



**OFFICIAL REPORT**  
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

# Meeting of the Parliament (Virtual)

**Thursday 11 February 2021**

**Session 5**



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# Scottish Parliament

Thursday 11 February 2021

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

## Portfolio Question Time

### Finance

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Lewis Macdonald):** Good afternoon, and welcome to this virtual meeting of the Scottish Parliament. The first item of business is portfolio question time. In order to get as many people in as I can, I ask for short and succinct questions and answers. Any member who wishes to ask a supplementary question should press R during the relevant question—not before—and I will call them if I can.

### Employment

1. **Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what measures its budget will provide to support people into employment. (S50-04993)

**The Minister for Trade, Innovation and Public Finance (Ivan McKee):** In the budget announcement on 28 January, the Scottish Government pledged to support individuals into work by providing £1.1 billion to drive forward our national mission for jobs and to equip our future workforce with the skills that it needs. That includes an additional £125 million of investment targeted at employment and skills support such as the no one left behind project, fair start Scotland, the national transition training fund and the young persons guarantee, together with £230.9 million for Skills Development Scotland.

**Dr Allan:** I am sure that the minister will agree that it is vital that our recovery from the current crisis is a green one. How will the budget ensure that we have people with the right skills for the jobs of the future, to enable such a green recovery to happen?

**Ivan McKee:** Of course I agree with Alasdair Allan. As part of our green recovery, the £1.1 billion for jobs and skills to which the Scottish Government committed in the budget includes funding for the creation of a green workforce academy, alongside the first £14 million of our £100 million green jobs fund. Those targeted interventions will equip our Scottish workforce with the expertise necessary to secure work in the low-carbon economy and, as will be vital, will develop a clear support system for our young people to enable them to thrive in the good, green jobs of the future.

### Local Authority Funding (Covid-19)

2. **Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what additional funding it will make available to local authorities in response to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. (S50-04994)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Kate Forbes):** The Scottish Government has committed to providing £456.1 million in additional Covid-19-related funding to local authorities this year, through the annual local government finance settlement. On 8 October 2020, I announced a package of financial flexibilities for Scotland's councils that could be worth up to £600 million over the next two years. The Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities have also finalised a lost income scheme to compensate councils that have lost funding from sources such as fees and charges, which is worth £200 million. In this year's budget, I announced £259 million of Covid-19 consequentials. Taken together, those measures bring the value of the overall support package for councils, in the light of Covid pressures, up to £1.5 billion.

**Sandra White:** I am sorry, Presiding Officer. My connection froze earlier and I did not hear all of the cabinet secretary's reply. However, I thank her for mentioning the additional funding and local authority spending powers, which are welcome. Will she provide an update on the value of the overall Covid-19 support packages that are available to councils, and specifically to Glasgow City Council?

**Kate Forbes:** I am sorry that Sandra White did not quite catch my reply, and I hope that the clerks will tell me if the screen freezes again.

The total value of the Covid support package provided to local authorities amounts to £1.5 billion, which was the substance of my first answer.

On Ms White's specific question, Glasgow City Council has been allocated an additional £92.5 million to enable it to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic. It will also receive its fair share of the £200 million provided for the lost income scheme and the further £259 million of consequentials in 2021-22; that share will be allocated following agreement with COSLA on how that funding should be distributed.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** There is a supplementary question from Murdo Fraser.

**Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** Local authorities across Scotland have done a sterling job in paying out funds to needy businesses, but many businesses are still falling through the gaps: they are those which, because they are not forced by law to close, but

nevertheless have lost a large amount of business, are not able to access any of the funds that are currently available. Will the cabinet secretary agree to look again at the list of sectors that are able to get support, to see whether those that are currently ineligible could be given some assistance, which they desperately need?

**Kate Forbes:** Murdo Fraser's question is pertinent. At the moment, the largest proportion of the overall funding available is distributed through the strategic framework business fund. We confirmed yesterday that £244 million had been paid out in January. Over and above that, we have the sectoral grant schemes, and 94 per cent of the funding is currently live.

We have prioritised the largest programme to help as many businesses as possible, but that is complemented by the sectoral schemes to try to reach that are excluded. Yesterday, details were published on support for the newly self-employed and support for mobile close contact services and I know that local authorities up and down the country have started to open their discretionary funding, which now has a total value of £120 million. Therefore, my recommendation to businesses is to look at the discretionary fund as their first port of call to see whether they are eligible for that, but I commit to keeping business support under very careful review and, where we can do more, I will absolutely consider doing more. In particular, if there are more businesses that we can capture through the strategic fund, I am keen to do so.

### Glasgow City Council Finances

3. **Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to a recent three-year forecast showing a £113 million shortfall in Glasgow City Council's finances by 2023. (S5O-04995)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Kate Forbes):** Next year, Glasgow City Council will receive a total funding package of £1.5 billion to support local services. That includes an extra £29.8 million to support vital day-to-day services, which is equivalent to an increase of 2.2 per cent compared with last year. That funding for day-to-day services also includes £9.7 million to compensate the council should it choose to freeze council tax levels to protect households. The council will also receive its share of the overall Covid-19 support package for councils of up to £1.5 billion.

In short, I recognise the challenges that councils are facing right now and we will do everything within our powers to ensure that we provide adequate funding as well as flexibilities to help them to deal with those challenges.

**Johann Lamont:** I think that Glasgow deserves a bit better than a financial response that relies on spin rather than dealing with what is happening in the real world.

The city faces huge cuts this year, which will directly affect local services, on top of years of cuts imposed by the Scottish Government, and the finance secretary has the audacity to talk about increases in budgets. It is hard to calculate the massive impact of Covid on families and communities, but we know that it is amplifying and increasing the inequality that already exists in Glasgow. How on earth does the cabinet secretary, in all seriousness, think that Glasgow City Council can address the needs of the city without the finances to do so and when will she provide a fair settlement for Glasgow, rather than continue an approach that further disadvantages those who are already severely disadvantaged?

**Kate Forbes:** Considering that most local authorities and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities accept that it is an increase, I do not think that it is "spin" to suggest that it is an increase. If we also, on top of the increase in the core settlement, look at the extra funding to deal with Covid pressures, which is not ring fenced, and the extra funding on top of that to deal with lost income, the overall package is one that recognises the pressures on local authorities due to Covid as well as the need to continue to deliver day-to-day services.

We keep all that under review. If we can do more within the package of funding that we have, we will absolutely do that. Of course, Labour has an important role to play during the budget process to negotiate and to deal with the facts at hand. If Labour members are concerned about local authority funding, I hope that they will engage properly in the budget process.

### Infrastructure Projects 2021-22

4. **Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what financial support it is putting in place for infrastructure projects in 2021-22. (S5O-04996)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Kate Forbes):** Total infrastructure investment next year will be just over £6 billion—a total of £6.1 billion.

**Liz Smith:** The cabinet secretary will be well aware of the demands from across Mid Scotland and Fife, including from many businesses and the chambers of commerce, for an upgraded rail link between Edinburgh and Perth, which is surely in line with the Scottish Government's commitment to a green recovery. Why has £33 million been lost from the rail infrastructure line in the draft budget?

**Kate Forbes:** We have to prioritise projects within the budget that we have. One of the biggest

hits to our budget this year was of course the 5 per cent cut in overall capital. In this year's budget, there is still £0.5 billion of investment in rail infrastructure. We will continue to keep that under review. The member will be aware that, just last week, we set out the capital spending review alongside the infrastructure investment plan. That is a five-year pipeline of capital projects. As most capital projects require more than one year to deliver, it is worth reflecting on that five-year pipeline of projects and the positive impact that it will have on Mid Scotland.

**Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP):** Can the cabinet secretary provide an update on the progress of plans to upgrade the Sheriffhall roundabout in my constituency, which remains a major cause of congestion in the local area?

**Kate Forbes:** We continue to progress the proposed improvements at Sheriffhall roundabout. Obviously, standard statutory procedures need to be followed. Following publication of draft orders, a number of representations have been made, including objections, and those are being reviewed and considered. Delivery of the scheme will commence only if it is approved under the relevant statutory procedures. Thereafter, a timetable for progress will be established.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Question 5 was not lodged.

### Town Centre Support

6. **Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what measures in its budget will provide support for town centres. (S5O-04998)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Kate Forbes):** The budget for next year incorporates the establishment of a new place-based investment programme, which is backed with £275 million of capital over the next five years, including initial investment of £55 million in next year's budget. That will support town centres and community regeneration—including through the regeneration capital grant fund, which has supported projects right across the country—and will deliver on the 20-minute neighbourhood ambitions. The investment builds on the additional £34 million of economic stimulus for regeneration and towns and the other funding specifically for town centres and business improvement districts in the current year.

**Joan McAlpine:** What measures will the budget take to help to bring vacant and derelict land back into use?

**Kate Forbes:** The budget includes an additional £5 million for next year as part of the new £50 million low-carbon vacant and derelict land

investment programme, which we will deliver over the next five years. That investment helps to lay the foundations for a green recovery that is fair and inclusive and that promotes thriving places.

**Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):** Town centres were struggling before Covid. Has the Government done any analysis of the impact of Covid on town centres and of how they will be affected by the shift towards people shopping online? Will the Government bring forward a strategic plan that sets out the best way forward for town centres?

**Kate Forbes:** Alex Rowley's question is so important right now, but I do not think that there is one simple answer to it. There are issues around supporting businesses to digitise, supporting and encouraging people to change their behaviour so that they visit town centres, and supporting town centres to diversify.

Mr Rowley will, I hope, be aware of the independent review of the town centre action plan, which was published on 3 February. All members who, as Mr Rowley does, have an interest in the health and vitality of our town centres should certainly consider that report, which will require action on a range of fronts. Our commitment is to consider those recommendations and to work collaboratively to implement our response. There is funding in the budget to support efforts to revitalise town centres.

### Council Tax Freeze

7. **Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what it anticipates the financial impact will be on the lowest income groups of its proposal to freeze council tax. (S5O-04999)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Kate Forbes):** The funding that we have allocated to councils to support them, if they should choose to freeze council tax, will provide financial reassurance to households of all incomes, while the council tax reduction scheme will continue to protect low-income households from local tax liabilities that they would not be able to meet.

**Neil Findlay:** That is very interesting. Some councils have highlighted the fact that people who earn less than £15,000 a year will benefit by 1p a month from the freeze, while those who earn more than £40,000 a year will gain £30 a month.

Last night, we saw pictures of people queueing in Glasgow for charitable food. Many of them will gain a solitary brass penny from the proposed freeze while their services will be cut. I have to ask this question: is the cabinet secretary not ashamed of the Government's perverse, regressive and—in the circumstances—ludicrous proposal?

**Kate Forbes:** I think that that is quite an illogical question, because it does not need to be one or the other. Households across the country have been through the most challenging of years. Many people who are still earning are working from home and face increased household bills. I am not sure whether I am hearing correctly that it is Labour's position to hike council tax. Our position will not have a detrimental impact on local services, because councils will be fully compensated. That is the whole point of setting aside the £90 million to compensate local authorities.

As I said, it does not need to be one or the other. Alongside the council tax freeze, our budget will provide a 7.1 per cent increase in funding for the social security and older people portfolio, which will bring its total allocation to £4 billion. That includes support of more than £3 billion in benefits to support people with disabilities, £306 million for carers allowance, £42 million for carers allowance supplement and £68 million for the first full year of the Scottish child payment, which is a game-changing new benefit that will be instrumental in tackling child poverty.

It does not need to be one or the other. On one hand, we are seeking to support low-income households, which is precisely why the council tax reduction is in place, alongside the other proposals in the budget to tackle inequality. Equally, we are fully compensating any council that chooses to freeze council tax to support households across the country.

### Workplace Inequalities (Budget)

**8. Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what measures in its budget aim to tackle workplace inequalities. (S5O-05000)

**The Minister for Trade, Innovation and Public Finance (Ivan McKee):** The Scottish Government is committed to tackling workplace inequality as part of our approach to fair work, and that is reflected in the draft budget.

This year, we have supported a number of projects to tackle workplace inequalities through the workplace equality fund and the women returners programme, which was launched in November. We will set out further details on support in 2021-22 as part of the draft budget process.

**Ruth Maguire:** It is not a new phenomenon, but the pandemic has again brought into sharp focus the fact that responsibility for unpaid care and domestic work often falls disproportionately on women. I know that I will not be alone in hearing directly from women who are really struggling at this difficult time. How will the budget address that

issue and its subsequent impact on women's employment and the wider economy?

**Ivan McKee:** We recognise that those responsibilities still fall disproportionately on women. To support access to employment, we have committed to investing a further £59 million to deliver the expansion of funded early learning and childcare, and the recent budget includes an additional investment of £125 million from expected consequential to support employability and skills provision. We are increasing the parental employability support fund by a further £2.35 million, bringing in-year investment to £7.35 million.

## Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I remind members that questions 1 and 5 have been grouped and that questions 3 and 7 have been grouped. Anyone who wishes to ask a supplementary question should indicate that by typing the letter R in the chat box during the relevant question and not before.

### Net Zero Transition

**1. Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what environmental measures it has in place to support Scotland's transition to become net zero. (S5O-05001)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform (Roseanna Cunningham):** In December, the Scottish Government updated the climate change plan with over 100 new policies, putting Scotland on a pathway to meeting our targets over the period to 2032. That is supported by a record £1.9 billion of capital funding in the Scottish budget for 2021-22 that is aimed at tackling climate change, creating good green jobs and delivering Scotland's green recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic.

Many of those measures also seek to tackle the twin challenge of biodiversity loss. For example, the budget includes £22 million for peatland restoration as part of our landmark £250 million, 10-year commitment and an increase of £26.9 million to the forestry budget. We will provide annual updates on progress against the plan through our monitoring and evaluation framework, with our first report being published in May.

**Bill Kidd:** I thank the cabinet secretary for that interesting response. What support will be available for local businesses to move to environmentally friendly vehicles ahead of Glasgow's progression to phase 2 of the low-emission zone?



**Roseanna Cunningham:** We are providing significant funding to help people and businesses to prepare for the introduction of LEZs well in advance of the 2022 introduction target. The low-emission zone support fund has made available £3 million of targeted grant funding in 2020-21 for taxis, heavy goods vehicles and microbusinesses, with a similar amount being made available in 2021-22.

In 2020-21, we have also provided £9.75 million for the bus emission abatement retrofit fund, allowing over 600 buses and coaches to be retrofitted across Scotland. The Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity would be able to furnish the member with more detail than I am able to provide.

### Carbon Emissions Targets

5. **James Kelly (Glasgow) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the action it is taking to meet its carbon emissions targets. (S5O-05005)

**Roseanna Cunningham:** As I said in response to question 1, the Scottish Government updated our climate change plan in December with over 100 new policies, putting Scotland on a pathway to meeting its world-leading targets over the period to 2032. I will not repeat the rest of what I said in my earlier answer.

Delivering a just transition to net zero and reaching our 75 per cent target by 2030 will require transformational change in every area of our economy and for businesses, individuals and the United Kingdom Government to all make their contributions to delivering the change that we need.

**James Kelly:** I want to raise the issue of promoting more bus journeys in order to help to fulfil the objective of reducing carbon emissions. I believe that some of the larger bus companies are more interested in profit than in serving local communities. What is being done to support community-based campaigns, such as Get Glasgow Moving, with a view to getting more people to use buses and making bus journeys more accessible, thus helping to reduce carbon emissions?

**Roseanna Cunningham:** I can speak only in general terms. I am sure that the member is aware that Michael Matheson, the Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity, would be able to give him a great deal more detail.

As a bus user myself—at least in normal times—I can reassure the member that I would always wish to encourage campaigning and advocating for greater bus use, wherever it takes place in Scotland but particularly in those areas that are the likely first four low-emission zones,

because that will make an enormous difference in urban areas. There are challenges to the bus service across Scotland, given the huge differences between urban and rural areas, but each and every bus journey that people take makes a positive contribution to reducing our emissions.

**Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** The cabinet secretary will be well aware of the recent evidence that was taken by the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee, in which several witnesses cited the crucial importance of a holistic approach to net zero transition, and the part that the circular economy can play in that. When can we expect to see the flagship circular economy bill that the Scottish Government promised?

**Roseanna Cunningham:** It is absolutely clear that the delay to the circular economy has been caused by the pandemic. That was not the only change that had to be made to potential parliamentary business. I would not be able to say, in advance of any future programme for government, what would be in it or when it would be introduced, but I strongly suspect that there will be a circular economy bill in future, building on the work on the circular economy bill that we would have had, had it not been for the pandemic.

**Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab):** Why is a target for native woodland planting not included in the climate change plan update? Will the cabinet secretary reconsider that?

**Roseanna Cunningham:** I am always happy to look at further suggestions. All that I would say is that the climate change plan update could not be encyclopaedic in its nature. It is an update, not an entire climate change plan. If there are suggestions for things that people think should be included, I am happy to hear the arguments for them. It is important to remember that the climate change plan update was done at speed. It was not expected to be a full climate change plan, and everybody understood that when we set out on this process.

### Tarbolton Moss Landfill Site

2. **Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on any progress being made in developing proposals for remedial action to clean up the Tarbolton Moss landfill site. (S5O-05002)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform (Roseanna Cunningham):** Tarbolton Landfill Ltd, the operator of the site, remains in liquidation. The Scottish Government is not directly responsible for the site. However, on 4 February, officials met the Scottish Environment Protection Agency and South

Ayrshire Council to discuss how those public authorities can work together to move matters forward. Following that constructive meeting, the Scottish Government is actively considering how barriers to progressing with remediation work at the site could be overcome.

**Colin Smyth:** Does the cabinet secretary accept that there is considerable frustration in the local community? It is two years on since the Government sought a report from SEPA on possible options for remedial work at the site, and there is still no clear plan in place to carry out that work. Have options been presented to the Government? Given the apparent continuing deterioration at the site, are those options still viable? Who does the Government ultimately believe will carry out work at the site? This environmental mess will just get worse until somebody carries out that work.

**Roseanna Cunningham:** I understand the frustration of everybody who has any connection with the situation. We are aware that issues have not moved forward in the way that local residents would have hoped, but we are committed to working with partners, as I have indicated. The liquidation process is still on-going, and I am afraid that the legal position regarding the future ownership of and responsibility for the site remains to be determined. However, there is regular monitoring, and we are looking at what potential options there are. They are under active consideration.

I understand the frustration, but the period of time that has passed has included significant other challenges that we have had to deal with. I hope that what we are able to move forward with on the basis of the 4 February meeting will better satisfy local residents.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Question 3 is grouped with question 7.

### Coastal Communities (Climate Change)

3. **David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what support it provides to coastal communities to mitigate the impact of climate change and reduce the risk of flooding. (S5O-05003)

**The Minister for Rural Affairs and the Natural Environment (Ben Macpherson):** The Scottish Government recognises the impacts of climate change on coastal communities. For that reason, our programme for government committed £12 million over four years for coastal change adaptations to protect communities from the impacts of rising sea levels. We also provide £42 million each year to local authorities to mitigate flooding. Those funds assist the delivery of actions in the flood risk management strategies and plans,

and they include £13 million for the Broughty Ferry flood scheme. In addition, our programme for government committed a further £150 million over the next five years to supporting flood protection measures.

**David Torrance:** Although coastal erosion affects fewer properties than flooding does, its impact can be more drastic due to inevitable and irrecoverable loss of land to the sea. Many organisations across Scotland, such as the Save Wemyss Ancient Caves Society in my constituency, are committed to preserving and protecting our precious local heritage. What work is being undertaken by the Scottish Government to defend natural and cultural heritage that is at risk because of coastal erosion?

**Ben Macpherson:** Historic Environment Scotland is the lead public body that investigates, cares for and promotes Scotland's historic environment. It undertakes extensive work to understand the impact of climate change on cultural heritage, including coastal heritage. In 2019, it published "A Guide to Climate Change Impacts on Scotland's Historic Environment".

The cultural importance of the caves at Wemyss has been recognised, and the caves have been designated as a scheduled monument. I understand that, historically, there has been episodic erosion in the area of the caves. As the relevant coastal protection authority, Fife Council has produced a shoreline management plan, which sets priorities for coastal erosion risk management and takes into account the preservation of assets along the Fife coast.

### Flood Resilience (Mid Scotland and Fife)

7. **Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what steps it is taking to improve flooding resilience in Mid Scotland and Fife. (S5O-05007)

**The Minister for Rural Affairs and the Natural Environment (Ben Macpherson):** Our sympathies go out to those who have been affected by last weekend's flooding.

As I mentioned in my previous answer, our programme for government committed an extra £150 million for flood risk management in addition to the £420 million 10-year funding that was provided to local authorities. Those funds assist the delivery of the actions in the flood risk management strategies and plans, including the £28 million Comrie flood protection scheme.

We work closely with key partners to promote community resilience and flood preparedness, and we have increased to £193,000 our funding to the Scottish Flood Forum, which provides vital support to communities such as Kinglassie.

**Claire Baker:** As the minister has acknowledged, it has been a really difficult time for the region. We have seen road closures in Perthshire, and, in Fife, the River Leven has burst its banks, the coastal paths have become inaccessible and Ballingry cemetery has been flooded. That was very distressing for the community.

The additional £150 million is welcome, but the criteria for the annual £42 million budget for local authorities are quite restrictive. Is the Scottish Government considering changing the criteria so that they can be more flexible and provide support for more local schemes? Although those schemes are modest, they have a significant impact on the wellbeing of communities. Their cost is not high, but the cumulative costs to a local authority can be quite significant.

**Ben Macpherson:** As members would expect, the Scottish Government considers all matters on an on-going basis and where there is scope for improvement. I would not want to make a judgment at this juncture on the proposals that Claire Baker may have. There are no considerations at present but, if Claire Baker would like to write to me with further information about the situation that she has described, I would, of course, be open and keen to look at that.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** There are a number of supplementary questions on this group of questions.

**Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP):** A moment ago, the minister referred to the events of last weekend. In my constituency of Cowdenbeath, we saw flooding in Ballingry cemetery and in Navitie park, and that was not the first time. To be fair, Fife Council has been out to see what might need to be done.

Turning to Rosyth, which has a long-standing problem with flooding, I know that the Scottish Environment Protection Agency and others have been involved in looking at longer-term plans. Can the minister update me on where the proposed SEPA work plan stands? There has been a bit of a silence on that in recent months.

**Ben Macpherson:** I and my colleagues are aware of the flooding in Rosyth, most recently in August 2020, and my sympathies go out to all those who have been affected.

As Annabelle Ewing referenced, SEPA and local authorities are responsible for publishing, every six years, flood risk management strategies and plans that set out the actions that have been proposed by each local authority in Scotland. The Forth estuary local plan covers Rosyth. The current plan, covering 2016-22, seeks to reduce the number of residential properties that are at risk of surface water flooding in Rosyth.

Fife Council and Scottish Water are working together to develop a surface water study to identify the most sustainable mitigation option to achieve that. I expect that, as a constituency MSP, Ms Ewing is engaged by those two authorities in correspondence on the matter that she raises. If she wishes to bring such correspondence to my attention, I would welcome looking at it.

**Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con):** On Christmas eve, the SEPA computer system was hacked. As well as documents being lost, some key areas of operation were severely affected. Although severe warnings that are based on forecasts are still issued, the minister will be aware that often localised extreme weather conditions are difficult to forecast. That means that river level warning systems are critical for the protection of our communities, such as Newton Stewart and Dumfries, in my constituency. Can the minister tell me when those systems will be back up and running? Why have communities been left potentially vulnerable after over six weeks?

**Ben Macpherson:** I am sure that the member will appreciate that the cyberattack was a very significant situation. Measures to deal with that situation and its consequences are on-going.

As the member references, the SEPA flood warnings are an important contribution to the building of more resilient communities, and SEPA will continue to develop its flood forecasting and warning service over the next five years. I will take Mr Carson's question away and seek to give him an indication, after today's portfolio questions, of the proposed timescales for getting the full service up to the position that Scotland would expect. I am sure that he appreciates the difficulties and the serious challenge of the cyberattack.

**Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD):** Housing in Freuchie Mill, in my constituency, was badly flooded in August, and it has had two near misses since then, including last weekend. People in that housing estate are at their wits' end, and they want action now.—[Inaudible.]—from the minister—[Inaudible.]—for low-cost schemes such as would be involved in Freuchie Mill in Fife?

**Ben Macpherson:** I apologise, but I did not hear the whole of Mr Rennie's question, due to a difficulty with the connection.

On funding for Fife in general terms, it is for local authorities to determine the allocation of funding in collaboration with other partners, including the Scottish Government. I would encourage Mr Rennie to engage with the local authority on the distribution of its funding for flood prevention and other flooding measures.

### Common Frameworks (Environment)

#### 4. Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP):

To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its discussions with the United Kingdom Government regarding common frameworks relevant to the environment. (S5O-05004)

**The Minister for Rural Affairs and the Natural Environment (Ben Macpherson):** The Scottish Government has regularly pressed the UK Government on the need for progress on common frameworks relevant to the environment—most recently at the January meeting of the four-nations interministerial group for environment, food and rural affairs. The delivery of common frameworks across the four nations, which was already delayed by the impact of the on-going pandemic, has been made significantly more challenging by the prolonged uncertainty over the outcome of the UK's negotiations with the EU and the deeply damaging and unnecessary UK Internal Market Act 2020.

**Gillian Martin:** This week, on behalf of the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee, I, along with my Welsh counterpart, David Rees MS, gave evidence on common frameworks to the House of Lords. Does the minister support our joint calls for the UK Government to work with the devolved Governments more closely on common frameworks, to publish the details of all frameworks as they currently stand and to publish a list of the stakeholders that it has engaged with so far, so that we can be sure that stakeholders in the devolved nations are being heard? On the basis of his experience, does the minister feel confident that we will be fully involved in decisions about those frameworks in the next parliamentary session?

**Ben Macpherson:** The Scottish Government supports as much information as possible being made available to stakeholders and legislators, as long as it is done in a manner that respects the wishes of all UK Administrations, not just the UK Government, and that it follows a clear and transparent process.

As to my confidence in future Scottish Government involvement, I can only repeat that the Scottish Government remains fully committed to the development of the common frameworks when they are in Scotland's best interests. However, the UK Internal Market Act 2020 sets up significant barriers to their successful development and implementation. Of course, that act was pushed through the UK Parliament without the consent of the Scottish Parliament or the Welsh Parliament, and it hugely complicates the framework process.

### National Performance Framework (Environment)

6. **Elaine Smith (Central Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what importance it places on access to clean air and environmentally friendly spaces within the national performance framework. (S5O-05006)

**The Minister for Rural Affairs and the Natural Environment (Ben Macpherson):** We recognise the importance of clean air and the serious damage that poor air quality can cause. That is why we are taking bold action across the board to tackle it. The national performance framework aims to increase the wellbeing of all people living in Scotland, to reduce inequalities and to give equal importance to economic, environmental and social progress. Ensuring access to a healthy environment, including clean air and quality green space, will play an important role in achieving that.

**Elaine Smith:** In 2019, it was reported that only 43 per cent of those in Scotland's most deprived areas visited the outdoors at least once a week, whereas the figure was 66 per cent in the least deprived areas. That is possibly partly because of the lack of pleasant outdoor facilities in ex-industrial areas, which the pandemic and the lockdown have highlighted.

Will the minister outline the Scottish Government's plans to specifically address that environmental inequality and, in doing so, to ensure that people have easy access to clean air and to pleasant and environmentally friendly outdoor spaces? Will he support country park status being given to Woodhall, Faskine and Palacecraig greenbelt in Airdrie?

**Ben Macpherson:** There are quite a number of points in that question, and I will be happy to correspond with the member as a follow-up.

The national performance framework is a strategy that will strengthen and build on the links between air quality and other key Government policies and strategies, including the issues of equality that the member refers to. Further progress in embedding place-making principles across policy areas, including in the communities portfolio as well as in our own, will deliver benefits for physical and mental health by creating better urban spaces that are more attractive to spend time in and easier to move around in. Of course, the development of the 20-minute neighbourhoods is also important to that.

The member raises important questions for us all to consider within the national performance framework and different portfolios in determining how we can continue to develop access to green space for everyone in all communities within our country.

### International Environment Centre

**8. Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how Scotland's international environment centre could contribute to meeting the country's climate change ambitions. (S5O-05008)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform (Roseanna Cunningham):** The Scottish Government is pleased to commit £17 million of funding towards the creation of Scotland's international environment centre through the Stirling and Clackmannanshire city region deal. The centre will provide an integrated approach to cutting-edge research, innovation and skills development to tackle global environmental challenges. It aims to transform the relationship between environmental management and business in order that the protection and enhancement of natural resources becomes a driver of clean, inclusive growth. In the first phase of the programme, the Forth Valley environmental resilience array, which is part of the international environment centre, will create a regional-scale living laboratory to enable business innovation in low-emission sustainable technologies, products and services.

**Keith Brown:** The cabinet secretary is correct in saying that £17 million of investment will be made in my constituency as part of the Stirling and Clackmannanshire city region deal and the environment centre. It will also provide the best possible conditions and infrastructure for businesses to flourish and ensure a cleaner, greener and healthier environment for future generations. Does the cabinet secretary agree that the 26th conference of the parties—COP26—is a fantastic opportunity for the environment centre to demonstrate Scotland's global leadership in responding to the climate emergency?

**Roseanna Cunningham:** COP26 is, indeed, a fantastic opportunity to showcase to the world the world-leading climate action that Scotland is already taking across all sectors, as well as providing a platform on which to demonstrate our place in the world through our innovation and international partnerships. I am delighted that so many companies, groups and individuals are looking to engage with COP26.

Although I understand that construction of the SEIC has been delayed due to the impact of Covid-19, the completed SEIC will bring together scientists, policy experts and businesses in a state-of-the-art hub that will be an integral part of Scotland's journey to net zero. We will explore how it can best support our COP26 programme and demonstrate that global leadership.

### Rural Economy and Tourism

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I remind members that if they wish to ask a supplementary question, they should enter R in the chat box while the relevant question is being asked.

#### Local Authorities (Tourism) (Support)

**1. Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what support it is providing to local authorities regarding any potential tourism-related opportunities arising from an increase in the number of people holidaying at home during the pandemic. (S5O-05009)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism (Fergus Ewing):** Provided that restrictions can be lifted safely, we are very hopeful of a strong domestic tourism market in 2021. To support critical tourism projects in our more remote areas we are more than doubling the rural tourism infrastructure fund to £6.2 million in 2021-22, bringing our total investment to more than £15 million. We are also using consequentials and increasing our package of lifeline support for tourism businesses this financial year. That includes lifting our visitor attractions support fund to £10 million and the tourism destination and sector support fund to £1.5 million. Those and other tourism support projects are being delivered through VisitScotland.

**Clare Adamson:** If standing orders had permitted, I would have caveated my question by noting the clear advice offered by the First Minister regarding caution about planning holidays in today's Covid briefing.

In my Motherwell and Wishaw constituency we are blessed with a number of sites of historical significance. The Roman legacy left in Strathclyde country park is an excellent example of rich local history that is arguably overlooked. In addition, the park is a fabulous site for sport. How will the Scottish Government support local authorities to increase wider community awareness of and engagement with the local attractions in my constituency?

**Fergus Ewing:** We are working closely with local authorities, the national parks, VisitScotland, NatureScot, Forestry and Land Scotland and Police Scotland, and we have developed a rural visitor management strategy. It has many aspects, including a welcome campaign; high-level messages about responsible enjoyment; and co-ordinated promotion of the access code, including messages on vital topics such as camping, fires and litter. That has been taken forward by a range of bodies working together, with a range of target audiences, including young people. We are undertaking a wide range of activities on the basis

that we can—provided that it is safe for us to do so—resume domestic tourism this year.

**Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** It has been some time since the cabinet secretary announced that bed-and-breakfast accommodation and guesthouses that pay council tax rather than business rates will receive support that is equivalent to the strategic framework business fund. That is welcome, but those businesses are already having significant issues with cash flow, as in many cases they received only small sums several months ago. Many are concerned that equivalent support has been delayed, despite assurances that the scheme will be launched very shortly. Can the cabinet secretary clarify for those businesses when the scheme will launch and, just as importantly, when grant funding will be in their bank accounts?

**Fergus Ewing:** I can confirm that the plan is that local authorities should launch the scheme from 15 February, which is next week. I absolutely agree with the member's points that bed-and-breakfasts are an essential backbone of our accommodation provision. They are small businesses that are run by people who work extremely hard, and we absolutely appreciate the great offer that they provide to their customers.

That is why we are introducing a measure to assist bed and breakfasts that pay council tax rather than business rates; I am not sure that there is a counterpart measure elsewhere in the UK. Last year, we devoted—from memory—a sum of £3 million to bed and breakfasts that did not have a business bank account but were able to demonstrate that they were bona fide businesses operating as such. It is a key sector—I appreciate that the support is essential, and I am delighted that I have been able to work with my colleagues to ensure that it will be delivered from 15 February, which is next week.

### **Employment (Rural Economy)**

**2. Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it will take to increase employment opportunities within the rural economy. (S5O-05010)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism (Fergus Ewing):** The “Skills Action Plan for Rural Scotland: 2019–2021” sets out how we will support the needs of the rural economy by addressing skill shortages and increasing access to education and skills provision. We are also providing green skills opportunities through a specific programme of funding for island projects relating to net zero and green recovery, and through a doubling of specific apprenticeship opportunities in forestry at Scottish Forestry and Forestry and Land Scotland.

**Alex Rowley:** One of the needs that has been identified in rural Scotland, as it has across Scotland, is the need to build housing. Is there a specific rural programme in place for housing? Does the cabinet secretary recognise that if we want to drive the rural economy, we need to be able to give workers houses? There is a shortage in that regard. Does he accept that if we want to create jobs and increase skills in the rural economy, a national house-building programme needs to play a major role in that?

**Fergus Ewing:** I am sympathetic to the points that the member makes. I am apprised of the fact, and I absolutely agree, that we need to match jobs, people and housing. I am well aware of that from my own part of Scotland. In places such as Aviemore, people have been able to get a job but not a house; they have moved into temporary accommodation, but they have not been able to find a place to take their family to live. That is just one example, but the member makes a good point.

I am not the housing minister, but I know that the Minister for Local Government, Housing and Planning, Kevin Stewart, works extremely hard to recognise the particular needs of rural Scotland in respect of the additional costs and the shortage of housing. I very much agree that a flexible approach is essential, especially as more opportunities will be created in rural Scotland by the green economy in order to tackle climate change. There will be a bigger workforce with more people, and better access to broadband through the reaching 100 per cent, or R100, programme—the biggest single investment in the UK—which will provide rural people with access to superfast broadband.

All those things mean that there will be an increasing demand to live in rural Scotland, and that must be matched by flexibility, and more housing, in the countryside. I am conscious that a great deal is being—and has been—done by this Government, but there is of course much more to do.

### **United Kingdom Shared Prosperity Fund (Rural Economy)**

**3. Maureen Watt (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what recent discussions it has had with the United Kingdom Government regarding the administration of the proposed UK shared prosperity fund to support Scotland's rural economy. (S5O-05011)

**The Minister for Rural Affairs and the Natural Environment (Ben Macpherson):** Despite the importance of European Union structural and social funds to Scotland's rural communities, there has been a continued lack of information from the

UK Government regarding its proposed replacement, the UK shared prosperity fund. For several years now our requests have been ignored, with little meaningful engagement about how the fund will be delivered and allocated or about whether the replacement to the LEADER programme will be included.

Our published proposals for Scotland's share of those funds in the future make it clear that the UK Government should extend the fund to include a replacement for LEADER. Notwithstanding the lack of clarity from the UK Government on that, we recently announced an extension of the current LEADER programme until the end of 2021.

**Maureen Watt:** The Tory Government has indicated that it will bypass the devolved Administrations to replace European funds. Given that Tory MSPs on the Finance and Constitution Committee accepted that those moneys must be spent in Scotland by the Scottish Government and its local partners, does the minister agree that, if the Scottish Tories want to save any face at all, it is time that they stopped undermining devolution and told Boris Johnson that those funds must be spent by Scotland in Scotland?

**Ben Macpherson:** Yes, absolutely. As well as the lack of detail on the shared prosperity fund—despite ministers asking about the matter consistently for many years—we have seen, through this and other processes, that the Tories do not care enough about the interests of rural Scotland. They are using every opportunity that Brexit presents to grab both powers and funding from Scotland's Parliament, and Scotland as a whole will lose out as a result.

The Tories are proving what some of us have long suspected: that they just do not respect devolution. Everything that rural Scotland values, which is embodied in schemes such as the LEADER programme, is at risk right now, because Brexit and the ideological, reckless and disrespectful approach of the UK Government are doing real damage and will continue to do so if the UK Government proceeds in the same fashion.

### **Peak Visitor Season (Disruption)**

**4. Dean Lockhart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what measures are planned ahead of the peak visitor season to avoid disruption similar to that experienced in 2020 because of the Covid-19 pandemic. (S5O-05012)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism (Fergus Ewing):** Our rural tourism infrastructure fund is already supporting 45 projects and 26 design grants across Scotland, with investments in car parks, waste disposal facilities and toilet provision, for example. We

recognise the tangible benefits of the fund and we have more than doubled it to £6.2 million in 2021-22.

Last year I convened a group of public bodies to consider how we might collectively tackle visitor behaviour. A visitor management strategy for the 2021 season is in the final stages of drafting and will be published in the coming weeks. It will cover co-ordinated messaging and collaborative management at key hotspots. Our public bodies are working closely with Police Scotland on how they will tackle visitor behaviour in the coming season.

**Dean Lockhart:** There were unprecedented pressures on our countryside and rural communities last year due to the high volume of visitors during peak holiday periods, including in many areas of rural Stirlingshire, an area that I represent. In addition to the measures that have just been outlined, will the cabinet secretary provide an update on the progress that is being made towards the development of a holistic national visitor management strategy that would deliver a co-ordinated and well-resourced approach across the country to ensure that those who are responsible for managing our countryside locations have the capacity and the resources that are necessary during peak seasons?

**Fergus Ewing:** I repeat what I said in my original answer, which is that the visitor management strategy for this season is in the final stages of drafting and will be published in the coming weeks. I absolutely accept that there were huge pressures in this past year. If we are able to safely resume the domestic tourism market—as I hope that we will be—we will be able to address those problems more effectively.

We have worked extremely hard with local authorities, national parks, NatureScot, VisitScotland and the police—many people are, of necessity and rightly, involved—particularly on tackling issues that are caused by the pressures of so-called dirty camping, toilet provision, waste disposal, littering and car parking. The tourism infrastructure fund has helped projects around, for example, Doune castle, the Fife coastal path and Loch Leven heritage trail in Perth and Kinross. We work hard with local authorities on practical projects that are designed to alleviate those pressures in some of our key hotspots, and that work is an absolute priority. I look forward to publishing the visitor management strategy soon.

**Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP):** In addition to what appears to be the most comprehensive set of measures from any Government in these islands, as the cabinet secretary mentioned, what plans do the Scottish Government and VisitScotland have to encourage those who seek to holiday locally this year and to

ensure that attractions across Scotland can benefit from what we all hope will be an increase in domestic tourism?

**Fergus Ewing:** VisitScotland is working hard to provide a boost to the domestic market. Of course, now is not the time to proceed with such a marketing strategy—at the moment it is safety first, and caution is the watchword—but I hope that we will see a resumption of access to the countryside sooner rather than later. VisitScotland and I work extremely hard to promote the enormous benefits of holidaying in Scotland, as my family and I have done for a great many years, and of seeing more of the country; during lockdown, I have heard many people talk about that with fondness and pleasant anticipation.

### Agriculture (Research)

**5. Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what research it is funding to drive efficiencies in agriculture. (S5O-05013)

**The Minister for Rural Affairs and the Natural Environment (Ben Macpherson):** We fund a range of research, particularly through our strategic research programme. The research that is planned for the coming year includes crucial work on vaccines and treatments for animal diseases, which can cost farmers millions of pounds in lost revenue. We also fund research on crop development, which supports the arable sector, as well as improvements to soft fruit stock for the horticulture sector, and livestock breeding improvements. Details are available online on the SEFARI Gateway website.

**Rachael Hamilton:** Despite the minister's ridiculous comments earlier, I want to set the record straight. The Scottish Conservatives care deeply about rural Scotland and we are concerned that although last year's budget committed £40 million to an agricultural transformation programme, only £21.5 million of that fund was committed before this year's budget announcement. Why was the 2020-21 agricultural transformation programme fund underspent, given that farmers tell me that there was huge interest and oversubscription to the sustainable agricultural capital grant scheme?

**Ben Macpherson:** The funding that Rachael Hamilton references with regard to research has been considered, as one would expect. I am not clear on the direct link to the question on Scottish Government research. As I emphasised in my first answer, we fund a range of research, particularly through our strategic research programme. I also articulated the important and effective aspects in which that research is targeted and makes a meaningful difference for rural Scotland as a

whole, and therefore for the benefit of Scotland as a whole.

### Food and Drink Industry (Brexit)

**6. Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what support is being provided to Scotland's food and drink industry in response to exporting issues as a result of Brexit. (S5O-05014)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism (Fergus Ewing):** The Scottish Government chairs the weekly food sector resilience group, whose members are industry leaders across the sector, in order that it can take quick and decisive action where necessary.

The seafood sector has been particularly hard hit. On Friday, I launched the £6.45 million seafood producers resilience fund to support businesses that have lost all or part of their relevant market due to the Covid-19 pandemic and European Union exit.

We have also provided funding to Seafood Scotland to allow recruitment of three Brexit advisers to work with businesses that are struggling to adapt to the new requirements arising from the United Kingdom's departure from the single market.

**Colin Beattie:** The on-going financial chaos of Tory Brexit has left Scottish fishermen and coastal communities high and dry. The UK Government announced support that the industry considers derisory. What support has the Scottish Government put in place to help people to meet their day-to-day costs, and will the Scottish Government continue to argue for a better deal for our vital seafood sector?

**Fergus Ewing:** Yes, we will continue to fight for the sector with the UK Government—I do so day and daily. The saddest thing about the UK Government's failure to recognise the plight of, for example, inshore fishermen, who have had no income for some time now due to the huge difficulties caused by Brexit, is that the families depend on those exports to get food on the table and roofs over their heads. We are starting to hear from local fisheries associations that people are telling them, "I have nothing left—I can't feed the family or pay the rent". Therefore, we have stepped in pretty quickly to set up the fund in order to alleviate hardship. I am pleased that we are able to do so, and we are working hard to get the money out of the door to where it is required as quickly as possible.

**Gil Paterson (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP):** The trade dispute between the UK and the USA is having an adverse impact on the Scotch whisky industry, which had absolutely nothing to do with the cause of the dispute. There is a



distillery in my constituency, and some of my constituents work at others that are a few miles away. Will the Scottish Government explain to the UK Government that the mess needs to be sorted out, and that it should be much more proactive to get the job done?

**Fergus Ewing:** I am familiar with the Glengoyne distillery, which produces marvellous, fine Scotch whisky. The tariffs have been in place for more than a year, and have cost the sector an unbelievable £500 million. My colleagues and I have taken every opportunity—most recently, in a call last week between my colleague Ivan McKee and the UK Minister of State for Trade Policy—to press the UK Government to resolve the situation and bring it to an end.

### **Accommodation Providers (Financial Support)**

**7. Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will review the financial support available to self-catering establishments, bed and breakfasts and guest houses. (S5O-05015)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism (Fergus Ewing):** All self-catering, B and B and guest house businesses in level 4 areas that pay non-domestic rates can apply for grants of £2,000 or £3,000—depending on rateable value—every four weeks from the strategic framework business fund. Equivalent support for B and Bs that do not pay non-domestic rates, but pay council tax, is also available.

Larger self-catering and exclusive-use properties will also benefit from an additional £7 million fund to mitigate the impact of the single household restrictions.

Support packages have been designed in response to business needs and agreed with sector representatives, but we will continue to monitor tourism support needs.

**Willie Rennie:** I am sure that the cabinet secretary knows that there is real anger in the self-catering sector that the sector-specific support misses most of them out. Around 15,500 businesses will get nothing. For the small number of businesses that will get support, the fund has not yet opened. Many of them are on their knees, and are considering selling up already.

The cabinet secretary is generous with his time and is open minded. I suggest that he urgently changes the scheme before it is too late.

**Fergus Ewing:** Mr Rennie raises a serious point. I am determined that all businesses whose trade has been terminated as a result of the Covid restrictions and which have been unable to offer their excellent hospitality and accommodation to their guests are supported.

The problem is a serious one. I am not sure that I recognise the figures that Mr Rennie quotes, but I am happy to discuss the issue with him, as I already have done.

We believe that the funding that we have put in place is sufficient to provide lifeline support. We previously provided support for B and Bs that did not have business bank accounts, and we are extending the support to B and Bs that do not pay business rates, as I explained in my response to Mr Halcro Johnston. We paid support to self-catering properties last year. There is also the continuing entitlement to a payment of £2,000 or £3,000 every four weeks. As with all the schemes, that is designed to provide lifeline support to get people through.

I hope that we can safely resume the staycation market. If we can do so, many self-catering properties, B and Bs and guesthouses will be well placed to continue to offer an excellent experience. They did that last summer; indeed, self-catering units and caravan parks were allowed to open slightly earlier than the rest of the tourism sector.

I accept that those businesses are the backbone of our tourism sector, especially in rural Scotland. They must get sufficient support. I constantly review whether we are achieving that objective, working closely with people such as Fiona Campbell of the Association of Scotland's Self-Caterers and David Weston of the Bed and Breakfast Association. I will continue that work.

### **Glasgow Tourism Sector**

**8. Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how it is planning to support the tourism sector in Glasgow in 2021. (S5O-05016)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism (Fergus Ewing):** Glasgow, which Mr Doris represents, is a vibrant and welcoming city, and I look forward to encouraging the return of visitors to enjoy its many world-class attractions.

We understand the severe impact of the pandemic on tourism in our cities. We have provided a support package of almost £3 billion for businesses, including the tourism sector.

We are working closely with all our partners. That work includes the establishment of a city centre recovery group and a five-year investment plan for the sector, which will be developed by our enterprise agencies and VisitScotland.

**Bob Doris:** It is likely that Glasgow will rely on tourists from across Scotland, rather than on international visitors, for much of this year. In these challenging times, how will the Scottish Government support businesses in Glasgow that

have been increasingly reliant on international tourism? The cabinet secretary has put some details on the record, but what more can be done?

**Fergus Ewing:** The international sector has been hit especially hard. Glasgow has been successful in attracting visitors from around the world. Its success in areas such as business conferences is well recognised.

We are working hard with VisitScotland to pave the way for the recovery of the international market. We are also providing support for many of the key players, such as tour operators, which put people in the aeroplanes that bring them to Scotland. We are also investing to support hotels. The hotel recovery programme aims to support up to 3,000 jobs in that sector. Through the pivotal enterprise resilience fund, we awarded more than £8.9 million to hotels and other accommodation providers last year. Those are some of the elements of our support.

We hope that the efficacy of the vaccination programme here and worldwide will enable us to beat the virus. Once we have done that and have an international system for the reciprocal recognition of vaccine certification, I look forward to resuming international trade and custom, which are essential to our overall tourism offer and to the Glasgow economy.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** That concludes portfolio questions.

## Scotland's Hydrogen Economy

**The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh):** The next item of business is a statement by the Minister for Energy, Connectivity and the Islands, Paul Wheelhouse, on developing Scotland's hydrogen economy. The minister will take questions at the end of his statement.

15:15

**The Minister for Energy, Connectivity and the Islands (Paul Wheelhouse):** Hydrogen is rapidly emerging as a sustainable solution for the decarbonisation of the economy and a key piece of the energy transition picture. That view is now held in Scotland, in Europe, in south-east Asia and around the world.

On 21 December 2020, we became the first country in the United Kingdom to publish a hydrogen policy statement. The statement is underpinned by independent analysis and sets out how we can make the most of Scotland's massive potential in this new sector. I am pleased to talk today about hydrogen's role in decarbonising our energy systems and about our ambition for the future hydrogen economy in Scotland.

Hydrogen has a potentially very important role to play in achieving net zero. We also believe that Scotland's abundant natural, human and physical resources will support the establishment of a thriving hydrogen sector in Scotland and the emerging global hydrogen market.

That view is supported by the extensive engagement, assessment and analysis in three studies that we have commissioned over the past year: the "Scottish Hydrogen Assessment", the "Scottish Offshore Wind to Green Hydrogen Opportunity Assessment" and the "Deep Decarbonisation Pathways for Scottish Industries" study. Those key reports have provided a comprehensive evidence base for our hydrogen policy statement.

We are not acting in isolation. The European Union has set a strategic objective of installing at least 6GW of renewable hydrogen electrolyzers that will produce up to 1 million tonnes of green hydrogen in the EU by 2024 and 40GW that will produce up to 10 million tonnes of green hydrogen by 2030. The UK Government's recent 10-point plan for a green industrial revolution included setting a target of 5GW of low-carbon hydrogen production capacity by 2030, and we expect a UK hydrogen strategy to be published in 2021. In 2020, the Government of Germany committed €9 billion of funding to its hydrogen strategy over the next five years, and it was closely followed by the French Government committing €7 billion of funding to deliver France's hydrogen strategy.

The sixth carbon budget report from the Climate Change Committee suggests that low-carbon hydrogen production will scale up to 90 terawatt hours by 2035. That is nearly a third of the output of the current power sector in the UK.

In our hydrogen policy statement, we set out a vision of Scotland becoming a leading hydrogen nation. We believe that producing clean hydrogen and showing that it can be used to meet challenging energy demands from industry and from the transport and heat sectors will be a key part of the next stage of Scotland's energy transition pathway. From our assessment, it is clear not just that hydrogen is an energy and emissions reduction opportunity, but that it could also have an important role in generating new economic growth for Scotland by creating new jobs and significant just transition opportunities—for example, in the export of hydrogen and associated technologies.

Our hydrogen policy statement is aligned to the Scottish Government's climate change plan update, and our climate targets are underpinned by our commitment to a just transition that supports sustainable economic growth and jobs.

Our policy statement confirms our support for the strategic growth of a strong hydrogen economy in Scotland, focusing our efforts on supporting the development of Scotland's hydrogen production capability to meet our ambition of having at least 5GW of renewable and low-carbon hydrogen production capacity by 2030, which will be capable of producing up to 27 terawatt hours of energy. We will seek to have at least five times that capacity by 2045, which will be 25GW of hydrogen production capacity.

On the scale of our ambition, it is worth noting that our target of an installed capacity of 5GW of hydrogen production by 2030 is the same as the installed capacity target that has been set by Germany, which is clearly a much larger country with a much larger industrial base. We have confidence in setting such a high ambition due to Scotland's vast resources in onshore and offshore wind and in wave and tidal energy, and we are confident about hydrogen's potential to unlock more of those renewable resources and improve the competitiveness of hydrogen production in Scotland. Scotland's company base, skills and assets in the oil and gas, offshore wind and energy systems sectors will add value and bring the transition opportunity that will be a critical part of building Scotland's hydrogen economy.

We are in a climate emergency, and pace is vital. With that in mind, we have, in addition to existing funding programmes, committed £100 million of the £180 million of new funding in the emerging energy technologies fund to the development of our hydrogen economy over the

next five years. That will be implemented through our hydrogen action plan, which is due for publication in 2021.

We believe that both green and blue hydrogen will play increasingly important roles in our energy transition to net zero. It is therefore important that carbon capture and storage systems are established to support the production of blue hydrogen by the mid-2020s.

Our hydrogen policy sets out our continued support for the demonstration, development and deployment of hydrogen. We are committed to exploring how we can drive forward technological progress and advance innovation by unlocking public and private funds for innovation development. We also intend to support demonstration of key hydrogen technologies such as fuel cells and electrolyzers, which we will seek to exploit for supply chain development opportunities.

International collaboration will be key to the development of hydrogen markets. In our policy statement, we committed to actively seeking international collaboration in the development of our shared hydrogen economy. The hydrogen action plan will set out how we seek to develop Scotland's potential to export significant quantities of hydrogen.

Carrying on from the wide-ranging assessment of hydrogen that we undertook in 2020, we continue to explore our hydrogen potential, and I can now announce the commencement of a project to examine marine vessel hydrogen transportation and storage. That collaborative project will reflect the opportunities for hydrogen development and energy transition in our regions and will be jointly funded by the Scottish Government, the Port of Cromarty Firth, Shetland Islands Council, the Oil & Gas Technology Centre, Global Energy Group, ERM and Pale Blue Dot Energy. We expect the study to conclude its report in the summer of this year.

The pace of industry-led hydrogen projects in Scotland is accelerating. I am pleased to inform members that, through its recently launched green hydrogen business, Scottish Power has signed an agreement with Global Energy Group at its Port of Nigg site to work together to identify how green hydrogen could be generated at the site. The project will open a window for us into how hydrogen can be viewed as playing an integral role in our energy and industrial systems.

I recognise that it is crucial that Scotland and Scottish companies benefit fully from our development of hydrogen. Scottish content will be central to the sustainable growth of this new sector, and the development of our supply chain will play a critical role in shaping and defining our

approach to the hydrogen action plan. We will support the transition and growth of Scotland's emerging hydrogen supply chain by embedding it in our new supplier development programme, which is led by my colleague Ivan McKee, and by including the development of skills and manufacturing capacity that can play a significant role in the hydrogen economy both domestically and internationally.

We cannot achieve our hydrogen ambitions alone. As we move forward, we will work closely with industry to design policy and regulatory environments that will enable us to support hydrogen production at scale.

Of course, many of the regulatory and legislative levers that will be required are determined at the UK level. We are therefore committed to closely engaging with the UK Government on the development of a UK-wide policy. We urge it to move quickly and decisively on the development of such a policy and of regulatory frameworks for hydrogen, and to make the important decisions on the future of the gas grid, business models and market mechanisms that will underpin the hydrogen economy. All of that will be important for increasing market certainty and boosting investor and consumer confidence.

Our provision of £6.9 million of funding to the Scottish Gas Networks H100 Fife project has now leveraged a further £18 million of funding from Ofgem. That flagship demonstration project will deliver a first-of-its-kind 100 per cent hydrogen heat network that will supply 300 domestic properties with clean, green hydrogen heating. It will be a critical step towards understanding the role that hydrogen can play in decarbonising heat by using the gas network, and it will demonstrate technology such as hydrogen-enabled boilers.

I re-emphasise the following key points. Scotland has abundant natural resources, and we believe that we have a competitive advantage in the components that are necessary to grow a strong hydrogen economy that will support jobs and gross value added growth and develop new industrial opportunities on a significant scale. Our reputation for excellence in energy, our innovative oil and gas supply chain and our strong onshore and offshore wind sectors will be key to our achieving a just transition to a low-carbon and, ultimately, a net zero age. Both our oil and gas sector and our renewable energy sector will be critical to establishing stable and secure production of affordable large-scale hydrogen power facilities. We believe that hydrogen will play an important role in our transition to a net zero electricity system, directly complementing renewable generation and providing new ways and opportunities to use, transport, integrate and store such energy.

We also believe that the development of a hydrogen economy with a strong export focus represents a substantial economic opportunity for Scotland. Many of our neighbours in northern Europe are looking to Scotland to export to them the hydrogen that they will need for their own decarbonisation journeys, with the rest of the UK also likely to be a significant net importer.

No single fuel or technology is, by itself, the solution to climate change, but hydrogen has the potential to be an important part of a decarbonised energy system, and it represents a significant and valuable export opportunity. We are committed to supporting the emerging hydrogen sector in Scotland while maximising the "new industry" benefits that the production of hydrogen may bring. I look forward to seeing Scotland grasp the opportunities that a hydrogen economy presents to secure a just transition to net zero.

**The Presiding Officer:** Thank you, Mr Wheelhouse. There will be around 20 minutes of questions for the minister.

**Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West) (Con):** I thank the minister for early sight of the statement. The Scottish Conservatives have long been supporters of looking at the use of new technologies such as hydrogen as a way to decrease our carbon emissions in our use of energy for both heating and transport. However, it has been disappointing to see how slow the Scottish National Party Government has been in supporting the emergence of hydrogen technology and giving support to the industry to help with the transition.

It is also concerning how much store the Scottish Government is setting on converting the mains gas grid to 100 per cent hydrogen. I questioned the minister's colleague Roseanna Cunningham on the wisdom of that approach several years ago, when the industry was clearly telling us how unfeasible it was. However, it appears that the minister is continuing with that gamble in trying to hit his targets.

Can the minister please explain which parts of the gas network will switch to 100 per cent hydrogen before 2030 and how he will overcome chemical issues that arise with moving above a 15 per cent hydrogen mix? Today's statement offers little more than a list of previous announcements at a time when the industry is asking for the hydrogen action plan to be delivered with urgency, so with no new mechanisms, plans or policies being announced today and given the SNP's repeated failures to hit both emissions and renewables targets in the past, how can we trust the 2030 target?

**Paul Wheelhouse:** I thank Alexander Burnett for his interest in the subject. It is important to

stress, as I did in my statement, that Scotland is the first part of the UK to have a hydrogen policy, so when the member criticises the Scottish Government for being slow in developing hydrogen, I would just remind him that we are the first area of the UK to have a hydrogen policy. We are also participating actively in the UK Government's workstreams. The Scottish Government is represented in that work at an official level and I have had regular discussions with UK ministers on the subject.

The member mentions his concern about the continued focus on potentially using hydrogen for domestic heating and for the conversion of the gas network. We are encouraging the UK Government to review the gas grid. Unfortunately, the Scottish Government does not have the powers to review the gas grid. We require the UK Government to do so, as it is a reserved area of policy. We are urging the UK Government, as is industry, to accelerate the review of the gas grid to see what the potential is for hydrogen within the gas mix.

The Fife H100 project that I referenced is a hugely interesting project. It is of great interest not just in Scotland but in the rest of the UK; indeed, similar proposals to have demonstration sites are emerging in the UK Government's own strategy, so Scotland is ahead of the game in that respect. Mr Burnett is probably out of line with his party's Government at the UK level, given its interest in the potential role of hydrogen in domestic heating. The H100 project in Methil will be of huge significance in demonstrating how hydrogen-ready boilers can be used in practice in 300 homes and will enable us to develop consumer confidence and investor confidence that the technology can work.

I will happily engage with Mr Burnett on issues of joint interest in relation to hydrogen; I recognise his interest in the energy sector and I am happy to discuss that with him. However, I encourage him to pick up on the fact that the UK Government is also interested in the area and that Scotland is the first part of the UK to develop a policy, so we are by no means the last in line, as he has implied.

**Lewis Macdonald (North East Scotland) (Lab):** Perhaps unlike Mr Burnett, I welcome the work that is being done to look at conversion of the gas grid and the potential for hydrogen heating systems, as in Fife. However, if that is successful, what will be done to enable householders to make those conversions? Who will pay for that? Will the costs fall to low-income consumers or will the Government take action to support that conversion?

I welcome the link between hydrogen and offshore wind, which will be key going forward. However, we know that many of the offshore wind jobs are now going abroad and are not happening

here. What do we do to make sure that hydrogen jobs are created here?

Finally, places such as Rotterdam are using a hydrogen economy to underpin heavy industry that is reducing its carbon emissions. What is being done to work with industry, in particular with manufacturing, in Scotland to enable hydrogen to play that role here?

**Paul Wheelhouse:** I thank Lewis Macdonald for his constructive approach. I recognise his long-standing interest in hydrogen, particularly in Aberdeen, and I welcome his interest in the matter.

Lewis Macdonald makes the important point that, if we learn successfully from the H100 project that there is potential for hydrogen to play an increased role in decarbonising the gas grid—through upping the percentage in the gas mix to perhaps 20 per cent initially, which I think is what industry players propose, or ultimately to 100 per cent—and then proceed with that, clearly, there will be conversion costs. I am encouraged by the fact that manufacturers such as Worcester Bosch are developing hydrogen-ready boilers that would be relatively simple to transfer to domestic properties to allow hydrogen-enabled heating systems to be used. Obviously, other manufacturers are interested in the area.

There is a great emphasis on minimising the investment that individuals and businesses will need to make. Obviously, there is potential for the development of heat networks, which could use hydrogen. The Government is carrying out work on the idea of heat as a service. In effect, that would take the problem of having to decide what kind of system to put in place out of householders' hands. In effect, householders would commission, through their monthly bills, a service from a provider that would provide the heat at the contract price. Householders would not have to worry about the technology because, in effect, the investment decisions would be taken out of their hands and developed through commercial arrangements.

Mr Macdonald is right that offshore wind is an area of enormous potential and that we need to do better on supply chain opportunities. We need to learn from the difficulties with offshore wind in that regard. An integral part of our approach not only to hydrogen but to the heat and building strategy is to consider the supply chain opportunities.

As I emphasised in my statement, we are keen to work with industry stakeholders as part of the development of the action plan. We want to engage with industry to identify where we can achieve early wins. For example, can we be the manufacturers of electrolysers? By being an early adopter and early mover, can we get an

advantage in the market? That would give us the ability not only to generate low-cost green hydrogen in the long term and blue hydrogen in the meantime but to develop an advantage in the supply chain. I am happy to engage with Mr Macdonald on that.

Mr Macdonald is right to identify Rotterdam as a good example of the great interest in hydrogen that there is in Europe. We have had strong interest from the port of Antwerp, the Dutch Government's hydrogen envoy and colleagues in Germany, all of whom are looking to work with Scotland to source green hydrogen for industrial decarbonisation. That could apply also in Scotland, in locations such as Grangemouth and elsewhere.

**Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP):** My question is in a similar vein to Lewis Macdonald's, and is on opportunities for our workers. The minister alluded to the fact that hydrogen has a role globally in the transition to net zero. To what extent would a home-grown hydrogen economy present an opportunity to protect existing jobs and create new sustainable jobs as well as to export our hydrogen technologies worldwide?

**Paul Wheelhouse:** Gillian Martin raises a really good point. The hydrogen assessment by Arup that I referred to in my statement looked across three main scenarios and concluded that, by 2045, a hydrogen economy has the potential to protect or create between 70,000 and more than 300,000 jobs, with gross value added of between £5 billion and £25 billion annually, depending on the degree to which hydrogen develops for domestic use only or develops to service a wider export market.

That is hugely significant for Gillian Martin's constituency and the wider region that it sits in, given the importance of the oil and gas industry there. If we can create new job opportunities and migrate people from the oil and gas sector across into those roles, that could be an important route to a just transition for the more than 100,000 people who currently work in the oil and gas sector and its supply chain.

Our hydrogen action plan will set out to align with our broader support for the just transition. The growth of Scotland's emerging hydrogen supply chain will be embedded in our new supply chain development programme that I referred to in my statement and which Ivan McKee is leading on, which includes the development of matching skills and manufacturing capabilities. We want Scotland to play a significant role in the wider global hydrogen economy, but we will also be trying to service our domestic requirements in Scotland.

**The Presiding Officer:** I highlight the fact that we have nine more questions to get through and we are almost halfway through the allocated time.

**Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con):** What is the minister doing to help motorists to transition to hydrogen? Specifically, how is he getting behind the proposal to establish a network of 12 hydrogen stations across Aberdeenshire, Moray and the Highlands?

**Paul Wheelhouse:** I recognise that interesting proposals have been put forward for a hydrogen coast, so to speak, from the north-east of Scotland all the way up to Shetland. There is enormous interest in that. We have previously set out plans for the A9 to be an electric highway and for investing in an electric vehicle charging infrastructure to meet the needs of travellers on that route.

We want to work closely with our partners in local government and the energy sector. Interesting partnerships are emerging in Aberdeen between BP and Aberdeen City Council, which build on the success of the deployment of hydrogen in the city and involve the extension of its use in buses to other modes of transport. We are keen to engage with all interested local authorities and partners to progress plans, and we want to work with industry partners, such as BP in the case of Aberdeen, to get the fuelling infrastructure in place to give motorists the confidence of knowing that they will be able to use the technology to travel freely across Scotland.

We should also be mindful of the fact that, as the use of hydrogen develops in Europe and the rest of the UK, we will need to cater for the heavy goods vehicles and private passenger vehicles that come to Scotland, through tourism or for business purposes, such as carrying freight. Those issues are very much on our minds, and I will be happy to engage with Graham Simpson on them.

**Shona Robison (Dundee City East) (SNP):** Will the minister say more about the work that he has been doing with local partners Arcola Energy and Dundee City Council to ensure that the hydrogen project at the Michelin Scotland Innovation Parc in Dundee progresses? I understand that the refuelling station at the MSIP could provide hydrogen to a fleet of 12 hydrogen buses for Xplore Dundee, and that that is set to be taken forward through procurement.

I would welcome any assurances that the minister could offer with regard to Scottish Government support for the hydrogen bus project, as well as the refuelling station, to ensure that Dundee can become a leading centre for hydrogen technology.

**Paul Wheelhouse:** Absolutely. Shona Robison makes a very good point. We see Dundee as being the next city in line to develop hydrogen after Aberdeen. The Government is committed to supporting the Michelin SIP site in Dundee so that it can become a leading centre for sustainable mobility.

Shona Robison mentioned Arcola Energy, whose representatives Mr McKee and I met at a round-table event to discuss the potential for developing the supply chain. I know that the company is an exciting potential player in that area. We are working closely with Arcola and other partners, including Dundee City Council, the MSIP and a number of universities and companies, to create the infrastructure for the development of hydrogen technology in the region, and Transport Scotland is working closely with partners on the development and delivery of the Dundee hydrogen bus project that Shona Robison mentioned.

We regard the project in Dundee as unique in its structure and approach, which involves drawing together a mix of commercial research and public funding. In that regard, it is quite different from the approach that has been taken in Aberdeen. Discussions about the commercial elements of the project are on-going, but I assure Shona Robison that further information will be made public at the appropriate time, which I hope will be in the near future. I will make sure that she is kept informed of progress, given her strong interest in the project.

**Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab):** Will the Scottish Government commit to considering monitoring the advanced technology whereby green hydrogen is used to contribute to the production of liquid fuel for aviation, in particular, which has such high emissions, but also for haulage and shipping—[*Inaudible.*]

[*Inaudible.*—negative impact on land use while contributing robustly to our net zero emissions target?

**Paul Wheelhouse:** I agree with Claudia Beamish. It is hugely exciting to see the potential for hydrogen to play a role, either directly as an energy source or through conversion to ammonia, which has a potential role as a drop-in fuel for marine use and other heavy vehicles. It is enormously interesting.

Claudia Beamish also rightly raises the prospect of decarbonising aviation fuel, which would make an enormous difference not only to our ability to meet the challenge of the climate emergency, but to our ability to sustain international tourism and business travel in an otherwise challenging period, given the climate emergency.

I assure Claudia Beamish that the Scottish Government has partnerships with the likes of the

University of St Andrews, which is proactively taking forward research into propulsion systems and alternative fuels. As she may know, we are also working to trial a converted hydrogen-powered train unit in Scotland in order to demonstrate the potential value of hydrogen for our rural rail routes, where it may not be economic to electrify lines. That may help us to ensure that we can decarbonise our railway journeys.

I am happy to engage with Claudia Beamish on the subject. I know that she is a passionate and long-standing campaigner for tackling climate change and I am sure that we can work together on the matter.

**Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP):** Does the growth of the hydrogen economy present any particular opportunities for island and rural communities, beyond transport?

**Paul Wheelhouse:** Indeed it does. That is a very important point. I have been passionate about this since the start of our hydrogen policy. Our island and rural communities often depend on imported heating oil, liquefied petroleum gas and conventional diesel and petrol to power transport and heating systems. With the potential growth of both green hydrogen and blue hydrogen, but particularly green hydrogen, I foresee a period when our island economies will not only provide themselves with self-sufficient supplies of fuel through hydrogen or ammonia, but also—potentially—become net exporters.

I recognise that Shetland and Orkney are already at the heart of our oil and gas industry, but hydrogen also provides potential for the decarbonisation of facilities such as the Sullom Voe and Flotta terminals, which would provide a long-term future for those important economic sites.

Across our islands, whether at the large-scale sites such as Flotta and Sullom Voe or in our smaller island communities, where a wealth of community energy projects are already in place, hydrogen provides a potential other revenue source for projects. That can deal with grid constraints, where there are such constraints, as we have seen in Orkney. Work at the Surf 'n Turf and BIG HIT projects has overcome grid constraints there. There is potential to make our other island communities net wealth generators and exporters through hydrogen, and that is a very exciting potential part of the vision for Scotland.

**Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD):** I thank the minister for early sight of his statement and for his previous answer. I welcome the content and assure him of Scottish Liberal Democrats' support for efforts to maximise the potential of Scotland and the UK in the development and use of hydrogen. As Orkney's MSP, I see evidence of

that potential already, not least in transport and heat.

The challenges of decarbonising our economy are perhaps the most pressing challenges that we face, but does the minister accept that hydrogen can play only a limited role in helping us to achieve our 2030 target en route to net zero? Does he further accept that scaling up home insulation and other demand-reduction measures can create jobs now and make the supply of heat—from whatever source—less difficult in future? Will he ensure that any hydrogen strategy does not see the Government take its eye off the ball on the need to improve thermal efficiency?

**Paul Wheelhouse:** I very much agree with Liam McArthur on that point. We have to keep our eye on the ball as far as energy efficiency and renewable heat supplies are concerned.

As he may know, our “Draft Heat in Buildings Strategy: Achieving Net Zero Emissions in Scotland’s Buildings Consultation” was published last week, on 5 February, and it sets out an ambitious programme for Government spending, with £1.6 billion over the next five years and a larger programme of up to £17 billion over the next 10 years—that is the whole-economy cost—to improve energy efficiency and invest in renewable heat in the Scottish economy.

That is an important strand of work to which we are committed. As I said, £1.6 billion will be committed in the next session of Parliament should we be re-elected. In addition, we have set out the £180 million emerging energy technologies fund, which is a separate strand of funding that will help to support the development of hydrogen.

I believe that the two things are complementary. As I am sure Mr McArthur would acknowledge, hydrogen can play a role in decarbonising heat. I welcome his support for developing the hydrogen economy, as outlined in his comments, and I would be happy to work with him. I hope that we can develop this part of our energy system on a bipartisan basis and that we can all work together to make Scotland a great success internationally in this area. I would be pleased to work with Mr McArthur and other colleagues in that regard.

**Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green):** I welcome aspects of the statement in relation to green hydrogen—[*Inaudible.*—]—for heavy industry and heavy transport, but I urge the minister to move away from the fantasy of blue hydrogen, which is too risky and reliant on the unproven technology of carbon capture and storage. It seems to be a ploy for the oil and gas industry to maximise production, which in the short term could lead to the production of grey hydrogen, which would be disastrous for the climate.

**Paul Wheelhouse:** I want to reassure Mr Ruskell on a couple of points. First, we recognise that grey hydrogen is a product that is used in the Scottish economy already, but it is not a key plank of our hydrogen policy. We hope to see the development of blue hydrogen and green hydrogen so that they can replace grey hydrogen, which is used as an industrial feedstock in the manufacturing sector. I hope that I can reassure Mr Ruskell that developing grey hydrogen is not a core part of our hydrogen policy; indeed, we want to see it replaced.

Carbon capture technology is already up and running. There are several projects in Norway that are operated by Equinor. The issue is about getting carbon capture, utilisation and storage to a commercially viable position where it can survive without huge subsidies. We are truly excited about the potential for the Acorn project to use St Fergus gas terminal near Peterhead to deploy carbon capture, utilisation and storage technology and potentially play a role in developing green hydrogen for use in the Scottish economy. That could help to grow the hydrogen economy and make sure that demand for hydrogen can be met as we increase the capacity for green hydrogen in the medium to long term. There is a role and a need for both technologies.

Mark Ruskell seemed to be critical of the oil and gas sector’s involvement, although I appreciate that that might not have been his intention. We have to have an eye on the need for a just transition. We need to protect jobs in the oil and gas industry and transition those jobs into a form that is consistent with achieving net zero, and that is clearly what the industry is trying to do. I know that there is some cynicism about that, but I assure Mark Ruskell that I believe that the conversations that I have had with the oil and gas sector have been sincere and that the industry is genuinely trying to decarbonise. We have seen that with the Crown Estate’s auction round 4 in England, where there has been huge interest from the oil and gas industry in developing offshore wind sites to generate green hydrogen.

I am happy to discuss that with Mark Ruskell offline, but I hope that he can be confident that his fears are unfounded.

**The Presiding Officer:** We are well over time now, but I will take Maureen Watt, to be followed by Liz Smith.

**Maureen Watt (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP):** I thank the minister for his statement, which is hugely exciting. As members know, Scotland has been an early adopter of hydrogen in transport, with Aberdeen being one of the first European cities to roll out hydrogen buses. Will the action plan commit to increase the



number of hydrogen buses and public sector fleet vehicles in Scotland?

**Paul Wheelhouse:** I agree with Maureen Watt. The people of Aberdeen can be hugely proud that their city has been pioneering hydrogen buses, and I am pleased that the Scottish Government has played an important role in helping to fund that activity. We are working with the wider public sector to reduce emissions from the public sector vehicle fleet and we have established the bus decarbonisation task force, through which we are working to eradicate emissions from the bus sector altogether. Battery electric vehicles and hydrogen fuel cell vehicles will be very much part of that approach. We will also try to move the use of hydrogen into other heavy-duty vehicles, and ensure that hydrogen infrastructure is in place to support that.

I should point out that the £62 million energy transition fund that we announced last July has already helped to enable the development of an Aberdeen hydrogen hub, and, as part of that, the bid for funding for additional buses for the Aberdeen city area. I hope that that reassures Maureen Watt that we are committed to developing hydrogen in public transport, particularly buses.

**Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** The minister knows that there are, obviously, huge opportunities for hydrogen in agriculture, not just in relation to fuel and heavy machinery but for fertiliser purposes. Programmes such as the James Hutton Institute's HydroGlen programme have shown what can be done. What funding can the minister commit to take that beyond a feasibility study?

**Paul Wheelhouse:** I am very interested in Liz Smith's point about the wider role of hydrogen. It would be useful to have a discussion with her and, indeed, the James Hutton Institute, if she would wish to do that, to consider the potential engagement that we can have with the industry as part of the development of the hydrogen action plan.

We want to try to understand the full role of hydrogen in the economy and the full range of economic opportunities that we can exploit. If we can exploit hydrogen, whether that is for use in fertilisers or for wider use in the agriculture sector, with a competitive advantage compared with our competitor economies, that will potentially allow sectors that will depend on hydrogen in one form or another to have a competitive advantage, a lower cost base and a faster rate of growth and, obviously, to sustain more jobs. I would be happy to engage with Liz Smith on that.

**The Presiding Officer:** I apologise to David Torrance. I am afraid that we will have to end the

questions there. We have already eaten into the time for the next item of business.

## Coronavirus Acts Report

**The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh):** The next item of business is a statement by Michael Russell on a coronavirus legislation update. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of his statement.

15:51

**The Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, Europe and External Affairs (Michael Russell):** The “Coronavirus Acts: fifth report to Scottish Parliament” covers provisions in both the Scottish Covid acts—the Coronavirus (Scotland) Act 2020 and the Coronavirus (Scotland) (No 2) Act 2020—as well as the United Kingdom Coronavirus Act 2020. As required in the legislation, the report covers the reporting period for the two months up to the end of January.

The measures in the UK act and the two Scottish acts continue to be an important part of our response to the significant public health risk and economic challenges posed by the pandemic.

It is getting close to a year since we introduced the first Scottish emergency Covid act and created the structure for reporting to the Parliament on how its provisions—and those of the second Scottish Covid act—would be used. I am sure that I speak for all of us when I say that it has been a much longer journey than any of us would have hoped when we debated that legislation in the chamber.

The Scottish Government takes very seriously the need to account for how these exceptional provisions have been and are being used. In that regard, and mindful of the detail that is included in each report, I thought that it would be helpful if I took a few moments to take a wider view and reflect on the ways in which the Covid acts continue to enable us to respond to the pandemic.

The acts have helped us to ensure that local authorities have been able to support children and young people who live in foster or kinship care, while prioritising their resources to help the most vulnerable children in Scotland. They have created flexibility in how child protection orders operate, which has had a positive impact on the capacity of social workers, panel members and education staff, and has assisted children and families in crisis.

The acts have supported the operation of the criminal justice system through steps such as the creation of remote jury centres, digital sharing of case information and the introduction of virtual trials for summary criminal cases. They have enabled parole hearings to continue and avoid postponements, ensuring that, for the period from

23 March 2020 to 1 January 2021, more than 99 per cent of scheduled tribunals and oral hearings were heard successfully.

The acts have added an additional amount to the carers allowance supplement, meaning that 83,000 carers received a special one-off payment to help them deal with the unprecedented circumstances of the virus and lockdown.

The acts established a social care staff support fund, which helps to prevent social care staff from experiencing financial hardship when, because of the virus, they face restricted ability to work and loss of income.

The acts have extended the existing moratorium on diligence and bankruptcy from six weeks to six months, and they have protected from eviction those who, as a result of Covid, have fallen into rent arrears.

Those are just a few examples of provisions in the Covid acts that have helped our fellow citizens.

When the Parliament agreed to pass the two acts, the Government made it clear that it would retain and use the powers in them only for as long as they were necessary. Consequently, when it has been possible to do so, we have suspended or expired provisions either because they have fulfilled their purpose or because we have listened to compelling views that support change.

For example, we have expired, without commencing, provisions relating to adults with incapacity that removed the requirement on a local authority to consult the adult and interested parties in certain defined and exceptional circumstances. From 30 September, we have suspended stop-the-clock provisions for guardianship orders and certificates for medical treatment of adults lacking capacity. We have responded to changing circumstances by suspending the muirburn provision to allow the muirburn season to commence from October 2020. We have also expired the provision extending the maximum timescales for which children could be kept in secure accommodation without the authority of a children’s hearing or a sheriff when it became clear that it had been used hardly at all.

As required by the Parliament, the report not only covers the provisions of the Covid acts, but, as required under the second Covid act, reports on a total of 79 Scottish statutory instruments whose main purpose relates to coronavirus. Those include the vital international travel regulations that were made under the Public Health etc (Scotland) Act 2008 and the regulations that relax the rules on breaks in caring, so that they do not affect entitlement to carers allowance.

Today’s fifth report also explains again that some provisions of the acts have not yet been

commenced as there has not been a need to do so, or have commenced but have not been required to be used in practice. However, in some cases, we remain of the view that those provisions could still be an important tool in supporting the lives and health of people living in Scotland, the economy, the public sector and the third sector. In other cases, the judgment is that the provisions continue to be necessary because they might be required to respond to possible future circumstances that result from Covid.

We know only too well that the importance of the legislation is, alas, now more apparent than ever. Since our previous report was published, the new, more transmissible variant of the virus has become the dominant strain in Scotland. From 26 December, the Government applied level 4 measures to all of the mainland, and it tightened those measures on 5 January. Although at that point the island areas remained in level 3, from 20 January level 4 restrictions were applied to the Isle of Barra and the Isle of Vatersay, and from 30 January, Na h-Eileanan Siar as a whole moved to level 4. No Government would wish to impose such restrictions on citizens without a clear and obvious need to do so. It is essential for the safety and wellbeing of all Scotland's people that we are never slow to take decisive action when necessary.

From the outset, in shaping our response to the Covid pandemic, the Government has placed particular emphasis on the needs of the most vulnerable individuals and communities. Therefore, in the development of today's report, we have continued to reflect on the views of stakeholders whose focus is on human rights, children's rights and equality. We also recognise the views of the Parliament's Equalities and Human Rights Committee, which is inquiring into the impact of the pandemic. We are grateful for the work that is being undertaken by the Parliament, stakeholders and others in scrutinising the Scottish Government's actions on those matters.

The requirement to consider information on domestic abuse also continues to be an essential part of the reporting process. We know that domestic abuse is an underreported crime, and data on reported incidents does not provide the full picture of the impact of the pandemic. The Scottish Government remains committed to ensuring a regular exchange of information about domestic abuse. We are working with our partners, including organisations that focus on violence against women and girls, to further inform our understanding.

As the Parliament will know, the provisions in part 1 of each of the two Scottish Covid acts are time limited. Those provisions have been

extended once already, from 30 September 2020 to 31 March 2021. Regrettably, we must shortly consider whether they need to be extended beyond that point for the final period of six months that is permitted by the legislation. I acknowledge the work that is being done by the Parliament's COVID-19 Committee to seek views on such an extension. The Scottish Government is considering very carefully the provisions in the acts with regard to such a renewal. Where it is desirable to expire or suspend further specific provisions, we will seek to do so, but it seems unavoidable that many of the provisions of the acts will be required after 31 March, to enable us to deal with the on-going effects of the pandemic. The decision on whether to extend part 1 of each act is, of course, for the Parliament to make. We look forward to hearing the outcome of the COVID-19 Committee's consideration of those matters. Once all the processes are complete, the Government will bring forward the necessary regulations for the Parliament's consideration, along with a statement of reasons.

Although the majority of the provisions of the United Kingdom Coronavirus Act 2020 that apply to Scotland are not due to expire until March 2022, I believe that it would be appropriate to consider the on-going necessity of those provisions alongside consideration of the Scottish acts. Therefore, the Scottish Government is also considering whether any of those provisions should be suspended or expired at 31 March 2021.

Covid-19 is no respecter of national boundaries. We are continuing to engage and work with the UK Government and the other devolved Administrations on the implementation and operation of the UK act. In addition, all Governments are working together to help ensure that their respective reporting arrangements operate successfully and appropriately alongside each other.

The Government also remains committed to ensuring that the Scottish Parliament has continued oversight of the provisions and can hold Scottish ministers to account for their use. Jason Leitch and I have been almost as much a fixture at meetings of the COVID-19 Committee as its members, and such scrutiny continues to be central to our work.

As is required by section 15 of the Coronavirus (Scotland) Act 2020 and section 12 of the Coronavirus (Scotland) (No 2) Act 2020, Scottish ministers have conducted a review of the provisions in part 1 of each of those acts and have prepared the report. We are satisfied that the status of the provisions that are set out in part 1 of each of the acts remain appropriate as at 31 January.

We have also undertaken a review of the SSIs to which section 14 of the Coronavirus (Scotland) (No 2) Act 2020 applies. Scottish ministers are also satisfied that the status of those SSIs at the end of the reporting period is appropriate.

A review has also been conducted of the provisions of the UK act to which the Scottish Parliament gave consent, and we are satisfied that the status of those provisions is also appropriate.

All the efforts made by the people of Scotland to combat and cope with the effects of Covid represent a truly extraordinary effort. I am sure that members will acknowledge that, despite our differences in other areas, we are united in our resolve to work together for the good of the people we represent as Scotland works through, and past, this unprecedented crisis. The provisions that we report on today are part of Scotland's ongoing response. The Government will continue to do our duty to report to and be held accountable to the Parliament for the use of those powers.

We welcome the opportunity of engagement with the Parliament as it considers the fifth report.

**The Presiding Officer:** The cabinet secretary will take questions for around 20 minutes. I call Donald Cameron to be followed by Anas Sarwar.

**Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** I thank the cabinet secretary for prior sight of his statement. On behalf of the Scottish Conservatives, I welcome the fifth report on the coronavirus acts, which has been published today. I also emphasise the importance of the Government reporting regularly under the legislation, given the many important issues that arise.

As convener of the COVID-19 Committee, I acknowledge the cabinet secretary's regular appearances at that committee. They are appreciated.

Scrutiny is critical, so I want to ask specifically about the potential extension of the emergency legislation beyond 31 March. If the legislation is extended, that period will, of course, cover a time at which the Parliament is in recess and many MSPs will be campaigning in an election, assuming that the election happens on 6 May. After 6 May, as we all know, MSPs will need to be sworn in, a new Government will require to form, a First Minister to be appointed and parliamentary committees to be constituted. All that takes time. There will thus be a significant period of time during which parliamentary scrutiny of emergency legislation will be difficult, if not impossible. Does the cabinet secretary share my significant anxiety about that? What measures can be taken to remedy the problem?

**Michael Russell:** The committee convener raises an important point and I would very much welcome the input of the committee and the Parliament to jointly decide how we might resolve those issues. I am absolutely certain that, during that period, there will require to be scrutiny of regulations as they change, because I suspect that they will change. There will also be an obligation for further reporting on the emergency legislation at the end of March, and that report would normally require to be laid before the Parliament during the first fortnight of April.

Ultimately, the Presiding Officer has the power to recall the Parliament, should he deem it to be necessary, to discuss either a report or new regulations. If there are arrangements that the Parliament can put in place that would require the continued presence of ministers, for example, they should be considered. I stress that we are very open to suggestions and proposals from the Parliament, and we will do our best to ensure that we can meet those. I agree with Donald Cameron that continued scrutiny of the legislation and regulations as they evolve is of vital importance.

**Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab):** I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of his statement. Like me, he will not like the restrictions but we both understand why we need them, and I support the Government when it gets things right.

The cabinet secretary said that the Government has never been slow to react and respond so, although I welcome the action that has been taken on airports, I think that waiting for 11 months was a mistake and I hope that we can now rectify that urgently.

I also pay tribute to the public, who have been going above and beyond to follow the restrictions, but that is clearly only one part of how we can suppress the virus. There are still challenges in areas for which the Government is responsible, such as our testing and tracing system, of which we are still not using full capacity. Can the cabinet secretary reassure us that, although we are focusing on eliminating the virus through the roll-out of the vaccine, we will not forget about virus suppression and that we will use this period of lockdown to get the parts of the process for which the Government is responsible, such as our testing and tracing system, fit for purpose?

**Michael Russell:** I maintain that those processes are not only fit for purpose but producing the results that they are meant to produce. I am certain that the on-going work in vaccination, in test and trace and at the airports and borders will continue. It is all of vital importance. I am grateful for Mr Sarwar's acknowledgement that we need to work together on those things and to support the people of Scotland, who have put up with a great deal and

continue to do so in what are the hardest of times. We will go on doing the things that we need to do, improving the things that need to be improved and focusing on the suppression and we hope, ultimately, the elimination of the virus using all the tools that we have.

**Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP):** With the publication of the international travel quarantine regulations imminent, will the cabinet secretary provide an update on the Scottish Government's latest engagement with the UK Government to ensure that a comprehensive approach is taken to preventing the importation of the virus, recalling that international travel contributed to a rise in coronavirus cases in Scotland last summer?

**Michael Russell:** The member raises an important issue about last summer and the importation of virus; that remains in all our minds. Today has seen another occasion on which the First Minister has made it clear at her briefing that we believe that the restrictions need to be firmer and more comprehensive than is presently proposed by the UK Government. There is an ongoing dialogue, as the First Minister also indicated, and it is interesting that there has been some support for her position south of the border—I notice that Keir Starmer made that point earlier.

I hope that the dialogue will continue and that we will be able to persuade and influence the UK Government to accept that point. We acknowledge the difficulty of closing the borders even to only those countries that are listed, but we think that, regrettably—nobody is happy about it—a wider and broader definition is required that will reduce the risk of the virus being imported. I hope that we will be able to agree that. That dialogue continues.

**Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con):** The cabinet secretary highlights the issues arising from the implementation of the coronavirus acts and it is fair to say that no part of society remains unaffected. He also talked about extending the acts from 31 March, for more than the currently permitted six months. The public are looking to the Scottish Government for a glimpse of the light at the end of the tunnel as we roll out the vaccine, and six months seems an awfully long time away. What plans are being considered for emerging from the pandemic, as the vaccine is rolled out, so that we can get back to an integrated society and a working economy?

**Michael Russell:** I did not hear the last part of the question, but I think that I got the gist. Mr Whittle should understand that the legislation can be renewed only for six-month periods. That was the intention at the start of the process. It has been renewed once, it can be renewed again and then that would be it. Of course, the whole thing

can be abandoned at any stage; if we no longer require it we can get rid of it.

Although we would be sticking to what the legislation anticipates by renewing it for six months, it will be up to the Parliament to decide what it does. I made no reference beyond that six months and, indeed, I shall not be a member of the Parliament after the election. That is not a prediction; it is my intention. However, I can assure the member that there would be no absolute requirement to stick to the six months if the legislation was no longer required. Indeed, we would all be very happy if it was not required.

**Gil Paterson (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP):** The coronavirus legislation introduced important measures to enable our justice system to continue to function while taking account of the public health challenges presented by the pandemic. Will the cabinet secretary provide an update as to how those measures have helped our justice system to continue to function safely and, most importantly, effectively?

**Michael Russell:** Yes; as I indicated in my statement, the creation of remote jury centres has been important, as has the digital sharing of case information, documentation and evidence, and the introduction of virtual trials for summary and criminal cases. We have also extended custody proceedings by allowing them to be heard by any sheriff court in Scotland, and by a sheriff of any sheriffdom, no matter where the alleged offence took place. We have enabled virtual appearances from custody, and there has been an increase in remote hearings for civil and criminal business. All those things have allowed the justice system to continue to operate in a way that it might not have been able to do without the coronavirus acts.

Of course, more could be done; I seem to remember that we debated other important issues during the passage of the first coronavirus act. However, those have been the crucial changes—I believe that they have been effective, and they have been assessed as such.

**Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab):** Will the cabinet secretary consider the next steps to take when the no-evictions policy—which I have welcomed—ends, in order to avoid a cliff edge that might mean many people falling into arrears immediately and, therefore, needing additional help?

In addition, when will the Scottish Government publish a list of those who are exempt from the £1,700 fee for quarantine? I am thinking in particular of lone children who are travelling to Scotland on family reunion visas and who certainly cannot afford that fee. Many other families will be worried, too.

**Michael Russell:** My sound broke up a bit there. I think that Pauline McNeill was asking about fees for compulsory quarantine. There are arrangements; there will be a fund for people who are required to quarantine but cannot meet the cost of so doing.

It is a matter of developing the regulations and the system to ensure that there is no undue hardship in what will already be very difficult and stressful situations. I have already been approached by a constituent who has concerns about that. I think that all constituency MSPs will hear such concerns, and we will want to make sure that there is an answer that protects people who are in need and who will find the situation onerous and difficult—and, sometimes, impossible.

**The Presiding Officer:** Cabinet secretary, you might not have heard Pauline McNeill begin by asking what will happen following the end of the no-evictions policy.

**Michael Russell:** That question would properly be addressed to the Minister for Local Government, Housing and Planning. I make the commitment that he will respond to it.

I am dealing with the legislation that we have in place, and with how we will take it forward and renew it. The longer-term questions of policy in individual areas must lie with the portfolio ministers and with the committees of the Parliament.

Some of the innovations that the coronavirus acts have introduced have been useful when important issues arise. For example, non-physical signing of documents in certain circumstances has turned out to be, perhaps, long overdue, and is very useful indeed.

However, we made a strong commitment at the start of the process that these—[*Inaudible.*]—temporary legislation was not introduced. If permanent changes are needed—Pauline McNeill is right to raise the question of evictions in that regard; the same is true for homelessness—questions have to be addressed by the portfolio ministers, with MSPs, to ensure that we get longer-term change. I do not see why that process should be delayed or onerous. If we know which aspects of the coronavirus acts have worked, we can perhaps bring them back to the Parliament in a different form to ensure that they become permanent.

**The Presiding Officer:** Thank you, cabinet secretary. I can see that you are having difficulty with your connection, at points.

**Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD):** The coronavirus acts that were passed by Parliament underpin many of the regulations that

govern who we can and cannot see, and the limitations of social distancing. The cabinet secretary will have heard my question to the First Minister yesterday, which was about expanding the extended-household policy to allow new parents to bubble up with other new parents or family members who are not currently covered by the policy. That would vastly improve the condition of people's mental health. Does the cabinet secretary agree that it is time to review the regulations, and to change them to allow that to happen?

**Michael Russell:** I agree that it is always necessary to examine the outcomes of regulations with regard to their intention, in order to ensure that that intention can be met. The intention behind keeping households separate is to ensure that there is no transmission of the virus.

If the intention behind the change to the rule elsewhere is to provide mental health support, I am glad to say that that support already exists in the Scottish system, in recognition of the role that early attachment plays. We recognise the difficulties that new parents will meet, particularly in developing and forming relationships, but there are measures in place to ensure that the most vulnerable people have access to support, through peer support for mental health, for example.

People will continue to have access to universal services, such as maternity services and health visiting, and will have access to local community support. Those are all allowed for. That support is already built into the Scottish system through exemptions and through other work that is being done.

I entirely appreciate the question and it is entirely legitimate to explore the matter, but what was asked for is already possible and happens in Scotland. The extended-household rules were developed in order to allow that to happen.

**Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green):** Today's report on the legislation notes that

"the mental health impacts of this epidemic ... may not be fully felt or understood for some months to come."

Given that we are facing an impending mental health crisis, can the cabinet secretary advise us how likely it is that schedule 9 to the UK Coronavirus Act 2020 will be commenced? If it is commenced, will he consider reporting more frequently on how its provisions are being used, given their potential impact on human rights?

**Michael Russell:** That is an important question. Modification of mental health legislation was, and remains, a contentious issue. I am happy to give that commitment, but I hope that the provisions will not be required.

I want to strongly agree with Alison Johnstone that the mental health impacts of the pandemic are quite clear and are likely to be far ranging. A focus will be required within society on those—*[Inaudible.]*—can make a commitment that, were schedule 9 to the 2020 act to be utilised and brought into effect, it would require a particularly strong focus on reporting. I would want to discuss with the COVID-19 Committee whether reporting should be more regular or more intensive, but I do not disagree with the thrust of Alison Johnstone's argument.

**Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP):** I apologise to the cabinet secretary, because my question is very similar to Alex Cole-Hamilton's.

My question concerns babies. We all understand the pivotal role that early attachments play in the first year of a child's development, including attachment to grandparents, aunts, uncles and others. We also understand the pressure on new parents, often mums, in that period. Is the Scottish Government giving any consideration to adapting legislation to allow families who have a child under the age of one to form a supportive bubble with one other household, in circumstances in which they are not currently able to do so? I believe that that would be a similar policy to that which has been put in place in other countries, as has been said.

**Michael Russell:** As I said to Alex Cole-Hamilton, I understand the concerns that have been expressed on the matter. We believe that the arrangements that are in place to support families are comprehensive, and that they meet people's requirements.

I am happy, given the concern about the matter, to take the matter away again, to ask the relevant ministers about it and to respond to Mr MacGregor and Mr Cole-Hamilton when ministers have considered the points that have been made today.

**Maurice Corry (West Scotland) (Con):** Instances of domestic abuse have been on the rise during the pandemic, unfortunately. The minister stated that the Scottish Government is working with various women's and girls' organisations. What regulation is being considered by the Scottish Government to prevent the increase in domestic abuse during the pandemic?

**Michael Russell:** Proposed legislation on that is before Parliament at the moment. I am sure that the debate on, and the development of, that legislation have been informed by what we have learned during the pandemic.

I do not think that it is so simple as to say that the statistics have led to clear resolution of what requires to be done next. However, it has indicated a need to intensify the work that is being

done at present to ensure that the legislation is fully fit for purpose and that the climate for consideration of the matter is very rigorous, such that there is not only no tolerance for domestic violence and abuse, but a—*[Inaudible.]*—stronger and stronger understanding of the causes and of the ways in which we can influence its elimination.

We have been able to do more as a result of amendments that Pauline McNeill lodged in the passage of the legislation. I wish that there was an instant solution, but we are working towards better legislation and better practice and effect.

**Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP):** I understand that Police Scotland data suggests that accommodation-rental websites are increasingly being used to book properties for illegal parties. Is the cabinet secretary concerned by that trend, and can he provide further information on how the coronavirus legislation equips our police to address that issue?

**Michael Russell:** I can. There is concern about that issue, of course. Whenever an illegal party is held, police resources have to be used to stop it and to ensure that those who are involved are informed and warned, and, if necessary, have legal action taken against them—not just the instant fine but, perhaps, further legal action.

The second level in the issue is in relation to the people who own the properties, who are committing an offence. If the properties are registered, the local authority can de-register them and take effective action against owners who are behaving illegally and criminally by advertising property for let when they know that it will be improperly used. No holiday lets should now be available in Scotland for any such purposes. If they are so used, the people who use them and those who offer them are committing offences, so all relevant authorities should take action against them.

**The Presiding Officer:** I thank the cabinet secretary and my colleagues. I apologise to David Stewart and John Mason. I am afraid that we have to end because we are running out of time.

## Decision Time

**The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh):** There are no questions to be put as a result of today's business. I hand over the chair to my colleague, Lewis Macdonald.

## Covid-19 Pandemic (Economic Impact on Women)

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Lewis Macdonald):** The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S5M-23756 in the name of Gillian Martin, on the impact of Covid-19 on women in the economy. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

### *Motion debated,*

That the Parliament recognises the impact of COVID-19 on women in the economy; understands that women in the Aberdeenshire East constituency and across the country have been more adversely affected economically by the pandemic, with the Gender Equality Index showing that they spent more time on housework and caring than men; notes the view that women should be supported as part of the economic recovery, and pays tribute to the work that has already been carried out by Women's Enterprise Scotland, Engender and Close the Gap to make sure women's voices are heard in the strive for a more equal wellbeing economy.

16:22

**Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP):** There is no need to tell anyone that the past year has adversely affected every single one of us. The hooks of Covid-19 have gotten to everyone in one way or another: children have not been able to go to school for long; offices are closed; people have been ill and have lost loved ones, and many have lost their livelihoods.

We miss socialising with one another and crave a normal life, in which we can all get back to work, restart our lives and stop juggling home schooling with home working. We look forward to a future in which surviving financially is in our own hands and not based on the R number or the emergence of a new strain. The fact is that women have been the worst affected by the pandemic. All the inequalities to which women were subjected previously have increased, and the effects could be long lasting if we do not factor them into our recovery as a priority.

The statement that women are more likely to be in precarious work and low-paid jobs could be from two, 10 or 20 years ago. I say it now and add that other truism—that women are most likely to be the main carers for children and older relatives—and the indisputable fact that women still do most of the unpaid labour of maintaining a home and feeding a family. I also add in a pandemic.

Covid restrictions have affected everyone, but they have put more pressure on women in particular. From reports from equalities organisations and personal testimonies, we know that the woman in the household is most likely to be the one who gives up her job or business if the



extra responsibilities that come with Covid get too much. I know that many couples take equal responsibility but, sadly, that is just not the case for the majority of them.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies found that in the first lockdown, on average, mothers did 50 per cent more unpaid childcare and housework than fathers. Let us not forget that the vast majority of single-parent households are run by women, and those women also have jobs or businesses. Women are more likely to be in the Covid front line, by working in health and social care or in supermarkets. Therefore, they are more exposed than anyone else to the virus.

We all know about the existing inequalities of the burden of unpaid care, the gender pay gap and persistent gender-segregated employment, but what a different experience the pandemic would have been for women if more serious effort had been made by society to eradicate such inequalities. However, we are where we are, and I will use my time today to point to ways in which we in Scotland can help to focus our recovery on stemming the widening inequality gap.

Before the pandemic, Scotland was on the cusp of doubling free childcare. We owe it to women in particular to make that a priority when the lockdown ends. For those of us who want to go further and expand free childcare in the same manner as our northern European counterparts, we must look again at the fiscal levers that are needed to facilitate that. If we have the levers ready—we have some, but by no means all, ready—we should use them to expand provision. If we need more such powers here, morally, every party that believes in free childcare expansion and gender equality must get behind the call for the increased tax powers that other countries use to fund their 100 per cent provision.

We also need to take a serious look at how we can get employment law devolved to the Scottish Parliament. I hope to see every party leader stand strongly behind the call to have the most effective levers of fair work in our own hands. In particular, I would like to see compulsory gender pay gap reporting stem from this Parliament, for such reporting to be strengthened to include more businesses, and for companies to be compelled to produce an action plan if they fall short.

I support the right of workers who have caring responsibilities to request agile and flexible working where appropriate, and for organisations to be compelled to prove that they have given the request serious consideration and made every effort to facilitate it.

I believe that we need to harness the few positive things that life with Covid has taught us. It turns out that we can work remotely, do not need

to commute through traffic jams, and can be trusted to get on with our work without being in a physical workplace, being watched over by managers. With a bit of help, we can balance work and family life with little or no detriment to either.

However, we need to take targeted action now to make women central to the recovery, and we must not hesitate. Throughout this period, together with colleagues in Women's Enterprise Scotland, I have been engaging with women business owners, and hearing testimony about how the types of businesses that are women run have been hardest hit. Close-working businesses such as fitness and hair and beauty, hospitality, tourism and events, catering and retail are the lifeblood of women's role in the enterprise sector in Scotland. Women sole traders make a huge contribution to our economy, yet sole traders were almost ignored by the United Kingdom Government in the first wave of support. The Scottish Government has stepped in and provided newly self-employed schemes and targeted sectoral support; it is rolling out a close-working business package, and has enabled local authorities to give out discretionary funding to those whom other sectoral funding packages might have missed.

In the recovery, we need to do everything possible to bring back into business those women who have lost their businesses completely, or made the decision to quit due to other pressures. Government borrowing will be essential to that. We must be able to target our resources to ensure that a generation of women entrepreneurs find their way back, and better access to finance has to be part of that.

I am encouraged that so many members have offered to speak in today's debate. I know that many members have been contacted by women in their constituencies with their stories and key asks, and I look forward to hearing about them. In particular, I thank Close the Gap, the Scottish Women's Budget Group and Women's Enterprise Scotland. I am also indebted to Dr Norin Arshed of the University of Dundee, whose excellent blog for the Scottish Parliament information centre is a vital read for anyone who is interested in how the pandemic has affected women's business.

In closing, I stress one key thing: women's financial parity is good for an economy. Let us prioritise everything that we can to close that gender pay gap and help women back into business and fair work to help us recover as a country.

16:30

**Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP):** I congratulate Gillian Martin on securing the debate and bringing this important topic to the chamber,

and I thank her for all the hard work that she does in raising awareness of these issues.

As the pandemic continues to affect lives and livelihoods, we can already see the regressive effects on women's equality. A disproportionate number of women are managing additional demands at home, at work and in family life. As we learned from the Ebola outbreak, gendered norms mean that women are more likely to be infected by the virus, given their predominant role as care givers within families and as front-line workers in health, social care and education.

We all know that the virus does not specifically target women, but restrictions affect parts of the economy that are largely represented by women. Mikaela Williams is one of many of my constituents who have contacted me for help during this period. Mikaela is a self-employed complementary therapist with a husband and four-year-old child. During the first lockdown, Mikaela was eligible for the furlough scheme, but circumstances meant that she had no choice but to take on a temporary job with a supermarket. As restrictions were lifted, she was pleased to reopen her business but Mikaela has now had to close again. With her husband unable to be furloughed and the closure of schools and nurseries, she is struggling to find childcare to allow her to attend her employment. Having exhausted all options, she is having to think about resigning.

As reported by Engender, Mikaela is a clear example of the differential effect that the closure of schools is having on women, with the consequence of limiting their work and economic opportunities. It particularly affects lone parents—90 per cent of whom are women—due to the difficulties of working from home or finding employment. Additionally, research by Close the Gap shows that there has been an increase in the numbers of women who are in predominantly female industries, such as beauty, cleaning and childcare, and are self-employed, with no access to statutory employment rights.

In addition, assessment for financial support for self-employed women can be inherently unequal. Gemma Newell is an eyelash technician in my constituency with a 14-month-old child. She applied for the self-employed income support scheme, which took into consideration her maternity leave. Gemma was assessed to receive £400 every three months. We can all agree that that is not enough income to support a child and live on.

As convener of the Equalities and Human Rights Committee, it was crucial to me that we proceeded with an inquiry into the impact of the pandemic and, prior to the budget, consideration of the groups and individuals that were disproportionately impacted by Covid-19 and

measures that should be taken to minimise negative impact on equalities and human rights.

The committee has been pursuing gender budgeting and distributional analysis for the best part of this parliamentary session. Each parliamentary year, the committee receives submissions and hears evidence on the need for the Scottish Government to take account of the impact of tax-raising and spending decisions on women specifically. This year has been no exception, and Covid-19 has further compounded the urgency to address those issues.

Furthermore, the Scottish Women's Budget Group highlighted that the decisions to delay increased provision of early years childcare and the implementation of the Scottish child payment are likely to have had a disproportionate impact on women, particularly in single-parent households.

Spending on childcare and social care must be treated as infrastructure spending, because it supports the realisation of women's equality and rights, but it is not just about fairness to women. More equal societies are better for everyone.

As we continue to endure the pandemic, we must have a focus on enhancing women's economic position. Without a gendered approach being taken that recognises the reality of women's lives, it is likely that women's equality and rights will remain disadvantaged and might even slip backwards. It has been shown that what is good for women's equality is good for the economy, so ignoring the position of women is not an option. We have all the information and evidence that we need to deliver meaningful and measurable change for women for Scotland. If we add to that the right political will, we can make a real difference.

16:35

**Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con):** I, too, thank Gillian Martin for bringing this important issue to the chamber today. We all know how tough the past year has been and, without a doubt, the impact has been more pronounced for women. Whether it is home schooling, having caring responsibilities, holding down a job or running a business—or, indeed, in some cases juggling all four—women have been disproportionately impacted.

Entrenched gender inequalities are systemic across every aspect of the economy and they continue to create an uneven playing field. The pandemic has genuinely exacerbated that. I resonate with the example that Ruth Maguire gave, as it mirrors a situation that I had with a constituent who is a single mother; she had to quit her job because she was not classed as a key worker and was not able to work from home.

We must remember that, although we are focusing on women today, there are many other inequalities that are worsening due to Covid, such as the disability employment gap and health inequalities associated with black and minority ethnic communities. A Trades Union Congress report found that the employment rate for disabled women is 53.2 per cent compared with 75 per cent for non-disabled women. The Scottish Conservatives are committed to seeing that gap narrowed.

I was pleased to welcome the publication recently of “Unequal impact? Coronavirus and the gendered economic impact”, which is a UK Parliament Women and Equalities Committee report that seeks to address these issues. It acknowledges that the UK Government acted quickly to design and implement schemes to protect jobs such as the coronavirus job retention scheme and the self-employment income support scheme. Those UK-wide schemes have provided a vital safety net to millions of people, including thousands of women in Scotland.

Yet it remains the case that, despite those measures, women continue to be disproportionately affected. Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs statistics show that, in most countries and regions, more women than men were furloughed as of 31 July last year. Engender highlighted that too. During lockdown, mothers have reduced the paid work that they do compared to fathers and are already 1.5 times more likely than fathers to have lost their jobs or quit their jobs over lockdown.

In its report “Gender and Unpaid Work: the Impact of Covid-19 on Women's Caring Roles”, Engender estimates that the impact of mothers' lost earnings on productivity is a staggering £15 million lost to the economy every day in Scotland. Those stark figures are underpinned by a McKinsey report that states that, despite women making up 39 per cent of employment globally, job losses among females have accounted for 54 per cent of job losses overall, with women's jobs being 1.8 times more vulnerable to the current crisis than men's.

Moreover, the IFS estimated that women were a third more likely to be employed in sectors that were shut down and were at a higher risk of job loss. Employment such as retail and hospitality, as highlighted by Gillian Martin, have been and continue to be adversely affected. I say gently that it does not help when Governments fail to recognise that businesses that employ women are on their knees. Next week, we will see burdensome licensing regulations brought forward by the Scottish Government without an impact study on how that will adversely affect women from Aberdeenshire to the Scottish Borders, such

as those who operate a bed and breakfast to top up their income. We all know many of those women.

That, combined with insufficient grant funding and awkward application criteria, has resulted in many female business owners struggling to protect livelihoods in Scotland. I believe that more could be done to protect women in business through the speedy payment of grant funding, an adaptation period or more targeted funding to support sectors on which women rely heavily for their income.

Many young people have been adversely affected and many young women find it difficult to find jobs. They are leaving school and going into a slumping economy, and the number of young people claiming unemployment-related benefits increased by 122 per cent between March and July.

We must also recognise that there is a greater need to place equality at the heart of employment interventions to support women returners to work. Although today is the international day of women and girls in science, women continue to be underrepresented in science, technology, engineering and maths modern apprenticeships. We must take bolder action to recruit, retain and progress women across STEM disciplines.

As green shoots start to emerge in our recovery from the pandemic, we must not forget its impact on women. We cannot ignore the fact that they continue to experience inequalities, which is why we should ensure that we tackle gender bias and support the next generation of women, who will play a key role in building back our economy.

16:40

**Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP):** I, too, welcome the debate and thank Gillian Martin for lodging her motion, which draws attention to this critical issue.

Before the arrival of Covid-19, women were already experiencing widespread economic inequality—for example, in their labour market participation and their income and living standards—and the pandemic has only exacerbated that. A vast amount of research, much of which has already been quoted by other members, demonstrates that, necessary though the lockdown measures have been to keep us all safe, they have had a disproportionate long-term impact on women, especially working-class women, significant numbers of whom now face redundancy and job losses.

Although furlough rates for men and women have been similar, analysis by HMRC shows that men placed on the job retention scheme have

been more likely than women to be retained by their employers. The highest rates of furlough have been in two female-dominated sectors, retail and hospitality, both of which are characterised by low pay and job insecurity. Two thirds of workers who earn less than the living wage are women, which means that they receive only 80 per cent of their usual income while being furloughed, putting them well into poverty. Lone parents, of whom 91 per cent are women, are especially likely to struggle to combine childcare and paid work, and they are much more likely to be in debt and financially vulnerable. We also know that single-income households are more likely to be in poverty and less likely to have someone to share childcare responsibilities.

It is startling to note that the gender equality index finds that 85 per cent of people aged from 16 to 64 who are economically inactive due to caring responsibilities are women. The closure of schools and nurseries has inevitably resulted in increased care demands, and that increase in unpaid housework and care has been a significant factor in women exiting the work force.

Carers of people with disabilities are also disproportionately likely to be female. As I have said in the chamber on previous occasions, we know that, with many disabled people losing their support packages, it is women who have to step in and take over the caring responsibilities for them. In my constituency, I have been dealing with a lady who has an important role as an essential worker and is also a carer for her adult sister. Her access to a local day centre was withdrawn and, with no thought for her own welfare, that essential worker has taken on a significant caring responsibility. That example has been repeated all over the country.

It is difficult for women to balance home working with childcare. The lack of flexible jobs poses a more significant barrier to employment and progression for women than it does for men. According to research from the Institute for Fiscal Studies, during the pandemic women with caring responsibilities in paid work have reduced their paid working hours substantially. Some 78 per cent of unpaid carers report having to provide more care than they were doing prior to the coronavirus outbreak.

The IFS data also shows that mothers who have left paid work over lockdown are continuing to do twice as much domestic work as their partners. By contrast, when a father in an opposite-sex couple stops working, both parties tend to share childcare even when the mother is still doing five hours' paid work a day on top. The extent of unpaid work is a key determinant of women's capacity to take part in the formal labour market, so it is essential that

additional support is provided for women with caring responsibilities.

As we have begun to look towards recovery, we have talked a great deal about a greener, fairer future. While women are still disadvantaged in this way, the future cannot be fairer for all. We should measure the progress of a community by the degree of progress that women have achieved. The pandemic has set that back. We therefore have much work to do, and we must measure what we do if women are to make up the ground that Covid has stolen from them.

16:44

**Elaine Smith (Central Scotland) (Lab):** Like others, I thank Gillian Martin for bringing the debate to the chamber. I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests recording that I am an unremunerated director of McQuick Ltd and a member of Unite the union.

There is no doubt that the impact of the pandemic has been felt differently across our society, and the evidence all points towards growing inequalities. That runs counter to the founding principles of our Scottish Parliament, and politicians from across the chamber have raised all sorts of concerns about weaknesses and gaps in policy responses to the pandemic on behalf of women in our constituencies.

In looking at the impact of the economic and public health crisis on women, I refer colleagues to the UK Parliament's Women and Equalities Committee report, which was published on Tuesday and which has already been mentioned by Rachael Hamilton. In its report, "Unequal impact? Coronavirus and the gendered economic impact", the committee leaves us in no doubt that, to date, the UK Government has failed to look at the differential impact of key Covid-19 interventions on women. The furlough scheme, the support for small businesses and the new initiatives around kick-start and green recovery show no sign of understanding the need for impact assessments and strong mitigating measures.

The report calls on the Department for Work and Pensions to conduct research to understand the gendered impact of the design of universal credit and adds the committee's voice to the call, which many of us support, for the extension of the £20 increase in the universal credit allowance beyond the end of March. Undoubtedly, if that £20 top-up is not extended, it is women who will go hungry, it is women whose health will suffer and it is women who will be cold and ill prepared for the bad weather, because women will always make feeding their children the priority.

Two excellent and effective national campaigning organisations, Maternity Action and

Pregnant Then Screwed, have welcomed the committee's recommendations that the UK Government should urgently introduce legislation

"to extend redundancy protection to pregnant women and new mothers."

I am sure that pregnant women and new mothers here in Scotland will have had the same experience of increased discrimination, including loss of work, breaks in contracts, and isolation for new mums. Today's debate needs to focus on those issues as experienced by women in Scotland. Mitigating measures can be taken here and the trade unions and the fair work agenda must be at the centre of that response. For example, we should ensure that procurement and commissioning contracts protect women and provide sufficient budgets for full maternity cover. This could also be a chance to rethink the childcare packages that are on offer.

The commitments on the provision of childcare for three to five-year-olds were certainly welcomed by Scottish Labour but, for many mothers, support is needed well before their children reach the age of three. The economic infrastructure needs the care infrastructure to be good—a point that was well made earlier by Ruth Maguire. That would provide jobs and career opportunities for women in the social care and childcare sectors but, undoubtedly, childcare and support for babies and toddlers need to be moved up our agenda. I ask the minister, when responding, to give an indication of what specific consideration is being given to those women falling out of the labour market due to lack of support while pregnant and in those early years. Of course, Labour would be happy to work on a cross-party basis to identify the measures that can be taken in Scotland, with the powers that rest here, to maximise support for new mothers and their families.

I also wish to highlight the Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights report on "Ethnicity and Poverty in Scotland 2020", which observed that poverty strategies seldom integrate the experience of black and ethnic minority communities. In recognising the impact of the pandemic on women, we must also recognise that the pre-pandemic 2019 employment gap figures showed that the minority ethnic employment gap was much higher for women than for men.

The Westminster select committee report also emphasises the importance of improving data collection by sex. Understanding any differential impact of both the disease and the response to the pandemic on women and men is essential if we are to tackle sex inequality. Indeed, in response to a question from me on 3 March 2020, nearly a year ago, seeking assurance on the importance of disaggregating data by sex, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport assured me that the Scottish

Government recognised that and would feed that view into the UK data collection plans.

Given what we have heard at Westminster this week, and in this debate, there is clearly much to do to develop policies that recognise that reversing these growing inequalities for women in Scotland is a matter of urgency. Once again, I congratulate Gillian Martin on securing the debate.

16:49

**Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP):** I am pleased to contribute to this important debate, and I thank my colleague Gillian Martin for bringing it to the chamber.

As others have said, Covid-19 has been terrible for everyone. None of us has ever experienced anything like it and I hope that, when it is over—which I hope is soon—none of us ever has to go through anything like it again. However, there is no doubt that women are disproportionately affected, whether that is a result of juggling working at home and supervising home learning or simply having their employment disrupted.

As the helpful briefing from Close the Gap tells us, women make up 77 per cent of key workers in social care, early years and childcare, nursing and supermarkets, but they are grossly "undervalued, underpaid and under-protected." Women are also more likely to work in sectors that have been shut down, such as hospitality and retail, and that is especially the case for BAME women and younger women.

Older women, too, have been impacted by the pandemic. The women involved in the Women Against State Pension Inequality campaign, who suffered one of the greatest injustices to women that I can remember when the United Kingdom Government withheld their pension without notice, have suffered a huge increase in unemployment. Perversely, many WASPI women who are over 65 and who are still working are in the at-risk category but are required to keep on working, often in front-line roles in nursing, care and retail, because they now have no pension that would allow them to retire.

Data shows that, since July 2020, women have accounted for the majority of furloughed workers in Scotland. Gender inequality has never been more exposed than it has been during the pandemic. When the pandemic is over, we must not go back to the old way of working, with women being disadvantaged in the workplace and overworked at home. The subject is huge—too huge to be tackled in a short debate—but it is clear that we have reached a watershed and that we must move towards a gender-equal economy and start making plans for that now.

A recent survey on work and mental health during the pandemic revealed that workers from all sectors and backgrounds are struggling to cope with the increased workload and with separating work and home life. One woman said that she felt like she had

“2020 responsibilities at work and 1950s home responsibilities”.

She went on to say:

“I don’t want my daughter to see that it’s always mum that does these things.”

Of course, we all have male family members and friends who take an equal share of domestic responsibilities but, as we have heard, the Institute for Fiscal Studies has found that, in the first lockdown, mothers did on average 50 per cent more unpaid childcare and housework than fathers. Enough is enough. The debate has demonstrated vividly why we need to change a society that takes women for granted at all levels. This is 2021. Our daughters and granddaughters deserve a fairer future and they deserve to be recognised as equals in everything that they do.

16:52

**Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab):** I thank Gillian Martin, who has taken the lead on many occasions in the Parliament on the issue of women, and I am pleased to support her debate. I have always supported the view that employment law should be devolved to the Scottish Parliament, so I support that, too. We have heard great speeches this afternoon highlighting women with disabilities, as Joan McAlpine did, BME women, as Elaine Smith did, and older women, as Rona Mackay did. It is important to talk about the diversity of women in our communities.

We know that women are carrying the burden of the crisis, with many having to juggle work and caring responsibilities. They are selflessly putting themselves before others and risking their health by working on the front line of the health crisis. As virtually all the previous speakers said, women are more likely to bear the brunt of the social and economic consequences of the pandemic. It is concerning that the United Nations secretary general has warned that Covid-19 could

“reverse the limited progress that has been made on gender equality and women’s rights”.

Women started the crisis from a position of economic disadvantage, and the pandemic has served only to deepen that. They are more likely than men are to be in precarious low-paid work. Data from the Resolution Foundation shows that only one in 10 lower earners are able to work from home, and that over two thirds of lower earners—69 per cent—are women. For those of us who have been able to work from home from time to

time during the pandemic, it is staggering to learn that the vast majority of low-paid workers, most of whom are women, have not been able to do that.

It is therefore no surprise that women have borne the brunt of the unemployment caused by the pandemic. A report by the Institute for Fiscal Studies found that mothers in the UK are 1.5 times more likely than fathers are to have quit their job or lost it during lockdown.

We know that women’s work is undervalued, and for many women who have retained their jobs, women’s work continues to be systematically undervalued. That contributes in large part to the gender pay gap, whereby there is often a discrepancy in the pay of women and men in jobs that require similar education and responsibility. Women make up 80 per cent of key workers in care, early years and childcare, nursing and our supermarkets. Not much has changed over the years. Unfortunately, those jobs are undervalued and underpaid, and we need to change that.

According to the Resolution Foundation, more than half of social care workers who are putting their health at risk during the coronavirus outbreak are paid less than the real living wage, which—outside London—is £9.30 an hour. Staff in that sector are four times more likely to be on a zero-hours contract than the average worker.

Since the start of the pandemic, there has been a surge in calls for people who work in care to be better appreciated and, crucially, better paid. In the current period, we have all had our eyes opened when it comes to the work that care workers do generally, and I hope that their situation will change for ever.

In a briefing for the debate, Oxfam noted the surge in caring responsibilities that Covid has caused and called for action to end the systemic undervaluing of care work as a national priority. I agree with that call.

Just last week, the independent review of adult social care in Scotland recommended the establishment of a national care service and concluded that the Scottish ministers need to have accountability for the delivery of social care. I think that there is consensus on the fact that we need a care service that puts people before profit, and Scottish Labour wants the pay of care workers to be increased to £15 an hour.

Many of those women who are able to work from home have the added pressure of home schooling. Trying to home school even one child, let alone several, while attempting to work is an incredible burden that we have placed on families. Women say that it is almost impossible to finish any task because they have to deal with constant interruptions and are forced to ignore their kids or to stop getting their work done. One mother I know

said that she feels as though she is failing at everything because she has so much to juggle. It is unfair for women to be placed in that situation on a daily basis.

There is a pressing need for us to consider refreshing our national childcare provision to ensure that we do not roll back on women's rights and their ability to progress their careers. As *Close the Gap* reminds us,

"There is a significant risk that the increase in caring responsibilities will force many women to leave their jobs, affecting their income and career prospects, and ultimately placing women and their children at greater risk of poverty."

Women in the Parliament have debated such issues over the past five years. Between us, we have set out the challenges for whichever women represent their communities in the next session of Parliament. I am pleased and proud to have taken part in Gillian Martin's debate.

16:57

**Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP):** I, too, thank Gillian Martin for securing this important debate and for the many considered, informative and heartfelt experiences that my MSP colleagues have laid out this afternoon. They have covered many of the issues that I might have spoken about, so I will move on and try not to repeat some of the great messages that we have already heard.

It was more than 20 years ago when I was studying economics as part of my degree that I first became aware of Marilyn Waring and her seminal book, *"If Women Counted"*. At the time, it shook the core of economic theory and perceived wisdom. The book was influential in tackling the methodology of the international standard of measuring economic growth. It challenged why travel to work was an economic activity but caring responsibilities were not. It persuaded the United Nations to redefine gross domestic product, inspired new accounting methods across the world and brought feminist economics to a mainstream audience. Indeed, J K Galbraith said of it:

"no concerned man or woman can ignore it."

The debate to which Marilyn Waring's book gave rise should be of concern to everyone, as it is essential to the economic success and the wellbeing of our nation. Twenty years ago, her book changed our view of work, and we can be glad of that.

The existence of the gender equality index that is referenced in Ms Martin's motion is testament to the impact of Marilyn Waring. In her parliamentary career in New Zealand, she framed the country's values and influenced exceptional policies on equal pay and environmental issues. She was also pivotal in the declaration of a nuclear-free New

Zealand. She gives us an example that we should aspire to and she shows what can be achieved with leadership and political will. Today, we look at the advances on gender equality in New Zealand as an example of what is possible.

There is absolutely no doubt that the challenges that have been outlined by Ms Martin and many other colleagues this afternoon are understood. We often talk about the symptoms, but we need to examine the underlying causes as well—the societal inequality and the gendered roles that exist, which Covid has only exacerbated and laid before us. It is right that they have been brought to the chamber for debate today.

As has been mentioned, today is the United Nations international day of women and girls in science. As a scientist, I have spoken in the chamber many times about the underrepresentation of women in STEM and something else that is perhaps even more worrying—the endemic sexism that has led to the leaky pipe of women leaving science professions. That was highlighted in the Royal Society of Edinburgh's report *"Tapping all our Talents"* and its update in 2018, and we must not let it fall from view or away from political attention.

We must do better in recognising the contribution of women in the professions, in the workplace and in their daily lives as they undertake caring responsibilities. We must recognise that their work counts and that low pay around gendered employment is systemic sexism that must be tackled. It leads to economic disadvantage that lasts a lifetime, with lower pensions following a life of lower pay.

As we reflect on the impact of Covid in our communities, it is clear that many women are engaged in key-worker duties that are low paid and are considered—I believe erroneously—to be low skilled. Other speakers have mentioned that. I also see the impact on BAME women. I see the economic and societal disadvantage that surrounds us and I reflect that those who are in jobs that we truly cannot function without need to be valued and recognised as we come out of the pandemic.

My experience as a councillor painfully reminds me of the failure of the job evaluation exercises across Scotland that saw a system put in place to undo some of the wrongs of the undervaluing of women's work, yet led to more systemic inequality. Organisations that were paid by women to represent their interests sometimes let them down and it took years for that to be put right, most recently in the equal pay awards in Glasgow, which were made not exclusively but mainly to women.

I will finish by highlighting just one of the symptoms of that economic inequality—the national gender pay gap. In order to include New Zealand in a comparison, we have to move away from the European Union index and look to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. In its most recent report, which is from 2018, the UK had a gap of 16.4 per cent while New Zealand's gap was 7.9 per cent, Ireland's was 5.9 per cent and Denmark's was 5.3 per cent.

One could easily draw the conclusion that small countries whose populations are similar to Scotland's and that have the complete economic levers of a normal country are in a far better position to move towards gender equality and wellbeing. That is something that we should all aspire to.

17:03

**The Minister for Business, Fair Work and Skills (Jamie Hepburn):** I join others in thanking Gillian Martin for lodging her motion, and I thank the other members who have taken part in the debate for their speeches.

I recognise the impact that the pandemic has had on women in the Scottish economy. I wholeheartedly agree that we must ensure that the position of women is properly considered and that they are properly supported as part of our economic recovery as we come through and out of Covid-19. How could we do anything else in these uncertain times, when women have been undertaking the majority of front-line roles? Those roles have rightly been recognised as essential; that they have been undertaken mainly by women must also be recognised. They include the roles in social care and retail that Gillian Martin mentioned when she opened the debate.

I join members in recognising the work done by organisations that powerfully articulate the voices of women on matters related to the economy. In particular, the work of Close the Gap and Engender has informed our understanding of the key issues affecting women during the pandemic and our approach to tackling them. Both organisations have contributed to the development of our gender equality index, and both participate in the gender pay gap working group, which I chair. That group has recently looked to repurpose some of the actions that were laid out in our gender pay gap action plan, with a specific eye to ensuring that they are appropriate and correct actions to take in responding to the impact of Covid-19. An update on those actions will be published in March.

I have always been clear that there is work to be done on this area, and that continues to be the

case—Elaine Smith was quite correct to make that point. We should recognise that the pandemic has the potential to damage women's employment opportunities in the longer term and to increase the gender pay gap in the coming years.

We know that the division of caring responsibilities exists and persists, and that is a challenge that we have to face head on. Women can be particularly impacted and put under pressure by school closures and increased care commitments, which might make it harder to maintain or undertake employment. The return of children to early learning and childcare and school, which is a priority for the Government, will help.

I am glad that the UK Government reviewed the guidance on the job retention scheme to make it clear that parents can be furloughed if they need to look after their children while schools are shut. I encourage all employers to support their employees' needs in whatever way is required. We made that clear in the fair work statement on Covid-19, which we jointly signed with organisations such as the Scottish Trades Union Congress.

I will, of course, be gladder still if and when the UK Government announces an extension to the job retention scheme, which has been and should continue to be a key response in supporting the retention of employees during the pandemic.

We know that flexible working can be another mechanism that supports women and other workers with caring, home schooling or other commitments. Covid-19 has brought about a rapid move to flexible working and working from home wherever that has been possible, albeit that it has not happened in ideal circumstances. The Scottish Government has funded Flexibility Works and Timewise to provide advice and support to a range of businesses and employment organisations on flexible working and home working as a response to the Covid-19 crisis.

We continue to support employers to advance equality in the workplace through our workplace equality fund. Our recent round of funding is supporting 12 projects with more than £300,000 of investment, some of which is focused on supporting women to enter, remain in and progress in work.

Through our women in enterprise framework, we are fully committed to tackling the entrepreneur gender gap and we continue to support a range of initiatives to do exactly that. That includes supporting the ambassadors programme with Women's Enterprise Scotland, which I thank for its work, and investing in the accelerateHER programme, which supports female-led companies to access finance and support.



We have allocated up to £15 million for a newly self-employed hardship fund, for those who have been failed by the UK Government's self-employed income support scheme. The second round of funding will open for applications shortly. I mention that because a number of members made apposite and appropriate remarks about the need to support women who have been compelled to take on forms of self-employment by virtue of their circumstances. We will support more of the newly self-employed, who have been missed out by the UK Government's support scheme.

Our range of employability support interventions recognises the increasing challenges that we are likely to see in the labour market, particularly for women. Members can be assured that those interventions are being developed and delivered with fair work, equality of opportunity and inclusion as central aims, and that a key element of our fair work activity is action to tackle the gender pay gap and create more diverse and inclusive workplaces. We are acting to support women in the labour market.

Our women returners programme supports women who have had a career break back into work. Projects focus on women who face multiple barriers. Twelve projects have been funded recently, some of which—the returners to finance programme, for example—support women in Aberdeen and the north-east. I am sure that Gillian Martin welcomes that focus on part of the country. I am sure that she also welcomes the energy transition zone in Aberdeen, which is creating around 8,000 training opportunities and building on the offshore wind skills mapping exercise to encourage and support women and others into employment.

We are also increasing the parental employability support fund by a further £2.35 million, which brings in-year investment to £7.35 million in total. That fund targets priority groups such as lone parents and, as Ruth Maguire mentioned, we know that the vast majority of lone parents are women.

Our young person's guarantee, our national transition training fund, our fair start Scotland employability programme, our employability fund, the community jobs Scotland programme and our no one left behind activity will all have a huge role to play in supporting women in the Scottish economy as we recover from Covid-19. Through those activities and our wider approach to economic recovery, I believe that we will make a difference to supporting women and improving their position in the labour market through the Covid-19 pandemic.

However, I do not want members to feel that I have ended with a litany of self-congratulatory statements about what we are doing as a

Government. I believe that what I have laid out and the direction that we have set out will contribute positively, but I return to my earlier point that I recognise that there is still much more to be done. Those who have contributed to the debate and—just as important, if not more important, perhaps—women throughout Scotland can be sure that with that recognition is a determination to do much more. My priority is that, as a Government, we will continue to ensure that we work concertedly to ensure that women are not disadvantaged by Covid-19.

I again thank Gillian Martin for lodging the motion and other members for their contributions.

## Galloway National Park

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame):** The final item of business today is a members' business debate on motion S5M-23892, in the name of Emma Harper, on the potential for a Galloway national park. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

### *Motion debated,*

That the Parliament recognises the Galloway National Park Association's work in promoting the establishment of a national park in the area as potentially Scotland's third such development; considers that this could bring positive benefits to mental and physical health, conservation, the environment, the economy and future sustainability; understands that, in 2017, following the publication of a discussion paper and a period of community consultation and engagement, the Association published *A Galloway National Park—It's Our Time*, which identified the goal of the proposed park as to promote an attractive and healthy natural and cultural environment that will benefit the communities of Galloway both socially and economically, and offer broader benefits to others, including visitors, and provide a vibrant and sustainable future in which the region's young people can flourish; recognises that the paper aims to strengthen the argument for the establishment of the national park in the area, ultimately leading to the development of further national parks; understands that, ahead of the COP26 conference, the Scottish Government has committed in its Statement of Intent on Biodiversity for an additional 7.3% of land to be designated as protected to meet the proposed UN 2030 target; considers that a Galloway national park could provide an ideal opportunity to help achieve this; believes that national parks, and protected outdoor green spaces, provide opportunities for people to access the outdoors and try new activities; considers that they promote positive health and wellbeing that can reduce stress, depression and help address physical health conditions such as obesity and type 2 diabetes as part of a social prescribing approach; thanks the Association and its Chair, Rob Lucas, and President, Dame Barbara Kelly, for their work so far on this issue, and notes calls for the Scottish Government to set out, in principle, its position on a national park for Galloway, which could proudly be Scotland's third national park.

17:13

**Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP):** I welcome the opportunity to debate the motion, which allows me to highlight Bonnie Galloway and the south-west of Scotland.

I thank colleagues from all parties who have supported my motion to move on the conversation about the potential of a national park, and I thank the Galloway National Park Association, its president, Dame Barbara Kelly, its chair, Rob Lucas and all the other trustees. I also thank NFU Scotland, Scottish Land & Estates and Ramblers Scotland for their briefings, as well as the individual farmers and others who have contacted me with their views.

I have been impressed by the media and social media reaction to the motion. It is good to have people laying their cards on the table.

This evening, we shall examine the pros and cons of the potential for a national park for Galloway; its potential benefits to health and wellbeing and conservation, the environment, the economy and future sustainability; and the GNPA discussion paper "A Galloway National Park—It's Our Time".

Specifically, the pandemic has demonstrated the absolute necessity of access to outdoor spaces, which supports health and wellbeing. Evidence to the Health and Sport Committee and our report on social prescribing back that up. Tackling obesity, preventing type 2 diabetes, tackling cardiovascular disease and promoting good mental health are all part of that.

The GNPA states that a national park could attract more visitors and promote a thriving rural economy in the south-west while helping to tackle the climate emergency and promoting biodiversity. The Scottish Government has committed to protecting at least 30 per cent of our land for nature by 2030—that is 30 by 30—and a national park could aid in that. National park status for Galloway would raise the profile of the area and attract visitors, new residents and investment. Strengthening the resilience of communities is a goal of the association.

All of that has to be done properly and not to the detriment of local farmers, rural and agricultural businesses or the Galloway and Southern Ayrshire Biosphere Reserve, which has been designated by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. Earlier in the parliamentary session, I hosted an event to raise awareness of the biosphere and its work. I welcome the recent award of £1.9 million in funding, over five years, for the UNESCO biosphere from South of Scotland Enterprise. SOSE needs to be supported in its excellent economic development work. It has achieved a lot since it hit the ground running last year, as the pandemic started.

Respondents to the GNPA's survey felt that Galloway's dispersed rural population presents additional challenges, but the long-term security of being a national park was seen by many communities and businesses—including hotels, bed and breakfasts and outdoor activity providers—as a potential catalyst for their development and expansion. The pandemic has shown us that working and learning from home in a rural community is achievable as long as digital connectivity requirements are met. I therefore welcome the Scottish Government's investment in digital roll-out. A national park would provide our region's young people with additional employment opportunities on their doorstep. It would give them

a choice of career prospects, whether they chose to remain in the area or to return to Galloway following further education.

We know that south-west Scotland already has world-class destinations such as the internationally recognised UNESCO biosphere, the dark sky park in Galloway forest and the 7stanes mountain bike trails. Let us not forget to add the waterfront at Stranraer on the Rhins of Galloway to that world-class list, as it has hosted the world's skiffie championship and is home to the famous Stranraer oyster festival.

As well as the positives that the national park could bring, it is important to highlight the concerns that have been raised. The NFU's briefing clearly states that it does not support a proposal for a Galloway national park at this time. Interestingly, I have also been contacted by NFU members who farm in Galloway who are in favour of a national park. There are concerns that national park status could create more bureaucracy and barriers to development with regard to farming and policy that would not benefit agricultural businesses that are looking to invest, diversify or develop new income streams. A national park cannot become a barrier to mitigating climate change by preventing modern farming practices or renewable energy policies being implemented. I am aware that there are ways in which planning powers can be retained by local authorities and not assumed by national park boards. Those issues need to be explored and discussed further.

It is crucial that all stakeholders are at the table when the potential for a national park is being discussed. There are now new stakeholders, such as South of Scotland Enterprise, regional land use partnerships and the South of Scotland Destination Alliance, which is the new

"strategic Destination Management and Marketing Organisation"

for tourism and hospitality across the south of Scotland.

I am acutely aware that we are still in a global pandemic, that businesses in Galloway and across Scotland are getting hammered by Boris's bungled Brexit and that we are near the end of the parliamentary session. However, I am looking at the light at the end of the tunnel, and that light is shining on Galloway. With that in mind, I want to make it clear to the minister that I am not asking for immediate action. The Covid pandemic, the vaccine roll-out and repairing the damage from Boris's Brexit are of primary importance. I am asking that we plan ahead for Galloway's future and that the Government sets out its position on further consultation on the potential for a national park and on whether it will pursue wider

consultation to best serve the future interests of all parties in Galloway.

17:20

**David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP):** I thank Emma Harper for securing this important debate.

As I am a lifelong member of the scouts and an outdoor enthusiast, discussion of Scotland's national parks is close to my heart. It makes me proud that a founding father of national parks was the Scot John Muir, who left Dunbar as a young boy for a life in America. His efforts in the 1890s led to the development of the world-wide national parks movement, and his legacy led to the Scottish Parliament passing national parks legislation in 2000 as an early part of the land reform programme.

Scotland's rich and varied landscapes are among the best in the world, ranking highly in their richness, quality and diversity. We have stunning beaches, coastlines, ancient woodlands, wild mountains, rivers and lochs, all of which are rich in wildlife and history and provide great opportunities for outdoor recreation. They are one of our country's greatest assets, attracting visitors from far and wide, and they have long been celebrated in art, literature and music all over the world.

The world-wide recognition of Scotland's natural and cultural heritage is reflected in our nature-based tourism, which is estimated to be worth £1.4 billion to the economy annually and which supports 39,000 full-time-equivalent jobs. As national parks are the leading internationally recognised destinations for visitors to our natural and cultural heritage, national park status brings higher levels of protection to our most treasured landscapes and wildlife, and it improves opportunities for the restoration of damaged habitats.

Since the establishment of the Loch Lomond and the Trossachs national park, in 2002, and the Cairngorms national park, in 2003, our national parks have been hugely influential in supporting the health, economy and natural heritage of their areas as well as of the country as a whole. Those benefits can clearly be seen in areas such as Aviemore. For more than 30 years, I have been a regular visitor to the area and I have seen the dramatic changes that the town has undergone. Originally a small, tranquil town, it has been revitalised through investment since the national park designation, in 2003, and it is now a leading destination in Scotland. My knees will testify to the number of years that I have spent snowboarding in the Cairngorm mountains, but the area offers so much more. The beauty of the area is its diversity, and it has arguably become one of the best places in Scotland for all ages and abilities to experience

a range of activities from walking, for those who want to relax, to white-water rafting, for the more adventurous among us.

We all know that outdoor recreation brings many benefits for our health and wellbeing, but that has never been more true than during the past year. The Covid pandemic has affected everything that we do, including the way and the volume in which we use the great outdoors, and it has shown just how much people value parks, beaches and lochs. When people participate in outdoor recreation, they do not just get fitter and healthier; they also feel better mentally. As a member of the Health and Sport Committee, I know that there are links between physical activity and the improvement of our health and wellbeing, and the topic has been given considerable attention. During the committee's work on social prescribing, it became clear to us that physical activity is an investment, not a cost, and that by positively influencing individual practices and personal behaviour choices we can build healthier communities and prevent long-term conditions rather than manage them.

However, increased outdoor activity can be a source of challenges, as has been highlighted by the Scottish Campaign for National Parks. The past year has revealed just how essential visitor management is, and there have been many reports of problems with parking, toilets, litter, camping, fires and path erosion. I strongly agree that managing access to the countryside for outdoor recreation is at the heart of the mission of the national parks, and I believe that having more national parks can contribute significantly to resolving such problems, benefiting visitors and communities and the future sustainability of the environment.

I will take a moment to commend the dedication and work of the Galloway National Park Association for promoting the establishment of a national park in the area and for its extensive engagement with the local community and local authorities. I am familiar with the natural beauty of the Dumfries area. Every summer, my scout group would camp in the beautiful Etrick valley and would regularly hike the southern uplands and take in the spectacular Grey Mare's Tail. The view from Loch Skeen has to be one of the most stunning panoramic views ever seen. However, you will know all about it if you get caught there in weather like we have had recently. Aside from the breathtaking Dumfriesshire scenery, the highlight for the scouts was always the wild mountain goats. Year after year, children would return home completely changed by their experiences.

I believe that Scotland's national parks lead the way in tackling the climate emergency and nature crisis, promoting mental and physical health and

wellbeing, boosting rural employment and celebrating our world-class landscapes. Therefore, I would welcome further consultation on proposals for a third national park in Scotland as we continue working towards fulfilling our commitment to increase protected areas for nature from the current 23 per cent to 30 per cent by 2030.

17:25

**Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con):** I am pleased to speak in the debate, and I thank Emma Harper for bringing the topic to the chamber again. It is one that I know my dearly missed friend, mentor, Presiding Officer, MSP for Galloway and West Dumfries and long-time champion of national parks, Sir Alex Fergusson, would have approved of. I am not sure that he would have approved of Ms Harper's opportunism in suggesting that Brexit has anything to do with national parks, however. He would have been more interested in highlighting her Scottish National Party's boorach of missed environmental and biodiversity targets.

After many years of campaigning, I am sure that Sir Alex would rather have debated a different motion to the one that is in front of us, because there is little in it to debate or disagree with. I will not revisit old arguments, because there is little doubt that Galloway has all the credentials that are required for it to be Scotland's next national park. Sadly, however, we already know the Scottish Government's regrettable and short-sighted position.

I would have preferred the motion to make an unambiguous call: that, given the grass-roots support from evidence that has been collected by the Galloway National Park Association, and given the cross-party political support for the establishment of a new national park, we parliamentarians demand that the Government initiate the process that is set out in the National Parks (Scotland) Act 2000.

In summary, the act states:

"The Scottish Ministers may require ... Scottish Natural Heritage, or ... any other public body appearing to them to have expertise ... to consider a National Park proposal and ... to report to them, on matters including

(a) the area which it is proposed should be designated as a National Park,

(b) the desirability of designating the area in question ... as a National Park,

(c) the functions which it is proposed the National Park authority for the Park should exercise,

(d) the likely annual costs and capital expenses of the authority in exercising its functions".

In short, that is the feasibility study and consultation on establishment of a national park in Galloway that we have long asked for.

Galloway National Park Association has already provided a strong case for a national park in Galloway to help to balance development and environmental pressures in the area, and to bring considerable social and economic benefits, but that has fallen on deaf ears. I do not buy the Scottish Government's excuse that South of Scotland Enterprise and the borderlands growth deal will fulfil many of the economic and environmental aims that would be delivered by a national park. Cairngorms national park is in the Highlands and Islands Enterprise area and Loch Lomond and Trossachs national park is split between the HIE and Scottish Enterprise areas, so the SOSE argument does not hold water.

More worryingly, the minister stated in a letter to me this week:

"it would not be appropriate at this time to set out plans to undertake feasibility studies to designate new national parks when the focus must be on managing the coronavirus pandemic, building a green recovery and progressing current plans to address climate change and biodiversity loss."

I know that Mr Macpherson is new in his role, but that is like saying "We don't want new national parks because we're focusing on the very things that new national parks would help us to achieve".

I thank stakeholders for their representations. On a first read, NFU Scotland appears to oppose a national park. However, on closer examination, its position is similar to Scottish Land & Estates' position. They both pretty much say that they are reserving judgment until they know more about the issues and opportunities that might come from national park status. I agree with that; that is the position that I take.

I will be the first person to reject national park status for Galloway if a feasibility study suggests that it would fail to pursue sustainable economic and social development of local communities alongside conservation and recreation. The Galloway countryside looks as it does right now because of farming practices over the centuries, so farming would be critical to achieving the national park's objectives.

There would be an increased emphasis on supporting future farm innovation, diversification and market development, which is particularly important post Brexit, and with future climate change measures that will herald a period of significant change. The area would undoubtedly attract additional funding to provide support and advice for farming and rural businesses. Indeed, higher levels of resources tend to be available to farmers within national parks than to those outwith them.

I believe that we can address any unanswered questions and concerns through the formal

process that the Scottish Government should undertake. Scotland's existing national parks currently lead the way in tackling the climate emergency and nature crisis, in promoting mental and physical health and wellbeing, in boosting rural employment and in celebrating our world-class landscapes.

Existing and new national parks would, therefore, be ideally placed to kick-start the green future that remote and rural areas now require. Scotland needs more national parks, including in Galloway. I urge Ben Macpherson to reconsider his position. His Government often tells us that Scotland is world leading. I point out to him that Chile has created five new national parks that cover more than 10 million acres. If a developing nation such as Chile can designate more national parks, surely Scotland can.

17:30

**Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab):** I welcome the opportunity to make the case again for a Galloway national park. However, it is frustrating that, weeks before the end of the current session of Parliament, we are debating a motion that simply

"notes calls for the Scottish Government to set out ... its position".

It is more than a year since Parliament unanimously agreed to support my motion—not only recognising the contribution that our national parks make, but agreeing that new national parks should be designated. Sadly, the will of Parliament has, so far, been ignored.

It is more than 20 years since Parliament passed the National Parks (Scotland) Act 2000, which paved the way for the then Labour-led Scottish Executive to create Loch Lomond and the Trossachs national park in 2002 and the Cairngorms national park in 2003. The parks have delivered social, economic and environmental boosts for the areas, but we know that there is unfinished business. Despite Scotland's outstanding natural beauty, and despite the fact that national park status is a successful and internationally recognised brand, we still have just two national parks in Scotland. We can compare that with 10 in England and three in Wales, and with the situation in topographically similar countries such as New Zealand, which has 14 national parks, and Norway, which has 37.

Given our world-class scenery, the protection and management that national parks provide for that scenery, and the positive impact on tourism and rural development of the national park brand, the case for expanding the number of parks in Scotland is absolutely compelling. That is why it is Labour policy, going into the next election, to do

just that, and to go further by strengthening local accountability, which is important. National parks are already governed by people who are directly elected from the local community, along with local councillors and national experts. We believe that the proportion of local representatives on boards should be a bit higher—a move that is already allowed under the legislation. Ultimately, there is no one-size-fits-all model for a national park. Despite the myths, the way in which a new national park would work, including planning, would be developed by the local community to meet the needs of that community.

There is no stronger case—and no stronger community support for a new national park—than the case that has been made by the Galloway National Park Association’s campaign. It has previously highlighted that park status could add between 250,000 and 500,000 new visits each year to Galloway and South Ayrshire, which would be worth between £30 million and £60 million in additional spend, thereby helping to create and support between 700 and 1,400 additional jobs. Even before the current pandemic, the weaknesses and challenges of the local economy in one of the most peripheral parts of Scotland were there for all to see, so the economic boost that a Galloway national park could bring was needed. That need is now more important than ever.

A Galloway national park would play a part in our region by leading the way not only in Scotland’s economic recovery, but in our environmental recovery. Last year, the Scottish Government gave a commitment to increase our protected areas for nature to at least 30 per cent of Scotland’s terrestrial area by 2030, in line with the international Campaign for Nature. However, with the clock ticking, we currently sit at just 23 per cent. Across the UK, that target is being met by designating new national parks, so Scotland is in danger of being left behind.

In conclusion, I note that there is a saying that we hear in Dumfries and Galloway: “That’s how it’s ayewis been.” It is a saying that has not served our region well. If we are to build back better after the pandemic, we in Dumfries and Galloway need to raise our game. The young people who leave our region—not because they want to, but because they have to—should not have to accept that that’s how it’s ayewis been. Those who live in poverty—we are the region in Scotland with the lowest pay—should not have to accept it. When we compare the level of tourism in Dumfries and Galloway with many other areas of the country and see that it is lower, and when we know just how much our region has to offer, we should not—and we cannot—accept that that’s how it’s ayewis been.

There will not be many opportunities to give the economy of Dumfries and Galloway a boost. A new national park is not a panacea, but it offers a rare chance to make a difference, and to complement the environmental work of the Galloway and Southern Ayrshire Biosphere and the economic work of the new South of Scotland Enterprise agency and the borderlands agreement. The Galloway National Park Association has submitted a detailed report to the Scottish Government, asking it to carry out a feasibility study. I hope that we will get a commitment today from the minister to do just that, and that we can take a step towards completing that unfinished business.

17:34

**Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP):** I thank Emma Harper for bringing the motion to the chamber. It is not my place, living as far as I do from Galloway, to tell Gallovidians whether they should have a national park or where it might be. However, I welcome the debate about that and about the benefits that national parks can bring. I will try to contribute to it by mentioning the conversations that have already taken place on the issue in my constituency.

However, before I do that, I want to say something that I think many others have already said today: that the south-west is a beautiful part of Scotland that more visitors really deserve to know something about. I hope that, when we get past the current crisis, people in Scotland and beyond will realise what a wonderful part of Scotland Galloway is.

As someone who, many years ago, walked the whole of the Southern upland way, from Portpatrick, through Galloway, and on to the east, I can confirm that Galloway has landscapes that rival anything else in Scotland. It also has a fascinating history, with speakers of Gaelic, Anglo-Saxon—later, Scots—and Brythonic—that is, Welsh—cohabiting in a landscape that was made famous throughout medieval Europe in French by the long poem about Fergus of Galloway.

Before I digress on any of that, however, I wish to say that more people should see Galloway. The national park idea might be a way of achieving that, if that is what Galloway chooses.

Let me offer a few insights into national parks from the Isle of Harris, in my constituency. Galloway suffers, I suspect, from some of the same challenges as Harris, including depopulation that is exacerbated by a housing market that is increasingly aimed, and priced, at moneyed retirees.

That is why the model for a national park that was promoted in the community in Harris some

years ago was aimed at protecting not just the natural environment, but the human one. That model aims to encompass development of the cultural uniqueness of the place and its need for economic development and housing. As someone who personally recoils from the word “wilderness”, at least when it is used to describe places in the world that have in fact been inhabited for centuries, those are all important factors.

Conversely, in Harris, as in Galloway, people are aware of the need to ensure that any hypothetical national park would sustainably manage numbers of tourists. People, it must be admitted, have a tendency to go on holiday where they are told to go. If the community in Galloway has the lead in the various debates on the matter, I am sure that it is more than capable of taking the right decisions.

In Harris, the people voted in a referendum in favour of a national park. In the end, however, the necessary buy-in to the idea from the local authority was not there. The idea has, so far, not progressed, although it might appear again in the future, given the hard work that went into producing the original proposals.

With those observations from elsewhere, I wish people in Galloway every success as they reach their decision about whether to pursue a national park. I hope that today’s debate helps to move that conversation forward.

17:38

**The Minister for Rural Affairs and the Natural Environment (Ben Macpherson):** The contribution that our national parks make to conserving our natural environment and delivering sustainable economic growth is unquestioned, and it has been emphasised by colleagues today, quite rightly. The work of national parks in protecting species and habitats, promoting tourism, facilitating the enjoyment and health benefits of using the outdoors and promoting local and national priorities is fully recognised and very much valued by the Scottish Government.

I thank Emma Harper for drawing this important issue to our attention and I acknowledge the considerable work that has been undertaken by the Galloway National Park Association on its aspirations for the area as a whole, including a new national park.

Galloway is an area of outstanding natural beauty that boasts an abundance of wildlife, superb coastlines and scenic uplands. It is home to Scotland’s first dark sky park, sited in the ancient Galloway forest park, and it is an internationally designated UNESCO biosphere. In recognition of its unique landscape, the area also has three designated national scenic areas.

In recognition of the importance of the Galloway area, and in relation to the matters under discussion today, my predecessor Mairi Gougeon met the Galloway National Park Association and Finlay Carson MSP a number of times to explain the Scottish Government’s long-standing position on the designation of new national parks. Although we fully understand the desire to maximise the benefits of the area and the enthusiasm for a new national park designation, the Scottish Government’s position remains unchanged at present, with no plans to designate new national parks in Scotland.

There are a number of good reasons for that position, which I will set out in more detail. I appreciate that there is a long-standing belief among campaigners that national park status provides the top accolade with regard to environmental designation and safeguards against potential development. However, national parks are by no means the only positive landscape designation to recognise an area’s natural heritage and to stimulate its potential economic growth: the south of Scotland currently benefits from a range of designations that recognise its landscape and are aimed at increasing tourism, boosting jobs and bringing investment to the area—aspirations and aims that members have, rightly, highlighted today.

I am keen to ensure that we make the best possible use of existing designations. As I mentioned, the south of Scotland is home to a biosphere, the Galloway forest park, national nature reserves, and several sites of special scientific interest and special areas of conservation. National park status is one of many landscape designations that can help boost the economic opportunities of an area, but it is not the only one.

I fully recognise that the south of Scotland has a particular set of socioeconomic challenges that need to be addressed, which is why we are making significant investment in the area. The new south of Scotland economic partnership and the Borderlands inclusive growth deal—more than £400 million in total—have a key role in addressing the economic issues in the area and driving growth and tourism. Until the new partnership has had time to bed in and the significant investment in the Borderlands inclusive growth deal has had time to take effect, we do not believe that it would be appropriate to make further commitments on the scale and significance that national park designation would require. There is a process of consideration to go through in the years ahead, which we can do collectively.

The Scottish Government has real concerns over the costs that would be associated with the designation of new national parks in Scotland. I

am afraid that we do not share the optimism that meaningful new parks could be set up at minimal cost. The associated costs would be considerable and involve a complex process of consultation and consideration by the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament.

Timescales are estimated at between two and four years, depending on the level of support, functions and governance structure that are suggested. Our existing national parks have combined annual budgets of more than £18 million in 2021-22, which, in part, recognise the additional financial pressures and challenges that the response to the Covid-19 pandemic has required; I alluded to that in my letter to Mr Carson this week. We therefore need to consider, appropriately and prudently, the affordability of additional investment on this scale at this time, given the pressures that existing national parks, tourism and hospitality and, more generally, public finances currently face. We have to be explicit and realistic in that regard.

Although the Scottish Government and I fully recognise the Galloway National Park Association's strong desire to build on the remarkable success of our existing national parks, as well as its enthusiasm and that of MSP colleagues who have spoken today, I am aware that not everyone shares the same level of enthusiasm. As has been referenced, the NFUS has reservations about the proposals. Such differing views simply demonstrate the need to balance interests and ensure that we maximise the potential benefits of the area's existing designations and opportunities. The new South of Scotland Enterprise agency has an important role to play in that regard.

As I said, the creation of a new national park requires considerable planning and carries cost implications. Given the considerations that I have outlined, we believe that, at present, it is essential to focus support on our two existing national parks to ensure that they continue their valuable contribution to tourism and sustainable rural economic development.

I pay tribute to all members who have spoken today, and to those who have campaigned on the issue. In particular, I pay tribute to the Galloway National Park Association for its work so far. The Scottish Government looks forward to continued engagement with the association and constituency and regional MSPs on how we can appropriately progress our shared aspirations to enhance and recognise the natural environment and other interests in Galloway and, more widely, the south of Scotland.

I thank members for their contributions, and the association for its work. I thank Emma Harper for bringing the topic to the Parliament for debate. As

I said, we should continue to talk, engage and work together.

*Meeting closed at 17:46.*



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