bill with rent controls for Scotland, even if it is weaker because of SNP amendments. I am also glad that our plans for energy efficiency rules for private landlords are finally going to happen. Will the First Minister explain why it took so many years of pressure from the Greens to make the SNP accept that rents are too high, that standards are too low and that urgent action is needed?

The First Minister (John Swinney): There are a range of provisions in statute and under existing arrangements to protect tenants. There are protections around evictions, and there have been protections around winter evictions. Support is in place through discretionary housing payments to assist tenants. A range of measures to protect tenants have been put in place by the Scottish Government over the years.

I welcome the fact that we are in agreement with Mr Harvie on the question of the housing legislation that is in front of Parliament, which the Parliament has passed at stage 1 and is considering at stage 2. We will introduce a system of rent controls, and I look forward to further parliamentary scrutiny on that issue.

Patrick Harvie: The frustration comes with the delay, and I know that that frustration is felt by SNP members who have voted for rent control policy for many years without action happening. There was never any need for the many years of delay, and we could have done far more good for people by acting sooner.

The Housing (Scotland) Bill must make rent more affordable, and it will need to be strengthened if it is going to do that. It must also provide more protection for people who rent their homes. People deserve the right to withhold rent payments when issues such as mould, damp and serious repairs are being left by landlords for months—sometimes years—on end. Will the First Minister back the Green proposal to give people the right to withhold rent payment until repairs are completed to stop landlords profiting while they ignore their responsibilities, or is that another issue that will take 10 years of pressure before the Government acts?

The First Minister: As I said, the bill is going through stage 2 consideration. If amendments are lodged, ministers will consider the issues that arise out of that process and, ultimately, the bill will

come back to Parliament for stage 3 consideration.

I acknowledge the issue that Mr Harvie raises with me. The purpose of the rent control legislation is to ensure that tenants have more say and more control, and that landlords fulfil their obligations. Those considerations will lie at the heart of the legislation.

Water Scarcity Alerts

4. Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's response is to water scarcity alerts issued by the Scottish Environment Protection Agency for the east of Scotland, in light of low rainfall and warm temperatures. (S6F-04057)

The First Minister (John Swinney): SEPA's latest report highlighted that 17 out of 47 areas in Scotland are in alert status for water scarcity, and that most of the rest of the country is in early warning status. An update on that position will be published by the regulator SEPA later on this afternoon. SEPA has contacted those who abstract water, including businesses and farmers, in the affected areas, and has provided them with advice. Public drinking water supply in those areas is not affected.

We are working closely with SEPA, Scottish Water and others to ensure that water supply is monitored and supported in line with Scotland's national water scarcity plan. Climate change is driving more extreme conditions, and we all need to adapt to that reality. I urge businesses, organisations and individuals to do their part to plan ahead and use water wisely.

Kevin Stewart: It is worrying that many rivers, including the Dee and the Don, which bound my constituency, have such low water levels at this time of year. In spite of nature's clear warnings, we are currently witnessing climate change denial and an even stronger pushback against net zero and a just transition from the likes of Farage and even from Tony Blair. Does the First Minister share my concerns that the rise of this regressive anti-net zero agenda puts at great risk all the vital work to grow our green economy and create jobs for the future?

The First Minister: I share those concerns. At the present moment, in early May, the water scarcity map makes quite difficult reading, because we face acute challenges that we would never ordinarily face at this time of the year. That illustration of climate change requires us to take the necessary action that Mr Stewart has suggested. That is why it is central to the Government's programme.

Prevention Measures (Health)

5. Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): To ask the First Minister, in light of the publication of the programme for government, what action the Scottish Government is taking to ensure that prevention is more strongly integrated into the health system. (S6F-04062)

The First Minister (John Swinney): As I set out in January and reinforced in our programme for government, a long-term shift to prevention is central to sustaining and renewing our national health service. Scotland has led the way in public health action over many years, with bold measures such as the indoor smoking ban and minimum unit pricing for alcohol. We will build on that action by publishing our new population health framework in the coming weeks.

Brian Whittle: The Scottish Fiscal Commission's latest fiscal sustainability report highlights the major effect on health spending of the rising prevalence of long-term preventable illnesses among Scots and the sizeable impact on Scotland's finances if such a rise continues.

In this chamber, we always seem to talk in statistics, to highlight how good we are or are not. However, as I have highlighted for the decade that I have been a member of this Parliament, when we are talking about health, the only statistic that matters is that Scotland continues to be the unhealthiest nation in Europe—many of those indicators continue to worsen at an alarming rate.

Does the First Minister agree that this fiscal sustainability report must be the final wake-up call for action and that, through early intervention, we must take greater steps to prevent illness, particularly by encouraging healthier lifestyles, supporting the third sector and improving access to sport and physical activity? If the Scottish Government continues on its current trajectory, the health service will fast become unsustainable.

The First Minister: I generally agree with the points that Mr Whittle has made about the importance of preventative interventions, and that approach is exactly what the Government is pursuing.

As he knows, in 2010, I commissioned the Christie commission report, which gave us valuable insight into the approach to prevention. The Government has applied that approach to programmes such as: the promotion of healthy eating; the work to tackle obesity and reduce harms from smoking and vaping; the investment in sport and active living; the work to increase vaccination uptake; and our work on the benefits of social prescribing. I assure Mr Whittle that that focus on prevention will remain central to the Government's programme.

Foyso Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): The First Minister talks about prevention, but the Edinburgh integration joint board is being forced to make cuts to preventative care and third sector organisations, including the Stafford centre, which supports 640 people with mental health issues and is estimated to save the NHS up to £4.4 million in hospital admissions. Given the situation in joint boards across Scotland, does the First Minister recognise that prevention will not be possible if IJBs are in permanent financial crisis?

The First Minister: Obviously, I want to make sure that the types of services that Mr Choudhury has raised are supported around the country. Those are operational decisions for integration joint boards to make. They can make those decisions based only on the financial allocations that this Parliament makes, and Mr Choudhury was unable to support the allocations of funding that the Government made to cover such services.

We will certainly work with the integration joint boards, but Mr Choudhury cannot be absolved of his responsibility for failing to support the budget, which is delivering the investment that is necessary in health and social care. *[Interruption.]* The Labour Party members can moan at me all they want about the public finances—

The Presiding Officer: Members, let us hear one another.

The First Minister: —but they have not been prepared to put the money in to support people in the communities of Scotland.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): My question follows on from the previous question. I have been contacted by numerous charities in my region that will have to cease providing vital preventative care for individuals in the Lothians due to the IJB cuts. The First Minister said that he wants to lay aside politics and do the best for the people of Scotland. Will he now intervene in the crisis to make sure that NHS Lothian does not cut the budget to the IJB? That cut would put vulnerable people out of the services that they require. Rather than talk about previous measures, will he now be proactive in working with NHS Lothian and the council to make sure that the IJB gets the appropriate funding?

The First Minister: The Government engages with health boards around the country, and local authorities have their own decisions to make as part of the IJB structures. We will engage constructively in any way that we can to help on those issues.

Mr Balfour is another one who comes here and asks me to invest in local services, when his party leader wants me to cut public expenditure by £1 billion. How will that help IJBs around the country?

I will not tire of pointing out the total and utter hypocrisy of the people who come here asking for tax cuts and wanting me to spend more money. It is hypocrisy on stilts.

A83 Rest and Be Thankful (Landslip Shelter)

6. Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): To ask the First Minister when the landslip shelter on the A83 at the Rest and Be Thankful will be complete. (S6F-04067)

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Government is committed to delivering an infrastructure solution to address the landslip risk at the Rest and Be Thankful as soon as possible. Delivery of a permanent solution is a priority.

In December, we published draft orders for both the long-term solution and future stages of the medium-term improvements. Construction can commence only if it is approved under the relevant statutory authorisation process. Therefore, a timetable for construction can be determined only at that time.

Jackie Baillie: The First Minister will be aware of the huge impact that the closure of the A83 at the Rest and Be Thankful has on the economy and the people of Argyll. However, it did not happen just yesterday; it has been a problem for more than 15 years.

All that local people want is a road that stays open when it rains. Instead, local campaigners have little confidence that the Scottish National Party will deliver a solution, given the Government's track record on road building. They are not whingers, First Minister; they fear that it could be another decade and £500 million before the road is actually usable. Will the First Minister commit today to accelerating that much-needed work to ensure that the people of Argyll are not disadvantaged by the continual closure of the A83?

The First Minister: I acknowledge the significance of that area for access to Argyll and Bute. That point is regularly made to me by Jenni Minto, the local member for Argyll.

We have taken steps to ensure that we strengthen the alternative route through the old military road so that it is operational to provide connectivity and to avoid the lengthy diversion that is required should all of those accesses be unavailable.

The steps that are to be taken to ensure that the landslip shelter is put in place are under way. As I have told Jackie Baillie, the preparatory work is being undertaken. The Government will be happy to share details with the Parliament and local stakeholders. I am pretty sure that the Cabinet Secretary for Transport has met the Rest and Be

Thankful interested parties to discuss the issue and the progress that can be made.

The Presiding Officer: We move to constituency and general supplementaries.

Harbour Energy

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): Harbour Energy, which is the largest independent oil and gas firm in the North Sea and is based in my Aberdeen Donside constituency, has announced that it will cut around 250 onshore jobs in Scotland. It has put the blame squarely at the feet of the Labour United Kingdom Government and its policies.

Successive UK Governments have ignored warnings about job losses and treated Aberdeen as a cash cow, and efforts to deliver a just transition are being undermined. What assessment has the Scottish Government made of the on-going situation? Will the First Minister join me in writing to the UK Government to urge it to take the action that is required to support jobs in Scotland's energy sector—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Ms Dunbar.

Jackie Dunbar: Will the First Minister comment on the importance of a just transition for energy workers? I say to Conservative members that I do not find it funny.

The First Minister (John Swinney): I agree with Jackie Dunbar that a just transition for Scotland's valued and highly skilled offshore energy workers is essential. I am deeply concerned to hear the news from Harbour Energy about its plans in Aberdeen. My thoughts are first and foremost with the workforce, which faces an extraordinarily anxious time. The Deputy First Minister is speaking with Harbour Energy on the matter today.

The fiscal and regulatory regimes for offshore oil and gas are reserved to the UK Government. The Scottish Government has made clear our concern about the extension and scale of the energy profits levy. I urge the UK Government to engage with the industry to address the fiscal realities and implications of the UK Government's position.

Harbour Energy

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): The 250 jobs going from Harbour Energy will be a devastating blow for the families involved. Enough is enough. We have a Labour Government in Westminster that is determined to destroy the north-east and the oil and gas industry, but we also have a Scottish National Party Government that is asleep at the wheel, with no energy strategy and a presumption against new oil and gas, and that is selling out communities all

over the north-east. Will the First Minister apologise to the 250 workers who are set to lose their livelihoods as his Government turns its back on the north-east?

The First Minister (John Swinney): My concern, first and foremost, is about the wellbeing of the workforce in Harbour Energy. I do not think that the way in which Mr Lumsden characterises the issue is in any way remotely helpful in addressing the concerns of that workforce.

I point out to Mr Lumsden and the Conservative Party that the energy profits levy was a product of the previous Conservative UK Government—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the First Minister.

The First Minister: It does not matter how much I get barracked in this Parliament—I will point out the hard realities and implications of the Conservative Party's decisions in the United Kingdom Government.

One of the things that I think would help enormously in this whole area of policy is for the current United Kingdom Government to do something that the previous Conservative Government did not do, which is to commit urgently and swiftly to the Acorn carbon capture and storage project. That would help us enormously. The Conservatives never lifted a finger to make that happen—not one finger. I hope that the Labour Party will not do the same.

Attainment Gap

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): In February, the First Minister told the chamber that the overall attainment gap had reduced by 60 per cent, but, today, the UK Statistics Authority has confirmed that the figure that has been used is not even part of the First Minister's Government's framework for measuring the attainment gap.

In its letter to me, the UK Statistics Authority says:

"To maintain trust and confidence in their statements, Ministers should take care that when they claim progress of their policies it is by their own defined measures".

That intervention demolishes the Government's claim on the attainment gap and exposes the truth—that a generation of children have been let down by a Government that is more interested in spinning numbers than in solving problems. Will the First Minister now admit that he and his Government have failed to close the attainment gap?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I acknowledge the contents of the letter from the UK Statistics Authority.

I have used one particular measure of the attainment gap—I could use others. The poverty-related attainment gap between young people from the most and least-deprived areas meeting standards in literacy is at a record low in primary schools, and the attainment gap has reached record lows between secondary pupils achieving third level in literacy and numeracy. Those are some of the points.

I accept that there remains an attainment gap in Scottish education. This morning, I visited Brunstane primary school in east Edinburgh and saw at first hand the effect of the Scottish attainment challenge programme, which has supported the development of leadership in the school, enhanced the curriculum and led to greater engagement with families and a rise in the attendance of young people at our school. That is a consequence of the investment that we, as a Government, are able to make available.

Nothing will detract me from focusing on improving the life chances of children, whether or not they are living in poverty, and ensuring that we tackle the issues around household income and engagement with schools. That will lie at the heart of the steps that we are taking in relation to our attainment agenda.

Deaf People (Support)

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): In light of this being deaf awareness week, what is the Scottish Government doing to support deaf people in Scotland?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I welcome the contribution that Karen Adam makes on these issues. It is important to highlight the importance of deaf awareness week to increasing understanding of deaf culture and language. The Deputy First Minister met members of the community last week. The "British Sign Language National Plan 2023-2029" represents our on-going commitment to making Scotland the best place in the world for BSL users to live, work, visit and learn.

Edinburgh Integration Joint Board (Service Cuts)

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): As we have already heard, the proposals by the Edinburgh integration joint board are likely to see key services cut, including drop-in support, carers services and, even as we mark victory in Europe day, veterans support services. The First Minister apportioned blame, but the cuts are not acceptable. The IJB will cut £29 million from services in Edinburgh. Does he think that our health services will be improved by the decisions that are being taken by the IJB? Will he agree to meet the cross-party group of MSPs who are

trying to raise the issue in Parliament and who have just had the First Minister whack this back at us? We need action and we want the First Minister to take heed of that today.

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am simply being straight with the Parliament about—
[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, members

The First Minister: I am simply being straight with the Parliament about the realities that we have to face. That is what I am doing.

I understand the issues that Miles Briggs is raising with me. I am totally familiar with them and I understand the importance of them. I have just answered Mr Whittle about the importance of a focus on preventative interventions, and many of the interventions that Mr Briggs is talking about are preventative interventions.

However, the point that I am making to the Parliament is that investment in those services does not happen by accident. It happens by political choice. Mr Briggs was one of those who voted against the Government's budget and he argued in favour, as his leader did, of £1 billion of cuts in public expenditure. How does Mr Briggs think that it would be possible to invest in local services with £1 billion of swingeing cuts from the Conservatives?

West Coast Ferry Contract

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (LD): Today, the Scottish Government announced the direct award of the west coast ferry contract to CalMac Ferries, citing that there are no legal barriers to doing so, yet, oddly, it used the opposite argument for why it could not award a contract to Ferguson Marine in Port Glasgow.

The real question on the minds of islanders is whether the removal of the tender process will deliver better and more reliable lifeline ferry services. Just days ago, CalMac made a unilateral decision to reduce the frequency of sailings to the isle of Cumbrae. That decision has been met with absolute fury on the island, and described as absurd, reckless and ridiculous by local businesses. I will forward that correspondence to the First Minister this afternoon.

What comfort will the First Minister offer island communities that they will be properly consulted before key decisions are made, and what comfort will they have that the decision to direct award the contract will improve their ferry services?

The First Minister (John Swinney): That is at the very heart of the direct award; there is an objective of doing exactly that. One of the key obligations in the contract is the necessity of engaging with communities. There is a more

significant role in the direct award for the ferries community board, which is able to articulate many of the issues that Mr Greene has put to me. The contract is structured to ensure that community voice and community aspiration are right at the heart of the delivery of ferry services. That will be a contractual obligation of CalMac.

India and Pakistan Conflict

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): The recent escalation in threats between India and Pakistan is deeply concerning for all of us across Scotland, but particularly for those of my Glasgow Anniesland constituents who are of Indian and Pakistani heritage. Many people are anxiously watching the situation develop. Will the First Minister join me in urging de-escalation in the region? Does he agree that peace and stability across the world are best achieved by dialogue and diplomacy and not by violence?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The terrorist attack in Pahalgam and the escalating tensions between India and Pakistan are highly concerning. I share Mr Kidd's aspiration that all leaders should choose dialogue, diplomacy and shared humanity ahead of force and bloodshed. There can be no winners in further military escalation. The world has enough conflict on its hands at present. I urge that dialogue in order to resolve the issues.

Scotland's Indian and Pakistani communities enrich Scotland's society socially, culturally and economically. I am mindful of the importance of encouraging and sustaining community cohesion in what will be a worrying time. I will do everything that I can to try to draw communities together at this anxious time in Scotland.

Prevention of Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Bill

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): In the past couple of months, I have been contacted by many survivors of domestic abuse from my West Scotland region and from across the country. Many of those brave women told me that their abusers were repeat offenders and that their ordeal could have been prevented.

My Prevention of Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Bill was published this morning. If passed, it would create a domestic abuse register, similar to the sex offenders register, to act as a deterrent and give further protection to potential victims. Will the Scottish Government back my bill, which has received the support of third sector organisations as well as many survivors of domestic abuse?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Ministers have met Pam Gosal several times to discuss her bill. I acknowledge that it has been published this morning. As always with members' bills, the

Government will engage on that question. We are always willing to explore any options to reduce crime and reoffending, particularly as they affect domestic abuse in our society. Ministers will be happy to engage on that question.

Peak Rail Fares (Abolition)

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): My constituents in Rutherglen will welcome the recent announcement that peak rail fares are to be abolished on publicly owned ScotRail trains. How much does the First Minister anticipate that the average commuter in Scotland will save over the course of a year's travel thanks to that intervention by the Scottish National Party—the only party that people in Scotland can rely on to protect their interests and to deliver for them?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Government is committed to supporting individuals who face challenges in the cost of living crisis that we are experiencing. The steps that the Government announced on Tuesday will support commuters. For example, an individual who commutes each working day between Edinburgh and Glasgow could expect to save almost £4,000 over the course of the year, from September, which is a formidable saving to assist individuals in their lives. That is just another example of the cost of living guarantee. People can be assured by a Government that is prepared to put a budget to the Parliament to support that, and to make sure that we help hard-pressed householders the length and breadth of Scotland.

First Minister (Salary)

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): John Swinney recently awarded all his highly paid ministers a £20,000 increase in their salary. Despite saying that he would not benefit from that, a response to a freedom of information request that I have received suggests that John Swinney did receive the increased salary in his most recent pay packet. Given that John Swinney said earlier that he wants to be “straight with the Parliament”, can he tell us whether it is correct that his most recent pay packet included that uplift? Will he pay that money back? Does he accept the anger among people across Scotland who see highly paid ministers get a salary increase while budgets are cut?

The First Minister (John Swinney): What I decided to do about ministerial pay was to apply the approach that pertained when Mr Ross was a minister in the United Kingdom Government—

Douglas Ross: Did you get it or not?

The Presiding Officer: Mr Ross.

The First Minister: —which is that ministers are entitled to take their full pay as members of the

Scottish Parliament, but that their ministerial pay remains frozen at 2008-09 levels. Actually, I do not think that that was the position when Mr Ross was a minister.

Ministers in the Scottish Government are getting the same pay, as MSPs, as everybody else, apart from—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Mr Ross, if I hear you once more, you will leave this chamber.

Please continue, First Minister.

The First Minister: To be clear—it is important that members of the public hear the facts—ministers will get their full MSP salary in the same way that every other member of the Scottish Parliament gets their full salary, apart from one person: me. I have decided—voluntarily—to maintain the freeze on my MSP pay as well as the freeze on my First Minister's salary. To the best of my knowledge, I have not had an increase in my salary, in terms of the cash payment that has been made, as a consequence of the recent uplift. *[Interruption.]*

I will go and check that, and I will make the position clear this afternoon. I am very happy to do that. I have no worries about sharing that information. I have said to the public and to Parliament that I will not take an increase in my MSP salary and I will not take an increase in my ministerial pay; it will be frozen at 2008-09 levels. From my recollection, I do not think that any different pay has been put into my bank account. *[Interruption.]* I will go and check that, but I do not think that that is the case. *[Interruption.]*

I think that it says something about where the Conservative Party has reached that—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the First Minister.

The First Minister: I think that it says something about the depths that the Conservative Party has now reached that it is not prepared to take in good faith anything that is said across the chamber. It never ceases to amaze me how low the Conservative Party will stoop. It is a disgusting organisation.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes First Minister's question time. The next item of business is a members' business debate in the name of Michael Marra. We will have a short suspension to allow those who are leaving the gallery and the chamber to do so.

12:56

Meeting suspended.

12:59

On resuming—

Wraparound Care (Children with Additional Support Needs)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-16503, in the name of Michael Marra, on wraparound care for children with additional support needs. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament understands that local authorities have a statutory duty to provide out-of-school and holiday care for children classified as "in need", which includes those who are disabled; is concerned by reports that many families of children with additional support needs are unable to find out-of-school care during holiday periods, including in Dundee and its surrounding areas; believes that the struggle to balance care-giving with employment can lead to routines being disrupted and is a cause of significant distress to families; further believes that reductions to local authority and third-sector organisations' budgets have contributed to these issues, and notes the view that the Scottish Government and local authorities should take action to ensure that families of children with additional support needs do not face another summer of uncertainty and disruption.

12:59

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): I begin by thanking all members, from across the chamber, who supported the motion to enable this debate to take place.

With just under two months until the long annual holidays, many Scottish families will have already planned holidays here or abroad, booked leave from work and sorted childcare with relatives. They are signing up for football camps or outdoor activities and hoping for a long, sunny summer, starting today.

However, far too little of that is available to families of children with additional needs. For thousands of families, summer arrangements are as yet unknown and unknowable, and they are staring down yet another chaotic summer period without adequate childcare. I hesitate to call that period a "holiday", for that is not a description of it that those families would recognise. It is far too often a time of increased anxiety and challenge, where routine disappears and hours at work are missed, and the build-up to it can take months. The knowledge of that vast chasm looms large for many families, and the stress that it imposes is acute. For many families, it defines what type of employment they can take, or whether they can even work at all.

In September 2024, I hosted a round-table meeting in Dundee to hear the stories of families who face those challenges year in, year out. Parents and carers attended, along with organisations including Dundee United Community Trust, the Yard and Happy Times Out of School Care Club. They were clear that needs are not being met—very far from it. Local authorities have a statutory duty under the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 to provide out-of-school and holiday care to children who are classified as "in need", which includes children with disabilities. Yet the usual childcare options, such as holiday clubs, are often not available or not appropriate for children with additional needs and disabilities.

Even when there are appropriate childcare options, information can be very hard to find or those services can be cancelled at the last minute, leaving working parents in the lurch and families in crisis.

I welcome the Scottish Government's announcement ahead of the debate that it will provide £1 million to local authorities for holiday play schemes and activities for disabled children. I would be grateful if the minister, in her remarks, could confirm whether that is £1 million per authority or £1 million to be divided by 32 local authorities. With the holidays fast approaching, families need details now on what specific services will be available and where, so will that money be available this summer? I hope that the minister will be able to set out tangible actions that her Government and local government can take together to ensure that this summer can be different.

My constituent Nicola Donnelly is joining us in the public gallery today. Nicola's son, Leo, is seven years old. Leo has cerebral palsy, which has resulted in developmental delays and visual impairment. Nicola has fought tirelessly for Leo and other kids like him to get the care and support that they deserve. Nicola told me this:

"Since Leo was born, he has fought for survival, had major operations and overcome medical and developmental hurdles with great spirit. To fail at finding something that should be commonplace, like a holiday club, felt very painful and a stark reminder of how inaccessible society remains for disabled children and how isolating life can be as a parent carer."

Those kids and their families are not asking for special treatment; they are asking for what the law entitles them to. In a recent survey by the organisation Pregnant Then Screwed, 71 per cent of parents who responded said that they had difficulties in accessing wraparound care for their children. Of those parents, 75 per cent had reduced their hours at work or left work altogether. That takes a real toll on family finances, the health and wellbeing of parents and, frankly, our wider economy.

My constituent Louise's son, Josh, has a diagnosis of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. He struggles in social settings, and his school attendance has been falling. As a single parent, Louise has had to give up her job working in a primary school with other children with additional support needs, so that she can be at home for her son. She has praised the "amazing" work of the Yard, and I know that many other constituents have been helped by the work of that excellent organisation. I recently visited its Easter holiday club in Dundee and met the children and parents enjoying play together there.

Louise has also told me that, without a section 23 referral from social work, despite the obvious difficulties that her son is experiencing, he cannot access many of the services that the local authority provides. It would be good if, in closing, the minister could address that particular issue. Louise said:

"I know how it feels to be a parent of a child with ASN and it's hard and draining. You give up your own life to fight for them and you constantly hit a brick wall because there is nothing."

Last Thursday at First Minister questions, the First Minister told Parliament that a person does not require a diagnosis of neurodivergence to access services and support. That is simply untrue. I very much believe that this Government's moves to ship children who are awaiting an ADHD or autism diagnosis off the child and adolescent mental health services waiting list will exacerbate the many challenges that are experienced by families with neurodivergent children.

What do families need? They need to be able to plan, so they require timely information, with a programme of options that is published well in advance of holiday periods. That should be standard practice in local authorities across Scotland, and it should include referrals, costs, transport options and whether a section 23 referral will be required. They must be given the details that they need, including staff ratios, whether services are accessible and whether appropriate facilities are available. Parents and carers need to have confidence that the service will meet their child's needs. We must make it easy, with a clear process for direct payments being provided and, where appropriate, personal assistance being engaged through self-directed support.

I thank organisations such as Contact, the Coalition of Carers in Scotland, PAMIS, Dundee Carers Centre and Pregnant Then Screwed for the work that they are doing to support families in such situations and for all the work that they did with me to raise awareness ahead of the debate. I know that colleagues will mention other organisations that work in their areas and do great work with these children. However, they can only

do so much. At the heart of the issue is a Scottish Government that is telling families that they are entitled to services, but families are discovering that those services are simply nowhere to be found.

I look forward to hearing members' accounts of families in their regions and constituencies. We can and must do better for Leo, Josh and thousands like them across Scotland—and, frankly, it should happen this summer. Let us actually solve the problem. *[Applause.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before we move to the open debate, I gently remind those in the public gallery that this is a meeting in public rather than a public meeting, so they are discouraged from participating.

13:06

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): I commend Michael Marra for securing this important debate. During my nearly two decades' tenure as an MSP, I have received lots of correspondence about the challenges that families with children with additional support needs face, and over the past 12 months I have certainly heard much of what Michael Marra has said.

One of the more pertinent issues is the lack of wraparound care. Wraparound care is critical for lots of families as it can support parents into work, but the need is even greater for parents with children with ASN. I read the briefing that Pregnant Then Screwed Scotland has provided, which states that, despite the statutory duty for local authorities to provide out-of-hours care for children with ASN, a staggering 71 per cent of surveyed parents reported serious difficulties in accessing that support.

Recently, I surveyed parents in my Greenock and Inverclyde constituency on this very issue, and my findings reflect Pregnant Then Screwed Scotland's research. I announced one aspect of the survey yesterday, and I will now write to Inverclyde Council and councillors on its education committee as well as going back to the parents with all the findings. However, the key headline results from the survey, which generated more than 119 responses, are as follows: 94 per cent of respondents said that the current out-of-school care options for children with ASN in Inverclyde do not suit their child's needs, 67 per cent do not receive out-of-school care for holiday provision for their ASN child, 69 per cent are either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the current care arrangements for ASN children in Inverclyde, and two thirds of respondents indicated that they have no access to wraparound support. It is unsurprising that the majority are unhappy with the current provision.

The situation is detrimental to children with ASN, but also to the wider family unit, as the impact on siblings and parents is also profound. The implications of a lack of wraparound support are significant not only for the child's wellbeing and development but for the economic security and mental health of their parents.

As Pregnant Then Screwed Scotland's briefing notes, the impact on employment is particularly severe. Michael Marra touched on that. Among those who could not access sufficient childcare, 29 per cent were forced to leave their jobs, 46 per cent had reduced their working hours, 37 per cent relied on informal care, often from ageing grandparents, and 39 per cent were able to continue working only due to flexible arrangements. Those are not just statistics. They represent real lives that are under immense pressure.

I know from speaking with local parents that the summer holidays come with a huge sense of dread. For many people, summer is a chance to enjoy more quality time with friends and family. Going on holiday or going away for the day can be special. However, for families with children with ASN, even one day out can require huge amounts of planning, and even more so if a child requires a changing places toilet.

Michael Marra: I commend Stuart McMillan for his excellent speech and for the survey that he carried out, which echoes many of the findings from my constituency. He touched on the challenges of planning ahead and the need for local authorities to offer options well in advance so that families can plan. Are his constituents in Inverclyde having a similar experience to my constituents, in that they do not have that information in advance?

Stuart McMillan: Yes, that is very much the case. The work that local parents have undertaken, and the pressure that they have put on Inverclyde Council, means that there is now more of a sense of engagement, which I welcome. In advance of this summer, an email was sent to parents in all the schools, asking whether they know of any families who would want to participate and take part in the activities to help children with ASN, so the pressure has been working.

Fundamentally, the issue is about children with ASN having similar opportunities to every other child in our communities. Wraparound care for children with ASN is hugely important and it needs to be given a lot more focus. We are now moving in the right direction, but—my goodness—there is still a long way to go. If there are any positive examples from across the country, I encourage local authorities to engage wider so that they can learn about what else is on offer. Fundamentally, it is about the kids.

13:11

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): I am very pleased to be able to contribute to the debate. I thank my friend Michael Marra for securing debating time on this important topic and for the way that he opened the debate by outlining issues that many members from across the chamber will recognise from their constituencies and regions. It is important that we take this time to discuss those issues and to hold the Government and local authorities to account for a lack of action to deal with them or to move things forward.

At the outset of my remarks, I declare an interest as a former employee of Enable Scotland and a former education convener in a local authority. It is in those guises that I approach the debate, as well as being a member for the West Scotland region who has had representation from many parents, children and young people with a learning disability or additional support needs who are struggling right now. I have been reflecting on Stuart McMillan's comments. He gave a very good speech, and he has carried out his own survey work.

I am reminded that, back in 2016, Enable Scotland produced an important report called “#IncludED in the Main?!” which looked at inclusion across education and childcare. It laid out 22 recommendations for the Government at that time, which encouraged it to think about how young people with additional support needs could be better included in the school day, the supports that are required in relation to wraparound childcare and how children with ASN could be included in activities such as sport, drama and all the other things that we would want all of our young people to be able to access. There were clear recommendations about how we need to support mainstream provision better to ensure that it can be more inclusive and that we have specialist provision.

Since that 2016 report, we have moved backwards on many of the issues that were outlined. That is a matter of great regret, and the Government needs to take it very seriously. It was clear in the work that was done by Enable Scotland that when parents were asked about their experience, they used words such as “battle” to describe their daily experience of getting provision for their child or young person. They talked about the anxiety and dread—which we have already heard about from colleagues—around accessing the support that they need during the summer holidays or other holiday periods. I am concerned that we have not addressed many of the recommendations in the report.

I approach the issue as a former convener of the education committee at East Renfrewshire

Council. In East Renfrewshire, we were very fortunate to have excellent provision at the Isobel Mair school in Newton Mearns. I pay tribute to the school for all the excellent work that goes on there. I am sure that members recognise the excellent provision that is available in many communities.

However, because of significant cuts to council budgets over many years, funding decisions have meant that many opportunities for childcare and support have been reduced. For example, in my time in the council, we had to take decisions to reduce the extended school day and the summer holiday programme. None of us wanted to do that, but we were forced into that position by the inadequate funding from the Government. The Government needs to take cognisance of that and of its decisions—[*Interruption.*] I think that the minister is saying something from a sedentary position. I hope that she will address that point in her summing up, because it is important.

It is clear that there is a will among members across the chamber to get this right and provide adequate support not only so that the children and young people have a rich experience, but to support their parents, who are experiencing stress and anxiety and, as we have heard in the debate, are having to make choices about their working life that are detrimental to our wider economy in Scotland.

It is important that the Government offers its response today and that we, as a Parliament, take the issue seriously, do not forget it and continue to work to ensure that solutions are in place.

13:16

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): I, too, thank Michael Marra for securing this afternoon's debate.

I fully agree with the comments of the two previous speakers. I am sure that members will be tired of hearing me say this, but it bears repeating as often as it takes for the message to break through: disabled people are being left behind in Scotland today. I agree that we have gone backwards in Scotland in the past number of years. Pre-pandemic, the situation was already bad, but, since then, the decline has been escalating and getting worse.

There is a worrying trend emerging as the country struggles to deal with our current economic predicament. It seems that, if sacrifices have to be made, the Government and local authorities are going to the most vulnerable in our society, and that is often disabled individuals. Third sector budgets are being cut and numerous charities are going to the wall. That is leaving undone the vital services that provide vulnerable

people with support when the need for those is getting worse.

Nowhere is that more evident than in the gutting of after-school and holiday care for children with additional support needs. For parents of ASN children, after-school and holiday care is not a luxury; it is absolutely essential to allow them to take part in society and, in many cases, to hold a job to support their family.

A number of constituents have written to me over the past couple of weeks leading up to the debate. They have been put in an impossible situation because of the lack of adequate support. I will give an example. One individual who has written to me is a single parent with two children, the eldest of whom has both autism and ADHD. She is classed as her child's carer but is also pursuing a degree at university. During the most recent school holiday, she managed to secure four days a week for her son at an ASN holiday club, which she describes as a godsend. However, thanks to a decision by the City of Edinburgh Council, she now has only two weeks' cover for the summer holidays. That leaves her with five weeks with no support at all. How do we expect that mother to cope on her own? Moreover, she has told me that ASN children are, in effect, banned from mainstream holiday clubs because the charities that run them cannot afford to pay the staff who are required for one-to-one care.

As members are, I am sure, aware, additional support needs are becoming more prevalent. In Edinburgh, the proportion of children with ASN in education has grown to around 50 per cent. Without support, that represents a huge number of parents who are unable to work because of caring duties, and we should not forget that most of those caring responsibilities fall on women.

That is obviously not good enough. Apart from the morality of ensuring that everyone has access to meaningful work to support their family, it has economic implications for us in Scotland. The Social Justice and Social Security Committee recently produced a report on "Addressing Child Poverty Through Parental Employment", in which it looked at trying to get women back into employment—in fact, that inquiry started back when the current Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise was a member of the committee. One of the key factors was enabling support for women to allow them to go back to work. However, my constituents are being told that, in the summer, there is no support for them.

I am tired of saying this, and I am sure that members are tired of hearing it, but disabled people and their families are being left behind. Children with ASN and their parents deserve our support, and they deserve much better than they are getting now.

I urge the Scottish Government and local authorities to deal with the situation. We have seven weeks until the summer holidays—that is seven weeks for something to be done to help the most vulnerable in our society. I say to the minister that people do not want to hear warm words today; they want action so that they can live normal lives.

13:21

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): Supporting the most vulnerable people in our society at the early stage of their lives is vital if we are going to improve the wellbeing and living standards of people across Scotland, so I thank Michael Marra for bringing the debate to the chamber.

Unfortunately, children with additional support needs are paying the price for a lack of funding by the Scottish National Party Government. Our councils have faced a decade of underfunding, which means that there is massive pressure on education and on local support services in the third sector. Parents have raised the issue with me directly, and I heard from them at an Inspiring Scotland event about the pressures that local charities, our services and parents face.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child says that children with ASN, as well as their carers, have the right to special care and support during the child's growth and development. As Michael Marra highlighted, the need for support does not stop once the school year is finished—if anything, children with ASN and their families or carers require more, not less, support outside term times. However, they suffer from a significant lack of consistent, accessible and affordable summer activities for children with ASN.

I thank the Edinburgh REPAIR—robust engagement with parents for ASN and inclusion reform—network for its excellent briefing. The City of Edinburgh Council organises the holiday hubs scheme, which is fantastic, but we do not have that support at the scale at which it is needed. Last year, only 260 of the 460 applicants were able to get places, and they received at most 16 days, from 9 to 3, of holiday hub care. That means that parents are struggling to balance childcare responsibilities with work obligations. There are massive pressures in that regard, and—as Michael Marra commented—the need for more information and support is key.

Studies have shown that children with ASN mostly just want to feel included, but the summer holidays bring isolation, boredom and social exclusion. The lack of support means that those young people and their working parents are going to struggle to get the opportunities that they need,

and working parents are struggling to work around their jobs to care for their kids.

Carers of children with ASN often experience burnout and isolation as a result of those increased pressures. A 2020 report by Shared Care Scotland, “‘Holidays or Isolation?’ Research into holiday activity provision for disabled children and young people in Scotland”, noted that

“96% of respondents said that the summer holidays were when they needed most support.”

As Jeremy Balfour said, we need action, not warm words. The adult carer support plan was introduced under the Carers (Scotland) Act 2016, which states that local authorities “must provide support to” unpaid carers. However, the “State of Caring in Scotland 2024” research

“found that just 20% of unpaid carers said they had received an ACSP in the last 12 months.”

We need action now, and the lack of funding is a key reason why parents and their children are not getting the support that they need. Michael Marra's point about having clarity on the additional funding that has been mentioned is absolutely critical. I want to know what that means for the councils in my region, because the holidays are weeks away and parents and their children need support now. We need increased investment, training and support for our carers, recognising and amplifying the vital role that they play in safeguarding Scotland's public health, keeping our economy going and, crucially, giving our young people the support that they need now so that they can achieve their potential. Everybody should be signed up to that, and the Government needs to give that support now.

13:25

The Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise (Natalie Don-Innes): I thank Mr Marra for raising this issue and for leading the debate, and I thank all members for their speeches. I am sorry to hear some of the accounts that members have read out in relation to families' access to services.

The subject of support for children who have disabilities and additional support needs—be it during the school day or, as has been highlighted in the debate, outside of school hours, such as during the holidays or activities—is an important and emotive one. That has been demonstrated by the passionate speeches that members have made.

I acknowledge the concerns and will respond to some of the points that have been made in the debate before setting out how we plan to address those concerns.

I hear very clearly the frustrations and challenges that are experienced by the parents and carers of children who have disabilities and additional support needs—from accessing specialist services that meet their expectations and provide quality experiences for their children to finding sustainable employment opportunities that are manageable around established care routines.

I have also heard parents and carers express the challenges that they experience in finding and accessing the services that they need to support them to work, when that is possible, to allow time for a short break and to ensure equality of opportunity for their children to take part in activities and play.

When it is available, holiday activity provision plays a vital role in supporting both child and parental health and wellbeing and has a disproportionately powerful impact on the lives of disabled children and their families. That can be extremely positive when the system works well but problematic when it does not.

Despite the challenges, many high-quality and well-established services are being delivered across Scotland. Many of them have been highlighted in the debate, and I commend the good work of local authorities and the third sector in delivering that support for families. Those services are often supported by parents and volunteers, which takes dedication and time.

However, I recognise that more must be done to ensure fair and consistent provision for children and families, and I acknowledge that a postcode lottery can sometimes exist, particularly in more remote and rural areas. I reaffirm the Government's commitment to getting it right for every child.

As members have noted throughout the debate, the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 places statutory duties on local authorities to provide care, as is appropriate, to children in need in their area

“outside school hours; or... during school holidays”.

Local authorities have a statutory duty to consult

“at least once every two years”

the parents and carers of children in their area about providing appropriate care. They also have a duty to

“prepare and publish their plans in relation to the provision of”

such care. When that works well, that should help in relation to the delays and issues with planning ahead that members have raised. If local authorities have concerns about what they find following consultation, they are able to discuss those with the Government.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): Will the minister take an intervention?

Natalie Don-Innes: Of course.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I pressed the wrong button to indicate that I wanted to make an intervention, but I thank the minister for taking it anyway.

On the point about consultation, across Scotland but particularly in Glasgow, parents tell me that they do not feel engaged with local authority decisions on support for their children with additional support needs. What is the Government doing to monitor how local authorities engage with parents on that?

Natalie Don-Innes: I am disappointed to hear that. What I will say at the end of my speech about what the Government is doing will directly address that point.

Local consultation should help local authorities to understand the specific needs of families with a child who has a disability or additional support needs. For example, I know that Dundee City Council has undertaken work to map its term-time and holiday services in order to show where providers can deliver a service for children with additional needs. However, as members have pointed out, that is not necessarily happening in the same way across all local authority areas, and that will need to be addressed.

Mr Marra has noted this already, but I am pleased to say that, in order to support local authorities in delivering provision for children during the holidays this year, we have committed in our programme for government to providing an additional £1 million of funding that will be targeted at holiday play schemes and activities for children with a disability. That investment will be distributed across local authorities, and it is to be delivered this summer. I hope that Mr Marra and members across the chamber will welcome that measure.

Jeremy Balfour: I do welcome that announcement, minister, but will you also commit to meeting the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities as soon as possible before the summer holidays to find out what is happening on the ground and what extra help the Scottish Government could give local authorities for this summer?

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

Natalie Don-Innes: Again, what I will touch on at the end of my speech will address that point directly, but I have regular meetings with Councillor Tony Buchanan, the COSLA spokesperson, and I am more than happy to discuss the issue with him at my next meeting, which I believe will be arranged in due course.

The Government is absolutely committed to building a system of school-age childcare that meets the needs of all children, families and communities. Through projects that we have been funding with our investment to date, we are learning what is needed to provide high-quality, affordable activities and childcare provision for children with multiple and complex disabilities, as well as for children with additional support needs. The projects include those supported by our access to childcare fund and our early adopter communities in Fife, Shetland, Glasgow, Clackmannanshire, Inverclyde and Dundee. Projects such as Support, Help and Integration in Perthshire have been supporting families of children with profound and multiple learning difficulties for years and, since 2020, our funding has been supporting children and parents to access a reliable and high-quality service round about the school day and in the holidays.

Understanding the specific needs of families and children with disabilities or additional support needs through early delivery of services is a key part of the work of the school-age childcare programme. From our learning to date, we know that individual and creative solutions are often needed to ensure that a service is the right fit for a child and their family. Our reporting processes will help to develop a picture of the number and proportion of families accessing childcare and family support services who have children with disabilities or additional support needs. I hope that that response helps to address some of the concerns that have been highlighted.

In addition to the investment in learning, my officials are beginning to work with partners across local government to understand the range of approaches being taken to implement their statutory duties. By working through an improvement lens and identifying opportunities to strengthen existing approaches across local authorities, we will move towards a position that ensures that families have the support that they need, regardless of where they reside in Scotland.

Michael Marra: Will the member give way?

Natalie Don-Innes: Do I have time, Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Yes.

Michael Marra: I appreciate the minister taking the time to give way. I know that she would like to welcome Nicola Donnelly, my constituent, to the gallery. Unfortunately, Nicola missed my opening speech due to the changeover.

I really appreciate the minister's tone and the proactive approach that she is taking. However, the issue of timing and forward notice is particularly concerning to me. Will she emphasise in her discussions with officials the fact that people

have to be able to plan? Will she consider, say, a charter of best practice for local authorities that will allow families to plan, ensure that they have the details that they require and make things easy with regard to funding? It might be, say, a simple checklist to ensure that local authorities are meeting this aim and taking a best-practice approach across the country.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give you the time back, minister.

Natalie Don-Innes: I am happy to consider all options. Mr Marra will know that I cannot commit to anything in the chamber, but, as I have said, local government and the Scottish Government are embarking on work to try to find a solution, and I have committed to raising the issue at my next meeting with Councillor Tony Buchanan.

Once again, I thank Mr Marra for bringing the debate to the chamber. It is, and will continue to be, an important and challenging issue, but it is one that, with local authorities at the forefront of delivery, we must collectively work to resolve.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate.

13:34

Meeting suspended.

14:30

On resuming—

Portfolio Question Time

Social Justice

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Good afternoon. The first item of business this afternoon is portfolio question time, and the portfolio is social justice. I advise members that there is quite a bit of interest in supplementary questions, so brevity in questions and responses would be appreciated.

Disabled People (Support)

1. James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what steps it is taking to improve support for disabled people, including when seeking employment. (S6O-04632)

The Minister for Equalities (Kaukab Stewart): We recognise the need for greater support for disabled people, including in employment. That is why we have committed an extra £2 million to our disability equality plan. We have also provided £5 million, through the equalities and human rights fund, to support people's rights. Since 2018, we have invested £4.5 million through the workplace equality fund and a public social partnership to help employers tackle labour market barriers.

Learning from those initiatives is being shared to ensure that employers across Scotland can access tools and guidance to implement fair work and support disabled people to secure and sustain employment.

James Dornan: As the Westminster Government launches a green paper proposing more cuts to the financial support for disabled people, more disabled people will be forced into seeking employment without the necessary support being available to help them overcome their physical and mental barriers to that often daunting, if not impossible, process. Does the minister agree that, thanks to the poorly thought-out decisions of the Labour Government, it is clear that an already vulnerable community may now face even greater fear and alarm over their future? Will she tell me, and the local community organisations I met recently to discuss their fears and concerns about the impacts of those cuts, how the Scottish Government can further support them at this time of ever-increasing need?

Kaukab Stewart: The welfare reforms set out in the United Kingdom Government's "Pathways to Work" green paper make it clear that the UK Government has prioritised spending cuts over the welfare of sick and disabled people across the UK. The Scottish Government, however, is clear that

the chancellor should not be looking to balance the books by targeting the benefits that sick and disabled people rely on. We strongly reject the welfare proposals, and we call on the UK Government to scrap them immediately.

I reaffirm that the Scottish Government aims to take a different approach to welfare, ensuring that everyone is treated with dignity, fairness and respect. As is set out in the new programme for government, we will offer enhanced support for disabled people to move into sustainable employment through specialist employability support from July 2025 onwards, and we have provided a £5 million uplift to support that.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): The minister rightly criticises the Westminster Government, but does she recognise that the disability plan that she has been working on has been overwhelmingly rejected by disability charities and disabled individuals? Will she re-engage with the disability community in a meaningful way, instead of imposing stuff that it knows will not work in practice?

Kaukab Stewart: I thank Mr Balfour for his continued interest and for championing the issue, but I take issue with his view on the matter. We are investing £2.5 million in the disability equality plan, which is an increase of £2 million. That will drive meaningful change in the lives of disabled people.

Priorities have been informed by recent engagements with disabled people's organisations, and we are working to align that investment with the areas that have been identified. We remain committed to listening to disabled people and ensuring that their voices shape the decisions and delivery of the funding.

Child Poverty Support (Coatbridge and Chryston)

2. Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what steps it is taking to reduce child poverty and ensure that targeted support reaches local families most in need in Coatbridge and Chryston and other deprived areas. (S6O-04633)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): We are providing a range of support that will benefit families in Coatbridge and Chryston and across Scotland, including investment in the Scottish child payment, early learning and childcare, and free bus travel for under-22s. Between February 2021 and December 2024, more than 530,000 Scottish child payments worth more than £77 million were made to low-income families in North Lanarkshire. That action is making a real difference. On average, households with children that are in the poorest 10

per cent of households are, this year, estimated to be £2,600 a year better off because of Scottish Government policies.

Fulton MacGregor: I welcome the steps that the Scottish Government is taking, which the cabinet secretary has outlined. With evidence suggesting that poverty is increasingly affecting working families, can the cabinet secretary provide details of how the Government is working with local employers and job support services in Coatbridge and Chryston and across Lanarkshire to tackle in-work poverty, especially for parents who are juggling low-paid jobs with caring responsibilities?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Last year, we made up to £90 million available to local authorities to support the delivery of our no one left behind approach to employability services, including more than £2.1 million for North Lanarkshire Council for parental employment support, which supports parents both in and out of work to increase their earnings. Between April 2021 and September 2024, we supported almost 20,000 parents through our devolved employability services. The programme for government, which was published this week, has committed us to further action, with a further £90 million for employability services and funding for pilot projects that will focus on inclusive recruitment practices to support people to enter and progress in the workplace.

Housing and Homelessness Systems (Racism)

3. **Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to tackle any racism in Scotland's housing and homelessness systems. (S6O-04634)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Scotland is determined to play our part in eradicating racism, inequality and injustice and in building a better, fairer world. We are investing £768 million in affordable housing in 2025-26. Local authorities are responsible for assessing local housing need and demand, as well as setting out how that will be met through local housing strategies and strategic housing investment plans. They should ensure that equality is central to housing and housing service delivery. The Scottish social housing charter, which is monitored by the housing regulator, also requires social landlords to provide fair access to housing in a way that recognises individual needs.

Elena Whitham: Statistics recently highlighted by Shelter Scotland show that black people and people of colour are bearing the brunt of Scotland's housing emergency, with 27 per cent of all failures to provide temporary accommodation and 28 per cent of unsuitable accommodation

order breaches being experienced by those households. They can also expect to spend longer in temporary accommodation than white Scottish households. Will the cabinet secretary update the chamber on the actions that the Scottish Government can take to target support for those families who are facing systemic inequalities in Scotland's housing system?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I thank Elena Whitham for raising an important issue. I hope that I can reassure her that the theme of equality runs through our homelessness strategy, "Ending Homelessness Together", which is underpinned by a person-centred approach. We expect local authorities to meet the needs of each homeless household and to pay due regard to the public sector equality duty as they carry out those functions.

The number of children in temporary accommodation is too high. Of the £768 million that we will invest in affordable housing in 2025-26, £40 million will be targeted at local authorities with sustained temporary accommodation pressures, in order to increase through acquisitions the supply of social homes, including larger homes that are suitable for families. I hope that that will assist local authorities to address the challenges that Ms Whitham has highlighted.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 4 has not been lodged.

Accessible Housing Stock

5. **Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what further action it can take to increase the stock of accessible housing. (S6O-04636)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): We are increasing the supply of accessible and adapted homes across Scotland. To support tenants to live safely and independently, we have increased the budget for registered social landlord adaptations for 2025-26 by more than 150 per cent, to £20.9 million. We have also consulted on proposals to enhance the accessibility and adaptability of Scotland's homes, which include proposed updates to the "Housing for Varying Needs" design guide as well as the introduction of a Scottish accessible homes standard through changes to building standards and guidance. The analysis of that consultation will inform our next steps.

Katy Clark: A constituent in Irvine has been waiting for housing with wheelchair access since May 2022. Another constituent in Ardrossan, who also has serious health conditions, has been informed that they will have to wait 12 years, even though they are sleeping on the sofa and the lack of a downstairs toilet means that they have to use

a commode. As the cabinet secretary knows, this is a Scotland-wide problem. What more can the Scottish Government do to increase the stock of accessible housing across Scotland? Does the cabinet secretary think that there is consistency of provision in different local authorities?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: That is an important aspect that we should, rightly, be discussing in Parliament. It ties into Elena Whitham's question about the challenge for the Government and local authorities to ensure that housing is available to everyone and that their particular needs are taken into account. In my answers to Elena Whitham, I mentioned the responsibilities not just of the Scottish Government but of local authorities through their local housing strategies and through the public sector equality duty and equality impact assessments, which we are all required to have at the heart of our discussions.

I appreciate that there are challenges that we all need to rise to. I hope that my original answer detailed some of the work that is going on at Scottish Government level to increase provision in the area. As the providers of housing, local authorities also need to take that into account very seriously.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): Will the cabinet secretary provide an update on the impact of Scottish Government investment on levels of affordable and accessible housing? Will she also provide an update on how the Scottish Government continues to invest in voids and acquisitions as part of its affordable housing supply programme to address temporary accommodation pressures?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: It is very important that the increased investment that the Scottish Government is putting into affordable housing, which amounts to £768 million, is used to unlock the new affordable homes that are required. We estimate that the money for 2025-26 will deliver more than 8,000 affordable homes. Important work is also going on through the housing investment task force, and the Government will look very keenly at that work to see what more can be done to unlock new investment opportunities across all tenures. I reassure Stuart McMillan that an estimated 2,669 households with children have been helped into affordable housing in the year to December 2024. That is an important part of the work that we must all undertake to ensure that children and their families are well housed.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): There is a significant shortage of accessible housing in Mid Scotland and Fife, which impacts disabled individuals, particularly those who require wheelchair-accessible homes. Although some local authorities have committed to building more accessible homes, the current rates

of construction are insufficient to meet the growing demand. What further action can be taken to achieve a resolution to this crisis?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As I mentioned, the £768 million of investment that has been allocated for 2025-26, which Alexander Stewart did not vote for as the budget went through the Parliament, is an important part of that, as is the work that has been undertaken to increase the budget for registered social landlords to allow for the adaptation of current homes. The investment in new builds and in adaptations by RSLs shows the Government's commitment to helping to increase the provision of affordable homes, including for those who have particular design needs due to a disability or long-term condition.

Carer Support Payment (Earnings Limit)

6. Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (LD): To ask the Scottish Government what further consideration it has given to increasing or removing the earnings limit for recipients of the carer support payment. (S6O-04637)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): The recent earnings limit increase for 2025-26, from £151 to £196 a week, means that carers in Scotland can earn £45 more per week and still get the carer support payment. That will help to remove barriers to work and provide more stable support. The earnings limit for the carer support payment will continue to be aligned with carers allowance until the case transfer process is completed later this year. We continue to consider stakeholder feedback, learning from live delivery of the carer support payment and from engagement with the Department for Work and Pensions on its plans for carers allowance in order to develop future policy on earnings rules from 2026-27 onwards.

Jamie Greene: The increase to £196 per week is welcome in the care sector, but it still involves a cliff edge. If people go £1 over the earnings limit, they lose the benefit in its entirety. The problem with that is that people face a choice between refusing to do more hours or accept pay rises, or putting in more working hours and perhaps being able to care much less. I do not think that either of those outcomes is good.

I ask the Government, in response to calls from Liberal Democrat members and the third sector, to give serious consideration to some form of tapering of the benefit so that there is not a cliff-edge cut-off. We hope that such an approach will get people back into work but allow them still to perform their caring duties.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As we have developed the carer support payment, I have had discussions with carers organisations. I assure

Jamie Greene that I fully appreciate the importance of the point that he makes. I reassure him that we are already trying to undertake—and have undertaken—work with carers to make sure that the information on the earnings rules for carer support payment, as it stands, is clearer. For example, to provide more stable support, we average out carers' earnings and use data from His Majesty's Revenue and Customs and scheduled reviews to check and track earnings, in order, I hope, to assist with some of the challenges.

As we have gone on with the consultation, there have been differing views on the earnings taper. The analysis was that that would introduce significant complexity for carers and their interactions with wider support. As I said in my original answer, as future policy on earnings develops—and once the case transfer is complete—we will continue to consider that approach. I absolutely take the member's point about the concerns that carers have raised. However, I urge caution, because it is an exceptionally complex area. We need to ensure that the differences that any change will make to the wider support for carers, some of which is still reserved, are taken into account. I assure Mr Greene that we will do that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Collette Stevenson has a brief supplementary question.

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): Unpaid carers offer vital support to their loved ones, and it is important that they are recognised for that dedication while pursuing their ambitions.

How many young people in full-time education now benefit from the payment, and how will the Scottish Government continue to support young carers in education?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The carer support payment is available to many full-time students, who would have been unable to get carers allowance under the Department for Work and Pensions—we estimate that that will assist 1,500 more carers. Carers aged 16, 17 and 18 who are not getting carer support payment might be able to get a young carer grant, which supports 9,400 carers. Again, that is not available elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

Social Security Scotland (Benefits Delivery)

7. Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made to ensure the timely delivery of benefits by Social Security Scotland. (S6O-04638)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Social Security Scotland has significantly improved processing times. In April 2023, processing time for adult

disability payments was 96 working days, and the latest statistics from January 2025 show it as 42 days.

The agency's flexible approach manages client demand effectively. Along with new applicants being supported, more than 390,000 people have now had their awards transferred from the Department for Work and Pensions. Client satisfaction remains high, and 90 per cent rate their overall experience as "very good" or "good". I hope that that reassures Ms Thomson that the Government is taking very seriously the need for improvements in processing times.

Michelle Thomson: Since the agency was set up six years ago, there has been a quite remarkable delivery of 15 benefits. What assurances can the cabinet secretary give about the available capacity at Social Security Scotland, particularly given the transfer of some 66,000 disability living allowance recipients to Scottish adult disability living allowance? What progress has been made in approving accessibility of key performance indicator data in order to assist with the improved scrutiny of how Social Security Scotland is functioning overall?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: In the past six years, the agency has grown at pace and is now delivering 15 benefits, seven of which are available only in Scotland. This winter, the agency will introduce the pension age winter heating payment, which will restore winter fuel payments for pensioners.

Social Security Scotland actively manages its workforce to ensure that resources are managed effectively and efficiently, ensuring that there is value for money for the public and that it delivers on requirements. That involves managing application peaks and the challenges that inevitably come with the roll-out of additional benefits, such as the pension age disability payment and the winter fuel payments that I mentioned earlier.

Affordable Homes Target

8. Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on its own reported assessment that its target of delivering 110,000 affordable homes by 2032 is at risk. (S6O-04639)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): We remain focused on delivering 110,000 affordable homes across Scotland by 2032, with at least 70 per cent for social rent and 10 per cent in our rural and island communities, backed by the investment of £768 million in 2025-26.

We will continue to work with partners to increase the number and availability of affordable

homes to help to tackle the housing emergency and deliver on our target.

Paul O’Kane: Delivering more affordable homes is a vital component of tackling the tragedy of there being 10,000 homeless children in Scotland. No matter how much the First Minister would like the Labour Party to

“move on and find something else to talk about or to moan about”,—[*Official Report*, 6 May 2025; c 29.]

which I noticed that he doubled down on at First Minister’s question time today, when he told us to stop “whinging”, we will continue to hold the Government to account for that failure and to advocate for action to help those 10,000 homeless children.

On accountability, given that the affordable housing supply programme risk register, obtained by Scottish Labour through a freedom of information request, shows that staffing, financial and commercial risks are all so high that the 110,000 target is at risk, what is the Scottish Government doing to address those risks—or does the cabinet secretary, like the First Minister, think that we should all just move on from the issue?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I assure the member that the Government is absolutely determined to deliver on the 110,000 affordable homes target. What the First Minister was pointing to—and I make no apology for also doing so—is the hypocrisy of the Labour Party in coming to the chamber to talk about putting more money into housing when it would not even support the £768 million that is in this year’s budget. I will not stop going on about that this year, and nor will the First Minister.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There are a number of supplementaries, and I will try to get them all in. They will need to be brief, as will the responses.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): The best way to make housing affordable for Scots is to build more homes, but we know that the Scottish National Party Government’s housing policy has led to the loss of £3 billion of investment from the private sector. Will the cabinet secretary work with the sector to ensure that housing providers can do their job without further interference from the Government?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I have heard loud and clear from investors who wish to invest more in Scotland about the importance of ensuring that we balance the rent controls that we are bringing in to protect tenants with the need to provide certainty. I find it astounding that Meghan Gallacher has asked that question two days after she made it easier for rent controls to apply in

Scotland rather than take her supposed principled stand against them. She will have to answer for that to private investors directly.

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): I am proud of the SNP Government’s record on delivering affordable housing for families across Scotland. I am not sure that Mr O’Kane can say the same about his party, which famously delivered only six council properties in its last four years in government. Will the cabinet secretary outline how the Scottish Government will work tirelessly to meet the target of 110,000 homes by 2032, particularly through investment in the 2025-26 Scottish budget, which the Labour Party did not engage with, let alone vote for?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The budget for 2025-26 sees an increase of more than £211 million when compared with the 2024-25 published budget, which is more than £180 million in capital and almost £31 million in financial transactions. That is a demonstration of this Government’s determination to continue to deliver on affordable homes.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): Purpose-built student accommodation, alongside affordable accommodation, is important. I do not believe that purpose-built student accommodation should be in the Housing (Scotland) Bill. Does the cabinet secretary agree?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As Willie Rennie will know, the Government has introduced a bill that does not include purpose-built student accommodation. I do not wish to see purpose-built student accommodation included in rent controls, and the Government will not support any amendment that seeks to include it.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions on social justice. To allow members on the front benches to change over, there will be a brief pause before we move on to our next item of business.

Relationships and Behaviour in Schools

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a statement by Jenny Gilruth on relationships and behaviour in schools. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:55

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): Today's update on relationships and behaviour in schools follows the progress made on the national action plan that was published last August by the Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. I can inform members that further progress, most notably on consequences, will be published before the summer recess.

As cabinet secretary, I spend much of my time engaging with teachers and other school staff across the country. Over the past six months, I have hosted a series of regional events, with all of Scotland's secondary school headteachers being invited to attend, and we are now halfway through the events for all primary school headteachers. I again pay tribute to teachers in Scotland's schools, from Dumfries to Inverness and Aberdeen, who are helping to make a difference every day. Those events have been pivotal in allowing us to hear about the post-Covid challenges that our schools face and in creating the necessary conditions to have frank and pragmatic conversations about the solutions with those who are at the chalkface.

I stress the need to look beyond party politics and to work across the Parliament to collectively discuss solutions. There is a role for each of us in working together, with the interests of our young people in mind. That is why, in advance of the publication of the behaviour action plan, I engaged with Opposition members to hear their ideas for solutions. A further example of that approach was the First Minister's youth justice summit, at which members from across the Parliament heard directly from young people. A further discussion will take place shortly, and I look forward to continuing that conversation with all parties.

We all know that the reasons underpinning trends in behaviour are complex. Staff who responded to the behaviour in Scottish schools research highlighted the impact of wider societal factors—including poverty, deprivation and the cost of living crisis—as the root cause of some disruptive behaviour. Given that a core mission of the Government is getting it right for every child,

we have a commitment to support all young people to help them to reach their potential.

I turn to my update on the relationships and behaviour in schools action plan. Importantly, the plan is jointly owned with COSLA to reflect the sharing of legal responsibilities between the Government and our councils, which carry the statutory responsibility for running Scotland's schools. The plan was developed in collaboration with the Scottish advisory group on relationships and behaviour in schools, which means that it was informed by our main teaching unions, the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland, Education Scotland, the Association of Scottish Principal Educational Psychologists, parent representatives and wider stakeholders.

The plan contains 20 overarching actions under eight themes and is to be delivered by March 2027, and the first progress report was published at the end of March. Between November 2023 and March 2025, good progress was made against all 20 actions that are set out in the plan. I will take a few moments to highlight some of that progress.

We have prioritised responding to emerging areas of concern. That is why new guidance has been published on preventing and responding to gender-based violence and on mobile phones. We have also updated "Respect for All", our national anti-bullying guidance, to include strong messages about our expectation that all instances of bullying should be recorded.

Our national education agencies have a crucial role here. In November 2023, I announced support, spearheaded by our interim chief inspector of schools, to ensure that inspections by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education support improvements in behaviour in our schools. As part of inspections, every school in Scotland now receives enhanced feedback on relationships and behaviour. Education Scotland has been supporting local authorities and schools with bespoke professional learning, tailored to the needs of their staff, on topics such as expectations, consequences and de-escalation.

Practical resources to support staff on specific topics have also developed. That work includes updating the "Keeping Your Cool in School" programme, which uses discussion and reflection to equip primary-aged children to recognise and manage strong emotions. As part of the violence prevention framework, partners in the third sector have launched the "Quit Fighting for Likes" campaign, which includes a suite of resources for teachers to engage young people in conversations that are aimed at preventing the filming and sharing of violent incidents on social media. That is just a snapshot of some of the action that is detailed more fully in the progress report, with which I am sure members have engaged.

Today, I will focus on our next steps in the action plan, with particular reference to two areas that are of specific concern to members: the increase in gender-based violence and responding to the most challenging behaviour in our schools.

Like many members, I was deeply concerned by the recent NASUWT and Educational Institute of Scotland findings on the experiences of female teachers and staff, which echo those of our own BISS research. As a female politician, I have to say that the findings are, sadly, also reflective of some of the experiences that are encountered by women in politics in 2025. That is because our classrooms can hold up a mirror to who we are as a society. Therefore, we should not divorce wider societal shifts from behaviour in Scotland's schools.

Gender-based violence should not be tolerated in our society. Important conversations are needed about how to address the attitudes that are influencing such violence, and I welcomed my most recent meeting with the NASUWT to that end on Friday, when I attended its conference.

I have already highlighted the good work that is being done on the gender-based violence framework, which was launched last year. We are also continuing our investment in the mentors in violence prevention and Equally Safe at School programmes, which are aimed at addressing violence against women and girls.

I am particularly concerned about the impact of online content. In January, I was fortunate to attend the launch of the new digital discourse initiative. The free resource provides practical strategies and curriculum tools to support school staff to challenge online hate and disinformation. I heard at first hand from staff and pupils at Cathkin high school about how helpful that resource has been in aiding the understanding of terminology and providing practical tools to address those issues in schools. As part of the programme for government, we have committed to further supporting that initiative.

Beyond gender-based violence, we know that the rise of extremism and far-right ideology across wider society is having a detrimental impact on our young people. That concern was shared by the teaching trade unions when I met them all yesterday as part of our professional association forum. As I confirmed at last Friday's NASUWT conference, I have committed to engaging further on that topic, building on the gathering that the First Minister held two weeks ago, to understand the role of our education system in tackling the harms of the far right. Today, I extend an invitation to all MSPs to be part of that alliance and to work collectively with the Government to tackle the threat of the far right and, in particular, the threat that extremism brings to women in society.

I turn to the steps that we are taking to respond to the most serious behaviour in our schools. This year, as part of our broader investment in violence prevention, we are investing £2 million to address youth violence and the carrying of weapons in and around our schools. That brings our total investment to more than £6 million since 2023. Such investment supports Medics Against Violence to engage with young people in schools and youth clubs to address the consequences in our schools of knife carrying and knife injuries. It also supports YouthLink Scotland to deliver the no knives, better lives programme, to develop resources and to deliver training sessions to hundreds of practitioners and young people.

I recognise the BISSR findings, which were reinforced by our relationships and behaviour summits, that staff can feel disempowered by using consequences. However, I am absolutely clear that consequences are an essential part of a supportive learning environment. As I mentioned, we will publish new guidance on consequences before the summer recess, and I will update the Parliament at that point.

I also recognise the concerns that have been raised about the potential underreporting of incidents and about variation in practice among local authorities. We have already refreshed guidance on the recording of bullying incidents and, during phase 2 of the plan, we will undertake a broader review of processes for recording incidents, including violent incidents, to identify potential means of streamlining processes and improving consistency.

Our schools and school workforce remain central to all that. In recognition of their importance, we are investing an additional £29 million in this year's budget to support provision of the additional support needs workforce in our schools. That resource will be used to support the recruitment, retention and training of the whole of the inclusion workforce.

I am aware of how much interest there is in this topic across the chamber. That is why, ahead of the publication of the national action plan, I engaged with all parties and their suggestions for improvements. I hope that party spokespeople can see some of those suggestions reflected in the national action plan and in our progress to date. In a similar spirit, as we enter phase 2 of the plan, I am keen to engage on the development of further solutions so that, collectively, we can consider how they might be integrated in the plan.

I have set out the progress that has been made during the first nine months of the action plan and my commitment to further action. I hope that members across the chamber can share that commitment as we move to the next phase of the action plan. We all share the ambition to make our

schools safe and consistent learning environments and, in so doing, support Scotland's young people and teachers.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The cabinet secretary will take questions on the issues raised in her statement. There will be around 20 minutes for questions, after which we will move on to the next item of business. I encourage members who wish to ask a question to press their request-to-speak buttons.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of the statement.

At a time when teaching unions are reporting record levels of violence in our classrooms and teachers are requesting self-defence training, I continue to have deep concerns that the plan and what has been outlined today will not end violence in our classrooms and schools.

Teachers and parents with whom I have spoken said that they had not even heard of the relationship and behaviour in schools action plan. Ministers have a long way to go to demonstrate and give confidence to teachers and our school communities that the plan will deliver the safe school environments that we all want to see. Teachers want to know that they will be supported and that any decisions on disruptive and violent pupils, whom they cannot manage in the classroom, will be respected, including by council management.

The cabinet secretary says that consequences are an essential part of a supportive learning environment—I agree. One of the action plan outcomes was that school staff should

“feel confident to report, record, monitor, assess and respond to individual incidents and patterns of behaviour”.

Will the new guidance on consequences include a presumption that, if a pupil has been violent towards a member of staff—including towards classroom assistants, which I believe is not being recorded—they will be kept out of the classroom until their behaviour changes?

Jenny Gilruth: Miles Briggs raises a number of important points. I will try to summarise them all—forgive me if I forget any of them. I am more than happy to meet him to talk about the issues at length.

I had substantive discussions with the teaching unions yesterday, in advance of the committee session that Miles Briggs and I attended last night. We talked for two hours about some of the broader issues related to the challenges in our classrooms. The NASUWT's research on the matter, in addition to that of the EIS, has been seminal to the national action plan.

I hear the challenge from Mr Briggs about where the action plan is now. I hope that he understands the tone that I am taking and that I am continuing to engage with Opposition parties on the plan. I recognise that we have got to get it right. I engaged substantively with Liam Kerr, Mr Briggs's predecessor as his party's spokesperson on education—he was at the table, engaging with me and other parties on the draft action plan.

Part of my response today set out that, as we approach phase 2, there will be further information coming in relation to consequences. I am more than happy to engage with Mr Briggs on that. He is correct to say that teachers must be supported in our schools—he will know that I take the issue very seriously, having come from the classroom myself. He spoke about the role of council or school management—he will also know some of my frustrations, as the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, in relation to the different responsibilities of the Government and of local authorities in that space, which are stipulated in law. We share legal responsibilities, which is exactly why the national action plan ties COSLA to the work.

Mr Briggs also raised an issue about parents' lack of understanding or knowledge of the plan. I accept that. The point was also raised by Mike Corbett of the NASUWT. I discussed the point extensively with Councillor Tony Buchanan, the COSLA spokesperson for children and young people, and on the back of that, he and I wrote to the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland about helping to support that confidence raising.

We need to use the national action plan to inform behaviour policy in our schools. I will continue my work on that, but I would welcome the member's support. In every school that I go into, I am constantly surprised and amazed by some of the approaches that are being used. We need to ensure that the action plan is giving support where it is needed. The budget also provides extra funding for additional support for learning, which was a key ask from the teaching trade unions.

The member asked a final question about SAGRABIS and violent behaviour. I am happy to take that question away, because the guidance on consequences will not be published until next week. Although I do not want to prejudge the outcome of that work, my firm expectation is that it will be in agreement with the member's point.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): The cabinet secretary said that staff need to feel supported to manage behaviour. I agree, but that support must be systemic, not sticking plasters.

Staff are exhausted, stressed and underresourced, and they are being asked to

deliver a national behaviour strategy while ASN provision is stretched and wider support services have vanished. In too many cases, dealing with violence in schools has become expected and is simply seen as being part of the job.

Last year, Parliament agreed to a motion in my name that called for a national workforce plan to be produced. That motion was agreed to, but the Government has not yet delivered. The action plan is too little, too late. The cabinet secretary has talked about working across parties, but the motion that the Parliament agreed to had cross-party support. Why has a workforce plan not been published? How can phase 2 of the strategy work when the workforce that it relies on still lacks the support that it needs?

Jenny Gilruth: I thank the member for her interest in the matter. I agree that a systemic approach is needed, rather than sticking plasters, but I am not sure that I agree with the member's point that teachers are being asked to deliver a strategy. We are talking about a plan to support our classroom teachers, our middle leaders and our leaders in schools. I have not come up with that plan on my own; it is a plan that is jointly owned by COSLA and the teaching trade unions. They have fed into the work and have told Government and local authorities exactly what support their members need. I think that that gives the plan a strength that will mean that it should help to support the profession.

The member mentioned a motion on workforce planning that was voted for some time ago. I reassure her that work on that is being taken forward. However, as the member will know—I discussed this with her yesterday evening, which does not feel that long ago—some of the issues that I have experienced in that regard relate to the legal responsibilities that rest with local government as an employer, so we need to work with COSLA on that. That work is being progressed as part of the education assurance board, which was a key component of the budget agreement with COSLA, as part of which extra funding was provided for teacher numbers and for ASN provision. That is so important.

I am not sure what point the member is making to me, but I am more than happy to catch her after question time to discuss the matter in further detail.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Around 13 colleagues wish to ask questions, and they have around 14 minutes in which to ask them, so I would welcome brevity in the questions and the responses.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I welcome the cabinet secretary's statement. Pupils are well aware that there are

few, if any, tangible consequences to bad behaviour. It is obvious that allowing persistently disruptive pupils to remain in classrooms come what may, it would seem, is not working for staff and well-behaved pupils, who are undermined by constant disruption, which makes learning difficult and sometimes impossible.

It is time to remove persistently disruptive pupils from classrooms to where their behaviour can be closely monitored, and for them to be given an opportunity to return, should their behaviour improve. Will the consequential improvements that the cabinet secretary is looking to deliver be in place for the autumn term?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That is not the brevity of question that we are looking for.

Jenny Gilruth: I sincerely hope that those improvements will be in place for the autumn term. Mr Gibson's point was about consequences and, in response to Mr Briggs, I mentioned the further work on consequences, which will be published before the summer recess. It is worth while recounting the fact that teachers in Scotland can already take a range of actions in responding to disruptive behaviour, and that, at the furthest extreme, exclusion remains an option that is open to them.

As I set out in my statement, we will publish the new guidance on consequences before the summer. I am clear that consequences are an essential part of a supportive learning environment, and I will provide more information on our approach in that respect when we publish the guidance in June.

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I welcome the fact that the cabinet secretary has come to the conclusion—two and a half years after we first mentioned the issue—that consequences are an essential part of a supportive learning environment.

We have recently heard about examples of headteachers who have taken decisions to limit mobile phone use in classrooms, but I note that the statement did not fully address the connection between mobile phone use and behaviour. Does the cabinet secretary agree that the use of such devices to access unchecked content is contributing to aggressive behaviour among some pupils in our schools, and that that issue needs to be highlighted?

Jenny Gilruth: I very much agree with the sentiment of the member's question, although I am not sure that I have taken two and a half years to come to the conclusion that consequences are required in our schools. As someone who taught in the classroom, I know that consequences and rules are very important in delivering education,

especially when trying to do so to a large group of unruly young people.

On the member's point about the connection between mobile phone use and behaviour, it is absolutely true that those things are linked. I agree with her on that. I made one reference to the updated mobile phone guidance in my statement, but I did not explicitly refer to the connection with behaviour. I reassure the member that I absolutely accept that those things are linked.

Last week, I noted that a couple of schools in Edinburgh are now moving forward with full bans. That follows a policy approach that I think has been adopted by Perth and Kinross Council. Schools are now looking at the national approach, which empowers headteachers to take the decision to ban mobile phones, and decisions are being rolled out across the country. That is the approach that works best in Scotland. Because there are shared legal responsibilities, as cabinet secretary, I cannot enforce a national ban, but I can set out very clear national guidance that empowers headteachers to choose to ban mobile phones if they see fit. I think that it is welcome news that we are starting to see real progress to that end.

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): Can the cabinet secretary outline how the programme for government that the First Minister announced this week will support children and young people with ASN as they navigate an ever-changing school environment?

Jenny Gilruth: I am clear that all children and young people are entitled to the support that they need to reach their full potential. We have committed £26 million of funding each year—£15 million for support assistance, plus £11 million to our grant-aided schools and in other grants—to support that aim.

The programme for government commits an additional £29 million to support the recruitment, retention and training of our additional support needs workforce via local and national programmes.

Further, we will hold a data summit with all local authorities to support improved consistency of identification, support and reporting of children's needs at local level. We know that inconsistent data gathering has caused a challenge to that historically, so it is important that there is national consistency in data gathering and in how the Government monitors and supports local authorities in relation to additional support for learning.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): Does the cabinet secretary share my disappointment that, after 18 years, we can still only talk about the

ambition for our schools to be safe and consistent, rather than having safe and consistent schools?

Jenny Gilruth: Although the member is perhaps a bit older than I am, I am sure that, when he was at school some time in the past, there were incidents at schools—there certainly were when I was at school. I am not sure that we are necessarily living in a different age 18 years after my party came to power, although I accept that that is the member's point.

There are challenges in our classrooms, some of which predate Covid, but some of which have undoubtedly been compounded by Covid. We have also seen the onset of austerity in our classrooms, and that is harming behaviour. I hear that in evidence from the third sector as well as from our teaching trade unions. I have been making a point at our headteacher regional events about the way in which the delivery of education has changed in recent years—something that the member, as a former teacher, will know. For example, we now have food banks and clothing banks in our schools. The relationship of that support and our schools has changed.

I am mindful of that challenge, and I am thinking about the support that we give our schools and how it might have to be adapted in the future. More broadly, of course it is an ambition that our schools are safe and consistent learning environments. I am not sure that I would accept that they have changed in that regard in the past 18 years.

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): I am sure that many members will join me in welcoming key announcements on education from this week's programme for government. Can the cabinet secretary outline what the programme for government will do to address behaviour and improve standards in schools specifically?

Jenny Gilruth: The programme for government makes a number of additional contributions to funding to enhance, for example, the number of teachers in our schools. Having a full staffing complement is hugely important, but the extra funding that I spoke of in response to a previous question on additional support for learning is specifically tailored to give that additionality in terms of trained specialist staff. We know that there are challenges in that regard; for example, although historically we have seen our pupil support population increasing, there are fewer additional support for learning teachers. The extra funding from the Government is designed to allow local authorities to have the power to choose to invest in specialist provision to help support their workforce.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): I am glad that the statement had a focus on gender-

based violence. It is essential that we talk with boys and young men about the importance of consent in relationships. The new version of the sex and relationship education guidance for teachers, which the cabinet secretary and I were involved in drafting, does that, but its publication has been delayed again. Will that be published in time for schools returning in August?

Jenny Gilruth: It is my expectation that there will be an update. I am more than happy to write to the member or to meet him to talk about that point. I recognise some of the challenge in the matter and his specific interest in it.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I understand that violence in schools will not stop immediately, but for teachers and staff the situation is getting worse, not better. It is frustrating that the timetable for the plan has already slipped and that the guidance on consequences will not be published for months yet. Can the cabinet secretary assure teachers and staff that there will be no further slippage?

Jenny Gilruth: I am not necessarily sure that there has been slippage. The work on consequences was a direct ask from SAGRABIS, which includes COSLA, our teaching trade unions and our other partners.

We have to agree the guidance collectively, but it will be published in the coming weeks, before the end of term. I hope that that gives the member some comfort. I have been very clear that there is a need for the updated guidance to be published before the end of term so that, when schools return in August, they can use it at their in-service training days to help to inform better practice in our schools.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): My question follows on from my colleague Ross Greer's question. Abuse, violence and harassment of any kind, but particularly gender-based violence, should not be tolerated in our society, and certainly not in our education environments. Will the cabinet secretary outline the steps that the Scottish Government is taking to address those issues, particularly in schools, in support of the equally safe strategy?

Jenny Gilruth: The Scottish Government absolutely agrees that gender-based violence of any kind is unacceptable anywhere in our society, including in our education settings. That is why we are implementing our equally safe strategy to prevent and eradicate such violence and harassment.

Our equally safe delivery plan contains commitments from ADES to ensure that all secondary schools sign up to the equally safe at school work, encourage the development of peer learning and activity around gender-based

violence in schools, and ensure that all staff complete trauma awareness training. As of January this year, 133 schools have signed up to the equally safe at school programme, which involves a whole-school approach to tackling gender inequality and gender-based violence.

We have also published the national framework to help schools tackle sexual harassment and gender-based violence, which, as I mentioned in my statement, is a wider societal challenge at this time.

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Challenging behaviour and relationships can be difficult for all teachers and staff, but particularly for supply teachers, who do not necessarily have the opportunity to build up a rapport with their students. We know that the cabinet secretary met Scottish Teachers for Permanence back in November. I understand that, at that meeting, she committed to meeting it again and arranging a meeting with COSLA, but it tells me that, despite requests, it has not had an update on that. Will the cabinet secretary agree to meet it urgently to discuss the issue and its recent survey?

Jenny Gilruth: Mr Ross's point in relation to supply is pertinent. We have real challenges at the current time in relation to that issue of permanence. If we look across the country, about 80 per cent of all teaching jobs are permanent. That has stayed pretty static since 2014. However, at the local authority level, there are undoubtedly challenges.

I have engaged with the group that the member alluded to. I am happy to engage with all partners on the issue. Substantively, though, I engage with our teaching trade unions. I engaged with them yesterday for two hours on a range of different issues, and we had a significant contribution from them on this issue and the way in which the uncertainty affects their members. I am very alive to that. We have to work with local authorities on the issue, recognising their responsibilities in law, and I will continue to engage with the teaching trade unions to that end.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): I understand that the EIS noted in February that the number of violent incidents in schools has increased steadily since the onset of UK Government-imposed austerity. That is a further example of the harm that UK Government policies cause in Scotland. Will the cabinet secretary outline what steps the Scottish Government is taking to tackle the sustained impact of austerity on our young people?

Jenny Gilruth: Ms Dunbar raises some important points. We know that UK Government welfare cuts have caused wide-ranging damage to the lives and outcomes of children and young

people across the UK, including in Scotland. *[Interruption.]* I hear some chuntering from members on the benches to my left, but the End Child Poverty coalition estimates that the two-child cap alone pulled 30,000 children into poverty in the UK between Labour being elected in June last year and 5 April this year, while Department for Work and Pensions figures show that proposed welfare cuts for disabled people will drive 50,000 more children into poverty.

We have committed around £1.4 billion to mitigate the impact of 15 years of UK Government policies such as the bedroom tax and the benefit cap. Because the UK Government has failed to act, we have also committed to developing the systems that are needed to effectively scrap the impact of the two-child cap by April 2026.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Three additional members wish to ask questions. I will get them all in, but their questions will need to be brief, as will the responses.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): When does the cabinet secretary expect the prevalence of violence in our schools to be reduced? Why has the number of exclusions fallen on this Government's watch while levels of violence have increased?

Jenny Gilruth: On the point that Neil Bibby raises about exclusions, we know that there is some reticence from the profession in relation to reporting. I addressed that point in the chamber in November 2023, when I responded to the behaviour in Scottish schools research. At that time, I was very clear in calling on the profession for clearer reporting, but, to that end, we need to give the profession confidence that it will have support. Updated guidance in relation to reporting will be published before the end of term as part of the updated work on consequences in order to help to give that support to the profession. Exclusion exists as a consequence and we need staff to feel empowered, as and when appropriate, to understand that it exists as an option for them to use.

Ash Regan (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba): What is the cabinet secretary's response to calls for a national smartphone ban across all school estates, a single national behaviour standard, clear lawful guidance based on biological sex and safeguarding policies that are no longer dictated by activist-driven disinformation?

Jenny Gilruth: A number of points were raised there, and I am conscious of time. On the point about mobile phones, as I referred to in my response to Roz McCall, as cabinet secretary, I do not have the legal power to enforce a national ban on mobile phones. What I can do is set out very clear national guidance—which is what we have

done—that tells headteachers that we trust them to enforce bans in their school, as and when they see appropriate. It is good to see that that is already starting to have an impact, including in schools in Edinburgh.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I do not understand how the cabinet secretary can say that we are making good progress in this area at all. The delayed guidance on consequences was supposed to be issued during phase 1. We still do not have a definition of what violence or misbehaviour actually is. The wellbeing group that was supposed to meet about staff welfare has not even met yet. We still do not have any idea about mandatory reporting. There is no progress in those vital areas, which should have been a priority. Why is the cabinet secretary not frustrated with her own lack of progress?

Jenny Gilruth: I am not sure that I am going to accept Stephen Kerr's characterisation of the progress that has been made, because there has been progress made against all 20 of the measurements. I have the information in front of me, but I am conscious of time, so I am not going to read it out for Mr Kerr, but he needs to accept that progress is being made and that further progress is coming. I see him shaking his head, but I want to ensure that he understands that further progress is coming. There will be progress before the end of the summer term on consequences, which I know he is interested in. There will be progress in relation to our anti-racism work.

We are going to develop further interim guidance ahead of the summer, and guidance on risk assessments where there are incidents of harm. The trade unions have welcomed that work, and they are taking part in the forming of that guidance and support.

I hope that the member welcomes the progress. I can hear him chuntering; I am more than happy to share the action plan, but I would point to the answer to the Government-initiated question that was published some weeks ago and set out the progress in more detail.

Victory in Europe Day (80th Anniversary)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-17457, in the name of John Swinney, on commemorating the 80th anniversary of victory in Europe day. I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to push their request-to-speak button.

15:28

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am honoured to open the debate on behalf of the Scottish Government and to share my reflections on the 80th anniversary of victory in Europe day. Today, we give thanks to every individual who fought and sacrificed to ensure victory over fascism during the second world war.

Presiding Officer, 8 May 1945 was a day of great celebrations across the country and the world as news spread of the allied victory in Europe. The end of the war in Europe brought with it an enormous sense of relief, as memories of bombings and U-boat attacks could finally begin to fade, and hope for the future grew instead—especially for the safe return of family and friends overseas. We must not forget, however, that the fighting continued in Japan and Myanmar. There were another three long months of suffering before the surrender of Japan brought the second world war to its ultimate conclusion.

There are few milestones more significant in our modern history than the one that we celebrate today. Today, we enjoy our freedom thanks to our armed forces, which served during the second world war. During six years of conflict, 380,000 members of the British armed forces lost their lives, as well as more than 67,000 civilians. Memorials to the 57,000 Scottish soldiers who died can be found far and wide, from Albania to Greece and from Hungary to Zimbabwe. For every soldier killed, many broken hearts were left behind to suffer the grief as parents, as children and as friends. I am forever grateful to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission for caring for its many cemeteries here at home and abroad, which offer families peaceful moments to come together and pay their respects to loved ones who have been lost.

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): Will the First Minister join me in recognising and commemorating the pre-partition British Indian army—the largest volunteer force in history, with 2.5 million soldiers—for its brave actions in world war two?

The First Minister: I join Pam Gosal in that point of remembrance. It is significant that that point was made at the VE day 80 commemoration event in the Usher hall in Edinburgh, which I thought demonstrated the scale of the involvement of so many peoples from around the world in the effort to defeat fascism. I happily associate myself with the point made by Pam Gosal.

Before I leave the point that I was making on the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, I note that it will always be a point of significant remembrance for me that I was able to visit the site of my uncle's grave in Argenta, in Italy, and to stand on a spot that had been visited some 30 years before by my grandmother on her only trip out of the United Kingdom to pay her respects at the grave of her beloved son. The decades that have passed dampen neither the memory and the loss nor our gratitude and pride.

Each of us now lives in freedom because of the sacrifices of the men and women who overcame fascism.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I thought that the First Minister spoke movingly of his uncle when VE day tributes were paid earlier today. I have been thinking about my mother, who, as a six-year-old child, was pulled from the wreckage of her bombed family home in Birmingham in 1940. Does the First Minister agree that we all have a sacred responsibility to keep remembrance alive in this country for the sake of those people and for future generations?

The First Minister: I agree with Mr Kerr's point. His example of his mother's experience resonates with that of my mother-in-law, who was also removed from a tenement block that was bombed in Birmingham, in exactly the same era.

That is an illustration of how people were affected, but there is a substantial point in what Mr Kerr says. If I think back to when I started my parliamentary life, 28 years ago, I would say, anecdotally, that attendance at remembrance events was perhaps beginning to dwindle. Then, in the aftermath of conflict at the start of this century, I saw attendance at remembrance events grow. That is an indication that, sadly, there have been reminders of conflict and loss, which are matters of regret. However, they reinforce Mr Kerr's point that we cannot, for a moment, allow ourselves to forget the suffering and the after-effects of conflict. I agree very much with Mr Kerr's point.

Scotland owes a debt of gratitude to everybody who played a part in the efforts to defeat fascism. We live in an environment in which we still witness conflicts that have a profound effect on us all, brought to us by the images that we see, whether of the unbearable suffering in Gaza, which followed the terrorist atrocity by Hamas, or of the

on-going suffering of the people of Ukraine in all that they wrestle with. In reflecting on those conflicts, Scotland remembers the sacrifices that were made by so many individuals in the efforts that were undertaken.

Europe day is celebrated tomorrow, when we commemorate the signing of the Schuman declaration and the beginning of what is now called the European Union—which, of course, happened only five short years after the end of world war two. Those steps were taken by France and Germany to ensure that war was

“not merely unthinkable, but materially impossible.”

We think back to the founding values of that dialogue to overcome conflict, yet, in continental Europe, we still have conflict in Ukraine.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): The First Minister is absolutely right to reference the European Union as establishing a charter for peace so that no nation could ever build a war machine again. Much of that fabric was built on the foundation of a cohesion of factors such as the Polish airmen coming to Scotland and fighting so bravely in the battle of Britain, many of them settling here and becoming part of an established Polish community. Will the First Minister join me in paying tribute to them, too?

The First Minister: Unreservedly. There is a very strong affinity with the Polish community in the area of Perthshire that I represent—indeed, there is a Polish cemetery in the city of Perth. Of course, in subsequent generations that has led to a very welcoming environment for the Polish community to come to, where, thankfully, they are able to contribute to our schools, local communities, churches and community activities. That is all very welcome, and it is based on the deep roots that Mr Cole-Hamilton has cited.

In the past few days and weeks, I have been mindful of a sequence of events that took place in my family's life, which rather illustrates the mixed feelings that would have been in evidence on VE day in 1945. I had not really thought about this point until the events of the past few weeks.

On 3 April this year, I attended a memorial event down at Ocean Terminal, where a memorial to my late uncle, Corporal Thomas Hunter, has stood for many years. Here we are today, only 35 days later, marking VE day. That has made me realise that, on 3 April 1945, my mother's family was devastated by the news of the loss of my uncle, yet, only 35 days later, the streets were full of people jubilantly celebrating the end of the war—quite understandably, of course, because there was an enormous sense of relief.

What has struck me is the level of contrast that there must have been between my grandmother's

and grandfather's household, where people were nursing unbearable grief—which I saw in later stages of my life, when I became conscious of my family's experience and understood the gravity of the loss that they felt—and the jubilation outside their front door. I leave that observation with members simply so that they will recognise that, although there was great relief on 8 May 1945, a lot of suffering was still going on in households the length and breadth of the country. We should never forget that contrast, which highlights the sense of loss that many individuals experienced.

Today, the Deputy First Minister has attended, on my behalf, a commemoration event in the city of Glasgow, and the Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, External Affairs and Culture has represented the Government at the national commemorative service at Westminster abbey.

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): Will the First Minister take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give you the time back, First Minister.

The First Minister: I will happily give way to Mr Brown.

Keith Brown: I have mentioned to the First Minister on previous occasions that his uncle is remembered by every single person who goes through Royal Marines training, which is a lengthy and difficult process. They learn about the exploits of Corporal Thomas Hunter, who won the only Victoria cross given to a marine in the second world war. I hope that it will provide at least some comfort to the First Minister's family to know that his uncle's name is always remembered.

The First Minister: I am grateful to my colleague and friend Mr Brown, who has distinguished service of his own in the Royal Marines, for adding that reminder. It was made clear to me most powerfully when I attended a commemoration event that the Royal Marines organised just a few weeks ago, to mark the 80th anniversary of my uncle's death and to recognise the significance of his contribution to their history.

Presiding Officer, I will draw my remarks to a close. On this 80th anniversary of VE day, Scotland pays tribute to our second world war generation. We thank all those who have served, or are serving today, in our armed forces. Together, in their honour, we dedicate ourselves to enhancing democracy, standing steadfast against fascism and building a better, safer and more peaceful world. Many towns and cities across the country will stage beacon-lighting ceremonies from 9 pm tonight. The lighting of those beacons represents something that is fundamental to our society: the light of hope emerging from the dreadful bleakness and

darkness of war. It is a hope that we need now more than ever, and it is one that inspires us all to act, to reach out and to be champions of peace and democracy at home, in Europe and in the world.

I move,

That the Parliament marks the 80th anniversary of Victory in Europe (VE) Day, which took place on 8 May 1945; remembers the 380,000 UK Armed Forces personnel, including 57,000 Scots, and over 67,000 civilians who lost their lives during the conflict; commemorates the service and pays tribute to the sacrifices of those individuals from across Scotland and the UK, the Commonwealth and the Allied Nations, which ensured the peace and freedoms that are enjoyed today; appreciates the efforts of Legion Scotland and Poppyscotland to mark the occasion, including a national commemorative concert held in Edinburgh on 6 May 2025, Scotland's Salute to VE Day, which was supported by the Scottish Government, and commends the work of both organisations and of veterans charities across Scotland in supporting the veterans of this conflict and their families, many of whom continue to be affected by the tragedy of war to this day.

15:40

Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): Today marks 80 years since the unconditional surrender of Nazi Germany. After six years of bloodshed and horror, our country awoke to the light of freedom as the dark forces of fascism were vanquished.

The victory announcement was made by Winston Churchill on 8 May 1945 at 3 pm. Following his radio address, the Prime Minister spoke from a Whitehall balcony to huge crowds of people celebrating on the streets below. This is some of what he said:

"God bless you all. This is your victory! It is the victory of the cause of freedom in every land. In all our long history we have never seen a greater day than this ... My dear friends, this is your hour. This is not victory of a party or of any class. It's a victory of the great British nation as a whole."

The worldwide death toll from that industrial-scale conflict is difficult to get one's head around. Up to 85 million military and civilian lives were lost. Tens of thousands of brave Scots went off to war, only to fall in foreign fields. The average age of a Scottish serviceman killed in world war two was just 21. To our generation and the next, who have only ever known peace, the deeds of the greatest generation are almost unfathomable. It has been heartening to see the many events being held across Scotland to mark VE day. It is right and proper that war memorials stand proudly and prominently in communities across the land. Today especially, we remember that they serve as a permanent reminder of that bravery and sacrifice.

Many thousands of Scots were also killed at home as German bombers targeted industrial

areas, including Clydebank, Greenock and many other towns. The war touched every family, every town and every workplace. In 1940, when hundreds of thousands of allied soldiers were rescued from the beaches of Dunkirk, tens of thousands were captured. They included my grandfather's brother, who endured a forced march to a prisoner-of-war camp in Nazi-occupied Poland. Miraculously, he survived the disease, violence and squalor of the camp to return home to Glasgow after the war ended. During those darkest of times, Britain and our allies stood resolute and defiant. Although victory in Europe was achieved on this day 80 years ago, the war still raged in the far east for another three months.

Today, I am proud to salute the sacrifice, duty and bravery of the greatest generation. They fought and died for our peace and for our freedom, and we all live in their shadow. A famous VE day cartoon shows a wounded and bandaged soldier emerging from a battle-scarred wasteland—in his hand is a scrap of paper with the words,

"Victory and Peace in Europe",

and the caption beneath reads:

"Here you are! Don't lose it again!"

Yet, here we are again, with war raging in Europe and elsewhere, and the rise of murderous tyrants across the globe. Today, we must reaffirm our support for the brave people of Ukraine as they fight for the freedoms that we take for granted. We cannot abandon them. The front line between Russia and Ukraine represents a greater global fault line. On one side are our western values of democracy, decency, freedom and humanity, and on the other side are bleak tyranny, oppression and an ugly disregard for human life.

Today, the west must remember and restate what bonded us between 1939 and 1945. I return to the words of Winston Churchill, spoken on this day 80 years ago:

"I say that in the long years to come not only will the people of this island but of the world, wherever the bird of freedom chirps in human hearts, look back to what we've done and they will say: 'Do not despair, do not yield to violence and tyranny, march straightforward and die if need be—unconquered.'"

Those words from history ring true today. We cannot become weary or lose our resolve when faced with Putin's murderous regime and others. As we remember the fallen of world war two and celebrate VE day, we must recommit to supporting our armed forces. They are not a relic of a bygone age; they are essential to the defence of our islands. Last week, I was privileged to attend the ceremony to install Major General Bob Bruce as governor of Edinburgh castle. Some of the Royal Regiment of Scotland soldiers who took part in the ceremonial event were just days away from being

deployed to join our allies on military exercises in eastern Europe.

Recent global events and the volatility of our times mean that we must ensure that our armed forces are properly funded and supported. As we mark VE day, we should support the veterans who have served our country. Recently, it was my privilege to speak with ex-servicemen and ex-servicewomen at the Scottish Veterans Residences centre, and I can assure all members that they will get an equally warm welcome if they pay a visit to the centre, which is just across the road from Holyrood.

I associate my party with the words of the First Minister. Today is a day to remember all that brings us together and the proud history that we share. VE day was the very best of Britain and the very best of the British people.

15:46

Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): Eighty years ago today, the German instrument of surrender was signed by representatives of Nazi Germany, the United Kingdom, France, the United States and the Soviet Union in the ruins of the city of Berlin. With that document, the darkest chapter in the history of Europe finally came to a close. As the First Minister has pointed out, while fighting would still rage on in the jungles of Burma and the islands of the Pacific, for the first time in almost six years, the guns fell silent over the continent of Europe. The Nazi tyranny that had tried to subjugate an entire continent and eradicate an entire people had finally been defeated.

Throughout Europe, from the rubble-filled streets of Paris to the bombed-out shipyards of Clydebanks, and from the devastated villages of Poland and Ukraine to the still-smouldering ruins of German cities, an entire continent was finally at peace. In the United Kingdom, we celebrated at last the victory that so many had thought would never come and the victory that, sadly, so many did not live to see. Six years of bloody fighting, from the fields of France to the deserts of north Africa, had taken the lives of almost 400,000 British soldiers—400,000 sons, brothers and fathers who would never return home; 400,000 lives that ended early in the fight against Nazi tyranny. At home, almost 70,000 British citizens—sons, daughters, mothers and fathers—were lost through blitz and bombing, hunger and disease.

The struggle against tyranny was global. Some 15 million allied personnel from Europe, North and South America, Australasia, Asia and Africa gave their lives. I want to remember all those from across the globe who stood against fascism, including members of my family who served in the British Indian Army and who fought on the front

lines to protect our liberty. I hear tales about the British Indian Army only from my sole remaining grandmother, who talks often about her cousins who fought in that war and, tragically, lost their lives. Similar to the First Minister's reflections, that makes me think about how fortunate we are that we pay service to remembrance and that we have proper records of those who have lost their lives. In many parts of the world, no such records exist, and people hear tales only because of surviving family members. I will never truly know how many of my family members were lost or how many made contributions. That is the case, I imagine, for communities right across the globe.

However, thousands of young men from different faiths travelled halfway around the world to answer Britain's call in its hour of need. We might not know their names or where they came from, but they, too, must never be forgotten. That is why I am proud to join campaigners in calling for a permanent memorial to the soldiers of the British Indian Army in Glasgow, the city that so many of those soldiers' descendants now call home, because the great victory over fascism is their victory, too.

Six years of total war had left our country and the entire continent of Europe on the brink of the abyss. As the victory was celebrated in the streets of Scotland and the UK, details slowly began to emerge from liberated concentration camps on the continent. The world learned the truth about the greatest crime ever perpetrated in human history: the systematic attempt to eradicate the Jewish people. Six million people were dead, and many more disabled people, LGBT people, trade unionists and minorities were killed by the apparatus of the Nazi state. The clock had struck midnight in the story of human history, but, through collective will and the united endeavour of people across the world, that evil had finally been defeated.

As people across the country celebrated that final victory, the Prime Minister addressed the nation. He said:

"God bless you all. This is your victory! ... In all our long history, we have never seen a greater day than this. Everyone, man or woman, has done their best."

He was right. The workers in the shipyards, the women of the land army, the soldiers on the front line, the air raid precautions wardens, Home Guard volunteers and doctors and nurses—the people of the United Kingdom in their collective will and our allies, all united behind the just cause of victory—had proven triumphant.

As that victory was celebrated, the hope for a new and fairer future for our country was born. The comradeship, self-sacrifice and unity of the war years had shown the world the potential that the people of the United Kingdom held. At home,

the construction of a new social and political order—one fit for our heroes—began in earnest. Coming out of the war, we developed a proper welfare state. The national health service, stronger pensions, new towns, slum clearances and new rights for workers were all delivered in the spirit of victory that people had worked so hard to deliver.

Across the world, the need for a new order was clear. The United Nations was established to promote peace across the world and to uphold the ideal that nations can resolve their issues through dialogue instead of violence. That was the lasting message of VE day—the demand for peace, justice and solidarity across the globe. That is why, today, on the 80th anniversary of VE day, we must all recommit to those ideals. No matter what walk of life people come from, their faith, their nationality or their vision for the broader world, we all have a shared aspiration for peace, dignity and freedom across the globe.

On this day, we remember them, we thank them and we pledge to carry their values forward. We think not just of those who lost their lives in that war but of those who are losing their lives in wars today. We resolve to deliver a fairer, more peaceful and more just world.

15:53

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): Today's motion reminds us of the hundreds of thousands of members of the UK forces and the tens of thousands of civilians whose lives were lost in world war two. Beyond those deaths, the war caused up to 85 million deaths worldwide—about 3 per cent of the global population at the time. That number includes the 6 million Jews and the millions of others who were exterminated by the Nazis. An estimated 40 million to 60 million people were displaced.

However, mere statistics are not enough to truly comprehend the scale of what had to be done to defeat Nazism and fascism, the sacrifice of those who fought and the scale of the impact on the millions of lives affected. I honestly do not think that I can begin to imagine the emotional release that must have come—including in households that were, as the First Minister described, still suffering their own personal grief while the celebrations began—when the announcement of VE day was made.

In the wake of such suffering, VE day led to new beginnings. In recognising that they had fought together and survived together, people decided to rebuild their society together, with a welfare state and a national health service—an astonishing legacy for that generation to leave us—the creation of international institutions of peace, a

framework of international law, human rights and what eventually became the European Union.

However, it is important to remember that VE day was not the end of the story for those who were still enduring war in other parts of the world, or for East Germany, which went from Nazi to communist control. It would be decades before that country would achieve freedom and join a peaceful and democratic family of European nations. It was not the end of the story for the gay men who were liberated from Nazi concentration camps but re-imprisoned by the allies.

We must also remember that the struggle to defeat fascism remains our responsibility today. We see an expansionist war against Ukraine being rewarded on the world stage and the horrific images of genocide from Gaza. We see the brutality of immigration detention camps and imprisonment without trial in countries that claim to be democracies. We see far-right ideology growing around the world and the arrest of Nazis in the UK only yesterday. We hear prominent voices in major political parties seeking to abolish our fundamental human rights and tear up the astonishing endowment that the post-war generation left us. As we see the UK Government celebrating VE day on the same day that it announces an agreement with a US President whose ideology is indistinguishable from fascism, we need to remember that appeasement never works.

I will end with the words of Ken Turner, 98 years old, as he sat in a Sherman tank. Mr Turner served in world war two, as did the tank. In a video that was posted on social media yesterday, he said:

"I'm old enough to have seen fascism the first time round, and now it's coming back."

After driving that tank over a Tesla and crushing it, he gave this message to Elon Musk:

"We've crushed fascism before and we'll crush it again."

Ken gets it—he knows what had to be done and the cost of what had to be done—but Ken also knows why it had to be done, and he knows that it must still be done. Let us never forget what Ken has reminded us of.

15:57

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): It is my distinct privilege to offer the Liberal Democrats' respects to the fallen in our armed forces and in armed forces across the world; to the dead in our civilian population and across the world; and to the victims of the Nazi Holocaust—something that we have heard a lot about this afternoon, and rightly so.

I was reflecting on what this 80th anniversary means in Germany, and I heard a fascinating radio interview with a German diplomat who was asked that question. He explained to the interviewer that, in Germany, the date is seen as a commemoration of liberation, because it was a liberation of normal Germans from, in the words of Churchill,

“the odious apparatus of Nazi rule”.

On dates such as this, we often forget the brave Germans who stood up against Hitler within the Third Reich and those who, for want of freedom, died under its regime. Today, I am thinking of those brave people, such as Sophie Scholl and Pastor Niemöller.

We are also thinking today of our brave Scottish communities who, in a singular national effort of determination, pulled together for the war effort.

I asked the First Minister about the Polish airmen. I grew up in a farming village not far from RAF Leuchars in Fife, and there was a shed at the bottom of our garden that still had telephone lines and a fireplace for the three Polish airmen who had lived in that shed for three years. Even then, there were still signs of our collective war effort.

Just last week, in the communities of Lerwick and Scalloway in Shetland, there was a commemoration of the Shetland bus. As part of that operation, merchant navy vessels took troops, ammunition and weaponry to and from the Norwegian resistance. I pay tribute to all of them.

Each of our communities played its part in certain ways, but each of us—as the First Minister very movingly told us—will have personal reflections on this 80th anniversary.

I think of my grandfather and his three siblings in particular today. His older brother, Dick, was a German linguist and, as such, became an interrogator in prisoner of war camps. His younger brother, David, who was a commander on HMS Sikh, was, sadly, killed on a troop transport, which was sunk north of Tobruk by a Stuka dive-bomber. My father is named for him, such is the enduring memory of his loss.

Their sister, Joan, was awarded an MBE at the age of 23 for her service to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in the Norwegian legation that evacuated the King and the Government from Oslo as the Wehrmacht rolled in. She walked overland to a resistance farmhouse, led by Frank Foley, and was eventually evacuated by submarine. Sadly, she died in 1945, just after the San Francisco conference that set up the United Nations. Her plane disappeared over the Atlantic, and we still have a letter in my attic from Anthony Eden expressing grave concern for her loss.

It was my grandfather who taught me everything about freedom and sacrifice. He served as the

lieutenant commander on a destroyer in the north Atlantic. He was one of the last surviving witnesses of the sinking of HMS Hood by Bismarck, and he lived to tell the tale. I have 19 hours of audio of his seafaring stories, which I treasure.

We have heard a lot about Winston Churchill's remarks from the balcony of the health ministry on this day, 80 years ago. He gave a very short speech, and much of it has been quoted, but these lines have not:

“My dear friends, this is your hour. This is not victory of party or of any class. It's a victory of the great British nation as a whole. We were the first, in this ancient island, to draw the sword against tyranny.”

With those words, he closed out a war that had endured for six years. He ushered in a long peace, and it is a long peace that it is incumbent on decision makers and parliamentarians like us in chambers such as this to safeguard for future generations, and we must also recognise those who draw the sword against tyranny in places such as Ukraine today.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):
We move to the open debate.

16:01

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): Eighty years ago, the world exhaled when the guns across Europe fell silent, because VE day marked not just victory but our survival—a freedom reclaimed and a future made possible.

This day always brings me back to my grandfather—my Pa—who fought in the war. When I was a wee girl, he would tell me stories of his time as a soldier, although I realise now that the stories were very heavily filtered for my young mind. He was a great storyteller, and it seemed to me that war was his great adventure—racing from exploding bridges, laughing with his soldier pals and falling in love with my gran through letters passed across their worlds.

For my young mind, he made it all into a Hollywood movie version. There is one particular story that he told that has stuck with me, and I have grown to understand and find deeper meaning in it. He told me that, when the soldiers were lined up for religious observance, names were called out of particular religions—Catholic, Baptist, Church of England—but my Pa would be left standing, so he would be asked, “Well, what religion are you?” He would straighten his shoulders, with his chin up, and proudly exclaim, “Church of Scotland, sir”. That always made us giggle as a family when I was little, but as I have grown up, I can see that there was more to it than just a wee funny story. In that moment, he was telling us about a deep sense of identity—a sense

of belonging—that mattered very much to him. He was there proudly fighting for his country and for his people back home in Scotland.

When he was stationed in Italy, my gran was serving here at home as a firewoman, and their love story spanned war zones. I still have the love letters that they exchanged, which are filled with words of longing and hope and with plenty of the word “darling”. They dreamed of being reunited and of their future together, and thanks to VE day, they got that chance.

My dad and I are compiling those stories so that we do not lose them to time, but when I recall them now, with my adult mind, I can see the parts that my grandfather had omitted—the fear, the horror and those soldier pals who did not make it home. That is a reality that he chose to shield me from.

We must mark VE day not just as a celebration but as a solemn reminder. We are here today because our relatives survived, but many never came home. From Scotland alone, 57,000 armed forces personnel lost their lives, and millions more lives were lost across the world. They sacrificed not just their lives but their future posterity.

As we honour the efforts of Royal British Legion Scotland and Poppyscotland, which have beautifully marked this 80th anniversary with Scotland’s salute to VE day, it is important that we also acknowledge the deeper meaning behind those tributes. The concerts, the gatherings and the red poppies are not just about looking back with pride but about carrying forward a warning. Remembrance is not passive. It is a deep responsibility that rests on the shoulders of posterity, of those who survived.

At a time when war once again rages in parts of Europe, when hatred is on the rise and democracy and peace feel very fragile, we must learn from the past. Those people fought for a world for us to build, not to destroy. We must remember how we got into that war in the first place and what it cost, but we must also remember how we came back from it.

VE day should never have to be repeated. We should let it remain a celebration of hard-won peace and protect that with everything that we have. For the futures that ended too soon, and for those who never got to be, let us mark this 80th anniversary not only with words but with purpose, and let it be a thank you, but also a promise.

16:05

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con):

It is a real honour to contribute to the debate. I associate myself with the motion in the First Minister’s name, with the moving speech that he

gave today and, as Stephen Kerr said, with many of the speeches that he has made on the subject in the past. It is encouraging that all our party leaders have taken part in today’s debate to show the importance of the subject.

When I was considering what to speak about, I wondered whether I should focus on the celebration that the war in Europe had finished or whether I should recognise that the war continued for some time thereafter. I will do a bit of both.

There is absolutely no doubt that VE day was a celebration. The royal family posted a comment this morning to remind us that the then Princess Elizabeth went out on to the Mall on VE day, pulling down her uniform cap so that she could go out incognito to join the thronging crowds that had turned out to celebrate. She went on to reign over this country for 70 years and it was important for her to be among the people whom she would serve for seven decades.

We have heard many quotes today from Winston Churchill. The one that strikes me most is that he said:

“We may allow ourselves a brief period of rejoicing, but let us not forget for a moment the toil and efforts that lie ahead.”

Although there was celebration, there was still much to do.

Throughout this week, as I have watched many of the events shown on television and listened to today’s debate, I have been struck by the ever-dwindling number of people who fought in that war. When I watch remembrance Sunday events, I see that the veterans marching past the cenotaph look older and frailer and are fewer in number. That reminds me that we owe them a great debt of thanks for what they did, but that we also have an obligation to ensure that their memory lives on in future generations because of what they sacrificed during the war and, as Karen Adam reminded us, because many did not come home.

This morning, my three-year-old was excited that he did not have to wear his usual uniform to nursery and that he got to wear his party clothes. He did not know why he was wearing party clothes but, in years to come, he will, and I want to ensure that the next generation knows about the sacrifices of the past.

It is in that spirit that I really commend to members a two-part podcast produced by Parklands care home. The company has care homes across Moray and the Highlands and has produced a podcast called “Peace at Last: Memories of VE Day” so that memories will not be forgotten but will be passed on to the next generation. Listening to some of the residents’ experiences will bring a tear to your eye: tears of sadness because of what happened but also tears

of joy at the resilience that many of those people still have eight decades after VE day.

I will pick a couple of those who shared their first-hand experiences. Dr Jean Munro is 101 years old and is a resident at Lynemore care home in Grantown-on-Spey. She spoke about working in hut 6 at Bletchley Park, but really did not acknowledge how important her role was. In fact, until the 1980s, she would not even tell her friends and family about the role that she played in the war. Then there is 101-year-old Mamie Cree. I know Mamie because her son, Stewart Cree, was a councillor and the convener of Moray Council. She speaks about how she was conscripted to go from Keith to Dalkeith during the war, which was a major thing for her because she had never travelled further than Elgin. Mamie speaks about her work in Army payroll but also about some of the positives, such as how she went to wartime dances and how, at one of those dances, she met her future husband, Jack, to whom she was married for 75 years.

I say all that because we must recognise the horrors of war, but we must also recognise that those stories will be lost if we do not continue to articulate them in the future. It is a commitment that I give to my boys and future generations; we must ensure that they know about the horrors of the past, and that we never forget the sacrifices of so many in that war and in many other conflicts.

16:10

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): Today we commemorate the 80th anniversary of victory in Europe day. On this day, eight decades ago, the guns fell silent across the European continent, marking the end of a brutal conflict that engulfed the world in darkness and despair.

VE day stands as a testament to the resilience, courage and unwavering spirit of those who fought for freedom and justice. As we reflect on this historic milestone, we honour the sacrifices that were made by millions of men and women who served on the front lines and the home front. I want to reflect on some stories from Aberdeen and the north-east, but some stories I do not know.

I know that a large group of Aberdeen women were conscripted to work in munitions factories in Coventry, because my grandmother, Violet Morris, was one of them. However, I do not know any of her tales from Coventry, because she refused to talk about her experiences, which makes me think that, for her and for those other young women who had to move far from home, those experiences were pretty grim.

We also have to look at the fact that war touched every community, with the sacrifice of the Gordon Highlanders touching every part of the

globe, from Dunkirk and St Valery to Singapore and Burma, from El-Alamein to the beaches of Anzio and Normandy, and onwards as they went to liberate Rome and Germany. In the dark days of 1940, the threat of invasion was real, with the beaches of Aberdeen a tempting target. To this day, our children play among the remains of pillboxes on north-east beaches.

Although the invasion did not come, those who were at home were not spared, with Aberdeen enduring 34 bombing raids, the worst being on 21 April 1943, when 31 tonnes of bombs rained down on Hilltown and Powis.

Despite those darkest of days, through the bravery and sacrifice of our men and women in uniform, victory came 80 years ago today. On this 80th anniversary, we are reminded of the importance of solidarity. The victory that was achieved on VE day was not the triumph of one nation over another but the collective victory of all who stood against tyranny and oppression.

However, as we honour the past, we must also confront the present, because today we face some of the same challenges as those that forged the peace on VE day, and I hope that that does not unravel. The far right is again on the rise across Europe and North America, and here in these islands. The ills of society are once again being blamed on minorities and people from overseas, with older and disabled folk being singled out as a drain on society. Those movements and views threaten the very values that so many fought and died to protect during world war two.

It is our duty today to stand against hatred and division, and to uphold the principles of democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

16:14

Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): Today, on the 80th anniversary of VE day, we paused to reflect on all those from our communities who gave their lives in the course of the second world war, for the freedom and liberation of Europe and for the peace and security of us all.

The war memorials in our towns and villages are etched with the names of those who fell—on land, at sea and in the air—and who made the ultimate sacrifice for the things that we value so much.

Today, I am also thinking of those who suffered so much and who lost their lives here in Scotland and in the communities that I represent across West Scotland. I am thinking of the terrible toll that the blitz took on communities in Clydebank, Greenock and so many other industrial towns across the west coast. The scars run deep in those communities, even to this day—whether they be scars in the minds of people who survived,

physical scars or the scars that were inflicted on the landscape, which would never look the same again.

Many of us have brought personal stories and we have heard very eloquent ones. Those stories are important. Many of us have loved ones who lived through and perhaps served in the war.

I have been thinking a lot about my grandmother, who would have been 95 if she were still alive. She did not live to see me be elected to the Scottish Parliament. When she passed, she left me a painting of Craighead in Barrhead, where she was born and where she grew up. It sits in my office upstairs. I was thinking about that painting today, because it shows the house from which my grandmother experienced the second world war. She would tell us stories frequently about the blackout, rationing, carrying your gas mask to school, and the work that she did for the local co-operative society in her teenage years during the war. I was also thinking about how she would have left that close in Craighead on VE day to join the celebrations in the community of Barrhead. I remember the sense of relief and joy that she expressed that war in Europe had finally come to an end.

There is something else important that I have been thinking today about my gran and her generation. We have heard it articulated already in speeches. My gran's generation—the generation who lived through the war—not only gifted us freedom and security but went on to gift us so much more of the things that we value in this country today. They are the generation who rebuilt this country from the ashes and rubble of war. They are the generation who turned their shoulder to the wheel, having faced the storm. Under the reforming Labour Government of Clement Attlee, they gifted us institutions such as the NHS and the welfare state, new towns and access to education.

They did it in their own ways, washing floors or putting bricks and mortar together. They fed children and helped the ill and disabled. In doing that, they also gave us something more fundamental. They gave us values that endure to this day: the values of standing with and helping our neighbours, of hard work and dedication, of keeping calm and carrying on and of never giving in.

This evening, I will join people in my community of Neilston as we light a beacon for peace. When we do so, I will think of all those who gave their lives and those who gave so much of the life that they had after the war to building this country. I will think of my gran and all those people who stood with her, whom we remember today, on VE day.

16:18

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): We are gathered here to mark a solemn and significant anniversary: 80 years since victory in Europe day—that moment on 8 May 1945, when, after six long and harrowing years, the guns across Europe finally fell silent.

We remember the 380,000 members of the UK armed forces—among them were 57,000 Scots—and the more than 67,000 civilians who paid the ultimate price during the second world war. Each life lost was a son or daughter, a brother or sister, a neighbour or a friend—ordinary people who were called on to do extraordinary things. Today, let us pay tribute not only to those who fell but to the living who bore the scars, those who returned home wounded in body or soul and those whose lives were forever marked by the trauma of what they had endured and witnessed.

Let us also honour the brave souls from across the Commonwealth and allied nations, whose shared sacrifice helped to secure the fragile peace that we have enjoyed in the decades since. We are indebted, too, to the on-going work of Legion Scotland and Poppy Scotland, whose efforts—such as the moving national commemorative concert that was held in Edinburgh on 6 May—ensure that that legacy of service and sacrifice is never forgotten. Scotland's salute to VE day, which is supported by the Scottish Government, stands as a fitting tribute not only to those who served but to those who continue to bear the consequences of war.

As members across the chamber have said, today, it is also our duty to speak honestly. VE day did not mark the end of all war or the end of suffering. Just months later, the world witnessed the horrors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, when two nuclear bombs were dropped on civilian populations, ushering in a new and terrifying chapter of human conflict. Tens of thousands of lives were ended in an instant, and generations continue to suffer from the after-effects. Those strikes were not distant events. They remain a living warning. That terrible power still exists in our world today. The nuclear threat did not die with the cold war. It lingers in arsenals and doctrines, and it whispers into conflicts that grow more complex and dangerous by the day.

That is why we must not only remember the past but learn from it. Indeed, 100 years ago, the Spanish philosopher George Santayana wrote:

“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

One hundred years later, we see that grim warning being made real. War once again rages on Europe's borders in Ukraine. Civilians suffer, families flee and children grow up to the sounds of

missiles, not music. The echoes of the past resound. The echoes of the worst atrocities of man's inhumanity are deafening to those who are suffering in Gaza, where people have been starved and bombed to death, lives have been extinguished and graves have replaced hospitals and schools. Some call it a modern-day genocide.

Let us be clear: to honour the memory of the fallen is not only to look back, but to strive to stop war happening again and to speak out on the issue. We must ensure that "Never again" is not just a phrase—albeit a truly great phrase—that is carved on memorial stones, but a principle that is carved into the hearts of our politics and our people. Each and every one of us must strive to build a world that is free not only from war, but from the conditions that make war possible: poverty, oppression, hatred and silence in the face of injustice.

Today, as we correctly honour the sacrifice of those who fought and died for our freedom, let us not be content with ceremony alone. Let us ensure that we do not sit silently in the face of today's atrocities. Let VE day's 80th anniversary be not only a moment of remembrance, but a call to conscience. Let us not only speak with gratitude for peace but work with urgency for justice, and let us not only honour the sacrifice of the past but act to prevent the suffering of the future, because remembrance without action is remembrance unfulfilled.

16:23

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con):

We must never forget the brave men and women who fell during the conflict of world war two and those who fought to secure freedoms and liberties that we all take for granted today. We will forever be indebted to our second world war veterans for the sacrifices that they made, the friends whom they lost or the stories that they have told.

This momentous occasion marks the 80th year since the end of the war in Europe. In my short contribution, I wish to focus on why we need to keep marking that occasion. In every community across the country, names are etched into stone, alongside a rank and the date on which those soldiers died. Those are the names of family members and loved ones who will never be forgotten.

Every year, we stand at those memorials and fall silent. Among the crowds that gather are veterans of past wars and more recent conflicts, armed forces personnel, community groups, members of the public and, of course, politicians. We attend those events because we understand the significance of past conflicts and how fragile our world is. That is why I intend to introduce a

member's bill to protect our war memorials. It is important to ensure that they survive for years to come because, one day, there will be no more veterans left to attend such important occasions. We must encourage our younger generations to learn what people in our communities fought and died for—the triumph over totalitarianism.

Often we are told that there is an overfocus on world wars in our education system. However, given current global conflicts, it has never been more important that we reflect on our shared history in order to ensure that our future is one of peace. The values of victory in Europe day are as relevant now as they were then.

In the time that I have left, I will share an uplifting incentive that I read about. It is a fantastic example of how schools can connect with our armed forces and veterans community while learning about the VE day commemorations. Through the Together Coalition, 1,300 schools requested a letter from a veteran setting out their wartime experience and what it means to them 80 years later. Passing that baton of memory and meaning to the next generation will not only have helped to close the generational gap, but will have left a huge impression on the young people, who now have memories of being able to speak to a veteran who lived and fought through the second world war. The Commonwealth War Graves Foundation is the proud custodian of those letters, which have captured those moments in history and which form an additional piece of the picture that members of the public will be able to reflect on in years to come.

I think that that is wonderful. It is what we should strive for in our society—connecting older generations with younger generations, in order to learn from past mistakes. Sharing those experiences can ensure that our future generations do not repeat the mistakes that were made by previous ones.

There is only one thing left for me to say, and that is that we will remember them.

The Presiding Officer: Jackie Dunbar is the final speaker in the open debate.

16:26

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): It is an honour to speak in today's debate commemorating the 80th anniversary of VE day, as we remember the sacrifices that made VE day possible.

The First Minister said today that we all naturally think about how the lives of our own families were affected by the war. The stories that have come from across the chamber today have reflected that.

My first thoughts are of my granddad, Private James Dunbar. He served with the Gordon Highlanders and was captured with the 51st Highland division at St Valery. When granddad left home to serve his country, my dad was just weeks old. After years as a prisoner of war—of which he rarely spoke later—victory in Europe meant that he got home safe. He got home to my granny and their bairns, including my dad, who was by then five years old and had no memory of ever meeting his dad, so to him it was a first meeting. My granddad got to enjoy the peace and freedoms that he fought for and he got to see his children and grandchildren grow up with those.

That was not the case for thousands of others who served during that war, including 57,000 Scots. Today, as we remember those who lost their lives during world war two and those who contributed to the war effort across that time, I urge folk also to reflect on what they fought for.

VE day was a victory for democracy. It ensured freedoms for folk across Europe. In its aftermath, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was agreed and concerted efforts were made to maintain and build on what was secured with the end of that long and bloody war. There was a recognition that peace for their time was not enough and that building a lasting peace is an on-going process.

Scotland has enjoyed 80 years of peace since then, but across the world we are seeing democracy, human rights and basic freedoms increasingly under threat. We cannot afford to just paper over the cracks. We owe it to those who sacrificed so much to make peace happen in the first place to ensure that it continues for decades more to come.

We also owe it to them, and to the veterans who since then have helped to maintain that peace, to ensure that we look after those who served and their families. Charities such as Poppyscotland, Legion Scotland, Forces Children Scotland and many others go above and beyond to ensure that people do not slip through the support net that we have in place. They support and stand up for everyone who is part of the armed forces family. I put on record my appreciation for the work that they do.

I finish on the point that, 80 years on from VE day, there are not many veterans from world war two left. The youngest, who would have been just teenagers at the end of the war, are nearing 100 years of age. The second world war is fading from living memory. The next few years will be the last chance that we have to hear about world war two at first hand, rather than just reading about it in history books. I hope that folk will take that chance to speak to the veterans that we have left, not just about what they did, but about why they did it, why

it was so important to win that war and why it is so important that we build peace and commit to not repeating the mistakes of the past. Their legacy is the peace that they secured and built on, and we need to ensure that that legacy is passed on to generations to come.

The Presiding Officer: We move to the closing speeches.

16:30

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): Eighty years ago today, after monumental sacrifice and suffering, Nazi Germany was forced into unconditional surrender. However, that was not the end of the fighting in Europe. The battle of Slivice did not end until 12 May and the battle of Odžak in Bosnia did not end until 25 May. Across Europe, for weeks after VE day, people still fought and died in the struggle against the remnants of Nazism. Today, we remember them as well. As the First Minister said, there were three more months of suffering in Asia before Japan was defeated. Nonetheless, the greatest moment in the history of Europe was the absolute defeat of the Nazi empire on 8 May 1945. It is now more important than ever to remember that, given, as Jackie Dunbar highlighted, that experience is fading from living memory.

I will never forget what my gran told me about surviving the Clydebank blitz—how the children were taken to the bottom of the tenement close, how every adult left to fight the fires and how every window was shattered. There was an inescapable orange glow because everything was on fire. In that whole community, just 12 buildings were left undamaged at the end of that 48 hours. My church was hit—the building took a direct hit from an incendiary and was destroyed. It is so hard to imagine now—bombs falling on Clydebank. What an incredible privilege it is to live in Scotland in this era, when that kind of conflict here is unfathomable.

The First Minister mentioned the contrast between the loss and the joy that were felt by so many families, and Patrick Harvie mentioned that, for entire nations, that joy was short lived because the iron curtain then fell. I add to that the experience of the Spanish exile community here in Scotland and across Europe. Nazism was defeated in 1945, but it would take 30 more years before fascism was defeated in Europe, with its end in Spain. I also want to remember the Scots who volunteered to fight against fascism in Spain before we were forced to do so against Nazi Germany.

Nazism was defeated only through unimaginable sacrifice by our armed forces, our allies and resistance movements across the

continent. It was years before we fully understood the scale of the Holocaust in particular—the attempted extermination of Jews, disabled people, LGBT people, the Gypsy Roma Traveller community and other so-called undesirables. When we learned of that, we said, “Never again.”

The United Nations and the European Union were established on that commitment to peace, but attempted extermination has happened again across the world. It is happening now in Israel’s genocidal assault on Palestine. We also have a war of aggression in Europe that is being fought against free and democratic Ukraine by Putin’s fascistic Russian regime.

Douglas Ross recognised the tension today between reflecting on evil and the suffering that it caused, and the joy at its defeat. Today is a day for both of those. It is a day for us to remember those who were lost, to celebrate the freedom that their sacrifice won and to recommit to the fight against rising fascism today and the fight for freedom here and now.

16:34

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab):

I thank members for some very thoughtful and, at times, moving contributions. Eighty years is an important milestone. It is a literal lifetime since the war ended in Europe, and we need to reflect on that.

My personal reflection, as it always is at moments of silence, was on what it would have been like. Beyond the numbers, which we need to remember, and the history and politics, we need to ask what it would have been like to be one of those young people in a landing craft on D day, or in a bomber flying over the darkened skies of Germany, knowing that, in the latter case, you had a 40 per cent chance of survival. What would it have been like knowing that, coming off one of those landing crafts, there was a very high chance that you would lose your life in pursuit of democracy and against fascism? I do not know what that would be like; I actually really cannot imagine it. I also cannot imagine what it would have been like to come from a civilian life and to be conscripted and asked by your country to do that.

As we move past the 80-year anniversary and beyond living memory, we need to keep that fresh, visceral memory alive. It must have been incredibly scary. It was an incredible sacrifice, and an incredible thing to go through. After all, 85 million people—3 per cent of the world’s population—lost their lives. It was a conflict the like of which and the scale of which we had never seen before, and we must never allow it to be seen again. Members are right to have raised

concerns about whether we are continuing to learn those lessons.

We also need to remember that it was not only armed forces personnel that made that commitment. The nature of world war two was different; it was a total world war. It was good to hear contributions from across the chamber about that, including Douglas Ross’s reflections about family members going down to Dalkeith to work on Army payroll, and Kevin Stewart’s comments on family members going to work in Coventry. There were a vast number of people in reserved occupations—people whose duty was to serve on the home front—including those conscripted to work in the coal mines. The conflict consumed the whole of society. Everyone had a part to play, and everyone did that. The scale is not just about the number of people fighting, because the conflict consumed the whole of society. That is why the lessons of world war two are so important.

At this 80-year mark, we need to remember that many of the lessons stem from the fact that world war two occurred only one generation following world war one. The commitments and the lessons learned from world war two happened because we could not afford the proximity of another global conflict so swiftly after that war, as had happened after world war one.

I was pleased to hear the contributions of the First Minister and Anas Sarwar, which reflected on how the new order was created and the institutions that people sought to create. What I find most interesting is that people did not wait until after the war to create those. In 1943, Winston Churchill called for the creation of the Council of Europe, which came into being. It was in 1944 that the Bretton Woods conference took place, which sought to create economic institutions, including many that exist today.

The lesson of the first world war was that war was created by economic and political circumstances, and that the world had to work together to ensure that those could not—

The First Minister: I agree entirely with the analysis that the member is sharing with Parliament. Does he agree that there is a particular threat and challenge to the strength of those global institutions at the moment? There is a duty on everybody to reflect on the significant role that those institutions have played—although it has not been perfect—in avoiding conflict for many years. Does he agree that we all need to recognise the peril that many of those institutions now face?

Daniel Johnson: I very much agree with that point, and that was the conclusion that I was seeking to draw. Although people are right to reflect on the rise of the far right and fascism, and

we must guard against that, more fundamentally, we need to understand that the institutions that sought to create economic stability and economic equality were vitally important ingredients in the 80 years of peace that we have enjoyed. At a time when people are seeking to retreat into economic isolation and protectionism, we must see that there are consequences to that. We need a world system in which everyone across the world can enjoy access to economic prosperity. I would make this observation—

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I am loth to interrupt Daniel Johnson's eloquent exposition of what happened to the structures of global unity after the war so that there would never be a war again, but does he recognise that the first treaty of the European Union established the European Coal and Steel Community, so that no country could ever again build a war machine without an EU signatory country knowing that?

Daniel Johnson: That is absolutely right.

It is my observation that our physical security is inextricably linked with our economic security and our political security—the three go hand in hand. We need to protect our national physical, economic and political security all at the same time. That is what the people who were involved sought to do with the creation of structures such as the Council of Europe, the United Nations and the Bretton Woods system. It is also what was sought when we undertook, as Paul O'Kane mentioned, the effort of house building and building the welfare state in the UK. Although it is true at international level, it is also true at national level: everyone must have a stake and everyone must have a fair share.

As we pass the 80-year mark, and as the war passes out of living memory, we must, as many members have said, continue to remember what needs to be done. Institutions matter, equality matters and equity matters. Ultimately, we need countries around the world to continue to work together and not to forget the lessons of world war two.

16:41

Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con): It is an honour to speak in today's debate marking VE day, especially as I am the convener of the cross-party group on the armed forces and veterans community. I thank Graeme Dey, as minister with responsibility for veterans, for his support over the years in recognising the role of not just the CPG but the veterans community.

Eighty years ago, Sir Winston Churchill marked this hour of victory with the following words to the British people. It is a much-used quote, and so it should be. He said:

"My dear friends, this is your hour. This is not victory of a party or of any class. It's a victory of the great British nation as a whole."

He was right. It was a victory that belonged to everyone—the ordinary men and women who had been forced to put their lives on hold and endure the most awful conflict in human history. They had risen to the occasion like no generation before or since. They fought and died in far-off fields. They suffered night after night of relentless bombing that brought terror to their homes. They raised families and tended the sick while cities fell down around them, and they waded through the rubble to rebuild and carry on. Today, we remember their courage, their sacrifice and their victory over tyranny.

However, even as we celebrate the victory, we must never forget that war itself is nothing to celebrate or glorify. Around 384,000 British soldiers died in world war two, including almost 60,000 Scots. Fighting alongside us, 580,000 Commonwealth troops were killed, and we must never forget the enormous casualties that were suffered by our allies, either.

Sadly, I do not have time to mention every allied contribution, but I want to highlight the role that Polish troops played in my part of Scotland in the early days of the war, with Britain under threat of invasion. It was Polish troops who helped to defend the coast between Arbroath and Burntisland, and we honour them for standing alongside us in that dark hour.

It was not only soldiers who suffered. Tens of thousands of British civilians perished, too, on the streets, at work and even in the one place where they should have been safe—their own homes. By the end of the war, tens of millions of civilians around the world had been killed, including 6 million Jews who were murdered in the Holocaust. Although this is a day of victory, it is also one of remembrance and reflection. With that in mind, I will highlight elements of other members' contributions, with a focus on those of the party leaders.

The First Minister outlined that few milestones could be more significant in our history. He spoke about visiting his uncle's grave in Italy and about the gravity of the loss felt by his family. In a poignant and heartfelt contribution, he made it clear that the passing decades do not dampen that memory.

Russell Findlay spoke of the six years of bloodshed and horror that our country endured until it awoke to the light of freedom as the dark forces of fascism were vanquished. He also mentioned the disturbing fact that the average age at which a Scottish serviceman was killed was only 21.

Anas Sarwar spoke of a global struggle against tyranny, in which members of his own family fought in the British Indian Army. He called for a permanent memorial to those heroes and remarked that VE day was the day on which evil was finally defeated.

Patrick Harvie spoke about the scale of the war's impact on the millions of people whom it affected. In the wake of such suffering there were new beginnings. On the domestic front, the NHS and the welfare state emerged; internationally, institutions such as the United Nations were born.

Alex Cole-Hamilton highlighted the end of the war from the German perspective. For many Germans, today is viewed as a day of liberation from their Nazi oppressors. He spoke about the contributions made in all communities, including that of his own family.

Douglas Ross spoke of the requirement for not only celebration but commemoration on this day. I will certainly listen to the podcast that he mentioned, so that I can hear the interesting stories to which he referred.

Meghan Gallacher said that we will be forever in debt to our veterans, and she outlined why it is so important that we never forget their sacrifice. She also highlighted the importance of war memorials in supporting us to do that.

Victory in Europe was hard won. Let us remember that, especially in the early days of the war, victory was not certain. Despite that, Britain and our allies stood for what was right. We chose to uphold the rule of law, to oppose tyranny and to defend freedom and democracy.

16:47

The Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans (Graeme Dey): I thank members for their contributions. It is an honour to close the debate. Every so often, certain topics selected for parliamentary debate require us to set aside our usual tribalism. This has been one such occasion. Colleagues across the chamber have very much risen to the challenge by making excellent, memorable and moving contributions.

Russell Findlay helped to set the tone for the afternoon by reminding us of the scale of the loss worldwide—85 million people—and that the average age of a Scottish serviceman killed during world war two was just 21.

I echo Anas Sarwar's comments about the members of the British Indian Army who travelled halfway around the world so that, as he put it, they could answer the call. I recognise the tremendous work done by the Colourful Heritage archive here in Scotland to raise awareness of that contribution

and remind us of it for ever. The response to fascism truly crossed the boundaries of nationality and faith, and we should never forget that.

Today has served to remind us how greatly Scotland values and supports our armed forces and veterans, which is a reflection of a proud Scottish tradition. Going back through history, Scotland has always had a close link with its armed forces community, regardless of where the people concerned originally hailed from. In large part, that has been due to our regimental structures, which established traditional recruiting grounds across the country. For example, I hail from a part of Scotland that was the home of the Gordon Highlanders, in which my grandfather served, and both the First Minister and I represent the one-time home turf of the Black Watch.

However, as a nation, we have also welcomed many service personnel and units from further afield. As the First Minister rightly noted in his opening speech, it is important that we remember our links with the Commonwealth and the countless men and women from around the world who fought and suffered alongside the people of the United Kingdom during the second world war.

A staggering number of countries were actively involved in the liberation of Europe. More than 14,000 Canadians landed in Normandy during D-day alone, and nearly a million served over the course of the war. South Africans, New Zealanders and Australians all fought alongside the British Indian Army during the gruelling allied advance up the spine of Italy. From even further afield, they were accompanied in their liberation of Italy by an infantry division from Brazil. The free French forces under Charles de Gaulle played a proud part in liberating their homeland, assisted by French colonial troops from Morocco, Senegal and Algeria, while the Polish airborne brigade suffered huge casualties at Arnhem. Alex Cole-Hamilton reminded us of the Poles who served in the RAF and then settled in Scotland.

Resistance fighters and guerrillas across Europe played a vital role in keeping hope of eventual victory alive.

Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): It is important that we recognise people such as my grandfather, who, due to being in a reserved occupation as a dairyman, was part of the home guard, and my gran, who fibbed about her age and left the Calton in Glasgow to come down to Ayrshire with the land army, and who received a medal in recognition of her service only in 2008. Does the minister agree that it is important that we remember them?

Graeme Dey: I intend to come to that issue at the end of my contribution.

It is important that, when we reflect on the countless sacrifices made during the conflict, we do not overlook the contributions made by civilians here and elsewhere or the broader impact that the war had on them. We should never forget the suffering of families who were left behind at home, facing the future uncertain of what would become of their loved ones, or the sad cases of those who did not come home. Suffering never truly ended for widows, friends and other family members, as the First Minister eloquently reminded us.

Nor should we forget those who lost their lives or homes during bombing attacks, such as the 1,200 people who were killed during the Clydebank blitz, which left only seven properties undamaged of the 12,000 or so in the town at the time. More than 35,000 people were left homeless, and many families were devastated by loss and injury. It was the worst destruction and civilian loss of life in Scotland in the entire second world war. The people of Clydebank showed incredible bravery and commitment in rebuilding their community and their lives under such terrible circumstances. In the face of devastation, they pulled together and worked continuously for three days to rescue trapped victims and minimise losses. Paul O'Kane was right to remind us of the sacrifice of Clydebank.

Stephen Kerr: I am grateful to the minister for giving way, because he is making a very impressive speech. Does he agree that today's anniversary, and nearly all the contributions in the debate, highlight the importance of history and the teaching of history, and that we, as a Parliament, should commit to continuing the teaching of the subject of the second world war in our schools? Does he agree that once young people learn the history, as has been the experience of my children and now my grandchildren, they will have an awakened appreciation of the value of freedom, the price of freedom and what it takes to stay free?

Graeme Dey: I agree with that. I note the contribution to keeping tradition and history alive of the poppy bud, which travels Scotland under the guidance of Poppyscotland. It certainly brings to life, particularly for young children, what actually happened, which is incredibly important.

The resilience that I talked about a moment ago during that time came to the fore once more during the pandemic, when those who were young children back in the early 1940s coped, as they did, with the social isolation that was required for society to respond to Covid-19. Much is rightly made of the impact of the pandemic on young people, but often the most elderly in our communities were the most isolated. The wartime generation pointed the way for us when it came to being resilient in the face of that challenge.

On the subject of showing resilience and coping with adversity, it would be remiss of us all not to reflect on the legacy issues of war, which have been carried for years by those who witnessed combat horrors and atrocities during the second world war.

Combatants returned in their hundreds of thousands to their civilian lives after the second world war, and many carried some quite awful, unimaginable memories with them. Post-traumatic stress disorder was barely acknowledged back then, and our understanding of its impact was negligible. It is only now, at a time when PTSD is far better recognised, that we can perhaps reflect that the impact of the second world war on those who served was felt way into the future. In doing that, our admiration for the resilience of that generation is surely only enhanced.

My grandfather, Major James McIntosh, formed the 5th and 7th Gordon Highlanders old comrades association when he returned to civilian life. His commitment to and passion for the task of maintaining the connection with the men he served with was something to behold. Behind that and the amazing camaraderie of the members, there was the deep sadness of loss, reflected in the fact that the 5th and 7th battalions of the Gordons were merged due to the losses that each had suffered during the war—there were so few of them left that they could not maintain two battalions. It is a compliment to the sense of purpose that they returned with and, as I said, to their camaraderie that they placed such importance on maintaining their connection for decades afterwards.

I want to focus briefly on some of the elements of the second world war that are all too often overlooked. We all recognise that the role of the merchant navy has often been overlooked when we reflect on the second world war. Members of the merchant navy showed incredible bravery and resilience in transporting vital supplies through the Arctic convoys to mainland Europe and beyond, despite the threat of U-boat attacks. It would also be utterly remiss of us not to note the many other civilian contributions to the war effort. I am thinking of the fire service, the home guard, which Elena Whitham touched on, those who worked so hard in our shipyards, the munitions factories, and, of course, the land army. They are great examples of that contribution.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): In the honour roll of those who did not serve at the front but ensured that the front could serve, mention should be made of our mining communities, particularly here in Scotland.

Graeme Dey: Hear, hear. My apologies. In listing some, we run the risk of leaving others out,

but it is absolutely correct for Martin Whitfield to remind us of that.

Eighty years on from the original VE day, we continue to hold an honoured place in our hearts for those who laid down their lives in protection of the ideals and values that we rightfully cherish. All of us owe them a great debt. They will never be forgotten. As Anas Sarwar said, we must carry forward their values.

Motion without Notice

16:58

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

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 11.2.4, Decision Time be brought forward to 4.58pm.—[*Martin Whitfield*]

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

16:58

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There is one question to be put as a result of today's business. The question is, that motion S6M-17457, in the name of John Swinney, on commemorating the 80th anniversary of victory in Europe day, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament marks the 80th anniversary of Victory in Europe (VE) Day, which took place on 8 May 1945; remembers the 380,000 UK Armed Forces personnel, including 57,000 Scots, and over 67,000 civilians who lost their lives during the conflict; commemorates the service and pays tribute to the sacrifices of those individuals from across Scotland and the UK, the Commonwealth and the Allied Nations, which ensured the peace and freedoms that are enjoyed today; appreciates the efforts of Legion Scotland and Poppyscotland to mark the occasion, including a national commemorative concert held in Edinburgh on 6 May 2025, Scotland's Salute to VE Day, which was supported by the Scottish Government, and commends the work of both organisations and of veterans charities across Scotland in supporting the veterans of this conflict and their families, many of whom continue to be affected by the tragedy of war to this day.

Meeting closed at 16:58.

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