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Wednesday 21 May 2025

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CONTENTS

	Col.
PORTFOLIO QUESTION TIME	1
DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER RESPONSIBILITIES, ECONOMY AND GAELIC	1
United Kingdom White Paper on Immigration (Impact on Economic Growth)	1
United Kingdom Immigration Policy (Impact on Labour Market)	2
Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry	3
Export and Investment Support Policies	4
Grangemouth Oil Refinery (Closure)	7
Visitor Levy (Highlands)	8
National Strategy for Economic Transformation (West Scotland Economy)	10
FINANCE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT	11
Employer National Insurance Contributions Increase (Local Government Finances)	11
Additional Support for Learning Provision (Midlothian and East Lothian Council Budgets)	13
Energy Infrastructure (Cost of Planning Applications and Appeals)	14
Inverclyde Council (Funding)	15
Income Tax Policy (Impact on Median Income)	16
National Resource Allocation Formula	17
Argyll and Bute Health and Social Care Partnership (Funding)	19
GRANGEMOUTH FLOOD PROTECTION SCHEME	21
Statement—[Gillian Martin].	
The Acting Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Energy (Gillian Martin)	21
ISLAND COMMUNITIES	31
Motion moved—[Mairi Gougeon].	
Amendment moved—[Jamie Halcro Johnston].	
Amendment moved—[Rhoda Grant].	
The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands (Mairi Gougeon)	31
Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con)	36
Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)	39
Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green)	42
Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD)	44
Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP)	46
Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con)	48
Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)	50
Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)	52
Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)	54
Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con)	55
Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)	57
Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)	59
Ariane Burgess	60
Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab)	62
Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con)	64
The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie)	67
BUSINESS MOTIONS	71
Motion moved—[Martin Whitfield]—and agreed to.	
Motions moved—[Jamie Hepburn]—and agreed to.	
PARLIAMENTARY BUREAU MOTIONS	74
Motions moved—[Jamie Hepburn].	
DECISION TIME	75
GAMBLING ADDICTION	83
Motion debated—[Clare Adamson].	
Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)	83
Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)	86
Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)	87
Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)	88
Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)	90



Scottish Parliament

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

Portfolio Question Time

Deputy First Minister Responsibilities, Economy and Gaelic

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The first item of business is portfolio questions. I remind members that questions 1 and 3 are grouped together and that I will take any supplementaries on those questions once they have both been answered.

United Kingdom White Paper on Immigration (Impact on Economic Growth)

1. Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the potential impact on Scotland's economic growth of the UK Government white paper on immigration. (S6O-04672)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): The UK Government immigration white paper completely fails to account for Scotland's distinct demographic or economic needs. Scotland's public services, communities and economy all benefit from inward migration.

The decision to end international care worker recruitment and the planned changes to the graduate visa and skilled worker visa schemes are short-sighted and will prove damaging to sectors that necessarily rely on international talent.

Clare Adamson: The Scottish Chambers of Commerce has stated that UK Government plans for immigration present a serious challenge for Scotland's economy and workforce. The Labour Government's rhetoric is demonising friends, neighbours and loved ones who have made their home here and are a valued part of Scottish society. Given that business leaders and public services have warned that the reforms will cause labour shortages and undermine business confidence, has the UK Government provided any assurance to Scottish ministers about its plans?

Kate Forbes: Yesterday, the First Minister met representatives from social care, education, the rural economy, tourism businesses and local government to discuss the implications of the UK Government's immigration white paper. We continue to engage urgently with the UK

Government, highlighting the potentially deeply damaging impact that its measures will have on public services, communities and the economy. Other stakeholders have backed up much of what has been said about that potential impact in the press.

Scotland's working-age population is growing only because of migration. We call on the UK Government to recognise Scotland's distinct migration needs and to work with us to deliver tailored migration solutions for Scotland.

United Kingdom Immigration Policy (Impact on Labour Market)

3. John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the potential impact on Scotland's labour market of the Prime Minister's recent statement on immigration policy. (S6O-04674)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): We expect the United Kingdom immigration white paper to have a damaging effect on Scotland's economy, because it fails to account for Scotland's distinct demographic or labour market needs. Our ambition is to ensure that immigration delivers for Scotland as well as for the rest of the UK.

Our working-age population is growing only because of migration, so we want a tailored migration solution for Scotland.

John Mason: The Deputy First Minister mentions other parts of the UK. Has she had any discussions with other parts of the UK? The last time that I was in the lake district, restaurants and shops were closing early, presumably because they did not have enough staff. Has she pointed out to the UK Government that other countries, such as Canada and Australia, have regional or state-specific migration policies?

Kate Forbes: Not only have we pointed out the fact that other countries allow for distinct immigration solutions on a state basis, but we have pointed out the comments from stakeholders about their particular needs. John Mason mentioned the hospitality industry; the same could be said for the food and drink industry and the care sector.

Previously, we worked with stakeholders in rural and island Scotland to design a rural visa pilot proposal that would reflect the needs of communities and economies. There is on-going disappointment, particularly from businesses, that that potential solution continues to be ignored.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Over the past few years, net inward migration to the United Kingdom has been at record levels.

Contrary to expectations, it has more than doubled since Brexit. However, relatively few of those new migrants come to settle in Scotland compared with other parts of the United Kingdom. Why does the Deputy First Minister believe that to be the case?

Kate Forbes: The figures show that payrolled employments of non-European Union nationals in Scotland have been rising since 2020. When it comes to tax rates, the most recent data from His Majesty's Revenue and Customs shows that, across different tax thresholds, we continue to see, on average, just over 4,000 more people moving in than leaving. That demonstrates that Scotland is an attractive place to work.

The point that we are making—which I think that Murdo Fraser also hears from businesses—is about a tailored approach. Particular sectors have repeatedly called for a tailored migration solution—soft fruits was one obvious sector, in the aftermath of Brexit—so that businesses and industry can recruit individuals to meet specific needs. They are currently restricted in doing so because of salary thresholds or other measures that are imposed by the UK Government.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (LD): Glenfield care home in Greenock is earmarked for closure, citing recruitment issues and the national insurance hike as primary reasons. Another care home manager, at Campbell Snowden House, warned that other care homes in my region will follow. He also admonished politicians for using language such as “low-skilled workers” when it comes to the care sector, saying that they are highly-skilled jobs and that it is a very respectable career. What is the Scottish Government's plan B if the white paper comes to pass? How do we ensure that vital lifeline sectors, such as the care sector, will have the staff that they need in order to survive?

Kate Forbes: Jamie Greene is right to identify the double hit of the immigration white paper and the hike to national insurance contributions, both of which could have devastating impacts on the care sector. That is not just my view—it is also the view of Donald Macaskill and others who work in the sector. The data is stark, and the evidence is clear. We have enough qualitative anecdotal evidence to illustrate what the impact could be. Jamie Greene is also right in his comment about the use of “low-skilled workers”, because we know how critical it is that we have a workforce in the care sector. Few things are as important to us, as a society, as the care of vulnerable people.

Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry

2. Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the Scottish child abuse inquiry. (S6O-04673)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): The Scottish child abuse inquiry is investigating abuse experienced by children who were in care in Scotland between 1930 and 2014. The inquiry has reviewed a wide range of care settings and, to date, has completed eight phases of investigation. It has now commenced phase 9, which is focusing on healthcare and specialist schools. When the inquiry concludes, it will publish a final report that could make recommendations to improve practice, policy and legislation. We are committed to carefully considering the inquiry's findings and recommendations.

Elena Whitham: I have heard several harrowing experiences of historic abuse from constituents who were placed in care as children. Will the cabinet secretary advise members what steps the Scottish Government is taking to ensure that survivors of such abuse receive adequate support following their participation in the Scottish child abuse inquiry, as they find their voices to relieve their horrific childhood experiences, the toll of which has haunted many of them throughout their adult lives?

Kate Forbes: Elena Whitham raises a really important issue. Having engaged directly and personally with survivors, I recognise the importance of the point that she makes, and I acknowledge the courage of survivors who have shared their experiences with the inquiry. Recognising the impact of trauma, which she identifies, the inquiry follows a trauma-informed approach to ensure dignity and respect, and to seek to minimise retraumatisation. The Scottish Government is supporting survivors through initiatives such as the Future Pathways service and the survivors of childhood abuse support fund, which fund trauma-informed services. We want to work with partners and survivor-led organisations to ensure that those services are accessible, responsive and person centred.

Export and Investment Support Policies

4. Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the effectiveness of its current export and investment support policies. (S6O-04675)

The Minister for Business (Richard Lochhead): The Scottish Government subjects its export and inward investment policies to regular evaluation. The most recent independent review, which was conducted by Aston University, has been published on the Scottish Government's website.

Our export and inward investment programmes are measured and tracked through robust data and analysis from a range of sources, including

HM Revenue and Customs, "Export statistics Scotland" reports, Scottish Enterprise and EY.

Our evidence-based approach to export promotion and inward investment has generated £1.6 billion of additional overseas sales over three years and has maintained Scotland's position as the most attractive location outside London for inward investment over the past nine years.

Martin Whitfield: The Scottish Government has attacked the recent deal with the European Union, which it says does not go far enough. However, in the same breath, the Scottish Government says that it welcomes the progress on sanitary and phytosanitary checks, energy co-operation, youth mobility, and trade in services and steel. Now that the United Kingdom Government is finally delivering for Scottish exporters by cutting red tape on food exports, among other things, will the Scottish Government hit its target of ensuring that, by 2029, 25 per cent of gross domestic product will be made up of exports?

Richard Lochhead: I might advise the member to speak to the Scottish fishing industry about its view of the deal that has been struck with the European Union.

Of course, the deal includes elements that we welcome, because we welcome any reduction in barriers to trade with the EU, which is Scotland's biggest export market. We are still waiting for the UK Government to provide full details of the deal, but nothing that has been achieved in it will make up for our lost membership of the EU.

The target that has been set for exports from Scotland is indeed ambitious. Since it was set in 2019, we have faced a number of global challenges, including Covid and Brexit, as well as conflicts around the world and other turbulent issues that have affected the ability of Scotland and other countries to engage in international trade.

Of course, the programme for government included a lot more support for increasing exports, because we recognise the importance of achieving the export target. For example, more resources are being provided to Scottish Chambers of Commerce for its trade missions, and we now have the six-point export plan. We are confident that we will make very good progress towards that target, which is why we addressed that important issue in the programme for government.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): Does the minister agree that, during such turbulent economic times, it is more important than ever that we champion our world-class Scottish products, such as salmon and whisky? Will he outline how measures in the programme for government, such as the Scottish

Government's new six-point export plan, will assist with that?

Richard Lochhead: Colin Beattie raises an important point, which is that now is the time to give more attention to global trade, rather than pull back in response to the current challenges. He is right to highlight the amazing food and drink products that we have in this country, which include Scottish salmon, Scottish seafood and Scotch whisky.

In the past few weeks, I returned from a trade mission to Japan, where there has been an increase in seafood imports from Scotland—there has been a dramatic increase in the amount of Scottish mackerel that goes to the Japanese market. We are also promoting Scottish salmon and whisky exports. There seems to be an ever-increasing appetite for Scottish produce in the Japanese market, and we are finding that that story is being replicated around the world.

Colin Beattie is right to say that we have great produce and that we must provide more support than ever to exporters—indeed, we discussed that very issue at the reception that the Scotch Whisky Association hosted last night in the Parliament.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): What assessment has the minister made of the possible impacts on trade and investment of the imposition of a hard border between Scotland and the rest of the UK?

Richard Lochhead: Trade with the rest of the UK is very important to Scotland, and we want that to continue. However, trade with the European Union is also very important. The EU is our biggest export market. Although the US is the country with our biggest export market, our biggest overall export partner is the EU. Therefore, we must ensure that we export as much as possible to the European Union and minimise the barriers to that trade. At the same time, we must continue the very healthy trade that we have with the rest of the UK.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): The minister will have seen this week's reports about the court appeal of Sanjeev Gupta's group to fend off an attempt to close down its steel mills, particularly in England. In my view, that raises concerns about the group's investments in Scotland. What communications is the minister having with GFG Alliance in relation to the Alvalde British Aluminium plant and Liberty Steel Dalzell? Those are important plants but, so far, I have heard nothing from the Government.

Richard Lochhead: I assure Willie Rennie that we pay close attention to those issues all the time, and we will continue to do so.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife)

(Con): Analysis that the Scottish Parliament information centre produced late last year shows that the value of international exports from Scotland remains below the Scottish Government's target of 25 per cent, and that the rest of the UK still accounts for most of Scotland's services and manufacturing exports. In the light of that, what action is the minister taking to strengthen our vital internal export market? How is he working with the Department for Business and Trade to ensure that Scottish products have access to competitive international markets?

Richard Lochhead: I very much welcome the focus on increasing Scottish exports. We have to be clear that the exports target of 25 per cent of gross domestic product is for 2029, but we are only in 2025. As I mentioned earlier, we are putting a lot of measures in place to achieve that ambitious target, hence the additional emphasis on supporting exports and global trade in the programme for government that the First Minister recently published—which I hope the member welcomes. The additional resource that Scottish Chambers of Commerce is getting has been warmly welcomed. We have to work flat out to make the most of our export opportunities, and that should be our best response to the current turbulence in global trade.

Grangemouth Oil Refinery (Closure)

5. Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab):

I remind members of my voluntary entry of trade union interests in the register of members' interests.

To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the economic impact of the closure of the Grangemouth oil refinery. (S6O-04676)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): A robust and independent analysis of the economic contribution of the Grangemouth refinery was conducted by PwC, and the findings of that assessment were published in August 2024. Our analysis notes that the economic value of the Grangemouth refinery, its supply chain and employee spending was estimated to be £403.6 million in 2023. However, the economic contribution of the refinery would not have been possible without the dedicated and highly skilled workforce, and I wish once again to pay tribute to them and to confirm my support for them at this difficult time.

Richard Leonard: Today's inaugural Grangemouth investment task force meeting is welcome, but the next set of refinery workers are due to leave the site, their jobs declared redundant, by 31 May. The cabinet secretary

knows that time is of the essence so, to accelerate the chances of retaining work and jobs, will the Government push for an immediate independent review of the assets at the refinery? Will the cabinet secretary update Parliament this afternoon on the 66 potential investors, who were previously named, and will she outline what can be done to speed up the investment process?

Kate Forbes: With regard to the second question, which was on the progress on the 60-plus interests, I suggest that I take that offline to give Richard Leonard and other MSPs an update on progress. This is obviously quite a fast-moving situation, and I do not want to give Mr Leonard out-of-date information.

We have pushed for an independent review of the asset. It has been one of the big asks from the union, and we are pushing for it, too.

On the first question, which was about time being of the essence, because of the impending deadline of 31 May, the member is absolutely right. We are therefore keen to look for opportunities through project willow that can be delivered as quickly as possible. As he will know, and as I have said before, we think that the closure of the refinery is premature.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): A key element in securing a green industrial future for the Grangemouth site is the development of carbon capture in Scotland, so it is vital that the United Kingdom Government provides support not only for carbon capture projects in England but for the Acorn project, too. Does the Deputy First Minister agree that it is essential that the UK Government takes swift and urgent action to support Acorn, which in turn will help us deliver the future that Grangemouth deserves?

Kate Forbes: I agree. We are still awaiting a final decision on Acorn and confirmation of the full funding package and timeline. There are so many issues that are contingent on Acorn getting the green light, including Grangemouth's future, as well as other issues related to meeting our climate change targets and the energy transition.

We urge the Chancellor of the Exchequer to green light the project in the upcoming spending review, which is only a matter of weeks away. That would unlock more than £80 million, as committed by this Government's First Minister in the most recent programme for government.

Visitor Levy (Highlands)

6. Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions the economy secretary has had with ministerial colleagues regarding the potential impact on businesses and residents in the

Highlands should a visitor levy be introduced. (S6O-04677)

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): I am answering the question as the minister responsible for the visitor levy.

The Visitor Levy (Scotland) Act 2024 requires local authorities to prepare and publicise an assessment of the impact of any proposals to introduce a visitor levy, including on local businesses and residents. I regularly discuss a range of issues with my ministerial colleagues, and I hope to meet Ms Forbes shortly, in her capacity as an MSP, as well as Highland Council representatives to discuss the possible introduction of a visitor levy in the Highland Council authority area, as detailed in the act that was passed last year.

Douglas Ross: I understand that Ivan McKee is the minister responsible for this, but given the portfolio team that is in front of us, it is disappointing that a question about the Highlands was answered by the only minister who does not represent a part of the Highlands.

Does Ivan McKee accept the severe criticism about the potential for a visitor levy, including from the Highland Hotels Association, which only this week warned that it is “exceptionally frightening” for a tourism tax to be introduced in the Highlands? Does he also accept that that will impact not only on tourists who visit the area, but on local residents who have to travel from rural areas for overnight stays and potential early-morning hospital appointments? They should not have to rely on clawing that money back—they should be exempt from the very beginning.

Ivan McKee: First, the reason why Ms Forbes did not answer the question is that she has a constituency interest—I think that Douglas Ross will understand that situation. Also, I am the minister responsible for the visitor levy.

I am well aware of the concern that has been raised in the Highlands, in particular, and elsewhere. Indeed, I have had a series of meetings with the Scottish Tourism Alliance, the Association of Scotland’s Self-Caterers and others with regard to the issues that the levy can raise for small businesses in particular.

As the member is aware, the responsibility for implementing a levy lies with each local authority, and there is a range of provisions in the act to allow the local authority to design a system that is able to cater to the needs of local businesses. I am keen to continue to engage with members, local authorities and industry representatives as we seek to take the legislation forward, and as councils seek to implement it in their local areas.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP):

All four ministers know that I have opposed the tax from the outset, and that I voted against it. It is a percentage tax on which additional VAT will be payable—in other words, it is two sets of tax.

The minister knows that I have argued that the tax is uncollectible and that it will lead to a fiasco, that nobody has worked out how to collect it and that the information technology systems that will be necessary to administer it do not exist. Does he agree that it might be the death knell of many hard-working and excellent bed-and-breakfast establishments in the Highlands and throughout the country? He has been told that again and again. Will he call a halt to this outrageous and poorly designed tax?

Ivan McKee: The member will be aware that it is up to local authorities to choose whether to implement the tax. Highland Council proceeded with a consultation, and it is now reflecting on the response.

As I have said, I will meet Highland Council representatives shortly to discuss where the council is in that regard and the options that are available to it. The tax is set out in legislation, as the member is aware, and the City of Edinburgh Council is the first council that intends to implement it; it will do so next year. As I have said, we will continue to engage with other councils, as we learn from that implementation, to understand what their plans are in their local areas.

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP):

Visitor levies are very common in many parts of the world, including 21 European countries, and they bring benefits to visitors and residents alike, especially in high-traffic tourist destinations. Will the minister say more about how the decision to empower local government could benefit communities and businesses across Scotland?

Ivan McKee: The 2024 act gives local government the most significant new powers in that regard since devolution. It has provided businesses with the opportunity to work with their local council in order to generate funds for enhancing facilities that are frequently used by visitors and residents alike.

Funds can also be used to promote culture and heritage events, extend the tourist season and drive more business and economic activity. Many businesses and organisations recognise the value that the levy can bring, and it will help sustain and enhance the visitor experience by making destinations more attractive and competitive.

National Strategy for Economic Transformation (West Scotland Economy)

7. Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an

update on what impact the national strategy for economic transformation is having on the economy of the West Scotland region. (S6O-04678)

The Minister for Business (Richard Lochhead): Our national strategy for economic transformation outlines our vision for economic growth, and includes a programme to make Scotland's regions and communities more productive, innovative and prosperous. Reports on progress are made annually.

We have committed to providing £628 million of funding to the three regional growth deals across the west of Scotland, and we are enabling the region's economic partnerships to create jobs and help make the area an attractive place to live and work. That includes committing £2 million in 2025-26 to meet the Glasgow city region's skills needs in the maritime and engineering skills sectors.

Katy Clark: North Ayrshire has the lowest job density in Scotland. Does the minister believe that the Scottish Government is doing enough to prioritise North Ayrshire, given those poor job density levels? What more can be done to encourage investment and well-paid jobs in the area?

Richard Lochhead: We want to support measures that will help create jobs and prosperity in the area; indeed, we will all have that as a priority. With regard to the Ayrshire growth deal, the specific North Ayrshire capital projects include the £9.5 million marine tourism programme, which will deliver step-ashore facilities for Arran and Cumbrae, and the £9 million greater harbour project, which will reinvigorate Irvine's maritime mile. We must always look for more examples, and the member raises an important issue in that respect.

We have the strategy, and the programme for government contains a number of measures, too. I hope that we can make good progress on helping the people in North Ayrshire.

The Presiding Officer: Question 8 has been withdrawn.

Finance and Local Government

The Presiding Officer: Question 1 was not lodged.

Employer National Insurance Contributions Increase (Local Government Finances)

2. Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what engagement it has had with the United Kingdom Government regarding the impact of the increase to employer national insurance contributions on local government finances. (S6O-04681)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): I am grateful to the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and individual local authorities for their support in urging the United Kingdom Government to fully fund the tax increase. We are deeply disappointed that the UK Government has failed to recognise that the Scottish Government has prioritised investment in our public services and public sector workers. We are now, in effect, being punished for those decisions, but we have provided an additional £144 million of funding, and we will continue to work in partnership with local government to mitigate the impact of the UK Government's decision on front-line services.

Gordon MacDonald: The City of Edinburgh Council will see a £19 million increase in employer national insurance contributions because of the Labour Government's decision to increase that jobs tax. Does the cabinet secretary agree that the Labour Government must act urgently and agree to fully fund the public purse for those additional costs, and will she join me in calling on Scottish Labour MSPs to stand up for Scotland and put pressure on their Westminster Labour colleagues to reverse that ill-thought-through decision that is impacting on the delivery of public services?

The Presiding Officer: On matters for which the cabinet secretary has responsibility.

Shona Robison: I agree with that. We have consistently made it clear that the UK Government must fully fund the additional costs. However, it has confirmed that it intends to provide only a Barnett share, which would fail to reflect Scotland's larger public sector per person than the rest of the UK. It has confirmed that we will receive £339 million for the additional costs of increased employer national insurance, which is, of course, far short of the more than £700 million bill that we estimate public services will face.

We face the challenge of having to divert money from front-line services to cover those additional costs, which is an outcome that I am sure no one in this Parliament wants.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): The finance secretary reverts to type and blames Westminster. Despite the negative consequences of the national insurance increase, the financial crisis that councils face is nothing new. It stems from years of sustained underfunding from this Scottish National Party Government.

Councils across Scotland face budget shortfalls amounting to well over half a billion pounds, with 10 per cent council tax increases the norm and many councils raiding what is left of their reserves. Why does the cabinet secretary still blame others and continue to defend her Government's record

when we all know that the cash crisis that councils face is down to the SNP Government?

The Presiding Officer: In relation to the substantive question, cabinet secretary.

Shona Robison: The responsibility for the hike in employer national insurance contributions is Westminster's. The decision was made by the UK Government—that is a fact. It is not about trying to shift blame—it is a statement of fact that, in his next breath, Craig Hoy criticises the hike in employers' national insurance contributions.

With regard to council funding, the £1 billion unfunded tax cuts that Craig Hoy wants would impact negatively on that. Yet again, the Tories come to the chamber demanding more money for local government, and then they oppose measures such as the visitor levy, which will help local authorities to raise much-needed revenue—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the cabinet secretary.

Shona Robison: There is no consistency whatsoever from those on the Tory benches, but we should not be surprised by that.

Additional Support for Learning Provision (Midlothian and East Lothian Council Budgets)

3. Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government, regarding its decisions on local authority budget allocations, what discussions it has had with Midlothian and East Lothian councils regarding any impact on their budgets as a result of providing support in schools for additional support needs. (S6O-04682)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): The Scottish Government continues to meet regularly with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and individual local authorities to cover a range of topics, including current and future budget pressures.

The 2025-26 budget provides an additional £29 million of funding for local and national programmes to support the recruitment and retention of the additional support needs workforce.

Colin Beattie: Given the rise in ASN demand across the country, has the Scottish Government considered any changes to the local authority funding formula to better reflect and support local authorities with that rise?

Shona Robison: The local government needs-based formula that is used to distribute the funding that is available for local government uses the most up-to-date data available to ensure that

changes in circumstances are accurately reflected as quickly as possible. The formula is kept under constant review through the settlement and distribution group.

Of course, the Scottish Government is always open to suggestions to improve the funding formula, but proposals must come through COSLA in the first instance.

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): I have spoken to many concerned parents and teachers who have said that after-school care for children with additional support needs is almost impossible to find, adding an extra layer of stress to the lives of parents and children.

After-school care providers have neither the capacity nor the budget to fund the specialist staff who are required to look after children with additional needs. We cannot ignore the needs of those children. Councils need to be properly funded. Will the cabinet secretary wake up to reality, look those parents in the eye and tell them why the Government is failing future generations?

Shona Robison: I will say a couple of things to Pam Gosal. First, we recognise the important services that local authorities provide, which is why they have received record funding of more than £15 billion—something that is put at risk by Pam Gosal's support for £1 billion of unfunded tax cuts, which would affect local government funding—*[Interruption.]*

The Tories do not like to hear the facts, but I will not stop repeating them, because facts matter—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the cabinet secretary.

Shona Robison: Pam Gosal's point about after-school care is important, and that is why we have provided an additional £29 million of funding on top of the existing funding for special needs provision that local government has. How each local authority decides to spend that money is down to councils themselves, and if they want to prioritise after-school care for children with special needs, they can do that.

Energy Infrastructure (Cost of Planning Applications and Appeals)

4. Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what it estimates the cost to local authorities has been since May 2021 of dealing with planning applications and appeals relating to new energy infrastructure, such as wind farms, pylons and battery storage facilities. (S6O-04683)

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): The Scottish Government does not hold that specific information, but I fully recognise the

financial and capacity pressures on the system. That is why I raised planning fees last December, with further increases coming into effect next month.

When applications for energy developments are made to the Scottish Government under the Electricity Act 1989, planning authorities receive half the fee to cover the cost of their input. In addition, the national planning hub offers support to authorities, including capacity and access to expertise, to help them to determine applications for renewable energy and housing projects.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: I am surprised that the minister does not have a figure for that. We know that too many of our councils are struggling under the weight of planning applications for energy infrastructure, and it is becoming an increasing drain on their resources. It is also a massive challenge for those local residents and communities who face having those developments right on their doorstep.

On Saturday afternoon, I met residents who will be impacted by the proposed Scottish and Southern Electricity Networks substation at Fanellan. Some are already looking to move away, but they are being told that interest in their homes will be impacted by the development. Others want to stay and fight the development, but they feel that they do not have the resources or expertise to do so. Does the Scottish Government provide any support for local communities to access legal and regulatory advice, or does it expect local people to foot the bill to protect their homes and their local communities?

Ivan McKee: The member will appreciate that I cannot engage in discussion about any specifics, including the case that he has raised. Every Conservative member who has spoken this afternoon has called for more resources for local government or tax cuts and, in some cases, for both. *[Interruption.]* I can get back to the member with the detail that is available on his question.

Inverclyde Council (Funding)

5. Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how much additional funding Inverclyde Council has received since 2016, over and above its annual funding allocations. (S6O-04684)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): Funding such as that awarded in city and region deals is often allocated to regions and therefore not attributable to individual local authorities, even where all local partners benefit directly from the investment. In 2025-26 alone, almost £867 million of funding will be provided to local government over and above the record funding settlement. Inverclyde Council

will receive a share of that funding. In recent years, it has benefited from funding to expand the quayside and build a new visitor centre to further expand the Greenock ocean terminal, alongside investment in the learning estate, such as the development at Kilmacolm primary school and St Patrick's primary school.

Stuart McMillan: The cabinet secretary's reply certainly demonstrates that the Scottish Government has provided additional funding to Inverclyde Council over and above the budget settlement, which I warmly welcome. The Inverclyde socioeconomic task force, which I co-chair, has presented a range of projects to the Scottish Government, which have the potential to benefit the community. Will the cabinet secretary give an assurance that those projects are being considered, notwithstanding the financial challenges that the Scottish Government is facing?

Shona Robison: I recognise the importance of the task force's work. As Stuart McMillan will be aware, the Minister for Employment and Investment has participated in meetings of the task force. The Scottish Government is aware of the project funding requests that have been made by the task force and will consider any proposal that has the potential to drive growth and create high-quality employment opportunities.

Income Tax Policy (Impact on Median Income)

6. Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on the impact of its Scottish income tax policy on the median income in Scotland, in light of this being estimated to be £29,750 in 2025-26, based on its current policy. (S6O-04685)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): Anyone in Scotland who has an income of less than £30,000 will pay less income tax than they would if they lived elsewhere in the United Kingdom. That accounts for more than half of Scottish income tax payers.

Stephen Kerr: The median salary in Scotland is projected to be £29,750, which is well below the UK figure of £37,480. That is a significant gap. However, Scottish workers face higher taxes if they try to earn more. The cabinet secretary needs to learn that low pay is not a virtue and that taxing aspiration is no route to growth. Does the cabinet secretary accept that Scotland's income tax policy unfairly burdens working people, discourages ambition and undermines our competitiveness by making it harder for individuals and families to get ahead?

Shona Robison: It is refreshing to hear a Tory say that he does not support low pay, given that

Stephen Kerr's Tory Government at Westminster based its whole economic strategy on low pay, which, of course, this Government has addressed—

Stephen Kerr: Rubbish!

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the cabinet secretary.

Shona Robison: We have addressed that with our support for the real living wage, which has driven up wages in Scotland. It is also important to consider the package of support that we are providing in the round. Households that are in the lower half of the income distribution are, on average, around £450 per year better off than they would be under the UK's tax and social security policies.

Stephen Kerr: By having lower pay.

Shona Robison: Perhaps Stephen Kerr should occasionally listen to the answers—he may even learn something.

Stephen Kerr: But it is nonsense.

The Presiding Officer: Mr Kerr, I ask that, when you have put your question, you listen with courtesy.

Stephen Kerr: It was wrong!

The Presiding Officer: Mr Kerr!

National Resource Allocation Formula

7. Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government, in relation to the setting of budget allocations, what discussions the finance secretary has had with national health service boards regarding the national resource allocation formula. (S6O-04686)

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): The NRAC formula is an objective measure of the need for healthcare services across Scotland. The formula, which is updated annually, provides target shares for regional national health service boards and has been in use since 2009-10. The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government has not had any specific conversations with NHS boards regarding the formula. The approach that has been taken by the Scottish Government has been to move boards towards parity gradually over a number of years. Since 2012-13, more than £4 billion of additional funding has been committed to those NHS boards that are below their NRAC parity levels.

Miles Briggs: In recent years, MSPs and MPs from all parties have heard from NHS Lothian that, with the poor financial allocation, it is consistently seeing under-level performance with regard to the national resource allocation formula. That situation

means that our health board here, in Lothian, is consistently losing out, with the result that it is now the lowest-funded health board per head of population in Scotland.

What actions is the Scottish Government taking specifically on NHS Lothian, given that the area is experiencing the highest level of population growth anywhere in the country? Will the cabinet secretary and the minister agree to meet a cross-party group of MSPs and representatives of NHS Lothian to discuss the board's concerning financial sustainability issues and the fact that we need a population-based funding model if we are going to deliver the services that Lothian will need in the future?

Ivan McKee: The NRAC formula, which is updated regularly, takes into account population growth and a range of other factors in its calculation. With regard to NHS Lothian, we have seen the board's funding move closer and closer to parity in each of the years since the matter came under consideration by the Government. Indeed, NHS Lothian has seen additional parity adjustments of almost £130 million in the past 10 years or so.

As I said, the formula is in place and the Government's policy is that we move boards towards parity over time. That is what is happening with NHS Lothian, as it is with other NHS territorial boards.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): NHS Fife had a £55 million overspend in the past financial year after attempts to bring the budget under control failed. Why does the Scottish Government boast repeatedly about being able to balance its budgets when it has direct control over NHS boards and is repeatedly unable to do so in that regard?

Ivan McKee: Obviously, NHS boards are responsible for managing their own funds, and I have already indicated the basis on which the funding is allocated to them. The member should recognise that the NHS in Scotland is receiving record funding from the Scottish Government as a consequence of the priority that we give to funding our health and social care services.

I have already indicated that the Scottish Government balances its budget in the round, and the funding that we give to NHS boards through the NRAC formula is at record levels.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): Highlands and Islands Enterprise estimates that, over the next decade or so, 18,000 additional jobs, mostly in the renewables sector, will be created in the region, which will add around 40,000 more people to its existing population. Will the finance secretary give that fair consideration in relation to

the NRAC formula, given that NHS services in the Highlands are bursting at the seams as it is?

Ivan McKee: I have already indicated that the NRAC formula will take into account population shifts over time, along with a range of other factors, including, in the case of NHS Highland, the rural nature of the area that it covers. The member can rest assured that that shift in population will be factored in to NHS funding and the NRAC formula.

Argyll and Bute Health and Social Care Partnership (Funding)

8. Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government whether it plans to allocate additional funding to Argyll and Bute Council, in light of reports of Argyll and Bute health and social care partnership's funding deficit. (S6O-04687)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): We, of course, appreciate the pressures that health and social care face, which is why we provided record funding for health boards and local government in 2025-26. I understand that the chief officer and chief finance officer of Argyll and Bute's integration joint board are preparing a recovery plan, which will be presented to the IJB at the end of May, and I welcome the fact that the council is actively discussing all available options to support the partnership and ensure the continued delivery of critical services.

The Scottish Government will continue to work with all partners to ensure that the people of Scotland continue to receive the high-quality public services that they expect and deserve.

Rhoda Grant: The cabinet secretary will be aware that Argyll and Bute Council still has to find £4.2 million to fill the gap in health services, while £500,000-worth of social work savings must also be found.

Islanders face challenges in accessing health and social care services. Research has shown that there is a worrying prevalence of certain health conditions in rural Scotland. Those include Huntington's disease, of which the north of Scotland has one of the highest rates in the world—five times the global average—yet there is no specialist service in the Highlands for that condition.

What discussions has the cabinet secretary had with her Cabinet colleagues about the forthcoming islands plan and whether it can be used to allocate additional funding to support island health and social care services?

Shona Robison: I am happy to write to Rhoda Grant with a bit more detail. She makes an

important point about the role of the islands plan, which has helped to lever in additional funding to some of our island communities.

We continue to look at the issues that she highlights, particularly those that are specific to more remote and rural communities, and we try to reflect that rurality through some of the formulas for allocating funding through health and local government to our health and social care partnerships.

To address some of the pressures that the sector faces more generally, we are taking forward the new social care financial viability response group, which has met weekly since February. It comprises Government and sector representatives, to make sure that we are working together to ensure the sustainability of services.

I will write to Rhoda Grant with more detail specifically on the islands plan point.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio question time.

Grangemouth Flood Protection Scheme

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is a statement by Gillian Martin on the proposed Grangemouth flood protection scheme. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:47

The Acting Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Energy (Gillian Martin): Thank you, Presiding Officer, for the opportunity to update the Parliament on Falkirk Council's Grangemouth flood protection scheme proposals.

Last month, the Scottish Government informed Falkirk Council that ministers have decided that the next steps in the consent process for the Grangemouth flood protection scheme should be undertaken locally rather than nationally. That was based on consideration of the proposals put forward by Falkirk Council and of the objections. Ministers deemed that it did not merit being called in to a public local inquiry.

I believe that it would be helpful as part of this update to provide some background on that decision and on where the next steps in the process for confirming flood protection schemes take place.

Last year, Falkirk Council gave public notice of the Grangemouth flood protection scheme. That started a statutory approval process under the Flood Risk Management (Scotland) Act 2009, and was followed by a period of 28 days, during which interested parties could lodge objections to the scheme. During that period, Falkirk Council provided information to households and engaged with the local community through newsletters, social media, a website and in-person events. The deadline for objections closed on 16 June 2024, and Falkirk Council duly considered the objections that were received.

Following that consideration, Falkirk Council made a formal decision to confirm the proposed Grangemouth flood protection scheme on a preliminary basis. Under the 2009 act, when a local authority receives objections to a proposed flood protection scheme from certain persons, it must refer the scheme to Scottish ministers to decide whether it should be called in for a public local inquiry or whether it can continue to be considered by the local authority through a local hearing.

Of the 22 valid objections that were received by Falkirk Council, 15 fell under a category that required the council to notify ministers of the

scheme. For instance, the objectors had an interest in the land where operations would be carried out, in land that would be affected by the operations or by any alteration to the flow of water caused by any of the operations.

When ministers are notified of a flood protection scheme, the key consideration is whether the decision to confirm the scheme should be taken locally or nationally, with a decision that is taken nationally sometimes described as being "called in". In practice, that means that ministers must consider whether the individual or collective issues that are raised in any objections are so significant that they should be considered nationally. That would be done through a public local inquiry rather than through a local hearing held by the local authority.

Ministers notified Falkirk Council on 27 March 2025 of their decision not to call in the Grangemouth flood protection scheme, based on an assessment of the information that was provided by Falkirk Council, having had regard to matters that are set out in the Flood Risk Management (Scotland) Act 2009, such as the likely reduction in flood risk, the nature of objections and the likely effect on objectors.

Falkirk Council will now progress with a local hearing, and that process usually takes around 12 to 18 months. In accordance with procedures that are set out in the 2009 act, Falkirk Council has approached the planning and environmental appeals division to provide a reporter to lead the process. Once the reporter has held the hearing and provided their report, Falkirk Council can decide whether to confirm the scheme with modifications, to confirm the scheme with no modifications or to reject the scheme. If the scheme is confirmed by Falkirk Council at that point, any person who is affected by the scheme can still appeal to the sheriff court.

If the scheme is ultimately confirmed, Scottish ministers must, under planning legislation, direct that planning permission is deemed to be granted, subject to conditions including the duration of the validity of the planning permission.

As proposed in the notice sent by Falkirk Council to Scottish ministers, the proposed Grangemouth flood protection scheme would be the largest flood defence project in Scotland and one of the biggest in the United Kingdom. It is exceptional in terms of scale and financial cost and requires careful consideration to ensure that it delivers for the local community.

The initial cost for the scheme was £108 million in 2015. However, that has now risen to between £450 million and £672 million. That is why, in 2023, ministers and Falkirk Council agreed that the Grangemouth flood protection scheme would

be removed from consideration as part of the existing national funding programme. Up until that point, Falkirk Council had received £23 million for the development of the scheme.

Following its local hearing, should Falkirk Council confirm the scheme in its current form and wish to access further Scottish Government funding, it will be necessary to demonstrate that the scheme, in whole or in phased elements, is value for money assessed against other flood protection schemes across Scotland.

The Scottish Government will now consider how and when the scheme is brought back into the standard processes for flood protection governance and funding. In doing so, we must weigh up any investment decision in terms of the impact on the individual project and also the impact that any individual project has on its ability to invest in other areas.

Separately from the process in relation to the proposed scheme, the Scottish Government has worked with Falkirk Council through a task force approach to examine options for improved and affordable flood resilience for residents and local communities in Falkirk and Grangemouth. Tomorrow, I will meet with the leader of Falkirk Council, Councillor Meiklejohn, to discuss those issues.

More broadly, managing our exposure to floods and their impacts is a significant and growing challenge as climate change brings more severe and frequent flood events. Improving resilience to flooding is a priority for the Scottish Government, evidenced by the publication of the first national flood resilience strategy last December.

Since 2016, the Scottish Government has allocated £570 million to local authorities for flood protection schemes and flood resilience, which has delivered improved flood resilience to more than 6,000 properties across Scotland so far.

The Scottish Government is working with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and local authorities to reform the funding and governance for flood resilience, learning the lessons from delivering the first programme of schemes and ensuring that future programmes provide maximum benefit for local communities in the most efficient way.

I am committed to improving Scotland's resilience to flooding and that includes working with Falkirk Council on how we can improve flood resilience in the Grangemouth area. Since 2016-2017, the Scottish Government has provided almost £23 million to support development work on flood defences in Grangemouth and we will continue to work closely with the council to improve flood protection for communities in the

area. I look forward to my discussion with the leader of Falkirk Council tomorrow on the matter.

I am happy to answer questions on my statement.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The cabinet secretary will now take questions on the issues that were raised in her statement. I intend to allow around 20 minutes for questions, after which we will move on to the next item of business. Members wishing to ask a question should press their request-to-speak button.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I welcome the ministerial statement and thank the cabinet secretary for an advance copy of it.

Grangemouth's future depends on urgent infrastructure investment to support regeneration and to protect one of Scotland's most strategically important areas. The Grangemouth flood protection scheme is critical because it will safeguard 6,000 residents, 2,760 homes, 1,200 businesses and nationally vital infrastructure. As the cabinet secretary mentioned, under the Flood Risk Management (Scotland) Act 2009, the Scottish Government typically funds 80 per cent of such schemes, leaving the local authority to fund 20 per cent. However, that model will not work in this instance, because, as the cabinet secretary pointed out in her statement, current estimates are that the total cost of the scheme will be between £450 million and £672 million. Falkirk Council cannot possibly be expected to contribute what is likely to be at least £100 million.

The cabinet secretary also mentioned the joint task force that was formed in 2024 to explore funding options, among other things, but ministers have yet to confirm the Government's contribution or the timeline.

Time is of the essence. It is 10 years since we started down this road and 10 years since the scheme was first identified as the number 1 priority due to the high level of risk and the high cost benefits. What safeguards are in place to prevent delays in the local hearing process? After that process is concluded, what is to prevent Scottish ministers from kicking the can further down the road and not making a timely decision?

Given the—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Kerr, I must ask you to conclude.

Stephen Kerr: Given the exceptional scale, cost and national importance of the Grangemouth flood protection scheme, will the cabinet secretary confirm that we need a bespoke funding model for it?

Gillian Martin: It is important to reiterate that the next steps in the process for the Grangemouth flood protection scheme are to be undertaken by the local authority. Should Falkirk Council confirm the scheme in its current form and wish to access further funding from the Scottish Government, it will be necessary to demonstrate that the scheme, in whole or in phased elements, is value for money and to assess it against other flood protection schemes across Scotland.

We already know that the proposal, should we receive it from the council, will be exceptional in scale and financial cost. Therefore, it will require careful consideration to ensure that it is deliverable and that it delivers for the local community.

The Scottish Government must weigh up any investment decision both in terms of the impact on the individual project and its ability to invest in other areas. Ultimately, the decision whether to proceed lies with the council. As I mentioned, I am meeting Councillor Meiklejohn to discuss some of those issues tomorrow morning.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): I thank the cabinet secretary for advance notice of her statement.

Given the concerns about the need to address the climate and nature crisis, will she commit to discussing with Falkirk Council solutions to deliver effective environmental mitigation and compensatory measures to address the potential impact of the current design, which objectors have raised concerns about?

Will the cabinet secretary clarify whether the objections that Forth Ports submitted have now been addressed, given the importance to Scotland's economy of access issues and the development of Grangemouth? What additional communications will take place to address residents' concerns?

Will the cabinet secretary clarify why the council will have to justify flood management measures, when we know that rising sea levels and extreme weather events will increase the need for effective flood management, and that five flood warnings have already been issued in recent years in the area? Can she put on the record how many homes and businesses would be put at risk if costs and delays continue to spiral out of control?

Gillian Martin: As Ms Boyack knows, a flood resilience strategy was published in December with a lot of detail on those matters, including, in particular, the risk to Scottish communities if we do nothing. The Scottish Government has made funding available over many years—indeed, decades—for flood risk management actions. At the start of this parliamentary session, in the 2020 programme for government, we committed an

additional £150 million so that those actions could take place over the session.

It is not for Scottish ministers to consider the particular objections in this case—indeed, we have decided that it is important to hand back consideration to the council. However, I will discuss with Councillor Meiklejohn tomorrow some of the issues around funding and the further assistance that we might be able to give the council, depending on the decisions that it makes.

The task force is absolutely critical in that work. It has not dissolved in any way—it will take forward a lot of the discussions around the complexities and the nature of some of the objections, and it will have to consider how it might be able to resolve them.

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): Fundamentally, the fact that there is no clear line of sight for funding is still a huge issue. Having no guarantee that the scheme can be funded in whole or in part seriously calls into question the tens of millions of pounds that have already been spent or that there are plans to spend. When will the aforementioned assessment criteria be set out for that scheme and others? What further opportunities for widening the funding burden have been identified through discussions with the UK Government and industry?

Gillian Martin: As I said in my statement, it is for the local authority to decide whether to take the scheme forward in part, in a phased approach or as a whole. That will determine how it approaches the funding issue. A lot of the discussions on that will have to happen with the local authority. As a locally elected member, Michelle Thomson has regular dialogue with it as well.

The task force approach has been used to examine how to take forward improved and affordable flood resilience for Falkirk and Grangemouth residents and local communities. It is important that it is given the space and support to do that.

Michelle Thomson mentioned other funding opportunities. We need to see the plans that come back from Falkirk Council on the issue before we can answer any of those questions. As I said in my earlier answers, I will discuss all those elements with Councillor Meiklejohn, who will lead the deliberations.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): Given that this would be the largest flood protection scheme in Scotland and one of the biggest in the UK, irrespective of what the cabinet secretary has already said, does she not accept that, should Falkirk Council want the scheme to go ahead, it cannot go ahead without Government help—either from the Scottish Government or the UK Government, or from both?

Gillian Martin: It is important to mention that there are two Governments here, which is critical to the Grangemouth community. The council and the wider community take the criticality of the flood protection scheme very seriously.

The multidimensional nature of the Grangemouth flood protection scheme project means that many groups and stakeholders are involved at the civic and industrial levels, and the scale of the costs led to the decision to undertake a task force approach.

As Mr Simpson mentioned, this is not just about the Scottish Government; the UK Government has an important role to play in all aspects of Grangemouth's future. He will have seen the work that I have done with Ed Miliband and Michael Shanks at the UK Government level, particularly on project willow. We will have to take the industrial cluster's future into consideration. The Scottish Government will engage with the UK Government, but we will do so at the point at which the council comes back with its plans and sets out how it wishes to proceed.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): As Graham Simpson said, the proposed Grangemouth flood protection scheme is set to be the largest of its kind in Scotland to date. Can the cabinet secretary outline what steps have been taken to engage with the communities that are affected by the project?

Gillian Martin: Falkirk Council has regularly engaged with local communities throughout the years of the scheme's development. The first consultation exhibition, held in 2018, was followed by multiple online and face-to-face events. Public engagement events were held in February and March 2024, before the scheme's notification in May 2024. Throughout the project, the council has regularly engaged with local communities, which has included dedicating social media to the project and printing newsletters that have been distributed to residential and commercial properties.

Now that we have handed back the scheme—we have not called it in—I am interested to speak to Councillor Meiklejohn and others in the area about how they might continue their public engagement and enhance it ahead of making a decision.

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): Climate change is not abstract or theoretical for the people and workers of Grangemouth; it is very real and its challenges are very practical. What we have heard this afternoon is that the Grangemouth scheme still has no confirmed Scottish Government funding and still has no access to the usual flood risk management funding mechanism.

When can the Government give a cast-iron assurance that there will be sustainable funding

for the scheme and an approach that sustains both the Firth of Forth special protection area, the Ramsar site and the site of special scientific interest, and the people who are living in the affected communities?

Gillian Martin: I understand that members of the Scottish Parliament want cast-iron guarantees on an awful lot of things. Mr Leonard has to appreciate that we need the decisions on how, when and in what manner the scheme is progressed to be taken ahead of any funding discussions.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): Fortunately, Grangemouth has been spared some of the severe flooding conditions that we have witnessed in other parts of Scotland in recent years. However, can the cabinet secretary speak on the importance of proactive measures that are being taken by the Scottish Government to tackle the threats of climate change, in addition to the preventative measures that the minister has set out today?

Gillian Martin: In my statement, I mentioned a number of strategies, but I perhaps did not mention our response to the climate changes that we are seeing.

Our national adaptation plan, which we often refer to as SNAP3, has more than 200 commitments that cover activity up to 2029. A number of members have mentioned the criticality of flood mitigation and prevention. Climate change is real, and it is having an impact on our communities. A lot of named storms have had an impact on our communities. We need to protect our public services and communities in order to make them more resilient to climate impacts.

We are also introducing nature-based solutions to address local issues, such as local food production and biodiversity, as well as providing flood resilience. We have a range of advice and support in place through our adaptation Scotland contract, which enables individuals and public bodies to adapt to climate change. The Government has committed to funding in the form of year-on-year investment in flood resilience, which is delivered to local authorities.

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): If the building of the flood protection scheme in its current form is approved, it will take 10 years to deliver the entire project and 12 to 18 months to reach a planning decision. At least £23 million has been spent on it, but no homes are any safer from potential flooding now than they were. What is the Scottish Government doing practically to speak to Grangemouth home owners about how flood prevention is being progressed in the meantime, while they wait for the scheme to conclude?

Gillian Martin: I thank Gillian Mackay for that question; I recognise her long-standing interest in the scheme that has been proposed by the council. As I have said, the scheme is exceptional in scale.

I mentioned the task force: the task force has not been sitting back and waiting for a decision from the Scottish Government. It has been actively putting together a report, which will look at how the project can deliver improved and affordable flood resilience for Falkirk and Grangemouth residents and local communities. The task force will submit that report to ministers and to Falkirk Council leaders shortly, and I look forward to engaging with it on some of the solutions that it has found.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): The cabinet secretary talks about nature-based schemes but as far as I can see, despite all her strategies and plans, nothing is happening on the ground. There is no engagement with landowners and farmers on an on-the-ground basis to make practical differences. There is an absence of knowledge and shared understanding about how to tackle the problems. When on earth will the plans actually make a difference?

Gillian Martin: With the greatest respect, I push back against some of the assertions that Willie Rennie makes. Nineteen of the cycle 1 flood protection schemes have now been completed. Local authorities have had eight years to make progress since our commitment to fund their schemes. Funding has been given to local authorities, and I have a regular catch-up on the progress that they are making.

I say to members that, if they do not think that progress has been made by local authorities that have been given the funding to complete flood resilience programmes, it is incumbent on us all to scrutinise those local authorities. I am happy to engage with any local authority that members think has not been stepping up to the plate in that regard.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): As today's statement laid out, it is vital to engage with those affected by a project of this scale throughout its development and delivery. Can the cabinet secretary provide an update on the consultation of stakeholders relevant to the scheme?

Gillian Martin: Yes—Falkirk Council has done the engagement with a wide range of stakeholders, including residents, businesses, utility providers and other consultative bodies and interest groups, throughout the scheme's development. The publication of 10,000 statutory notices to affected parties commenced on 9 May 2024 with a notice that was published in the

Falkirk Herald. A copy of the notice was published in the *Edinburgh Gazette* on 10 May.

Dialogue remains open with all the remaining objectors. I am confident in that dialogue, and it is one of the issues that I will be talking to Councillor Meiklejohn about at our meeting tomorrow.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): Falkirk Council cannot afford 20 per cent of the funding. The Grangemouth flood protection scheme cannot come to fruition. Falkirk Council cannot contribute more than £100 million: like many councils, it does not have sufficient funds to commit to such a scheme. What options are available? Is the cabinet secretary suggesting that, if councils cannot meet the 20 per cent requirement, no protection can be put in place? If that is what the Government is saying, communities will suffer as a result.

On the back of my colleague Stephen Kerr's question, will the cabinet secretary commit to considering a bespoke plan for Grangemouth to safeguard those communities?

Gillian Martin: In my meeting tomorrow with Councillor Meiklejohn, we will go through a lot of those issues. Right now, the important thing to move the scheme forward is for the council to make a decision on how it wants to take it forward.

I understand that MSPs want cast-iron guarantees and commitments. It is for the council to decide how and when it takes forward the scheme. Of course the Scottish Government will engage with it on any funding requirements that it has—at the point at which it has made that decision.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): It is vital to consider the numerous factors at play when implementing a flood protection scheme, not only for the local community's well-being but for the environment, too. Can the cabinet secretary set out what assessment has been undertaken to ensure that the scheme does not have an adverse impact on the environment?

Gillian Martin: There are many legislative protections in this situation. Under the Flood Risk Management (Scotland) Act 2009, local authorities are required to consider the environmental impact of flood protection schemes. Falkirk Council carried out an environmental impact assessment, which can be seen on the Grangemouth flood protection scheme website. A habitats regulation appraisal was also prepared by Falkirk Council.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes this item of business. There will be a brief pause before we move to the next item to allow speakers on the front benches to change over.

Island Communities

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-17598, in the name of Mairi Gougeon, on empowering Scotland's island communities. I encourage members who wish to participate in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons now or as soon as possible.

15:17

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): I am glad to open the debate and highlight the enduring importance of Scotland's island communities and businesses. I will take this opportunity to outline the work that the Scottish Government has undertaken in partnership with communities, businesses and local authorities to promote our islands' voices and support their aspirations. In addition, I would like to update members on the development of a new national islands plan and on the progress that has been made on implementing the carbon neutral islands project.

Scotland's islands are an integral part of our national character, and they continue to play a vital role in how we are perceived around the globe. Island economies combine a mix of tradition and innovation that spans a diverse range of sectors, from farming and crofting to agritourism, and from food and drink to spaceports and, of course, fishing and aquaculture.

I know that island entrepreneurialism was, rightly, celebrated through a recent members' business debate that was promoted by Jamie Halcro Johnston. It is only right that we take every opportunity to recognise and champion rural and island businesses and their central role in sustaining our island communities. Next week, we will mark seven years since the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 was approved by this Parliament. To this day, Scotland remains one of the few countries worldwide with an island-specific piece of legislation. We should be very proud of that and continue to celebrate it.

The 2018 act introduced an explicit requirement for ministers and 70 other public bodies to have due regard for island communities. Island communities impact assessments are a formal mechanism to ensure that public bodies island proof their decision making by considering our islands' unique circumstances.

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): The cabinet secretary is speaking about the due regard that ministers must give to island communities. Why, then, does her motion about empowering our island communities fail to mention ferries?

Mairi Gougeon: We are talking about the national islands plan, and this is the opportunity for Parliament to feed into that. I will of course come on to transport, which is an integral part of getting to our islands.

To deliver on another key provision of the 2018 act, Scotland's first-ever national islands plan was published in December 2019. It was the result of extensive consultation with island communities, and it set out the strategic objectives that have since guided the Scottish Government's policies and investments for islands.

In the space of just a few years, we have encountered a formidable mix of challenges, including the Covid-19 pandemic and the on-going cost of living crisis, which have impacted our islands significantly. In implementing the plan, we have also had to navigate the detrimental impacts of an unwelcome Brexit. As members have regularly heard me say, Brexit has had profoundly negative consequences for Scotland's rural and island areas. It has exacerbated labour shortages, created new barriers to trade and stemmed the flow of crucial European Union funding.

In engaging with successive United Kingdom Governments, the Scottish Government has consistently championed the distinct needs of our rural and island communities. However, arbitrary decisions by Governments at Westminster have compounded the damages of Brexit and continue to cause lasting harm to our island communities.

What we witnessed earlier this week is no different. Although the UK-EU summit represents positive momentum in rebuilding our relationship with the European Union, I am deeply disappointed by the UK Government's lack of meaningful engagement in general and on fisheries in particular. Fisheries is a devolved area, and impacts on fisheries have a disproportionate impact on island jobs and communities.

Despite being at the sharp end of Brexit and the other crises that I mentioned, island communities have shown remarkable resilience. However, the Scottish Government has not taken that for granted. Throughout these difficult times, we have worked with islanders to develop tangible measures to support their economies and wellbeing. For instance, since December 2022, our islands cost crisis emergency fund has helped local authorities to support vulnerable households that are exposed to cost of living pressures. The fund has already distributed £3.4 million, and I am pleased to confirm that a further £1 million will be distributed over the course of 2025 and into 2026.

Much has also been delivered under the national islands plan. Through the islands programme, we have invested more than £15 million in capital for critical infrastructure, which

has been used to address locally identified priorities and to fund community-led projects. The fund has supported 70 projects across 51 islands, including the provision of social care facilities on Tiree, a new nursery in Orkney, harbour facilities on Skye and a community hub on Eriskay. Earlier this month, I was delighted to write to local authorities to confirm that another £5.3 million has been allocated to the islands programme for the coming year.

We know that the delivery of more affordable homes is important for islanders. Between April 2016 and March 2024, we delivered almost 1,300 affordable homes in island communities. Between 2023 and 2028, we are making up to £25 million available through the demand-led rural affordable homes for key workers fund, which is available to local authorities and registered social landlords to purchase existing homes, where there is an identified need.

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I get the point that money is being put into those communities, but does the cabinet secretary accept that we still face critical rural depopulation, because there is not enough housing, education and healthcare provision to keep people on the islands? How can the Scottish Government fix those points?

Mairi Gougeon: I will touch on that. The member raises a really important point. Depopulation is a critical focus for us as we develop the new plan. It is not an easy thing to fix. We know that there are a number of contributing factors, which is why the work that we are progressing in areas such as housing and transport is hugely important. I will address some of those issues later.

In addition, our £30 million demand-led rural and islands housing fund continues to deliver more affordable homes in island communities, and we recently announced its extension to 2028 as part of our programme for government. To date, 44 per cent of the projects that have been completed with support from the rural and islands housing fund have been delivered on islands.

Each year, we provide nearly £40 million to croft businesses, including through schemes such as the crofting agricultural grant scheme, which, since 2015, has committed more than £31.5 million to help more than 5,000 crofters with their croft businesses. We have also delivered almost £26 million to help to build and improve more than 1,160 croft homes; more than 80 per cent of the grants that were awarded over 2024 were awarded to island-based crofters.

Those are just some examples of the projects that have been delivered; the list is much longer. I refer colleagues to the reports that we have laid

annually to update Parliament on investments and initiatives that have been undertaken across portfolios to deliver on the strategic objectives that we set out in the national islands plan.

At the end of 2023, we carried out a public consultation to inform a review of the plan. I put on record the Scottish Government's gratitude to the many organisations and individuals who contributed to that review.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): Does the cabinet secretary agree that the lack of local residents from the islands represented on the boards of quangos and public bodies that provide lifeline services—notably Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd, CalMac Ferries and Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd—means that we lack the local knowledge, which is so important, and which—you never know—could have helped us to avoid the ferry fiasco in the first place had it been available?

Mairi Gougeon: Having local voices and engaging with communities is of course vital as we look to deliver critical services.

As I was saying, at the end of 2023 we carried out a public consultation to inform a review of the national islands plan. While the plan was found to be ambitious and comprehensive, those who responded were clear that more needs to be done to improve outcomes for island communities. Notwithstanding the tumultuous times that have had to be navigated in the delivery of the national islands plan, we fully accept the results of the consultation and recognise that island communities continue to face challenges in areas including some that have been touched on today, such as housing, transport and access to health and social care services. I stress clearly that we are listening, and we will continue to work with islanders to deliver real improvements.

Having heard what we did through the consultation, and having reflected on what islanders have told us, we have concluded that a new national islands plan is needed. We have heard that the new plan must be more targeted, with fewer objectives and an even stronger focus on delivering tangible and relatable commitments. In recognition of the demographic challenges that many islands face, population attraction and retention will be the key and overarching objective for the new plan.

Douglas Ross: Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Mairi Gougeon: I am sorry, but I have to make progress.

When we tested the proposal with island communities and local authorities, it received robust endorsement. Commitments that feature in

the plan will be geared towards the strategic objective.

We propose having community wealth building as a key principle that underpins delivery of the plan, so actions that feature in the plan will be designed to create and retain wealth and wellbeing locally. Key to all that is ensuring that islanders are at the very heart of the new plan. We have been engaging with island communities and local authorities to inform the new document, and in-person engagements across island areas are on-going. In fact, officials from the islands team are currently in the Outer Hebrides to engage with those communities directly.

Douglas Ross: Will the cabinet secretary give way on that point?

Mairi Gougeon: I am sorry; I am approaching the end of my speech and I need to progress.

While the new national islands plan takes shape, our determination to continue addressing islanders' challenges and ambitions is already fully reflected in the latest budget and programme for government. On transport, we have introduced free interisland ferry travel for all residents of Shetland, Orkney and the Outer Hebrides who are under the age of 22, and we have extended the free travel voucher scheme.

Another key project that I want to address is the carbon neutral islands project. The Scottish Government continues to take its climate obligations seriously, and we recognise that our islands are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. From the outset, communities have been central to the project, and we have directly supported the employment of community development officers to lead delivery on the ground. There have been several key achievements to date but, to build on those early successes, we have worked closely with island stakeholders and Highlands and Islands Enterprise to develop a financing road map, which is being published today. It sets out a range of initiatives that are in development. We will continue to invest in the islands, with a further £1.6 million of capital allocated this financial year.

The Government is committed to working with our island communities to deliver on their priorities. The next iteration of the national islands plan will build on the progress that has been made to date. As with any work that we undertake—whether it is the development of the new plan, the carbon neutral islands project or all the other activities that I have mentioned—we are deeply conscious of doing things with, and not to, island communities.

I look forward to today's debate and to continuing to work collaboratively to deliver

positive change for our islands. I move the motion on empowering Scotland's island communities,

That the Parliament recognises Scotland's islands' invaluable contribution to Scotland's economy, culture and identity; welcomes the investments that have accompanied Scotland's first ever national islands plan; recognises the positive impact that the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 has had, but notes the need for further action to tackle island challenges; welcomes the extensive community engagement to develop the new national islands plan, and notes that measures to address depopulation and create community wealth should be key themes of the new plan; further welcomes the positive progress and impact of the Carbon Neutral Islands project, and agrees that the Scottish Government should continue to work towards prosperous and sustainable island communities.

15:29

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): As my party's spokesman on islands, as convener of the Parliament's cross-party group on islands and as an islander myself, I am delighted to open today's debate for the Scottish Conservatives.

I do not think that people really understand island life and its challenges unless they live on one—and that is particularly true, it seems, for the Scottish Government. I appreciate that the minister and the cabinet secretary want to talk only about positives today—the Scottish National Party motion makes that very clear—but I want to focus on the challenges of island life and of running a business on our islands, where the SNP could and absolutely should be doing a lot better and where, in too many cases, it is failing islanders so badly.

Colleagues who came to the island showcase that I hosted in Parliament last month, and which the cabinet secretary has mentioned, will know that our islands are all different, with unique characteristics and unique challenges. However, there is a common thread of problems that many of them face, as highlighted in our amendment to the Scottish Government's motion.

I am sure that colleagues will concentrate on a variety of areas of concern—for example, the challenges of supporting education and learning in our island communities. They might also focus on the growing pressures on health and social care, which mean that far too many people are left without the care that they need, are left waiting for treatment or cannot access a general practitioner. An increasing number of GP services are now available only online, but broadband connectivity does not support that. Indeed, colleagues might focus on farming on our islands—as we will—where costs can be significantly higher.

Those are only some of the issues that islanders and island businesses face. The most high-profile issue is ferries, which are one of the most serious challenges that we face on our islands, both now

and in the future. There is a crisis in our ferries network. Between 2015 and 2024, the number of ferries that were cancelled due to technical faults on the Government-owned west coast routes rose by 531 per cent. In 2015, technical faults accounted for only around one in every 10 cancellations; they now account for almost four in 10. Our ferry fleet is ageing and increasingly unreliable, and although this worsening crisis is, for now, largely affecting the west coast, it is a threat to services across Scotland.

Island councils such as my own, in Orkney, and our friends a little bit further north, in Shetland, operate internal ferry networks that keep our island communities connected, but our fleets are ageing, too, with replacement costs likely to run into billions of pounds. There have been talks between island leaders and Scottish ministers—there are always talks; the Government loves talking—but we still do not have a definitive timetable, cost projections or funding commitments that cover the entirety of what needs to be replaced.

When I look out of the window of my home in Orkney and see the nearly 30-year-old MV *Hoy Head* ploughing through the waves of Scapa Flow, what confidence can I have that she will be replaced when she needs to be, and not be forced to plough on as growing technical issues risk her reliability? Given the SNP's record, with the over-budget and delayed Glen Sannox and Glen Rosa, the answer is: not a lot. The SNP ferry fiasco, scandal or boorach—delete as appropriate—means that no islander, except perhaps the most loyal SNP supporter, has any real confidence that the Government will get on top of the problem.

In Orkney, we are fairly lucky, because our ferry links with the mainland are operated by NorthLink Ferries and Pentland Ferries. I would suggest that that luck is not entirely unconnected to the fact that SNP ministers have no direct control over the operations of either company.

Ahead of the island showcase that I mentioned, I hosted a number of round tables on various different subjects, with attendees from across our island communities. They were extremely informative, but what was most striking was that virtually every issue came back to a lack of housing in those communities. That has an impact on people's ability to stay on our islands and bring up their families, and it stops much-needed public sector workers, teachers, nurses and police officers taking jobs on our islands and ensuring that vital services are delivered locally. It means that employers simply do not have the accommodation for staff, which often severely impacts their businesses and even their viability.

Scottish ministers have failed time and again to come anywhere close to the solutions that we

need. It is not rocket science—we need to build more houses. Even when Scottish ministers say that they are doing something, the devil is in the detail. The cabinet secretary has mentioned the rural and islands housing funds, but the Government spent £100 million of that money building new city developments. Between 2016 and 2021, the dedicated islands housing fund delivered fewer than 20 homes. Added to that, for many of our smaller island communities, the cost of a private build can be 30 per cent higher than that on the mainland, while planning restrictions continue to be a barrier for many.

Regulatory burdens are an issue for our tourism sector, too. However, instead of reducing those burdens, the Government has forced even more new taxes and new regulations on an important sector for our island communities, and one that is still recovering from some tough years. It has been hit time and time again by this regulation-daft Government.

Short-term lets licensing has seen costs rocket for accommodation providers, forcing many to close entirely. Now they are threatened with the introduction of the visitor levy, the Scottish National Party's latest tax, which has been so badly thought out that, in the face of widespread anger and opposition, Scottish National Party ministers have said that they are already looking at amending it—or claim that they are. However, the visitor levy is not just a tax that hits our tourism sector; it risks disproportionately hitting islanders, including those who have to travel for medical appointments and need to stay overnight, and families visiting patients in hospital. I ask the ministers on the Government front bench: is that fair? Was that even considered as the bill was developed? Is that really island proofed?

Many island communities feel increasingly detached from central Government and the decisions that are supposedly made on their behalf. They do not have confidence that ministers and officials understand or care about the impact that those decisions will have on islanders' lives. There is a feeling that when ministers talk about island proofing, what they really mean is island box ticking.

Our islands deserve better than a Scottish Government that legislates from Edinburgh and Glasgow as though the central belt were the only place that mattered. I am an islander, and I and my party know the challenges and the opportunities of our islands. The Scottish Conservatives will always stand up for Scotland's islanders, our island businesses and our island communities.

I move amendment S6M-17598.2, to leave out from first "welcomes" to end and insert:

“raises significant concerns about the lack of reliable ferry services for many island communities and the challenges that this creates for islanders and businesses, as well as the absence of a long-term plan to provide solutions and funding for a much-improved ferry network; draws attention to the Scottish Human Rights Commission, which found that Scotland’s islanders face a number of human rights challenges; emphasises the acute difficulties that islanders face, including in relation to the increased cost of living for households and businesses, access to health and social care, housing, fisheries, farming and island education; notes the widespread concern about depopulation and considers that not enough has been done to tackle it; highlights criticism raised about the national islands plan in terms of a lack of benefits and progress; appreciates the valuable role that the islands play in Scotland’s tourist industry; raises concern about the potential impact of the Scottish Government’s visitor levy on tourism; recognises the benefits brought by the energy sector on Scotland’s islands, but notes that this sometimes comes into conflict with communities, and urges the Scottish Government to take clear action to tackle all challenges.”

15:35

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):

Our islands are wonderful places, and I am honoured to represent all but two of Scotland’s populated islands. Each island is different, with a different personality, but all islanders have things in common: they are resilient, self-sufficient and quick to help and support others in their community. That is the reality of island living.

The Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 built a level of expectation that, I am sad to say, has not been met. The promise was that policy would be island proofed and that islanders would not be disadvantaged due to where they were born or where they had made their home, and the hope was that legislation would help build island economies and stop depopulation. Sadly, that has not happened. Our amendment points to examples such as highly protected marine areas, the ban on wood-burning stoves, the island bonds plan and many other policies that have been designed with no knowledge of islands or their needs.

We need a rural first policy approach in which every policy is tested in rural or island communities to ensure that there are no unintended consequences and that those policies are designed for our island communities. We know that policies designed in rural and island areas work well in urban settings, but the opposite is not the case. Government agencies ignore their obligations under the 2018 act and do not carry out island communities impact assessments; for example, there have been decisions such as the closure of tourist information offices that were obviously detrimental to those communities, but no impact assessment was carried out on them.

The communities of Mull have expressed concerns about the new school campus, but their concerns have been absolutely ignored. That is, of course, an issue for Argyll and Bute Council, which should be subject to the 2018 act and therefore should be island proofing that policy; however, it is also an issue for the Scottish Government, which will provide funding for the campus. It could step in to ensure that all islanders’ ambitions are met. Surely it is wrong that in a modern Scotland children are being forced to leave home to access education.

The act is a huge disappointment to islanders. It could have been a game changer, but it makes little or no difference to their lives.

Tim Eagle: I missed it if you said it, but I was wondering whether you would join me in welcoming residents of Mull who are in the gallery listening to the debate and who are probably very interested in what you are talking about.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair.

Rhoda Grant: Yes, I am happy to do that. I hope that the 2018 act will make a difference, because even at this stage, the Government could intervene to ensure that islanders’ views were heard.

It is also disappointing that no progress has been made on 11 out of the 13 objectives in the national islands plan, but I have to say that I am at a loss to understand which of the two objectives has seen any progress at all.

I come to the issue of ferries, on which, despite the fact that they are essential for island communities, we have seen growing disruption. The Government has failed our islands by having no ferry replacement plan, and it started a replacement programme only when the crisis loomed. The building of the Glen Sannox and the Glen Rosa has been a disaster; the cost to the public purse of building those ferries should have replaced the whole fleet, had the plan been efficiently managed. The cost to our island communities has been incalculable—there is a shortage of ferries, and the ones that we have are old and break down regularly.

When I speak to businesses, I am struck by the fact that they are surviving only through sheer determination. Had they not had island DNA, they would have upped and left for places where they did not have to struggle with constant disruption. The same is true for those who need to access healthcare off island. Against the backdrop of failing ferries, the stress of being unwell, in addition to the stress of trying to access care, will be incalculable.

Those issues are crucial to islanders, yet we do not have adequate representation of islanders on the boards of HIAL, CalMac and CMAL. The insinuation is clear: islanders cannot manage their own services. We all know, however, that HIAL was never so proactive as it was when Sandy Matheson chaired the board. Islanders are by nature seafarers and would make a much better job of running those services than people who have never set foot on an island.

The Scottish Government has promised resilience funding, but we need to know the detail of that and how it will protect businesses going forward. As we have heard, ferries are not just a problem for the Clyde and Hebrides service; the Orkney and Shetland interisland fleet is even older, and it does not even provide reasonable disabled access. Those councils cannot afford to replace their fleet, and they need help from the Scottish Government to access capital to allow them to do so.

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): Rhoda Grant has pointed out that those ferries are the responsibility of the local authorities. Does she accept, however, that, in Orkney in particular, we have had some very good news about replacing the interisland ferries, particularly with a ferry that has been funded through the zero emission vessel and infrastructure—or ZEVI—fund?

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

Rhoda Grant: Yes, indeed. After many years of trying to get help from Government, some is now forthcoming; however, it is late, and the replacement needs to happen a bit faster than is currently the case. It is not one ferry, but the whole fleet, that needs to be replaced to bring it up to date. For example, it is not acceptable that people with disabilities are not able to access the ferry.

We should ensure that we are never in that position again. Our islands have much to offer—they provide the green energy that we need, and when we perfect wave and tidal energy technology, that potential will be even greater. At the heart of that, we have the European Marine Energy Centre in Orkney. I should also add that Heriot-Watt University has sent members a briefing about its work and its concerns about the future, given the funding pressures on further and higher education.

Basically, all of that is crucial to the wellbeing not only of our islands but our whole country. We need to provide homes for young people to live in, because young islanders are being forced out of their communities due to the lack of affordable housing. Although I welcome initiatives such as the key housing fund, it does not help those young

people who are already there. People with capital can come in and outbid them, which means that they can no longer stay on the island.

In health and in local government, we have the distant island allowance for workers, but colleges do not get that as part of their funding package. Paying such an allowance would make them even more financially precarious, but not paying it means that college staff are worse off than their mainland counterparts.

I could go on. The Scottish Government could, and should, take steps to deal with those issues. I urge it to do so, and to empower our island communities.

I move amendment S6M-17598.1, to leave out from first “welcomes” to end and insert:

“notes the first ever national islands plan; believes that much more needs to be done to support island communities; recognises that depopulation is a major issue impacting the islands and that not enough work has been undertaken to counteract this; notes that the Scottish Government has not used the powers available to it to ‘island proof’ policy, resulting in the need to shelve policies such as Highly Protected Marine Areas, the ban on wood burning stoves, and the island bonds plans; believes that the Scottish Government-caused ferry fiasco has had a disastrous effect on the economy, wellbeing and future of many islands; further believes that a new procurement plan that ensures the timely replacement of all ferries is vital; recognises that islanders are best placed to make the decisions affecting their communities, and calls, therefore, on the Scottish Government to empower island communities and ensure that there is proper local representation on ferry boards for CalMac and CMAL.”

15:43

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): I extend my apologies to everyone in the chamber for being late to the debate.

I am grateful that today we are discussing and debating the need to empower Scotland’s islands. During the four years and a bit that I have been in this role, I have recognised that Scotland is not an island nation, but a nation of islands. As colleagues have said, every single island in Scotland is different and unique. I have found that an incredible thing to understand, having travelled from the southern tip of the Western Isles to the northern tip in my very first summer recess, and having travelled to Orkney in that same recess. I took in a lot of islands in that time, and I really saw the differences.

I want to convey to members that it is fantastic that we have had power devolved to Scotland, and we now have that power. However, I want to see power devolved to our island communities at the most local level. If communities are going to tackle the climate and nature emergency, they must have power in their hands.

As I have just said, each island is different, and they face very different circumstances. When I went to the top of a tiny hill on Benbecula and looked down over the sunlit water, I noticed that Uist looks like fragile lace that has been laid across the Atlantic Ocean. The island may be completely overtaken by flooding in the not-too-distant future, and the local authority is having to consider how it will handle rehousing people.

I want us to get to a point where we are designing Scotland with islands and rural communities first. We need to start to think about policies for our island and rural communities that are different from those for urban parts of Scotland, because the circumstances are very different.

Having said that, I will go back to my notes.

Scotland's inhabited islands are at a critical point in their 5,000 year history, having supported communities since at least the late stone age. In many places, the effects of climate change and depopulation could bring their long human history to an end. Rising sea levels, increasingly extreme storms and the unpredictability of our weather patterns could push island populations to the brink over the next few decades. Their resilience to handle what is likely to be significant change has been undermined by years of little recognition and support from the UK and Scottish Governments. That has already damaged the social fabric of islands and communities by drawing young people and local talent away to the central belt and beyond.

The Scottish Government has begun its journey towards rectifying that situation. I welcome the policy efforts, particularly the islands plan and the carbon-neutral islands project. I have met a number of the carbon-neutral islands project teams. The work that they are doing is fantastic, and it is great to see that the Government recognises the need for multiyear funding for the project, as that will allow us to roll out the work that it is doing to other communities. That is a good starting point when it comes to addressing the challenges that are presented by the climate emergency and depopulation, but we need more changes to be delivered more rapidly.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): Will the member take an intervention?

Ariane Burgess: That was highlighted by the Scottish Human Rights Commission's report, which was released last autumn. It is simply unacceptable that Government policy is not delivering on the most basic human rights obligations in relation to islanders' rights to housing and food. I hope that the new islands plan, which the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands mooted earlier, will lead

to better delivery than the previous version of the plan. It is encouraging that the cabinet secretary's motion acknowledges that more needs to be done.

How much time do I have, Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You have a generous four minutes.

Ariane Burgess: I will close with a couple of comments. I apologise to Mr Lumsden, but I will not take the intervention.

The review and extension of the rural and islands housing fund is really welcome, but we need to recognise a number of things. Uptake of the fund has been low because there is a high bar to access it due to feasibility studies. We need to look at that, because if there is no housing, no one will be on the islands to tackle the climate emergency or do anything with the economy. If we are going to give communities money from the rural and islands housing fund, we need to build in a resource for the communities that do not have wind energy to support someone who can deliver the plan. We need to think about building houses at scale and creating a pipeline. Switching the rural and islands housing fund on and off leads to questions as to whether funding will happen and will break the system at a time when we need to be building at least 11 per cent more houses on Scotland's islands.

15:49

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): I agree with the deserved recognition of the invaluable contribution of each of Scotland's islands to the country's economy, culture and identity. I have said repeatedly that, in Shetland, we punch well above our weight. On numerous occasions, I have highlighted the need for much more infrastructure investment to enable islands to be viable and to contribute to Scotland, as the limitations of infrastructure in addressing issues of geography is a serious barrier to growth.

I am grateful for advance sight of the "Carbon Neutral Islands Financing Roadmap 2025-2028", although the slightly inaccurate description and spelling of Up Helly Aa in the document leapt out at this Shetlander and is perhaps an unfortunate start.

The carbon-neutral islands project worked with the innovative and proactive North Yell Development Council, which has, unfortunately, now stepped away from the project. I was disappointed by the feedback from those involved locally. I understand that there have been concerns about islands in the CNI project being pitted against one another, overly ambitious timescales, technical complexity and the viability of projects. Reaching our net zero goals should

mean bringing along communities across Scotland.

The financing road map also references low-carbon transport solutions, including increased electric vehicle charging infrastructure, yet the National Grid is not in a position to manage increased demand. The irony is not lost on Shetland, where we see the Viking wind farm reportedly generating as little as 17 per cent of its capacity and being paid enormous sums to constrain production as it is considered that the energy infrastructure is not able to cope with higher generation.

Our ferries, both the internal and external services, are often at capacity, meaning that island residents are prevented from going about their daily business because they are unable to get on and off islands internally or to access the overnight ferry service on a date that they need to. As an example of the pressures on the internal service, on Monday a constituent waited in all day for an engineer to swap out his radio teleswitch meter. The engineer did not turn up because they had failed to book the ferry to the north isles and there was no spare capacity on the crossing. Freight in and out of the islands is also constricted simply by the capacity of vessels on the northern isles route.

With investment in short subsea tunnels, not only would there be freedom of movement between islands, cutting commuting time for those who work on mainland Shetland, but our seafood sector would benefit from quicker transport of time-sensitive products, which would enable people to catch external ferries to export their goods in good time.

Tunnels would also connect communities in Shetland and ensure that cultural pursuits are not limited by the last ferry home. Decarbonisation and emission reductions in ferry transport would be welcome, and, although tunnels will not work for all islands, they would for others.

The motion references the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018, which had the serious intention of empowering islands and giving island councils greater flexibility in relation to public services. There is still a debate to be had on its achievements, as I often hear constituents asking “Where’s the island proofing?” when any new legislation is brought forward, or when island impact assessment outcomes reach the conclusion that is wanted by the organisations that carry them out and which effectively mark their own homework. Surprisingly, the Scottish Parliament information centre found that the Scottish Government does not appear to record how often it undertakes island impact assessments.

On the development of the national islands plan, the community engagement events across the isles have attracted responses. I would be surprised if many of those contributions did not reference measures to address depopulation in areas such as transport, digital connectivity, childcare and housing, which should be key themes of the new plan.

Investment in housing would ensure that those looking to make a life in the isles and fill the many vacant posts in education, care and the NHS, and islanders returning home after time away, can find somewhere to live.

15:53

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I was pleased to hear Beatrice Wishart talk about tunnels. Having visited the Faroe Islands and seen its wonderful tunnel network, I certainly think that the Scottish Government should do more to explore the possibility of tunnels for some of our archipelagos.

I have the privilege of representing the most beautiful of Scotland’s 93 inhabited islands—Arran, Cumbrae and Holy Isle—and it is a pleasure to debate empowering Scotland’s island communities today.

Islands hold a special place in Scotland’s culture and our collective imagination. Writing in the *British Journal of Photography* in 1885, Sherlock Holmes writer Arthur Conan Doyle dubbed Arran

“the epitome of the whole of Scotland”

and said:

“Nowhere can the wandering photographer find in such a small compass so many varying beauties upon which to exercise his skill”.

Further, it was in Arran, while navigating the ridge between Beinn Tarsuinn and Cìr Mhòr, that outdoor writer and broadcaster Cameron McNeish decided to dedicate the rest of his life

“to climbing mountains and exploring wild places.”

Arran can even claim that it has influenced rap, with musician Loyle Carner naming his breakout single “Isle of Arran” in tribute to the island and its deep personal significance.

Despite our reverence for our islands and their mammoth cultural footprint, they face challenges that can seem invisible to those on the mainland: depopulation, housing shortages, fragile transport links and the high cost of living.

The Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 was a watershed moment, and Scotland is one of the few countries in the world to have created island-specific legislation. The 2018 act embedded island proofing in the formation of policy and legislation.

The first national islands plan, introduced a year and a half after passage of the 2018 act, set out 13 strategic objectives and 134 specific commitments that are aimed at improving the quality of life for Scotland's island communities.

The sheer volume of commitments must be addressed in the second national islands plan. The majority of individuals and organisations who responded to the Scottish Government's consultation on the first plan believed that the number was just too high. The next plan should prioritise, and deliver on, more tightly focused commitments, especially as islanders themselves do not feel that enough progress is being made.

Let us take transport as the chief strategic concern. Work to purchase Ardrossan harbour and redevelop it to accommodate the MV Glen Sannox and the MV Glen Rosa is crucial. The Government's intention to bring the harbour into public ownership is enormously welcome, but it must be matched by delivery.

Of course, there have been successes with ferries. For example, the introduction of the road equivalent tariff means that, for my constituents, ferry fares are cheaper now than they were 18 years ago, despite high inflation over that period. That has meant more visitors to the islands.

I was an MSP in the summer of 2007, and I remember that the second ferry to Arran was an old tub called "The Saturn", and that 15 per cent of its sailings were cancelled because of breakdowns. It ran only for a few weeks, whereas there is now a second ferry for six months. It has not all been bad news.

More must be done to empower our island communities in relation to ferries. As Fergus Ewing touched on, it is widely recognised that the lack of islander representation on the CalMac, CMAL and David MacBrayne Ltd boards suits no one. It fuels perceptions that those organisations are detached from the islands that they exist to serve, and it leads to poorer decision making. Despite the issue being campaigned on for years, progress to improve islander representation has been limited at best.

Why has the community on Cumbrae had to fight off a short-notice attempt by CalMac to overturn a summer timetable that has been in place for more than 40 years? I thank the Cabinet Secretary for Transport for reversing CalMac's unilateral decision within a week. Why, when the community expresses a clear preference to return to a system of return-only tickets for the sake of speed and efficiency, does CalMac refuse to listen?

Regarding Holy Isle, the peace and tranquillity of the Buddhist convent there is under threat from proposals by Forestry and Land Scotland—a

Scottish Government agency—to industrialise the area around Kingscross, across Lamlash Bay, with an unwanted timber export facility. No one locally supports the plans for Kingscross, and the strength of feeling against the project cannot be overstated.

Island communities face stark demographic challenges. The number of people aged 65 and older on Arran has increased by 38 per cent since 2001, while the working-age population fell by 17 per cent and the number of children by 37 per cent. Arresting such trends requires more affordable housing, such as the £2.38 million that the Scottish Government has provided to build 34 council houses in Brodick, and the Arran Development Trust's Rowarden project, which is a shining example of the possibilities. With £1.512 million from the Scottish Government, 18 affordable homes have been built and allocated—three of them just this week—allowing people to stay, work and thrive on the island. Crucially, Arran Development Trust did that with a proportionately much lower central Government grant than other island housing projects, which provides a possible template for other affordable housing projects.

Our islands are central to Scotland's identity. The 2018 act and the national islands plan have enhanced our focus on them. Nevertheless, when it comes to empowering our islands and delivery, we must go further and faster.

15:58

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): I stand here to discuss the importance of empowering island communities in Scotland. These communities, which are often isolated and face unique challenges, are vital to the cultural and economic fabric of our nation. Empowering them means ensuring that they have the resources, infrastructure and support that are needed for them to thrive.

Islands play a valuable role in our economy through tourism, agriculture and fishing. Tourism alone generates £10.8 billion, which supports thousands of jobs and local businesses. However, under the SNP Government, those communities have faced significant challenges, such as limited access to healthcare, education, transportation and housing, which have hindered their growth and development.

In November 2023, I visited Cumbrae while serving on the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee, and the lack of access to reliable ferry services was one of the main concerns of the island's residents. It is astonishing that, despite the SNP's promises, local businesses and job prospects are withering away due to the

dire state of transport. Transport is not just a convenience for islanders—it is their lifeline.

Kenneth Gibson: Will the member take an intervention on that point?

Pam Gosal: Have I got time to take an intervention, Deputy Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give you your time back.

Kenneth Gibson: There are 40 sailings in each direction, both to and from Cumbrae, each day—that is one sailing every 15 minutes—under the summer timetable. How would you increase or improve that?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Members should speak through the chair.

Pam Gosal: I did what the SNP needs to do: I went out and listened to the people on the ground, and that is what the people told me. I went out with the local government committee. Maybe the SNP needs to go out and listen to the people on the ground.

The same sentiments emerged while I spoke to council chief execs in islands councils when I served as the Scottish Conservative spokesperson for local government. Time and time again, the SNP has demonstrated an appalling inability to address the basic needs of the people it claims to represent.

The Isle of Arran, in my West Scotland region, is a perfect example of the SNP's betrayal. The contract for Glen Sannox and Glen Rosa was awarded to Ferguson Marine in 2015, with both ships originally due for delivery in 2018. The Glen Sannox, which serves the Isle of Arran, entered service earlier this year, almost seven years later than was initially scheduled. It even had to be pulled out of service a couple of months after first setting sail, as a crack was found in the ship's hull.

As for the Glen Rosa, we found out last week that its delivery will, once again, be delayed. At the same time, the cost of delivering both ferries has spiralled from £97 million to upwards of £460 million. That is a shocking figure, and taxpayers are the ones who are footing the bill. It is yet another catastrophic blow for my island constituents, who have been betrayed at every turn by the SNP's incompetence.

The Deputy First Minister said that

“there can be no more delays.”—[*Official Report*, 14 May 2025; c 92.]

Yet her boss, the First Minister, could not even say what the final cost will be to taxpayers for the corrupt ferry contract that he personally signed off. Our island communities would have been much

better off if that money had gone to public services instead of down the drain.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer—

Douglas Ross: Just do it at the end.

Stuart McMillan: Presiding Officer, is it in order for any member to make such a scurrilous accusation? There has been absolutely no proof whatsoever of any contract being awarded that was allegedly “corrupt”, to use that word—

Douglas Ross: It is corrupt!

Stuart McMillan: —as the member has just indicated.

Douglas Ross: Sit down.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr McMillan. That is not a point of order, and I did not deem anything to be out of order.

Mr Ross, I will deal with points of order. I do not need assistance from you.

Pam Gosal: Locals in Ardrossan have protested about the series of expensive blunders that have plagued the launch of the two new Arran ferries. The 30-year-old ferry that has been serving the islands for generations is failing, and the two new bespoke-design ferries are too big for the Ardrossan harbour jetty. The SNP Government is now considering buying Ardrossan harbour, following widespread concern in Ardrossan that the CalMac service might not be permanently switched back from Troon.

It is disappointing that the islanders have had to endure years of being at the centre of this ferry fiasco. “Challenging” is one of the more polite words that you will hear from a lot of people on Arran when they speak about how life has been over the past few years. I hope that the SNP Government will get its act together, accept the blame for its failures and take clear action to tackle all those challenges.

16:04

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): Like my late mother, Winnie Ewing, I am a survivor of Up Helly Aa, except that I think she attended it on 10 occasions, showing quite exceptional stamina. Unlike my mother, I cannot claim the unique achievement that she frequently professed that she had attained, which was that she had visited every inhabited island around Scotland in her five decades as a parliamentarian. However, in my 14 years as a minister, I have greatly enjoyed working with officials and businesses on the islands—I am sure that the same is true for current cabinet secretaries and ministers. I hope

that we have achieved things, but that is for others to judge.

There is a very interesting book that should be required reading for any minister and possibly for every member of the Scottish Parliament. “The Blunders of Our Governments” was written by two distinguished professors, Sir Ivor Crewe and Professor Anthony King. It was written mostly prior to devolution, and it catalogues the blunders made by the Westminster Government, including the poll tax, which was devised by a group of rather posh Conservatives. One civil servant commented on the policy by saying, “Good luck with that down Brixton way when it comes to collection time.” His advice was ignored.

The point is that the professors identified the problem as being the extent to which policy development had become separated from the realities of the world. They called it an operational and cultural disconnect. In other words, the people who are in charge of making the policy have no connection with the people who are affected by the policy—that is the point that I wish to make in my remarks. It is something that could and should have been corrected. It is sad that we have not corrected it as yet, but we should have.

As Kenneth Gibson said, doing so in this case means placing islanders at the heart not just of operational decisions, but of policy strategic decisions. That means mandatory places on the boards of those public bodies that are in charge of delivering the lifeline services—principally, but not exclusively, HIAL, CMAL and CalMac. There should be people from the islands on every one of those boards. The boards are quite small in number—there are five or six of them—and there is no reason why they could not be expanded to include, say, four or five people from the islands. As John Daniel Peteranna said,

“without the influence of Islanders on these public bodies controlling Island services the current de-populations trends ... will accelerate.”

I should also mention a long-standing campaigner and friend of mine, Brian Wilson, the former Labour minister, who said in a recent article that the

“central issue is about control. It is about the ‘who-whom’ relationship between Edinburgh and communities served by CalMac. At present, this is conducted through a tripartite arrangement with Transport Scotland as puppet-master, CMAL as procurement quango and CalMac as operator. It has been an unmitigated disaster.”

I ask, had there been islanders on the board, would we have seen the ferry fiasco? Would they have said to me, as Captain Iain Dewar did in Lochaber, back in the 1980s, that the public bodies build the wrong ferries because they do not understand how they work? That makes a very strong case for islanders’ involvement. The civil

servants are in charge of the selection policy. Far be it from me to attack civil servants, who cannot defend themselves, but I think that their role is too powerful, and they guard their powers as determinedly as squirrels hoard their nuts for winter hibernation. It has got to change. There should be islanders on the selection panels for the chairmen of all these bodies.

To conclude, we have a protocolonial approach. If, as the cabinet secretary says, people are to be at the heart of the plan, they must be in the room. As the election looms ever closer, I hope that all the parties—particularly the main moderate parties, not the two extreme ones—will put it in their manifesto that there will be islanders on these boards and that that change will be introduced in the first six months of the next session of this Parliament.

16:09

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):

As has been said this afternoon, Scotland’s island communities are a vital part of our national fabric. They are home to rich cultures, unique environments and resilient people. They contribute significantly not just to our heritage but to our economy. Yet, for far too long, they have been let down by Government policy that fails to meet their needs or match their ambitions.

In 2019, the national islands plan was launched with great fanfare. It was meant to be a turning point—a strategic framework to improve outcomes for islanders across 13 key objectives, from housing and connectivity to economic development and depopulation. However, the review and consultation report that was published last year painted a concerning picture: on 11 of the 13 strategic objectives, a majority of respondents believed that no progress had been made at all, while only 28 per cent of respondents said that the plan had

“affected their life in any way”.

That is a scathing indictment of a plan that was supposed to bring transformative change.

Equally alarming was the widespread lack of awareness and engagement. A quarter of respondents either knew nothing about the plan or had heard of it but knew nothing of its content, and a further 52 per cent only “knew a little” about it. The new plan must address that lack of awareness. To empower island communities, they should be informed, interested and invested in the process. Without that, it is little surprise that the outcomes have fallen short.

The consequences of Government inaction continue to be felt in real and painful ways. As others have said, depopulation remains a threat.

Young people struggle to stay or return, because of the shortage of affordable housing, the cost of building and the lack of access to reliable healthcare, childcare and other key services. Those challenges are pushing people away and undermining the long-term viability of island communities.

We must also talk about ferry services, which are lifeline links on which islanders rely for work, healthcare and access to markets. The disruption and delays that have been caused by the Government's failure to deliver a reliable ferry network have had significant consequences for families and businesses.

Earlier this year, the members' business debate that my colleague Rhoda Grant led focused on the Scottish Human Rights Commission's spotlight report on rights in the Highlands and Islands. The report highlighted the failure to deliver adequate services and the impacts of centralisation, as well as some of the key challenges for people in our islands, with food supply, healthcare access and the lack of affordable housing, for example. We need to bring services to people, rather than expecting people to navigate impossible distances and systems to access their basic needs.

Food costs more on the islands and independent shops struggle to compete on scale. As we saw with the recent cyberattack that left the Co-op on Islay bare, supply issues for island shops can leave communities vulnerable as there is nowhere else for them to shop.

Alongside those challenges, there is also innovation and strength. Employment rates on many islands are higher than the national average. Community-led co-operatives can offer sustainable economic models that are rooted in local needs. We should support those models to foster local ownership, to invest in infrastructure and to make housing genuinely affordable for young families and key workers.

The Scottish Government has blamed "a succession of crises"—Covid, Brexit, and the cost of living crisis—for the failings of the first national islands plan. However, crises are not an excuse—in fact, they should have been a catalyst for urgent action. What islanders need now is not another overly ambitious document but a new plan that is clear, measurable, and island led.

Before closing, I want to recognise the vital contribution of Rhoda Grant MSP as a strong voice for the Highlands and Islands for a number of years and I wish her the best for the future when the time comes for her to leave the Parliament next year.

In addition, now that the cabinet secretary has announced her intention not to stand for re-election, I urge her to cast a critical eye over the

SNP's legacy in the Highlands and Islands, wherever she wishes to employ her considerable skills.

We need to listen to island communities, not only in workshops, but also in the design, funding, and governance of the services on which they rely. Let us ensure that the next national islands plan is not another broken promise. Let it be the foundation for lasting, locally driven change so that our island communities can not only survive but thrive.

16:13

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): I am pleased to take part in the debate to highlight the importance of our island communities and the challenges that they face. However, we must also recognise their unique opportunities.

The Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 gave specific legal rights to Scotland's island communities to ensure that the Scottish Government works with and for the residents. Thanks to that act, all relevant authorities must now complete an island community impact assessment, which ensures that islanders' unique concerns are carefully considered. If we want those communities to thrive, we must listen to the experts—the people who live there—and act on their concerns.

National Records of Scotland estimates that the island population has increased at around a third of the rate of the whole Scottish population. Between 2001 and 2020, Scotland's population increased by 7.9 per cent, whereas the islands' population grew by 2.6 per cent. We need to understand why that is happening and how we can help residents to remain in their communities. It does not mean that those who move towards the central belt always wish to do so, and I am sure that countless people feel that they have no choice because of multiple factors, such as housing, employment and transport.

I am pleased that the Scottish Government has recognised those issues and is acting to remedy them. In housing, the Scottish Government is delivering affordable homes across Scotland, most of which are for social rent, and it has developed a £30 million rural and island housing fund that offers capital support for local organisations and developers to deliver affordable housing.

A thriving economy is key not only for supporting jobs for islanders but for attracting new residents to live, work and raise their families on the islands, boosting the population for future generations. As I mentioned at the start of my speech, our islands have unique challenges but also unique opportunities. Our island communities can and should be a major part of our response to

the global climate emergency. I am pleased that the Scottish Government recognises that and is committed to the innovative carbon-neutral island projects to support communities in several areas, not only decarbonisation.

The Scottish Government is acting and delivering several infrastructure projects that will deliver jobs and be of great benefit to wider communities. The renewables hub in Orkney is supported by a £5 million grant, and the Scottish Government has backed the deep water terminal in the Western Isles, which will support future renewable energy developments. Such projects empower the local community to be at the forefront of an energy and economic boom.

Although a thriving economy enhances our island communities, we cannot ignore culture, which so enriches our country. It is vital that we continue to support the Gaelic language, which is a fundamental part of Scotland's heritage, and I am pleased that the Scottish Government is supporting our ancient language. The ceilidh house in Stornoway will receive £10,000, which will enable it to promote ceilidhs and live music events in Gaelic, while the Gaelic Media Service, also in Stornoway, will be modernised through £110,000 of Scottish Government funding.

We also need to ensure that our island communities are connected through efficient transport services and to acknowledge the lifeline nature of our ferry system. The Scottish Government has not got every aspect of that correct, but we should acknowledge that the ferry services are now more extensive than they were before the SNP came to office. CalMac is now operating and servicing more routes than ever before. Everyone can agree that improvements are vital, and I encourage the Scottish Government to work with our island communities to match their needs.

The Scottish Government has plenty to be proud of, but more can be done to truly empower our islanders to thrive in their communities.

16:17

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Only in SNP Scotland can we have a debate, led by SNP ministers, on an SNP-drafted motion on empowering Scotland's island communities that does not mention ferries once—there is not a single mention in the motion. I am sure that I cannot be the only one who counted how many words were in the motion, but if I am, I will explain to the chamber. The SNP motion has 109 words about empowering our island communities. In those 109 words, SNP members congratulate themselves and say how great the SNP is for the

islands and islanders, but they do not mention ferries.

It got me thinking: how could that motion even have been signed off by highly paid ministers? The two SNP members who are on the front bench today get a combined salary of £216,700, which is more than £215,000 a year. When an official handed them the motion, did they say, "This is going to look a bit embarrassing if we don't even mention ferries"? No—they rubber-stamped it and allowed it to go. Frankly, it shows the ignorance of SNP ministers about islanders' real, hard lives and the impact that ferry delays and the lack of ferries have on so many of our island communities.

What do we get today? What is the response to our islands' problems? It is another islands plan. I ask the cabinet secretary—I tried to intervene, but she would not take it—given all her engagement, does she really believe that islanders want another islands plan? No, they do not. If they were given the choice, they would want a bloody ferry. That is all that they are after and all they need.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Mr Ross—courteous language, please.

Douglas Ross: I was being courteous. That is the most polite thing that I have heard about—

The Presiding Officer: Okay, Mr Ross. You will not repeat that word and you will apologise for the use of it in this chamber.

Douglas Ross: I will apologise, just because that is your ruling, but I have to say, that is—

The Presiding Officer: You will apologise because that is my ruling.

Douglas Ross: Yes, I said that!

The Presiding Officer: Now continue with your speech, Mr Ross.

Douglas Ross: I literally just said that.

I am saying that that is the mildest language that people in our island communities use when they are talking about ferries. If that is discourteous to the chamber, we should just listen to what the islanders are saying. The fact that ministers can bring a debate to the chamber to celebrate what they are apparently doing, while ignoring the impact of the lack of ferries in those communities, is shameful and something that I hope they regret.

We have also heard the defence from SNP members that we cannot call the ferry contracts corrupt. It cannot be anything other than corrupt if the ferries are years late and hundreds of millions of pounds over budget. In the past week alone, we have been told that another £35 million has been added to an already huge bill.

This morning, the Public Audit Committee was looking at the matter, and my colleague Graham Simpson asked a Scottish Government official, who I think is at director general level, what it will mean. Where is that money going to come from? So far, no minister has been able to tell us where that additional £35 million will come from. Will it come out of the rural affairs and islands budget? Will it come out of the health budget or the education budget? We do not know.

We have no answers, but we were told that there would be difficult trade-offs. Can the cabinet secretary tell us whether the Cabinet has had discussions about those difficult trade-offs? Will the money come out of the rural affairs budget?

The cabinet secretary and the minister are pretending to be speaking about something really important, but I think that this is really important and they should be addressing it.

Stuart McMillan: Will the member give way?

Douglas Ross: I am in my final minute and we have heard more than enough from Stuart McMillan today. *[Interruption.]*

Gosh. If I have a choice to hear or not to hear from Stuart McMillan, I will go for not hearing from him.

I will finish by commenting on an article by Calum Steele in *The Herald* today. Speaking about the challenges for our island communities of the lack of ferries, he ends his column:

“When successful, award nominated businesses simply cannot afford to open as the lack of footfall makes it economically illiterate to do so you begin to understand why South Uist is one of the most economically disadvantaged areas in the country, and faces a depopulation crisis that is amongst the most acute anywhere.”

He finishes by saying this—and I hope that these words are ringing in the ears of the SNP ministers:

“Little wonder its residents have dripping contempt for those who talk about delivery whilst being complicit in its neglect.”

That sums up the situation with the SNP, the ferries and our islands.

16:22

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I am afraid that I have one of the most landlocked constituencies in the country. Nonetheless, I adore our islands. I do not have the perseverance of Mr Ewing and his mother, who toured them, but I have spent many wonderful holidays and parliamentary trips on committee business going to our islands, not least of which was our last trip to Jenni Minto’s lovely Islay.

I say to Ms Wishart that I am really sorry that I would have trouble spelling a lot of the place names and that I will probably mispronounce a few, too. I apologise in advance.

The elephant in the room in this debate is not ferries. It was mentioned by the cabinet secretary, and it is Brexit. We know that Brexit had a negative impact on labour in our island communities. We know that it has created new barriers for trade and that we lost EU structural funds that had been absolutely—

Jamie Halcro Johnston: Will the member take an intervention?

Clare Adamson: No, thank you. I am sorry—I have heard enough from the Conservatives this afternoon. *[Interruption.]* That is directed not at Jamie Halcro Johnston but at his colleague.

We have just had the summit with the EU, and we look forward to seeing how that might help with what we are doing. However, there is no doubt that the biggest blow to our island communities was Brexit and the loss of the EU structural funds.

The Highlands and Islands benefited considerably from European structural investment funding in the past four decades. That had a transformational impact in terms of improving infrastructural connectivity and strengthening communities. We would not have the University of the Highlands and Islands or its expertise across islands if it had not been for the European Union and the funding to create it.

Such funding had supported infrastructure projects and community initiatives in the country since the 1970s, with Scotland receiving more than £6 billion to deliver transformational projects, such as the University of the Highlands and Islands and the European Marine Energy Centre in Orkney.

We have been investing in our islands. We have been looking to the future in relation to reducing carbon emissions and supporting renewable energy in our island waters and with wind technology. That has been absolutely vital to a lot of the issues that have been discussed.

Housing is essential, but we have to remember that we have to make such areas a place where people want to live and work. We want highly paid and highly skilled jobs to be available to young people. We also want to give them the opportunity to see the world, and then to return and build their own communities. How much has that been damaged by Brexit and the inability for young people to travel abroad?

Jamie Halcro Johnston: Will the member take an intervention?

Clare Adamson: No—I am sorry.

There has also been much talk about the cultural exchange that happens and about the festivals. We need only look at some of the music festivals that happen in Orkney. How disappointing it is that, in this reset of the relationship with the EU, we do not have access to the creative Europe programme, which would have helped a lot of our cultural and folk festivals and would have helped folk artists to tour in the way that they did when we had free movement of people in Europe.

Although I welcome the initiative and the plan, and I am really glad that the Government is putting it out for us all to discuss today, if I have anything to say this afternoon, it is that the best plan for our island communities is an independent Scotland back in the heart of European nations.

16:26

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I live in Keltie and represent Mid Scotland and Fife, so members might ask, "What does he know about islands?" However, like Fergus Ewing, I have survived Up Helly Aa more than once, and I have had brilliant times staying on Bressay and enjoying the nightlife in Lerwick. I therefore understand that island life can be different. My family lived on Bressay for many years. The costs can be far greater, and that is without some of the problems that we have had recently.

However, the central belt and the islands have some things in common. One is that, since the Parliament was established, over a number of Governments and political parties, we have seen a centralisation of powers away from local authorities and local communities and into this Parliament and successive Scottish Governments of different parties. That has to be reversed. A number of people have touched on that point the day; Ariane Burgess rightly highlighted it. Fergus Ewing highlighted the quangos, such as CalMac, in these areas, which we need to be able to address.

My favourite holiday destination is around the Oban area. There is nothing more exciting for me than getting a ferry across to Mull and being able to get a ferry to Iona. Going on that ferry and starting to see the islands will never cease to be amazing. I only wish that more people from the central belt were able to experience the islands. I have to say that the costs are sometimes far too great for people to holiday on the islands, as with the Highlands. Sometimes it is cheaper to get an all-inclusive holiday abroad than it is to spend a week in the Highlands. Those are issues for the whole of Scotland. As a youngster, I certainly never experienced the islands at all. Once I did, as I said, I have then gone back time and time again.

Housing and depopulation are absolutely major problems for the Highlands and Islands that we must tackle. We know that immigration supports jobs in the Highlands. Over the many years that I have holidayed in the Highlands, I have met families who have come to Scotland to make it their home and work here but who have not been able to get a home.

I liked Jamie Halcro Johnston's comment that island proofing is island box ticking, which is absolutely right. Mention has been made of consultation on a new islands plan. Instead of consulting on a new islands plan, we should allow the people of the islands to develop and write that plan, and we should then give them control over its implementation.

In the short time that I have left, I will highlight a piece that I saw on STV News last week, which members might not have seen. Under the headline, "Families 'heartbroken' after plans to expand island's only care home scrapped", the story said:

"Funding to expand the number of beds at Thomson Court—the only care home on the Isle of Bute—has been scrapped amid funding concerns.

Plans to expand the number of beds at the only care home on a Scottish island have been abandoned.

Families on Bute are struggling to care for loved ones with complex dementia needs or having to send them to the mainland."

That means that people are having to go to places such as Stirling and Fife to visit their loved ones. As well as the cost involved, for elderly people, the level of travel involved is difficult.

In October, Argyll and Bute Council announced funding to expand the number of beds at Thomson Court from eight to 14, but those plans have been scrapped because of an overspend on social care costs. The integration joint board says that it is "extremely disappointed", but that it cannot proceed because the costs far exceed its budget. That is a ridiculous situation for the island to be facing, and it is one that the Government and the Parliament should seek to address and to fix.

We must give power to island communities, instead of giving it to quangos and IJBs. Islanders should be able to make the decisions and to come up with the plans for what the islands need. That is how we must proceed; otherwise, we will keep coming back to the chamber to have the same discussion.

The Presiding Officer: We move to the winding-up speeches.

16:31

Ariane Burgess: Today's debate has clearly shown the strength of passion, feeling and support

for empowering our island communities that exists among members on all sides of the chamber.

Ferries and tunnels were mentioned by a number of members. Beatrice Wishart made a good case for fixed links in Shetland, but there are a number of other obvious places where fixed links make sense, and it would be good if the Scottish Government undertook work on the feasibility of such important infrastructure.

On ferries, it was good to see the Scottish Government take up the Scottish Greens' call for free interisland ferries for young people under 22. At the moment, the scheme covers only Orkney, Shetland and the Western Isles, and it would be good if it were extended to cover islands such as the Summer Isles, or to enable young people from islands such as Islay and Tiree to travel to the mainland for free.

Kenneth Gibson talked about the need for islanders to be involved in decision making about their ferries. It is astounding that that has clearly been an ask since long before the current session of Parliament. As a candidate, I learned that, despite asking for two smaller ferries, communities in Ullapool and Stornoway ended up with one larger one, which has resulted in a lack of service and limited sailings. If islanders had been on the board, different and better decisions would certainly have been made.

Claire Baker pointed out islanders' lack of awareness of the islands plan and its outcomes. She made the point that we need to bring services to people, rather than people to services. That picks up on what I said in my opening speech: we must start designing policy with islanders and rural communities, not for them, so that it works for them, to ensure that they thrive.

The issue of housing was raised by a number of members. Colin Beattie mentioned the rural and islands housing fund. It is clear how vital that fund is, so it is essential that we listen to communities that understand how we can make it work even better.

Clare Adamson said that the elephant in the room was Brexit and the challenges that it has brought for our island communities as a result of the loss of the EU structural fund. That is certainly the case. Wherever I go in the Highlands and Islands, the ring of EU golden stars on a blue background is ubiquitous. Brexit also created a great deal of red tape and paperwork for our small artisanal fishers.

I think that the Government's announcement of the next phase of the carbon-neutral islands scheme is a step in the right direction when it comes to empowering islanders. It is good that existing projects will be able to look ahead and plan for the next few years, but given that the

initiative is already delivering a tangible impact for communities, I urge the Government to go further faster. By the time the new road map draws to a close, it will have been seven years since the project was launched, and the other Scottish island communities will not be any clearer on how the project could help them on the road to net zero.

It is imperative that we do not reach a situation in which there is inequality of opportunity between our islands, and that all islands have an opportunity to participate with enough time, so that they can hit the carbon neutrality that we are seeking by 2045. If we can get it right on the islands, we can get it right anywhere in Scotland. As I mentioned in my opening speech, more decision making needs to take place in local communities, so that islanders feel like they have a real stake. In fact, it goes beyond their just feeling like they do— Islanders must have a real stake in their communities.

We have already seen the consequences of not doing that, on Mull. Communities on the island have been badly divided over the decision to build a new school campus in Tobermory. People living in the north and south of the island have been left completely at odds on the matter, because a decision was made that did not put Mull front and centre. It has left children in the south needing to spend most of their term time in mainland hostels, completely contravening their human rights and threatening their wellbeing. We need to avoid such scenarios, in which decisions are made for, rather than by, islanders.

I call once again on the Government and the Parliament to design with islanders and our rural communities, rather than for them. Let us put islanders first.

16:36

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): Well, there are risks as well as opportunities set out in this afternoon's Government report. There are roadblocks on this road map, and they are listed: grid connection challenges; barriers to raising capital; funding delays and risks; shortages of labour, including of local tradespeople and skilled labour; insufficient local contractors; and the persistent concentration of land ownership question. All are set out clearly in this report.

Now, in my view, these are not insurmountable. I was reminded just last night that 70 per cent of the population of the Western Isles now live on estates and land that are community owned. Gigha, Eigg and Ulva are thriving in community ownership, and there is a co-operative tradition on our islands, so a community wealth-building approach, which we have not really heard of this

afternoon, properly supported—properly resourced—by the Scottish Government could work. I would just say: look at the magnificent employee-owned Auchrannie resort on the Isle of Arran as an example.

There have been cries this afternoon of “Islanders on the boards”, led by Fergus Ewing, but echoed by other speakers, Claire Baker included. I think that they are right and it is a perfectly reasonable demand to make, but, as Alex Rowley reminded us, simply having people on boards is not of itself sufficient. There needs to be a much greater level of islander engagement in decision making.

We know, as well, that there are still some old challenges to be overcome—illustrated all too vividly recently by the actions of the Clan Donald Lands Trust on the Isle of Skye. So, as the Labour amendment points out, island depopulation persists, and we now have a statutory island proofing policy. We have passed a law, but is it working? Kenny Gibson described it as a watershed but, as Beatrice Wishart reports, recalling evidence from SPICe, there is no record—no data—of island impact assessments being carried out.

The Conservative Party amendment this afternoon refers to the excellent Scottish Human Rights Commission spotlight report into the Highlands and Islands, which concluded:

“Across all rights examined, there is not a single human right that meets all the conditions of adequacy under international law.”

Not one—not one. I hope that the conservative members of this Parliament, not all of them wearing a blue rosette, understand that we will never address these fundamental breaches of human rights—the right to health, to social care, to education, to be free of fuel poverty; the right to culture, to a home; the right to food, the clear breach of which is causing hunger, deprivation, even malnutrition on our islands in 2025—for as long as the rich remain so rich, because that is why the poor remain so poor.

As many people have said this afternoon, Alex Rowley included, it is surely a central job of this Scottish Parliament and of this Scottish Government to focus on what is distinctively Scottish. Nothing is more quintessentially Scottish than Scotland’s islands, and nothing is more important and necessary than a reliable transport service, a reliable ferry service—connectivity on and off our islands—and yet this Government cannot even get that right.

As Rhoda Grant said, ferry disruption is growing, and the Government has only belatedly responded when there is a deep crisis. So, it is 18 years in office, and now 10 years since the bidding

process closed on the two new ferries for the Clyde and Hebrides routes. In August of this year, it will be 10 years since the then First Minister jumped the gun, pulled rank on the then Minister for Transport and the Islands and announced the award as a “done deal” on a visit to the Ferguson Marine yard, even though “significant negotiations” were still to be concluded.

Kenneth Gibson: Is it not the case that all political parties supported the award of that contract in 2014, and what we have heard today is all about hindsight?

Richard Leonard: No, it is not hindsight at all. When the Public Audit Committee of this Parliament looked into what happened around the award of the contract, it heard clear evidence that the First Minister stepped in at a point when the buyer and procurer—CMAL—was not happy with the terms of the deal. So, it is my contention—and, I think, the contention of the committee at that point—that the announcement was a premature announcement, and that is not the benefit of hindsight.

I remain an inveterate and an unrepentant socialist, and I am convinced more and more that what we need is a social and an economic, not a constitutional, revolution; a challenge to landlordism; a revival ofcrofting; and a redistribution of wealth and power, instead of the perpetuation of this wholly unequal distribution of economic power and this wholly unequal distribution of wealth. I am convinced that all that people want from us, as members of this Parliament, is for us to act humanely, decently and democratically in the best interests of the people who sent us here, including all of those who live on our islands.

16:42

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I have to be honest: when I first saw that we were to have this debate, I thought to myself, “Wow, that’s brave!”. During the same week that we heard about another massive delay to and the spiralling costs of the Glen Rosa, and on top of concerns that I was already aware of about school campuses, healthcare and rural depopulation, we learned—to my great surprise—that we were to have a debate, led by the SNP, on how we empower Scottish islands.

It is true that our islands contain many wonderful people— Islanders are often very resilient and engaging—and there is much good work that goes on in our islands. I share the Government’s desire—it is probably the only desire that I share with the SNP—to ensure that our island communities are empowered, but are we really empowering them?

The cabinet secretary talked about the new carbon-neutral project on the islands and the successes of the national islands plan. I note, too, that the motion from the SNP admits that

“further action to tackle island challenges”

is needed, but that is quite the understatement, in my opinion. A lot can be said in a plan, but a plan is not the provider. Where we choose to invest and what we choose to support make a difference to the lives of our islanders.

I have yet to go to an island where the issue of ferries is not raised, yet—as Douglas Ross rightly pointed out—the SNP motion does not mention ferries at all. On ferry delays, the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister both admitted last week that it is not good enough—and indeed it is not. To be honest, I do not think that it is good enough that the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister said that line. It is their job to ensure that delays do not happen, but, time and again, they do.

Island community impact assessments offer an opportunity to ensure that the implementation of new policy makes practical sense for the islands, but the message that I too often hear is that it does not. Many people feel that authorities do those assessments because they have to, rather than because they see value in them.

It was interesting to listen to the wide range of views in the debate. Jamie Halcro Johnston and Pam Gosal mentioned ferries, the future of services on the islands, job prospects and tourism. Rhoda Grant gave a well-rounded speech in which she covered a wide range of issues that matter to our islands, including the point that I just made about island community impact assessments.

Kenneth Gibson told us, quoting Arthur Conan Doyle, that the islands are

“the epitome of the whole of Scotland”,

and he is right. It is elementary, my dear cabinet secretary, that the islands are the epitome of Scotland, and we should be serving them well—they are a microcosm of Scotland.

Beatrice Wishart talked about innovative solutions for islands, such as tunnels, and the requirement for more housing, and she gave a bit of a telling-off about the spelling of Up Helly Aa. Ariane Burgess talked about the uniqueness of our islands and the importance of devolving power to our councils in island communities. She also talked about Scotland’s islands being at a critical point in their 5,000-year history.

Fergus Ewing said that islanders should be at the heart of operations that affect them. We should not have to wait for the next session of Parliament for islanders to be on the boards of groups that take decisions that affect their daily lives. He also

talked about the book “The Blunders of Our Governments”, which I have read part of. I heard that the authors were going to do an update to the book on the Scottish Government, but it was going to be too heavy to lift, so they had to stop.

I am not greatly surprised that the SNP did not like what Douglas Ross had to say, but he is right. When I go to the islands, and I have been to quite a few recently, this is what they are talking about. Not surprisingly, what we heard from the SNP in the debate was Brexit, Brexit and more Brexit, but Brexit is not causing the problems on our islands. The ferry delays and the housing delays are caused by the Scottish Government; they are not caused by Brexit.

The only person who talks more about having something to blame is Richard Leonard when he blames the rich for always being at fault. However, I say to him that I respect that.

I, too, welcome residents from the island of Mull to the gallery. It is wonderful that they have managed to get a ferry across, and I hope that they can manage to get the ferry back home today.

The Mull school project is a classic example of things going wrong when we do not truly listen to and empower our island communities. However, it is not too late; in all seriousness, I say that there is something that we can do about that.

During the debate and discussion about the Mull school project, I tried very hard not to form an opinion on what the right location was for a new school campus, because I felt quite strongly that, ultimately, the location of a new school should be the community’s decision. I fundamentally believe that. However, I was conscious that there would be families in Tobermory that would prefer the school to be rebuilt there, reducing the need for their children to travel. I could not help but recognise—I think that Ariane Burgess and Rhoda Grant touched on this—that for the whole island to be successful, it is vital that all are listened to. I have been contacted time and again by people across the island raising concerns about the consultation process. In my opinion, the financial impact on the council was, ultimately, a much bigger consideration for councillors in Argyll and Bute than the views of the residents of Mull themselves. That is the problem.

Ninety-eight per cent of Scotland is rural, and 17 per cent of the population of Scotland lives in rural areas, but it is not just about numbers. Rural life is built into our very cultural heritage, and the traditions, languages and history of rural areas are baked into our national identity. Rural service delivery comes with a higher cost, and if we want rural areas and islands to thrive, we must accept that.

In communities such as those on Mull, education that relies on the ferries, the weather and the separation of families is never a good thing. Mull required a bespoke arrangement. It needed community, Government and council to come together to agree a funding package for primary and secondary education that delivered for the island and provided equity in education provision. The specific nature of the debate for a fragile community such as Mull necessitated the involvement of the Government in order for the right decision to be made. I still believe that there is time for the Government to act to support those in the gallery and the whole community of Mull, and I urge the cabinet secretary to take that point away.

Big changes will not happen overnight, but more and more we discuss depopulation and how to stem it. I wonder whether the lack of any real empowerment is the driver that leads to further depopulation of our islands, as in the case of Mull.

There might be a handful of successes that I could agree with the cabinet secretary on, and a few pieces of work that are welcomed by the islands, but are they really empowered?

I say to the minister that he should go to the islands without an agenda. He should sit down and have a coffee or go into the pub or the local shop and talk to people. He should talk to islanders about education and health, the visitor levy and fisheries. If he is really brave, he could talk to them about ferries. Then, he should come back to Parliament and stand up and tell us whether he really believes that our island communities are empowered.

My own feeling is that—just as we heard from Kate Forbes and John Swinney on ferries last week—what the Government is doing is not nearly good enough.

16:50

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): I am very pleased to have the opportunity to say a few words in bringing the debate to a close and to reflect on the contributions from members.

It is clear from what we have heard that there is a strong consensus on the crucial role that islands play in enriching Scotland's economy, culture and society. It is vital that we continue—across the chamber, when we can—to support our islands' aspirations and to make sure that their voices continue to be heard.

Jamie Halcro Johnston and Claire Baker both made very good points. Jamie Halcro Johnston said that we want to talk only about the good stuff, but we do not—we want to talk about everything,

so that we can find solutions for the island communities. That is what the debate is about.

The Scottish Government's decision, made in partnership with the communities and the local authorities—to touch on Alex Rowley's point, it was widely consulted on—was to have population retention and attraction as the overarching objective of the new national islands plan, as unequivocal evidence of our commitment to building a vibrant future for our islands.

Of course, the vision has to be backed by actions and investments. In her opening remarks, the cabinet secretary provided an overview of some of the initiatives that the Scottish Government has already put in train. It is also worth mentioning the support that the Scottish Government has provided for island tourism, with non-domestic rates relief of up to 100 per cent for hospitality businesses on islands continuing into 2025-26.

I am also proud of the Scottish Government's commitment to invest up to £700,000 in the international island games, which will get under way in Orkney in July and will be one of the largest sporting events ever held on our islands. I wish everyone who is involved very well, and I hope to see Orkney, Shetland and the Western Isles teams very high up the medals list.

Kenneth Gibson: Does the minister share my disappointment that, over many years, Arran and Cumbrae have been denied entry to those games because the organisers say that they are full up?

Jim Fairlie: That will be an issue for the games organisers, I would say.

Through the Scottish Languages Bill, we are strengthening Gaelic education and elevating the role of community development through the establishment of areas of linguistic significance in places where the language has particular strengths. Those will, of course, include many island communities.

As members know, agriculture and crofting are subjects that are very close to my heart. As well as cultivating the land and tending stock, crofters contribute to protecting island biodiversity and play a key role in maintaining their communities' heritage and resilience. Through the proposed crofting and Scottish Land Court bill, which was announced in the new programme for government, we will help crofting by streamlining administrative processes, facilitating the use of inby croft and common grazings, and making regulations less onerous.

To touch on Tim Eagle's point, in order to get to the point at which the crofting bill can properly take shape, I spent days on the islands, talking to crofters and local communities to find out what

they want to do. With crofting at the centre of our island communities, the bill is designed to strengthen and support the sector and the crofting communities for future generations.

The examples that the cabinet secretary and I have offered are testament to the Scottish Government's on-going efforts to address island challenges and ambitions. However, we recognise that more remains to be done. The new national islands plan offers a vehicle to further strengthen our delivery for, and with, the island communities.

Consultation events that have been held to date have shown strong support for a plan that takes a hands-on and targeted approach. In line with the respondents' advice—I say “advice” advisedly—the new plan will feature few objectives and commitments in comparison with the 2019 document. It will focus on a narrower set of tangible and relatable actions that will add to what the Scottish Government is already delivering.

We are working openly and transparently with partners to address the islanders' expectations and to ensure that the plan features impactful commitments. The suggestions that have been made during the debate will help us to shape the development of the plan, so I thank members again for their valuable contributions.

Ariane Burgess talked about human rights. The Minister for Equalities has responded to the Scottish Human Rights Commission and has copied that response to the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee and the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee. It sets out what action we are taking to address the issues that Ms Burgess raised.

Alex Rowley: Will the minister and the cabinet secretary make representations to the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care about the position of the care home on the Isle of Bute, which was highlighted by STV last week, given that that is an unacceptable situation? *[Interruption.]*

Jim Fairlie: I seem to have lost my speaking notes, Presiding Officer.

I think that Jenni Minto is taking the matter up. There is on-going work to address that.

Beatrice Wishart mentioned the road map's spelling of Up Helly Aa, which was a point well made. However, the document was shared with Shetland Islands Council and nobody picked that up. She also talked about having connecting tunnels, and we are considering what that might look like. There are mixed views on the idea, but we are happy to continue to have the discussion. We are also committing more than £70 million to inter-island connectivity.

Fergus Ewing and Kenny Gibson both talked about the need for island communities to have board representation. I note that CalMac has a community board and the chair of NHS Highland is an islander, but their points were well made.

It is not just about where people live, though, but about the language that they speak, as Colin Beattie noted. It is important that language, as much as anything else, is recognised.

Douglas Ross made a fair point—when I say “fair”, I mean that he made it robustly—about the fact that the motion does not talk about ferries. So, I am going to talk about ferries. I note that £530 million will be invested over the coming year and that the contract for seven new electric ferries has been signed. When those are added to the Glen Sannox and the five new major vessels that will join the fleet, we will have invested to renew more than a third of CalMac's fleet, and the 2025-26 budget confirms that we plan to do more. I commend Fiona Hyslop for the work that she has done to drive that forward. Yet again, Mr Ross has shown what a loss he will be to the chamber—I am sure that it will be improved enormously by his absence next year. As far as number 6 is concerned, talking to islanders is at the heart of everything that we do.

I have to mention the residents of Mull, some of whom are in the chamber today. Their issue has been raised with the cabinet secretary. It is a local authority issue, but I am pleased to say that Jenni Minto has agreed to meet them and is organising a round-table meeting to discuss the issue.

Listening to the voices of our island communities, with their knowledge and insights, must be our guiding principle. Therefore, I am very encouraged with the progress made in the implementation of the carbon neutral islands project. It offers an example of the results that will be achieved when communities are empowered to take action in a way that is efficient and appropriate to local circumstances. The financing road map that we have published today sets out the next steps in the journey towards achieving net zero emissions by 2040, and it will move the project into a new phase of delivery. The carbon neutral islands project also confirms our islands' credentials as places of innovation and entrepreneurialism. In fact, islands are often at the centre of Scotland's ambitions, from the production of renewable energy to the transition to net zero and our iconic food and drink exports, which span the globe.

I welcome the debate as an opportunity to reiterate the Scottish Government's steadfast commitment to listen to the voices of those in our island communities, to work across sectors and to ensure that island communities and businesses maximise their potential to prosper.

Business Motions

16:58

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-17607, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme. I call Martin Whitfield to move the motion.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): The motion that has been lodged by the bureau tables business that has been considered. I am content to take an intervention for 30 seconds, if the minister is able to intervene, in order to facilitate the passage of time.

Notwithstanding that, I move the motion in the bureau's name.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

Tuesday 27 May 2025

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Growing Community Owned Energy in Scotland

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 28 May 2025

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:
Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands;
Health and Social Care

followed by Scottish Liberal Democrats Business

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Approval of SSIs (if required)

5.10 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 29 May 2025

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

followed by Members' Business

2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.30 pm

Portfolio Questions:
Social Justice

followed by Ministerial Statement: Galloway and
Ayrshire National Park Proposal

followed by Ministerial Statement: NHS Grampian

followed by Ministerial Statement: Responding to
RAAC in the Public Sector Across
Scotland

followed by Legislative Consent Motion: Tobacco
and Vapes Bill - UK Legislation

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

4.50 pm Decision Time

Tuesday 3 June 2025

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by Citizen Participation and Public Petitions
Committee Debate: Public Participation
Inquiry

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 4 June 2025

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:
Constitution, External Affairs and
Culture, and Parliamentary Business;
Justice and Home Affairs;
Education and Skills

followed by Scottish Government Business

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Approval of SSIs (if required)

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 5 June 2025

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

12.45 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

(b) that, for the purposes of Portfolio Questions in the week beginning 26 May 2025, in rule 13.7.3, after the word "except" the words "to the extent to which the Presiding Officer considers that the questions are on the same or similar subject matter or" are inserted.

Motion agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next item of business is consideration of business motions S6M-17608 and S6M-17609, both of which are on a stage 2 timetable for a bill. I call Jamie Hepburn to move the motions.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that consideration of the Criminal Justice Modernisation and Abusive Domestic Behaviour Reviews (Scotland) Bill at stage 2 be completed by 20 June 2025.

That the Parliament agrees that consideration of the Land Reform (Scotland) Bill at stage 2 be completed by 27 June 2025.—[*Jamie Hepburn*]

Motions agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of three Parliamentary Bureau motions. I ask Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move motions S6M-17610, on committee membership, S6M-17611, on a committee substitute, and S6M-17612, on designation of a lead committee.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that Patrick Harvie be appointed to replace Gillian Mackay as a member of the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee.

That the Parliament agrees that Mark Ruskell be appointed to replace Gillian Mackay as the Scottish Green Party substitute on the Education, Children and Young People Committee.

That the Parliament agrees that the Criminal Justice Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the Prevention of Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Bill at stage 1.—[*Jamie Hepburn*]

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

Decision Time

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

There are four questions to be put as a result of today's business. I remind members that, if the amendment in the name of Jamie Halcro Johnston is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Rhoda Grant will fall.

The first question is, that amendment S6M-17598.2, in the name of Jamie Halcro Johnston, which seeks to amend motion S6M-17598, in the name of Mairi Gougeon, on empowering Scotland's island communities, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

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

17:01

Meeting suspended.

17:04

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: I remind members that, if the amendment in the name of Jamie Halcro Johnston is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Rhoda Grant will fall.

We move to the vote on amendment S6M-17598.2, in the name of Jamie Halcro Johnston, which seeks to amend motion S6M-17598, in the name of Mairi Gougeon. Members should cast their votes now.

For

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)

Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Rona Mackay]
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine)

(SNP)

Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-17598.2, in the name of Jamie Halcro Johnston, is: For 31, Against 78, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-17598.1, in the name of Rhoda Grant, which seeks to amend motion S6M-17598, in the name of Mairi Gougeon, on empowering Scotland's island communities, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

The Minister for Parliamentary Business (Jamie Hepburn): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I am afraid that the digital app would not connect. I would have voted no and my proxy vote on behalf of Màiri McAllan would have been no.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Hepburn. We will ensure that those are recorded.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My app would not connect. I would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Whittle. We will ensure that that is recorded.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): [*Inaudible.*]

The Presiding Officer: I am just going to ask for your microphone, Ms McNeill. We are having an issue with your microphone.

Pauline McNeill: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms McNeill. We will ensure that that is recorded.

For

Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)

Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Rona Mackay]
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-17598.1, in the name of Rhoda Grant, is: For 46, Against 64, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-17598, in the name of Mairi Gougeon, on empowering Scotland's island communities, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)

Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Rona Mackay]
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)

Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

Abstentions

Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-17598, in the name of Mairi Gougeon, on empowering Scotland's island communities, is: For 63, Against 40, Abstentions 7.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament recognises Scotland's islands' invaluable contribution to Scotland's economy, culture and identity; welcomes the investments that have accompanied Scotland's first ever national islands plan; recognises the positive impact that the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 has had, but notes the need for further action to tackle island challenges; welcomes the extensive community engagement to develop the new national islands plan, and notes that measures to address depopulation and create community wealth should be key themes of the new plan; further welcomes the positive progress and impact of the Carbon Neutral Islands project, and agrees that the Scottish Government should continue to work towards prosperous and sustainable island communities.

The Presiding Officer: Unless any member objects, I propose to ask a single question on three Parliamentary Bureau motions.

As no member has objected, the final question is, that motions S6M-17610, on committee membership, S6M-17611, on a committee substitute, and S6M-17612, on designation of a lead committee, all in the name of Jamie Hepburn,

on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, be agreed to.

Motions agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that Patrick Harvie be appointed to replace Gillian Mackay as a member of the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee.

That the Parliament agrees that Mark Ruskell be appointed to replace Gillian Mackay as the Scottish Green Party substitute on the Education, Children and Young People Committee.

That the Parliament agrees that the Criminal Justice Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the Prevention of Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Bill at stage 1.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Gambling Addiction

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The final item of business this evening is a members' business debate on motion S6M-17172, in the name of Clare Adamson, on the harm of gambling addiction. The debate will be concluded without any questions being put. I invite members who wish to participate to press their request-to-speak buttons.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes reports of the concerning rise of gambling addiction in Scotland, including in the Motherwell and Wishaw constituency; believes that gambling can have adverse impacts on the health and wellbeing of individuals, families, communities and society, such as loss of employment, debt and a deterioration of physical and mental health, and that this can lead to increased risk of suicide among individuals affected by problem gambling; understands that approximately 1% of the adult population in Scotland, around 55,000 people, is estimated to be experiencing severe gambling problems, with a further 3.8% at risk of developing gambling-related issues, according to the *Scottish Health Survey 2020*; further understands that gambling-related crime, often driven by financial desperation, poses a threat to public safety and community wellbeing, with GamCare's annual statistics report suggesting that more than 50% of individuals seeking help for gambling addiction also reported committing criminal acts to fund gambling activities; considers gambling addiction to be a significant public health issue and notes the view that it requires sustained policy intervention; believes with concern that there is an unprecedented variety of gambling apps, websites, online games, lotteries and social media platforms; notes with further concern marketing campaigns that promote gambling, despite the reported myriad public health concerns, and commends organisations, such as GamCare and the John Hartson Foundation, for their commitment and dedication to reducing the harm of problem gambling.

17:12

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I thank the members who are taking part this evening, and also those who supported the motion to allow it to come to the chamber.

Problem gambling is a serious public health issue. It has far-reaching consequences for individuals, families and the wider communities that we all represent. A public health issue requires a public health, person-centred response, and that is the framing that I would like to use for this evening's debate.

Problem gambling—and addiction more generally—does not just impact on finances; it can have serious implications for the health and wellbeing of not only the person with the problem but their immediate friends, family and loved ones. It can cause financial ruin. It can result in health and wellbeing issues, and people experiencing problem gambling face stigma and judgment that

can put them off seeking the help that they desperately need. Loss of employment, debt and deterioration of physical and mental health can lead to increased risk of suicide among individuals who are affected by problem gambling.

I have reflected on my framing for this debate and I know, from working with some brilliant recovery charities in Motherwell and Wishaw, that terminology is important and that a discussion can be charged if it is not framed correctly. I understand that the word "addiction" can be stigmatising in itself. However, I felt that it was necessary to use it in the context of raising awareness of the need for support for the most problematic cases. However, I must also consider my own language, and ensure that it is used to empower people to seek help rather than to judge people. As is the case with drug and alcohol use, a public health response to gambling is about framing our approach as a person-centred, awareness-raising and compassionate response to problem gambling.

We are not going to end gambling. It is a practice that I suggest is as old as humanity. However, we can recognise that, if it gets out of control, there is help for those who are struggling. People will continue to gamble. According to Public Health Scotland, 58 per cent of adults aged 16 and over have gambled within the previous 12 months. However, I do not accept that betting companies have done all that they can to reduce the harms that are associated with gambling.

According to the 2020 Scottish health survey, around 55,000 people are estimated to be experiencing severe gambling problems, with a further 3.8 per cent being at risk of developing gambling-related issues, which, as I have already said, go beyond the individual. It is estimated that, for every person who has a gambling problem, there will be six other people among their family, friends and working environment who will be deeply affected by it, too.

We know that this is not a gender issue, and that there are female and male people who are struggling with addiction in this area. However, I have to say that the targeting from the organisations that offer people opportunities to access support is very gender focused.

A person's life and livelihood can be devastated by gambling addiction, and that can have an impact on everyone around them, but there are wider social harms, too. It can cause financial desperation, which can lead to associated crimes. In a presentation at the recent community action network event that I held, which was hosted by New College Lanarkshire and brought together third sector organisations to share their experience, GamCare, which does work in my constituency, noted that its annual statistics report

shows that more than 50 per cent of individuals seeking help for problem gambling also reported committing criminal acts to fund gambling activities.

I commend the organisations that are doing work in the community. A lot of the gambling companies invest in those charitable programmes, and I welcome that funding. However, we have to get to the crux of the matter, because such activity does not address the array of harms that are caused by problem gambling.

Organisations that promote or market gambling also have to consider their responsibilities to the wider community. Sports clubs that take advantage of advertising revenue from gambling companies should think about the impact that that messaging has on their fans.

I know that teams are struggling, and I know that many clubs position themselves at the centre of their community, including, in my constituency, Motherwell Football Club, which is a prime example of a club doing incredible community work and fan engagement. In that regard, I also mention Wishaw Football Club, which was formerly a junior club and is now semi-professional. Many sports clubs, by chance or design, have a unique social role in their communities. That role gives them a serious social responsibility, and decision makers should consider whether the revenues are worth it, knowing the harms and problems that can be done to the fan base and, indeed, to some of the players, as we have seen.

However, gambling addiction is not a problem that is unique to sports. Gambling takes many forms—scratch cards, lotteries, bingo and games on mobile devices, as well as the more traditional sports and casino games. Our high streets are full of betting establishments, many of which also have fixed-odds betting machines in their premises. I know that my colleague Stuart McMillan, who is here for the debate this evening, has done a lot of work on highlighting the dangers of those fixed-odds machines.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): On the fixed-odds betting terminals, one of the arguments that the bookmaking companies put forward when they were campaigning not to have any changes to the terminals was that stores would close, jobs would be lost and there would be a financial detriment to their businesses. Is Clare Adamson aware of any cases where that happened, or was the industry just making false claims?

Clare Adamson: I think that the industry has been very defensive of its position in those areas, but I am not aware of fewer betting establishments being in operation, certainly in my constituency.

I will finish by highlighting a drop-in event that I am holding tomorrow, after First Minister's questions. GamCare, the Simon Community Scotland, the RCA Trust and the John Hartson Foundation will be here to talk about real-life experiences of gambling problems, offer help and raise awareness among colleagues of what help is available when people are in need.

17:20

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am pleased to contribute to this afternoon's debate, and I thank Clare Adamson for bringing this important issue to the chamber.

Gambling addiction can affect many aspects of someone's life, including their relationships, their finances and their physical and mental health. It can also affect others around them. Anyone who has seen a family member struggle with gambling addiction will know that all too well.

Data shows that more than 80 per cent of those with a gambling problem reported family or relationship difficulties. Other factors that can increase the risk of developing a gambling addiction include starting gambling at an early age, problems with drugs or alcohol or having a mental health condition.

As we have already heard, such addiction can be problematic for individuals and can lead to criminality. One of the biggest problems is that it can be easy for people to cover up their gambling addiction. In many cases, close friends or family members do not realise anything is wrong until thousands of pounds of debt have already built up.

The wider effects of gambling also extend to the whole economy. Estimates by the Institute for Public Policy Research suggest that problem gambling could be costing Scotland up to £60 million a year. It is also concerning that gambling problems are most common in young adults: it is estimated that 55,000 11 to 16-year-olds have a gambling problem.

A recent survey by the Gambling Commission highlights a worrying trend—that the number of 11 to 17-year olds with signs of problem gambling has more than doubled, compared with the previous year.

Stuart McMillan: Does Alexander Stewart also acknowledge that, because of their gambling addiction, some people have, I am sad to say, committed suicide? That loss far outweighs the £60 million estimated cost to the economy.

Alexander Stewart: Yes, I do, and I will come on to that later in my speech. It is a massive issue. Some individuals, because they can see no way out of their gambling addiction and feel that they have nowhere to go, consider suicide, and it is

problematic if they do not get the support that they require.

I welcome services such as those provided by GamCare and by organisations such as Gambling Leap, which was founded by Fife resident Colin Brown. Drawing on his own experience with gambling, which cost him more than £250,000, Colin launched Gambling Leap to support others and help free them from that addiction.

Organisations such as Gambling Leap are an important part of tackling the problem. We, and the Government, must consider our part in that. The introduction of a maximum stake on fixed-odds betting terminals in 2018 was a welcome step—but it was only a step.

I was pleased that, in 2020, the previous Conservative United Kingdom Government reviewed the Gambling Act 2005, and that, in 2023, it published a white paper on gambling. I welcome that the new Labour UK Government has looked at and is prepared to implement much of what is in the white paper.

However, the Scottish Government also has a role to play in tackling the issue. There has to be wider recognition of gambling and of NHS Scotland's concerns when it comes to supporting individuals.

The suicide prevention action plan is about ensuring that people are able to access the correct treatment across health and social care services. However, it is a problem that we still do not have any specialist national health service clinics for people with a gambling addiction in Scotland.

I urge the Scottish Government to recognise the challenges of gambling addiction and the damage that it can cause to so many people's lives, and to ensure that every community has access to the high-quality support services that will fully support their needs. I look forward to the minister saying that that is the case when she makes her speech.

17:24

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): I, too, pay tribute to Clare Adamson for lodging her motion and bringing to the chamber a debate on this important issue, and to Stuart McMillan for all the work that he has done over recent years.

I want to speak in the debate not just because the issue affects many of my constituents—as is the case for many constituencies across urban Scotland and beyond—but because it is an area of public policy and concern in our society that we do not talk about enough. There is—quite rightly and understandably—an emphasis, and debate and discussion, on the challenges that we face as a result of addiction to alcohol and illegal drugs, but

gambling does not seem to get the same attention. I appreciate that it is slightly different, but for those who are affected, it is just as damaging, and—as the motion sets out, and as other members have articulated—it is a significant concern in our constituencies.

As my colleague said, in approaching how we engage with and assist those who are experiencing gambling addiction, it should be treated as a health issue, from a person-centred perspective. However, we, as a Parliament and as a society, should perhaps spend more time considering how to work collaboratively with our colleagues in the UK Parliament, and beyond the jurisdiction of the UK, on addressing the prevalence of gambling addiction in our society.

All the main streets in my constituency have a bookies. If you go on the internet, gambling is advertised there. All our major sports are now disproportionately dominated by gambling advertising. The Premier League in England has, commendably, committed to try to remove gambling companies as the main shirt sponsor, from next season onwards. Whether that transpires or not, we have still to see, but major football clubs, and indeed leagues, are currently sponsored by those companies.

I appreciate that that is because gambling has a relationship with sport through the process of putting bets on—the whole concept of gambling is, in many cases, related to sport. Nonetheless, we are getting to a situation where that needs serious attention. Most regulation of gambling is reserved, whether it is through the Gambling Commission or hard regulation in law, but we should think about the soft power that the Scottish Government could use.

As a result of a members' business debate that I led last year, we now have a ministerial round table on Scottish football. Can that do more? What more can the Government do on engaging with public policy on town centre regeneration? Are there planning law considerations that could be utilised? In engaging with the UK Government, what more can be done about gambling online?

To give credit where it is absolutely due, we have an ally in our former colleague, Ruth Davidson, who has done a lot of work on the issue in the House of Lords. The minister may want to engage with her, and with other politicians in the UK Parliament, on how we do more to tackle this very serious and growing issue with regard to the damage that it is causing and its prevalence in our everyday lives.

17:28

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I thank Clare Adamson for bringing the debate to

the chamber, which provides us with the opportunity to speak about an issue that has consequences for individuals, families and communities across Scotland.

Although gambling can often be portrayed as a harmless leisure activity, gambling disorder is a significant issue, which, for thousands of people, carries serious risks and devastating consequences. The motion for debate highlights some of the figures: notably, that around

“1% of the adult population ... is ... experiencing severe gambling problems, with a further 3.8% at risk”.

Tens of thousands of people across Scotland are living with the serious consequences of gambling harms, and we know that those consequences can go far beyond personal finances. Gambling can, and does, destroy lives. The impacts include job loss, unmanageable debt, mental and physical ill health, relationship breakdown, and, in the most tragic circumstances, suicide. Those harms are not abstract—they are present in all our communities.

Alexander Stewart highlighted the example of Colin Brown, who is a former Fife Council worker who has shared his story in partnership with GamCare Scotland to highlight the services that are available for those who are struggling with gambling addiction.

Colin was a promising young footballer, and he would bet on matches, at times stealing from his mum to fund the bets. When he started working, he used loans and credit cards to fund his addiction, spending hours in bookies. He got to the point where he felt that it was taking over his life. Colin left his job and moved abroad, but he still found himself hunting for casinos.

Despite significant losses, he continued to gamble until 2023, when he took a different approach to tackling his addiction. He began self-improvement practices such as meditation, listening to podcasts and cold water therapy. He also—importantly—shared his story so that he could connect with others in similar situations, and they could see someone who had gone through the same thing. He is an example of how important it can be for people to try different types of support and not to give up hope, and how someone can recognise the problems that they have and try to address those problems in various ways.

I join other members in commending organisations such as GamCare and the John Hartson Foundation, which are doing life-saving work. Alongside dedicated organisations like those, however, we need a co-ordinated, properly funded public health response that is backed by robust data.

Although the Scottish Government's commitment to a public health approach is welcome, we need clarity on how that is being delivered on the ground. Where, and how, is support being signposted? Are general practitioners and front-line services trained to spot the signs and make referrals? Are we collecting and publishing data locally so that we can better understand the scale of the problem? Without that evidence base, it is difficult to assess the adequacy of support services.

We should also recognise that gambling harms are not experienced equally. People in deprived areas are more likely to be affected, and women are disproportionately impacted by the gambling of others. Gambling harm frequently co-exists with other challenges, including poor mental health and alcohol misuse. In areas of social deprivation, we need to acknowledge the layered nature of those harms and tailor our responses accordingly. That means ensuring that support services are well-publicised and accessible in every community.

I share the concern that is expressed in the motion about access to gambling products and the aggressive marketing of those platforms. Whether it is through applications, online games, social media integration or television adverts, gambling is becoming increasingly normalised and alarmingly accessible, in particular to younger people, and, in my view, the sector is now targeting younger women more.

The UK Government is taking some positive measures—for example, through the statutory levy on casino and betting operator profits, which will be used for NHS-led treatment and support for problem gambling, and through stake limits for online slots for younger people, but we have to ask whether more needs to be done.

We should be clear that we are talking about a highly profitable industry that invests millions in advertising, often targeting vulnerable people. Online platforms in particular have changed the landscape and the nature of addiction. If we are truly to take a public health approach, we need action across Governments and across sectors.

For the people who are battling problem gambling, we need to see the collection of better data, improved signposting, and properly funded local support. We have to ensure that people can access help when and where they need it, in a way that enables them to respond positively.

17:33

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): I had intended to come to the chamber just to listen to colleagues, but I have pressed the button because I wanted to highlight a couple of points.

Alexander Stewart spoke about the white paper on gambling that was produced by the previous UK Government. The minister at the time was Caroline Nokes. When I spoke to colleagues in Westminster at the time, they were very positive about Caroline Nokes and her actions and views, and the fact that she seemed to get it—she seemed to understand how important legislation would be in order to help people.

Sadly, the proposed gambling legislation did not go forward, but the new UK Government now has the opportunity to deliver on that, as the issue is reserved. I welcome any actions and activities that are going to help people in this regard—I do not think that anyone would disagree. Tackling the issue is hugely important. Claire Baker is right that the gambling sector seems to target deprived communities. People want a way out, and to try to regain their life. For some, sadly, it is about chasing the next win, which is a huge problem.

Ben Macpherson spoke about online gambling services. I know that for some territories around the world, gambling is one of their main economic drivers. Öland, which is between Sweden and Finland, is one example—a lot of online gaming is based there. It is a small island community, which the Deputy Presiding Officer will know well, given his island links. That is an important aspect, and I accept the point—and the challenge—that we need to look at the issue not just in a Scottish or UK perspective but in the context of what is happening elsewhere. There will be some pushback on that, because of the sector's economic importance to some areas.

Clare Adamson spoke about fixed-odds betting terminals. I was previously a member of the Devolution (Further Powers) Committee, where I championed the need to get the powers over FOBTs transferred to this Parliament. It struck me at the time that one company in particular—William Hill—had started to engage with MSPs. Others did as well, but it was mostly that one. The company, which sponsored football and the Ayr gold cup, along with other activities, had not done so before, but then it started to lobby all MSPs to try to get across the message that if the powers over FOBTs were to come to this Parliament, and the stake went from what it was down to £2, jobs would be lost and facilities would shut.

That has not happened. Since the Scotland Act 2016 was passed, we have those powers and the stake has gone down to £2. However, William Hill has stopped engaging with the Parliament, because it does not see it as a challenge, or a potential threat, any more. Ben Macpherson made a good point that we need to talk about the issue much more, and I very much agree. On the need for a public health approach, too, I absolutely agree, but it has to happen across the four

countries of the UK, because there are both reserved powers and the responsibilities that lie with this Parliament.

I have one final point. There is one meeting that will stay with me for the remainder of my life, and that was a Gamblers Anonymous meeting. It was a Thursday evening, and I was heading back from Parliament. Some of the testimonies that I heard from people in that room were absolutely harrowing, and some of the folk in the room also told me about people who had committed suicide. We have, therefore, to take a public health approach across Parliaments, because it is not just about trying to deal with gambling—it is, to a huge extent, about saving lives.

I thank Clare Adamson for bringing the debate to the chamber, because we certainly need to talk about these issues more. Today's debate is about gambling addiction specifically, but that can potentially lead people into alcohol and drugs misuse, so it is, in fact, about saving lives.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I invite Jenni Minto to respond to the debate.

17:38

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): I, too, thank Clare Adamson for raising this important topic in Parliament, and I thank every member who has taken part in the debate, because it has been really helpful.

As Clare Adamson said, gambling addiction is a serious public health issue. As we have heard from every member who has contributed, it affects not only people who gamble, but their families and relationships, communities and wider society. As Clare Adamson and other members said, gambling exacerbates health inequalities—I think that it was Claire Baker who specifically highlighted that—with the burden of harm being borne by those already facing disadvantage. Those who gamble tend to have lower levels of mental wellbeing in comparison with those who do not, and gambling can, sadly, even lead to an increased risk of suicide, as both Alexander Stewart and Stuart McMillan mentioned.

Anyone can be harmed by gambling, and it is estimated that at least six people are directly affected by the person who is experiencing gambling harms, with women more likely to be one of the others affected.

I am also aware that women could be gambling in a hidden context, which Alexander Stewart talked about. It is a wider harm that is often overlooked. We need to ensure that those people know—

Clare Adamson: On that point, does the minister share my concern about the targeted nature of some advertising? We see a lot of the betting apps being used in sports programmes and on those kinds of platforms, but a targeted-to-women advert is usually about the friendship group and having fun. Sparkles and characters are used to lure women into that feeling, but at the end of the day it is just gambling.

Jenni Minto: I thank Clare Adamson for her intervention. I was trying to work out a way of introducing that side of things, so I thank her for commenting on that. When watching certain television programmes, the number of different styles and colours that are used in the adverts is noticeable and, as Clare Adamson said, there is a pulling in through friendship.

I have met the Advertising Standards Authority to talk about that. Sometimes, as a switch-off, I play games on my phone, and there were a couple of adverts on there that I was really concerned about. I felt that they were being directed specifically at young people, so the authority was able to have a look at that. It is important that, in our roles, if we spot such things, we know the right people and can emphasise to them the damage that could be done.

Along the same lines, I welcome the recent launch of the Aila website, which has been developed by the RCA Trust and Simon Community Scotland to provide a resource that is focused on women's experiences of gambling-related harms. It is also a source for finding support when it is needed, and it has advice on how to provide professional support to women in need.

As I have highlighted, it is important that our children are protected from the harms of gambling. I am concerned, as are many members, about the reports of increasing numbers of children experiencing gambling-related harm. A number of members talked about the impact of children's games, and we need to be aware of that. I welcome the work of Fast Forward to develop an early intervention and prevention programme, providing workshops, training and resources for children, young people, parents and carers, practitioners and communities for gambling-related harm across Scotland.

In April 2020, the Scottish Government and Public Health Scotland, along with partners in the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, academia and the third sector, convened a national gambling harm working group to develop a Scottish public health approach to reduce gambling-related harms. Critically, that included holding engagement sessions earlier this year with those with lived experience and third sector stakeholders to inform our approach. Their voices

and experience were welcomed, and I thank them for their advice.

As another part of that work, Public Health Scotland has also published a healthcare needs assessment that describes what is needed for gambling treatment services, from local recovery support through to specialist clinical input. Last year, Ms Todd and I met Glasgow City Council, which, between 2022 and 2023, led a pilot of a whole-system approach to tackling gambling harm that demonstrated the complexity of the local system and the number of factors in gambling-related harms, including, as members have mentioned, the number of betting shops on our high streets.

Even though it is there in full view, we know that gambling is a hidden condition that is highly stigmatising and can have a significant impact on the mental health of individuals and their families.

As Ben Macpherson, Alexander Stewart and Stuart McMillan said, we do not talk about gambling enough and we need a person-centred approach. Just under two years ago, I was at a gambling harms event where I listened to a very personal testimony, which highlighted to me the stigma and embarrassment that that individual experienced. He made it clear that it is a public health issue and it should be treated as a public health issue.

I note Clare Adamson's and Ben Macpherson's comments about football and the unique social role that football clubs play in our society. I often say that football is on the front pages, the back pages and the centre pages of our newspapers. I note the round table on football that Ben Macpherson has highlighted and I will speak to Ms Todd about his suggestion about including gambling as a topic there.

In July 2024, Public Health Scotland published a briefing on gambling and suicide that outlines some of the work that the Scottish Government is doing with Public Health Scotland to tackle the issue. I also note how important cross-parliamentary work is.

I welcome the introduction of a statutory levy on the gambling industry that will provide much-needed funding for the hidden issue. I have been in written dialogue with Baroness Twycross about the levy, and I note Ben Macpherson's suggestion about engaging with Ruth Davidson. The levy is a significant step forward. The expectation is that Scotland will receive a fair allocation of funding for treatment and prevention activity this year. I look forward to working with the Welsh and UK Governments on that.

Improving health and reducing health inequalities across Scotland remains a clear ambition for the Government. In order to tackle the

mounting challenge, the Scottish Government and COSLA, in collaboration with wider partners, are developing a population health framework to take a cross-Government and cross-sector approach to improve the key building blocks of health. The framework will consider what action can be taken to mitigate the socioeconomic drivers of ill health in order to build a Scotland in which our places and communities can positively support health and wellbeing. The work that we are doing on gambling will directly support that framework.

I look forward to working with the Parliament and more widely on the issue in the coming year.

Meeting closed at 17:47.

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