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Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 21 March 2023

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The first item of business is time for reflection. Our time for reflection leader today is the Rev Heller Gonzalez, rector at St Augustine's Scottish Episcopal Church in Dumbarton and novice brother of the Anglican Order of Cistercians.

The Rev Heller Gonzalez (St Augustine's Scottish Episcopal Church, Dumbarton, and the Anglican Order of Cistercians): Presiding Officer and members of the Scottish Parliament, thank you for inviting me to address you today.

I was born and brought up in Cuba. Twenty years ago, my family and I, like many Cubans before and since, were forced to flee my country. Travelling into the unknown is a frightening experience. For the next 12 years, Spain would be my new home.

In 2015, an opportunity arose to live and work in Scotland. The Scottish Episcopal Church welcomed my wife and me, which heralded the beginning of a new life serving as an associate priest at the Episcopal churches in Kilmacolm, Port Glasgow and Bridge of Weir. Six years of cultural discovery and learning followed.

Then, two years ago, a further new chapter began for us: my ministry took me to the other side of the Clyde, to Dumbarton. Here I was to find a wonderful welcoming community spirit. It is no secret that deprivation and unemployment have affected many areas in West Dunbartonshire. The former industries of glassmaking and shipbuilding have now all but disappeared. For such a small place, the number of people struggling is heartbreaking.

Local churches and community groups have pulled together to support those in need. Church community halls are functioning as warm hubs where free lunches are provided. A listening ear is offered to those with little hope, the broken, the fearful, the abused, those struggling with addiction and the lonely. To the people we serve and to us, that is important work.

As a result of the cost of living crisis, we have seen a sharp increase in the need for those hubs. As is often the case, people of good will and compassion have come forward when most needed. The opening words of the "Rule of St

Benedict" sum it up beautifully. There needs to be a

"listening with the ears of our hearts".

In these difficult days, when many feel an utter desperation, the message that the church is called to proclaim is to look towards Easter for renewal of hope and even life itself. Yes! Through God, those things can be achieved. It is God who breathes life once again into the tired and dispirited.

As you all strive to make Scotland a better place for all, may it be given to you to listen with the ears of your hearts to the needs of the people of this country. Thank you.

Topical Question Time

14:04

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is topical questions. As ever, short and concise questions and responses are appreciated.

Circularity Scotland (Chief Executive's Salary)

1. **Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on whether it is appropriate for the chief executive of Circularity Scotland to be paid a reported annual salary of £300,000. (S6T-01276)

The Minister for Green Skills, Circular Economy and Biodiversity (Lorna Slater): Circularity Scotland is a not-for-profit company that is delivered and funded by industry in line with the polluter-pays principle. That structure is based on successful schemes elsewhere in Europe and was approved by the Scottish Parliament in 2020. Circularity Scotland is, therefore, separate from Government and we have no role in the recruitment of staff or their pay levels. Decisions on pay are made by the Circularity Scotland board, which is made up of members with a range of experience across a range of sectors. That is appropriate for a private company that is delivering an industry-led scheme.

Colin Smyth: The minister said that the scheme is business led, but let us be clear: it is being big business led at the moment. Only big businesses can become individual members of Circularity Scotland, and it would appear that only big businesses such as Biffa can get contracts for collecting bottles.

Let us also be clear that it was the minister who approved Circularity Scotland. It was not businesses but the minister who made that decision. Was she aware of the proposed wage structure for the company's senior executive when she appointed Circularity Scotland as the scheme administrator? If not, when did she become aware of the plan to pay such excessive salaries, and has she at any time expressed concern about them? It seems that this monopoly has a licence from the minister to print money not for the benefit of producers but for the benefit of its bosses.

Lorna Slater: Circularity Scotland is a private, not-for-profit company, and it would be inappropriate for ministers to interfere with or comment on—*[Interruption.]* It is a private company.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you. We will hear the minister.

Lorna Slater: Members of Circularity Scotland include the Scottish Grocers Federation, the Scottish Beer and Pub Association, the Society of Independent Brewers, the National Federation of Retail Newsagents and the Association of Convenience Stores. Those are the bodies that make up Circularity Scotland, and small businesses are powerfully represented.

Colin Smyth: The minister needs to learn to answer the questions that she is asked. I asked her whether she was aware of the wage structures when she appointed Circularity Scotland as the administrator, when she became aware and whether she has, at any time, expressed concern.

Given the importance of ensuring value for money, small producers are deeply worried about the cost of the scheme. Surely the minister should have asked for the information before she made the decision, because the regulations that the Parliament agreed are clear that applications

"for approval as a scheme administrator must be made to the Scottish Ministers"

and must

"include any ... information requested by the Scottish Ministers."

Why was that information not requested? Given that the minister now knows what the excessive eye-watering salaries are, how does she expect small producers to sign up for a scheme when they are so clearly being ripped off and part of their fees is being used for the excessive salaries of bosses who are using Scotland as a stepping stone for their wider aim of running deposit return schemes right across the United Kingdom?

Lorna Slater: Circularity Scotland's application to become scheme administrator was approved on 21 March 2021. Any other organisation can also apply to be scheme administrator provided that it can meet the requirements set out in the Deposit and Return Scheme for Scotland Regulations 2020. The DRS regulations were passed by the Parliament and CSL was an applicant that met those requirements.

Producers and small retailers have been an important part of designing and putting in place Scotland's deposit return scheme, and Circularity Scotland has worked closely with them, including in improving cash flow from day 1 and having the highest return-handling fees for manual return points in the world.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): It is clear from the minister's failure, once again, to answer straightforward questions that Circularity Scotland Ltd is a creature that is entirely out of control. It is deciding its own policies, is deciding its own salaries and will decimate small businesses throughout Scotland, whether those be

shops, pubs, clubs, brewers, distillers or recycling companies. In creating Circularity Scotland Ltd, has the minister not, on behalf of the Scottish Government, created a monster—a modern-day, 21st century Frankenstein—that is entirely out of control?

Lorna Slater: Circularity Scotland has been created by industry to support Scottish businesses to comply with the regulations that were passed by the Parliament. The approach of an industry-led scheme that is paid for by industry was supported by Scottish Labour and the Conservatives, and it is the same as schemes around the world. We are not reinventing the wheel here. Scotland's scheme is in line with successful schemes around the world.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): The minister cannot be serious. It is an insult to the Parliament that she comes here, is asked questions and then reads a scripted answer, whether or not it is relevant to the question that has been asked. Is she seriously saying that this not-for-profit company whose creation she has facilitated has nothing to do with her and that it can do what it likes? The people of Scotland will have formed their own views of those monstrous salary figures and of the incompetence of the minister, who is patently not fit for purpose.

Lorna Slater: I did not hear a question in there. Significant progress has been made towards Scotland's deposit return scheme as we work towards our go-live date in August this year.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): The Scottish Government has confirmed that Circularity Scotland is to be exempt from the Freedom of Information Act 2000. Does the minister agree that freedom of information should be extended to cover all providers of public services, including private firms that provide public services, such as Circularity Scotland?

Lorna Slater: Circularity Scotland is, indeed, a private not-for-profit company, and it is not subject to freedom of information legislation because it does not provide a public service as described by the member. Therefore, as a private company, it is not subject to freedom of information requests.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): The minister has been dragged into the chamber, week after week, because of the secrecy that has shrouded this Scottish Government-led company. It took a leaked document for us to find out about the extraordinary salaries that are being paid by CSL. We cannot find out anything about CSL because the Scottish Government will not allow us to FOI something when it does not want to answer a question. Lorna Slater has made CSL a private company so that she does not have to be held accountable and admit how badly the scheme

is being rolled out. Is it not about time that she lifted the shroud of secrecy and allowed the Parliament and us parliamentarians to understand what is really going on with this DRS?

Lorna Slater: I have said it before but I am happy to repeat it over and over again: Scotland's deposit return scheme is being delivered and funded by industry, and Scottish Labour and the Scottish Conservatives supported that approach, including the creation of an industry-led scheme administrator. Many of the questions that are being answered in the chamber could be answered by simply using Google, because CSL has an excellent website. I encourage members to look at it if they are unsure of the membership and board members of CSL.

The Presiding Officer: Can members please resist the temptation to speak over ministers when they are responding?

Highly Protected Marine Areas (Impact on Fishing Industry)

2. Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the Scottish Fishermen's Federation's recent warnings about the potential impact of highly protected marine areas on the fishing industry. (S6T-01270)

The Minister for Environment and Land Reform (Màiri McAllan): I begin by acknowledging that I expect this issue to generate interest among many stakeholders. As with a lot of the issues in my environment and land reform portfolio, there is a spectrum of views on these issues, and views are often polarised to either end of that spectrum.

Just as I have tried to handle other similar matters, I give a cast-iron assurance that the process will engage broadly and deeply, including with all those who will be affected by the policy. I believe strongly in that approach.

However, I cannot answer the question without referring to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report that was published yesterday, which has been called a "survival guide for humanity" and which makes absolutely plain the urgency of the need to take action on the climate and nature emergencies.

We are in the early stages of developing highly protected marine areas. Our consultation is ongoing and we are seeking views on what they should look like and how they should be selected and implemented. Fishing communities should be reassured that their views will be heard as part of that consultation, and the socioeconomic factors that affect the resilience of marine industries, fishers and coastal communities will be taken into account.

Rachael Hamilton: Last night, Scotland's finance secretary echoed the words of Elspeth Macdonald from the SFF, who has said that the proposals are unevidenced and

"have been hijacked by the Greens and will push the fishing industry into the red."

The Scottish National Party health secretary has different views and believes that the Greens are right.

Which of the two leading candidates to become Scotland's First Minister does the environment minister agree with: the candidate who quotes industry experts, or the candidate who panders to Green party ideology?

Màiri McAllan: I am not clear how that question is relevant to the issue of highly protected marine areas. I encourage Rachael Hamilton to focus on the issue at hand, which is something that is likely to be far more important to coastal and fishing communities than exchanges between candidates in the SNP leadership contest.

My position is exceptionally clear: we are in the teeth of a climate and nature crisis and the window within which we can take action commensurate with that challenge is narrowing. We must be bold, and the introduction of HPMA's is a bold proposal. By the same token, I am equally clear that everyone who will be affected by the policy will be deeply and widely consulted as we develop that policy.

Rachael Hamilton: Màiri McAllan is absolutely right: the SNP is indeed in crisis. Councillor Norman MacDonald said:

"It is clear, that Edinburgh-based Government Ministers and policy makers have no understanding of the devastating consequences these disgraceful HPMA proposals will have on the economy and community of the Outer Hebrides".

The chairwoman of Tiree Community Development Trust has said that the island was

"perilously close to being non-viable"

with a local fisherman adding

"If this ... is landed on top of us, we would be wiped out overnight with one stroke of the pen on a chart."

Furthermore, the SFF has been clear that the proposals, which would decimate a vital industry, are entirely unevidenced.

Will the Government listen, and will it commit to taking an evidence-based approach to HPMA's, or are we going to see a national-scale repeat of the Clyde cod box debacle, as was demanded by the Green party in return for its support for independence at the expense of the livelihoods and lives of fragile rural communities?

Màiri McAllan: I am sure that my colleague Lorna Slater will not mind me speaking for her when I say that the Green party's support for independence predates the issues that Rachael Hamilton has raised.

I hope that it has been demonstrably clear from my responses that consultation is at the core of how we are developing the proposal. That is why, on 12 December, I published a consultation paper, a policy framework, site selection guidelines, a partial island communities impact assessment, a partial business and regulatory impact assessment and initial sustainability appraisals. That is also why we have a significant programme of stakeholder engagement, beginning with the consultation and including taking some stakeholders through the process of responding to the consultation. I commit to continuing that process throughout the development of the policy.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): The evidence, not least from the no-take zone in Lamlash Bay, is clear. Protected areas benefit both fishers and fish, and one hectare of protected ocean in which fishing is not permitted produces at least five times the quantity of fish that is produced by an equivalent unprotected hectare. Those fish can then swim into unprotected areas to be caught.

In the minister's discussions with the fishing industry, will she continue to emphasise that highly protected marine areas ultimately serve the interests of fishers, as well as helping to restore marine biodiversity?

Màiri McAllan: Kenneth Gibson is absolutely right. At the heart of our proposals, there are plans to do more, as he says, to protect essential fish habitats. We believe that a properly designed network of HPMA's will provide benefits to fishers and that the best way to realise those benefits is to work with fishers when designing the proposals. We are committed to a participatory process, some of which I have set out, that listens to the views of fishers, makes our coastal communities more resilient and absolutely recognises that the sustainability and health of our seas are good for fishers and for coastal communities; the process also listens to the imperative to tackle climate change.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): The minister will be aware of the devastating consequences of the proposals and their impact on rural and island communities. Banning sustainable fishing and marine activity that has safeguarded our waters and their future for generations is nonsensical.

Harris Development Ltd summed up the views of many island communities when it said:

“It is sheer arrogance for desk bound ‘experts’ to suggest that we are not looking after our environment and protecting our stocks. The whole basis of the HPMA is that locals are clearly not doing what they should and need to be told how to look after it. You take no cognisance of the evidence that is available of sustainable fisheries and local, voluntary measures put in place before marching in wiping out our communities.”

Will the minister listen to our communities and support their work in protecting their marine environment rather than taking a top-down approach?

Màiri McAllan: I am only sorry that members are not listening to what I am saying. If they will not take it from me, perhaps they will look at the multitude of papers that I published in December and at the work that I and Marine Scotland officials are currently doing to talk stakeholders through those papers and help them to submit their views to the consultation. There is no part of this that I do not want the views of stakeholders to be embedded within.

On the reason why we have to do this, I mentioned the IPCC, which has been absolutely clear that there is a narrowing window. Equally, the Scottish marine assessment tells us that we have much more to do to achieve good environmental status and to protect ecosystems and habitats, including from damage by fishing. All of that underpins the policy, which will be developed hand in hand with stakeholders.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): I am pleased that the minister is prepared to listen. She will be aware of a column that was written by her Green party colleague that outraged communities from Shetland to Tiree and our fishing fleet, who know our seas well. The 10 per cent figure for HPMA in the Bute house agreement seems concocted. Will the minister explain the scientific basis for the figure and consider evidence-gathering pilot projects?

Màiri McAllan: There are a lot of useful points in that. I have spoken about the scientific underpinning of this. I have spoken about the IPCC report—there can be no clearer depiction of the crisis in which the whole world finds itself and of the very specific need for us to up our efforts. I also mentioned the Scottish marine assessment.

On the point about the timeline and the 10 per cent figure, I draw members’ attention to the fact that the European Union biodiversity strategy for 2030 requires member states to step up their conservation efforts to protect 30 per cent of Europe’s land and sea by 2030, of which 10 per cent will have to be strictly protected. Therefore, Scotland is not out of step.

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): I am glad to hear the minister outline the benefits of HPMA. We have heard about Lamlash

Bay in Arran. England’s Lundy island no-take zone shows evidence of increased tourism spend and larger lobsters, which benefit the local shellfish fishery. There is evidence and learning to be gained from more-established no-take zones. Is the Scottish Government in communication with other territories, such as California, New Zealand and Norway, to learn how their fisheries and coastal economies have benefited from no-take zones?

Màiri McAllan: Ms Burgess is absolutely correct. Scientific studies tell us that we can expect fish stocks to increase in HPMA, providing spillover benefits for fishers. A good example of that is evidence from southern California of the benefits from marine protected areas for the spiny lobster fishery. The experiences of New Zealand and Australia have helped to inspire our vision that recreational users will visit coastal HPMA for their enjoyment and appreciation, bringing economic benefits to communities as they do so. I will be very happy to provide Ms Burgess with the published evidence on that, which has informed our position.

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): Will the minister explain why fish habitats have already been listed as a priority for site designation when there is little available existing research and the report that was commissioned on the subject remains unpublished and in draft form? Will she acknowledge that current research work is not sufficiently far advanced, robust or reliable enough to form policies that could result in the lights going off in our coastal communities?

Màiri McAllan: I am sorry, Presiding Officer, but I am not even sure where to begin with that question. There is much vagueness in it, which makes it difficult to respond with the specificity with which I would want to respond.

First, we are at the very early stages of this work, and we are taking the opportunity to ask people what they think should form the basis of the HPMA. We have suggested a number of things, including blue carbon and essential fish habitats; strengthening the Scottish MPA network; protection from storms; research and education; enjoyment and appreciation; and other important ecosystems. If Finlay Carson has views on which of those should be prioritised, I encourage him to fill in a consultation response. As I have said in all my responses to today’s questions, I want to be clear that we will take all the consultation responses into account, and I absolutely agree that fishers and our coastal communities have a strong stake in the issue and need to be involved.

Care of Co-occurring Mental Health and Substance Use Conditions

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is a statement by Angela Constance on improving care for people with co-occurring mental health and substance use conditions. The minister will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:25

The Minister for Drugs Policy (Angela Constance): Today, I will update Parliament on our plan to improve care for people with co-occurring mental health and substance use conditions, but first I want to acknowledge the most recent figures on suspected drug deaths, which were published last week. Although I very cautiously welcome the 16 per cent decrease in suspected drug deaths in 2022 from 2021, I am only too aware that far too many people are still losing their lives to drugs.

As we all know, the link between mental health and substance use is clear and unequivocal. Unfortunately, however, the links between the services are not always as clear. We recognise that services must work together to deliver person-centred care, and that is why, last year, the Minister for Mental Wellbeing and Social Care and I commissioned a rapid review of mental health and substance use services. The recommendations from that review were preceded by the Mental Welfare Commission for Scotland's report "Ending the exclusion: Care, treatment and support for people with mental ill health and problem substance use in Scotland" and the medication-assisted treatment standards, especially standard 9, which focuses on mental health.

Those reports set a clear way forward. Our vision is a joined-up healthcare system where people with co-occurring conditions get timely access to the help that they need. To deliver on that vision, our plan has three clear objectives. First, we have to get the foundations right in every local area. Secondly, we must empower the workforce to stop people being passed from pillar to post. Thirdly, we must embed clear lines of accountability so that we know that services are delivering better care for people on the ground.

The plan also forms part of our cross-Government response to the final drug deaths task force report, "Changing Lives". The objectives of that work will help to fulfil the task force's sixth recommendation—that

"the principle of no wrong door"

should be

"at the heart of a ... whole-systems approach."

The plan is underpinned by funding of £2.4 million, which I announced earlier this year. Together, those things will deliver better outcomes for people with co-occurring conditions.

To have the right foundations in place in every local area, we need to be clear about expectations. To support our workforce to deliver the holistic joined-up care that we know they want to give, we have to make sure that it is clear how services will work together. To give that clarity to our workforce and, of course, the people who use the services, we will require every local area to have a publicly available protocol that sets out exactly how mental health and substance use services should work together.

To make sure that those protocols result in better care on the ground, Healthcare Improvement Scotland will develop a gold standard protocol against which all local protocols will be assessed. The protocol will set out how services should interact to meet all of a person's needs, including their other healthcare needs and their social needs.

We must also acknowledge that care must be personalised depending on the substance that a person uses. It might look quite different for someone who uses cocaine from how it looks for someone who uses opiates. The gold standard will be available to local areas by October 2023.

To be truly person centred, we must address the additional needs that some groups may face when they seek support. For example, we know that young people face specific challenges with both substance use and mental health. We are undertaking work to co-design with young people what service standards should look like for young people who use drugs. That is in addition to our commitment to the expansion of the Planet Youth and Routes programmes of prevention. That work will build on and contribute to that work to support our young people.

The protocol will deliver on the recommendations of the rapid review, "Ending the exclusion", and the relevant MAT standards and it will support the forthcoming adult secondary mental health standards. To make sure that we get it right, Healthcare Improvement Scotland will work with a reference group that will consist of the Mental Welfare Commission, NHS Education for Scotland, the MAT implementation support team, people on the front line and, most important, service users.

As important as the nuts and bolts of delivery are, a protocol is not enough; it must lead to

change on the ground. We will therefore ask all chief officers of integration joint boards to nominate an appropriately senior person who will oversee and take ownership of the plan in their area.

Our dedicated workforce needs to be supported to provide the best possible care. I am pleased that NHS Education for Scotland has already begun to respond to the recommendations, including widening access to training on substance use to staff in mental health services. We will also work closely with local areas to ensure that staff are equipped with the knowledge, confidence and skills to support people with co-occurring conditions.

As well as ensuring that staff have the appropriate skills, we need to do more to tackle stigma and to provide trauma-informed care. We will draw on existing activity such as the stigma action plan, the national trauma training programme and wider workforce initiatives to drive forward change across both services.

By the end of this year, we will move into phase 2: implementation. To support local areas to implement an effective protocol, Health Improvement Scotland will provide strategic change management support and act as a centre of excellence, sharing best practice and facilitating learning across Scotland.

We will agree individual milestones with local areas for the implementation of the protocol, based on their current status. It is important to note that we will not be overly prescriptive. Areas will be able to adapt the protocol to their local circumstances. However, my expectation is that all people with co-occurring conditions should be able to access high-quality care, regardless of their locality.

That is why it is important that people with lived and living experience are closely involved in the adaptation and implementation of the protocol. I will ask all areas to ensure that the people who use services, and their families, are able to meaningfully contribute to the process. We cannot hope to improve services unless we listen to the people whom we want to help. Indeed, we will not truly know whether we have succeeded unless we hear that change is happening on the ground.

Given the work's close links to the wider MAT standards, we will align the timelines. We expect all areas to be rated as green for the implementation of MAT standard 9 by April 2025 at the latest. Of course, we expect that many areas will achieve that much more quickly, and we will set ambitious but achievable timelines for each area as we move into phase 2.

By the end of the phase, all service users should feel that they are listened to and treated

with respect, and that they are receiving support in a way that makes sense to them.

To move forward to April 2025, the final phase of the plan is about sustaining the change. Health Improvement Scotland will continue to support local areas in that phase, to ensure that service users continue to feel an improvement in the care that they receive.

In addition to our work with local areas, we are taking forward national recommendations. We will commission an alcohol-specific rapid review, as suggested by the mental health and substance use rapid review, and we will undertake the exploration of an annual needs assessment and areas for further research.

I have set out our plan to deliver better care for people who have co-occurring mental health and substance use conditions. We will report on our progress through the national mission report, and I will keep the Parliament updated.

I end my statement by sharing a quote that articulates how important it is that we get it right. It comes from a person with living experience who spoke to the Mental Welfare Commission. He said:

"People with ... coexisting mental health conditions and substance misuse problems can and do recover, I have seen broken people with mental health issues and addiction's achieve this who are now in full time employment, living life, and are out there helping others."

I sincerely believe that we will hear more such testimonies if we deliver on the vision that I have set out.

The Presiding Officer: The minister will now take questions on the issues that were raised in her statement. I intend to allow around 20 minutes for questions, after which we will move on to the next item of business. I would be grateful if all members who wish to ask a question could press their request-to-speak buttons now.

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): In 2021, 1,245 people lost their lives due to alcohol and 1,330 died due to drug misuse. With suspected drug deaths increasing by 26 per cent over the previous quarter, progress on this vital issue is heading in the wrong direction.

The minister's statement perfectly encapsulates the Scottish National Party's current strategy. We have the Drug Deaths TaskForce's "Changing Lives" report, the Mental Welfare Commission for Scotland's ending the exclusion report, the MAT standards—which should have been implemented in April 2022—and now we have new gold standards and protocols. I have no confidence that the statement today will change anything on the ground.

The minister just said:

“As important as the nuts and bolts of delivery are, we know that a protocol is not enough; it must lead to change on the ground.”

Services are not meeting the needs of people who have mental ill health or problems with substance use, or both. The minister promised to fully implement the MAT standards by April 2022. MAT standard 9 states:

“All people with co-occurring drug use and mental health difficulties can receive mental health care at the point of MAT delivery.”

Delivery has now been pushed back to April 2025 at the latest.

Faces and Voices of Recovery UK’s slogan is:

“You keep talking, we keep dying.”

April 2025 is two years away. I ask the minister this: how can we stand here once again discussing another report and another set of protocols on person-centred care, when people cannot access the services that they need for their mental health or substance misuse right now?

Angela Constance: I have always sought to lead by example by demonstrating my accountability to this Parliament and to the people of Scotland.

The plan that I have set out today is essentially about joining up healthcare, ensuring that people with co-occurring conditions get the right treatment at the right time, and bringing forward how we will get absolute clarity about who leads when on the ground, so that our people are no longer being bounced between services or falling between two stools.

The importance of the statement is that it shows to Parliament that we are diligently building a better system and that we are bringing the detail of delivery to Parliament. This is not about the headlines; this is about the hard graft.

Ms Webber rightly pointed to the tragedy not just of drug-related deaths but of alcohol-related deaths. Part of my work now is to expand and develop specific alcohol treatment, notwithstanding the synergy that the national mission brings, for example, around residential rehabilitation placements. Figures that have been published today demonstrate that, for the latest quarter, we have the highest-ever number of statutory funded residential rehabilitation placements, which demonstrates that we are reaching out and providing care to people with substance use issues.

The suspected drug death information for the previous calendar year shows a 16 per cent reduction. We have also seen figures published today that demonstrate the impact of minimum unit pricing on alcohol deaths. However, I acknowledge, of course, that there was a spike in

suspected deaths in the last quarter of last year. That is why I reported to Parliament the work that is happening around public health alerts and what we are doing to combat our concerns around synthetic opioids.

Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): I thank the minister for advance sight of her statement. I offer my condolences to anyone who has lost a loved one to drugs here in Scotland

Perhaps especially this week, it is worth taking a moment to stop to assess the progress of this Scottish Government in getting to grips with this public health emergency, which was declared more than three years ago. Tragically, the statistics tell a sobering story. Scotland has recorded 2,269 confirmed drug-related deaths and, last week, we learned that there were 1,000 suspected drug deaths last year, including a significant spike in the last quarter.

It is also concerning that there have been delays and, at times, a seeming lack of urgency. MAT standards implementation was, for instance, promised and then delayed. We have known about the correlation between mental health and substance misuse for many years, but, by the minister’s own admission in her statement, work to deal with that has not always been clear or, indeed, quick enough.

I have two questions for the minister. The first is about timescales. The minister has stated that implementation will start by the end of this year. Can she guarantee to Parliament that that will happen? As she knows too well, there have been too many delays already in addressing this public health emergency.

Secondly, it strikes me that the big thing missing from the statement is data, which was a key recommendation of the rapid review. Last week’s publication in relation to the suspected spike in drug deaths clearly demonstrates that there is a problem in knowing exactly where the issues are and how we should tackle them, and indeed whether action is working. What will the minister do to get data right?

Angela Constance: The Government is gathering and publishing more data than ever before, because, when it comes to accountability, we are determined to lead by example. We need accountability at every layer of government and not only at the national level but at the local level.

I can point to the suspected drug deaths stats, which is information that we started publishing every quarter. There is the RADAR—rapid action drug alerts and response—work, which gives us early warnings. There is work that we are doing on data linkage, so that we get better and more timely information, not just about how people die but about the lives that they lead and where and how

we can intervene more effectively. There are also pilot projects on toxicology, testing and emergency departments. I am happy to write to Mr O'Kane about some of the nuances and detail.

On the timelines, phase 1 will be completed between May and December this year. The implementation of phase 2 will be between January 2024 and April 2025. We will be sustaining that between 2025 and 2026. There is a range of activities, so it might be better if I write to Mr O'Kane about the action that I expect, month by month, between April and November this year.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): The minister has been working with me to address stigma, particularly for those working in health and social care, and not just those who work in alcohol and drug services. I thank the minister for her letter to me yesterday setting out that NHS Education for Scotland is working to incorporate substance stigma across all its learning modules. Does she agree that we must do all that we can to tackle stigma if we are to enable successful recovery, and that the media has a key role to play in that?

Angela Constance: Ms Harper is quite correct to point to the importance of tackling stigma. As politicians, we all have a role in that, as do the way in which matters are reported in the media and how services are provided. That is why trauma-informed approaches are so important. Anything that is a barrier to treatment must be removed, and we have to kick stigma into touch.

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): A survey last year found that 90 per cent of GPs had experienced difficulties in referring patients to mental health services and addiction services, including when the patient presented in crisis. That is something that I have experienced as a GP this year.

GPs also reported that people with such issues are often turned away from those services, with GPs having to re-refer them. Does the minister think that it is acceptable that people with those issues are being turned away, with GPs being left to pick up the pieces?

Angela Constance: To be candid, no. That is not acceptable. Part of the improvement plan is to give absolute clarity about who leads and when. Mr Gulhane might well have read the findings of our rapid review. I am sure that he has also looked at the Mental Welfare Commission report, which talks about the four quadrants of care. It is an extremely helpful guide that can, I hope, move people on from inane debates about who should be leading and who should be supporting.

Mr Gulhane, and anyone who is interested in data, might be interested to know that recommendation 2 in the rapid review is that we

will evaluate referrals that have been rejected. It is about our boring down into the detail and ensuring that every part of the system is getting it right.

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): How does the minister intend to ensure that people in rural areas have sufficient access to mental health support?

Angela Constance: Although aspects of our response to the rapid review and the action plan might seem quite specific, it is important to recognise that the improvement plan sits in the context of the wider national mission and indeed the wider work that my colleague Kevin Stewart is taking forward. I hope that in my statement I demonstrated that we are clear about the level of expectation that must be met in every part of the country. Whether we are talking about implementing the rapid review or about medication-assisted treatment standards, there is flexibility for rural areas that need additional support to overcome the barriers that exist in those areas.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): The minister knows that substance use is often a form of self-medication for underlying mental health disorder and trauma. Yet the recent budget accounted for £290 million for mental health for the coming financial year, which is merely a reversal of the £38 million cut in the emergency budget review. That effective freeze will have a direct impact on services and risks increasing the likelihood of people using substances to self-medicate in the absence of professional help.

Today's announcements are welcome, but does the minister not accept that the Government could prevent such harm in the first place by going to the root cause of the problem and increasing the mental health budget in line with the 10 per cent commitment of overall NHS expenditure that was made previously?

Angela Constance: The Scottish Government is investing in and reforming services like never before. It is important to remember that there are always debates about the absolute quantum of services, but it is crucial to at least acknowledge that the mental health budget has more than doubled since 2020-21. Through the national mission to save and improve lives, we have made an additional investment of £250 million over this parliamentary session, which Audit Scotland last year acknowledged was a significant real-terms increase. However, notwithstanding the importance of investment, our approach should also be about what we do with that money and ensuring that it gets to where it is needed most.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): Will the minister outline the action that is being taken to ensure that all mental health and substance use staff are trained on how

to effectively assess and manage co-occurring mental health conditions and substance misuse disorders?

Angela Constance: That is where the work of NHS Education for Scotland is imperative. It is important that we expand the training opportunities that are available to mental health and substance use staff on the impact of other co-occurring conditions. As I outlined in the statement, that work has already started. On the previous occasion when I was on my feet here, which was on the subject of MATS, I made a commitment to members that I would be coming back to outline to Parliament where we were going on our workforce support strategy.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): I, too, welcome the recommendations that the Mental Welfare Commission has made in its report. The link between substance use and mental ill health is well documented and has been well debated in the chamber. The report offers a welcome road map on how we might address that, but the minister will be well aware that substance use is not limited to those who have attained majority or who can access adult services. Children and young people in this country take substances, too, and will have mental ill health as a result. What is the interplay between the recommendations in this report and the ecosystem in our child and adolescent mental health services?

Angela Constance: That is an absolutely excellent question. We know from the latest quarterly figures that more than 5,500 children and young people have begun treatment in the CAMHS system. That is the highest number ever, and represents an increase of 11 per cent.

However, we must acknowledge that young people use substances differently and tend to use different substances. We also know that prevention is important, because people with lived experience have told us that they often started their drug use very early in life. Services therefore really need to meet the needs of young people. There needs to be service specifications as standard, and that is what we are currently co-producing with young people. That point is crucial, because we have to be informed by the views and opinions of young people about what will meet their needs best, and where and when it will do so.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests, which shows that I am vice-chair of Moving On Inverclyde.

The minister has ensured that many third sector organisations have received funding to assist their activities and help people with addictions. Will that continue with regard to mental health

organisations and the opportunities for vital partnership working that they might wish to pursue?

Angela Constance: We have very clearly taken a belt-and-braces approach to the national mission to save and improve lives and reduce the number of drug deaths. We have increased funding for statutory services and alcohol and drugs partnerships, and we have funded about 200 projects thus far via funds that we provided to the Corra Foundation. There is a synergy between that and the work that Kevin Stewart has undertaken, in that 1,800 awards from the £36 million communities mental health and wellbeing fund have also been made. The Government values the crucial role of our voluntary and third sector organisations.

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): We know that, as well as poor mental health being a driver of addiction, addiction can be a catalyst in the deterioration of someone's mental health. How can we ensure that people receive appropriate support in order to address that interaction holistically, whichever way round the conditions occur? How can we ensure that the entire treatment pathway, from diagnosis to pharmacy, is stigma-free?

Angela Constance: I refer Ms Mackay to what I said to Sandesh Gulhane about the four quadrants of care. That tool is highly recommended and supported not just by our rapid review that was undertaken by clinicians but by the Mental Welfare Commission. We have to cut through some of the old debates that have persisted for long and weary. We must have clear protocols, leadership and accountability in relation to who leads when and which service provides support. I hope, and I am confident, that the plan that we have brought forward today will help to cut through some of that.

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): Earlier today, it was announced that John Wyllie, the chair of the Dundee alcohol and drugs partnership, will stand down at the end of March—just four months after his appointment in November 2022. As the minister says, a joined-up approach requires leadership. It requires leadership nationally and locally. We now face another potential tender process for an independent chair, with interim measures in place in the meantime. What support will the Scottish Government provide to the ADP and local partners to ensure that momentum is not lost on the response to Dundee's horrific drug deaths record?

Angela Constance: I appreciate Tess White raising that issue. I was very sorry to hear that the independent chair of the ADP will be stepping down. My understanding is that he is doing so for personal reasons. I give her an absolute assurance that my officials and I will be liaising

with, and reaching out to, the local service to ensure that interim arrangements are put in place and that another appropriate chair is found as soon as possible. Tess White makes a fair point.

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): Will the minister provide an update on the steps that are being taken to alleviate the demand on our acute hospitals and our emergency mental health services that is caused by alcohol use disorders?

Angela Constance: I am sure that members will have noted the information that was published today by Public Health Scotland and the University of Glasgow on the reduction in the number of alcohol-related deaths as a result of minimum unit pricing. In that regard, the number of related hospital admissions might have been reduced by about 400 a year.

Ruth Maguire makes an important point, because the whole *raison d'être* of getting people into the right treatment at the right time is, first and foremost, to save lives. The information that we publish regularly on hospital admissions demonstrates that there is a constant need to intervene earlier, quicker and in better ways.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): I will follow on from Tess White's question regarding the departure of the chair of Dundee's ADP. There were real concerns in the community when the previous chair—not this one—departed, with clear frustration at the lack of ability to drive and deliver change. Now, just months on, we are in the same position again. I share my colleague's concerns about the lack of leadership. Does the minister have confidence that the ADP can deliver change under the current model? What can we do to ensure that there is long-term, sustained leadership in Dundee, where these problems are so ingrained?

Angela Constance: I fully understand Mr Marra's frustration in that regard.

On the specifics around the current chair resigning for personal reasons, I cannot add any more to what I said to Ms White, but let me make a more general point. I am absolutely focused on ensuring that all ADPs, including the one in Dundee, get the right support, but there is an issue that we in the chamber often forget. Sometimes we are very critical—rightly so, at times—of alcohol and drug partnerships when the issue lies with senior leadership, and that may be senior leadership at this level in the Scottish Government.

One thing that we need to do as we embark on this journey of reforming alcohol and drug partnerships and services is ensure that leadership at IJB and health-board level steps up to the plate, because ADPs are sometimes left to

hang out to dry when the problem lies elsewhere, and that, I assure Mr Marra, is not lost on me.

Stephen Kerr: The minister is right to highlight the importance of leadership, which is why my question is very simple. All three candidates for the leadership of the SNP have stated their support for my friend Douglas Ross's proposed right to recovery bill, so will the minister take the opportunity, whether it is her last appearance in the chamber as a minister or not, to express her personal support for the legal provisions that are contained in the bill?

Angela Constance: I start by assuring Mr Kerr that whether I am on the front or the back benches, I will always seek to serve my country, my constituents and those people who have touched my heart who are impacted most by drug and alcohol deaths. Perhaps unlike him, I am not all that worried about what next week may bring.

On the right to recovery bill, I have not heard any candidate make any remarks that are out of sync with what I have said repeatedly to the Parliament, which is that we are all united in ensuring that people know their rights and can claim their rights.

I look forward to seeing the detail of Mr Ross's bill when it is introduced; it will get a fair and very sympathetic hearing. In the meantime, the Government will continue with our work on the human rights bill, which is about ensuring that people can know and claim their rights in practice.

I point Mr Kerr to the work of the national collaborative, which at its core is about holding all our feet to the fire and making rights real in this country.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the ministerial statement.

Secondary Education (Vocational and Technical Qualifications)

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-08291, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on expansion of vocational and technical qualifications in Scotland's secondary schools. I will allow a moment or two for members to change seats.

I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons.

14:58

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Shirley-Anne Somerville): I am delighted to celebrate the expansion of the vocational and technical qualifications that are on offer to senior-phase learners in Scotland's secondary schools.

It is almost a decade since we launched developing the young workforce, our youth employment strategy. It has resulted in a significant increase in the number and type of vocational and technical courses and qualifications that secondary schools offer. That has been possible because curriculum for excellence provides a broad framework in which educators are empowered to provide learning and teaching experiences that best suit the needs of individual learners. In that time, secondary schools have significantly expanded the curriculum opportunities for learners to develop skills for, and experience of, work.

We owe a huge debt of gratitude to all those who have worked in their roles in schools, local authorities, colleges, employers, third sector organisations and wider communities to provide an ever-increasing range of opportunities for our school learners as part of their curriculum.

Just last month, official statistics showed that, in 2022, a record number of school leavers went on to work, training or further study. I congratulate those learners—especially those who faced significant disruption due to the Covid pandemic during their senior phase of secondary school—on their achievements. Those statistics show that the percentage of 2021-22 school leavers in a positive destination was the highest on record. The gap between school leavers from the most deprived and least deprived areas progressing into further education, training or employment has narrowed to a record low of 4.4 percentage points. That is a reduction of two thirds compared with the gap in 2009-10.

That success is replicated across Scottish education. We have seen that the number of

school teachers in Scotland has increased since 2007. Overall pupil to teacher ratios remain at near record levels, with the current ratio of pupils to teachers maintained at 13.2, which is its lowest level since 2009. We spend more per pupil, and we have more teachers per pupil, than any other nation in the United Kingdom.

The resilience and hard work of our teachers and young people are extraordinary. Last year, we saw one of the strongest ever sets of qualification results in an exam year. Compared with the pass rates in 2019, which is the last year in which we had exams, pass rates for national 5s, highers and advanced highers are up and—this is important—the attainment gap has narrowed slightly.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): We would think that there is nothing wrong with Scottish education with how the cabinet secretary has started her contribution. To take one example, does she not reflect on the massive shortage of science, technology, engineering and mathematics teachers, which feeds right into vocational education and training? Does she not recognise that that is a real problem in our education system?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Unsurprisingly, I have begun with what there is to celebrate in Scottish education. There is a great deal to celebrate in Scottish education, and I hope that we will all take the opportunity to do a little of that today.

Willie Rennie has raised where there is a challenge. That challenge is not unique to Scotland, but there is a challenge. However, we see STEM teacher numbers at their highest level since 2011. We have, of course, more to do to ensure that, through the STEM bursaries, for example, we can continue to encourage young people and, indeed, those who are already in a career to take up STEM teaching.

We also see a record number of full-time first degree entrants to university coming from the most deprived areas.

Our strong record in education is further underlined by the fact that Scotland is ranked fourth in the recent—2018—programme for international student assessment study of global competence.

Given that a record number of school leavers are going into work, training or further study, that tells me that curriculum for excellence is preparing learners well for their futures. Indeed, curriculum for excellence has been endorsed by independent international experts in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Dr Beatriz Pont has been quoted as saying:

“curriculum for excellence has expanded the opportunities for Scottish learners to thrive.”

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): The cabinet secretary may not want to take Willie Rennie’s criticisms, but the OECD itself said that there needs to be further integration with vocational qualifications and curriculum for excellence. Rather than just trotting out lines on what she thinks is going well, does she accept that that is an area of curriculum for excellence and Scottish education that we need to improve on?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): I will give you the time back, cabinet secretary.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Daniel Johnson has raised a very important point about what the OECD has said about encouraging us to look to reform. That is exactly why one of the first things that I did when I was appointed as Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills was to develop the education reform process. That work, particularly the Louise Hayward work, is just about to report in many ways. That is a specific example of trying to take on some of the challenges that Daniel Johnson has quite rightly raised.

I will make no apologies for coming to the chamber and celebrating what is good in Scottish education. I wish that more people would do the same. My record in my time as cabinet secretary has also shown that I am ready to reform and take tough decisions. I hope that members across the chamber will support us when we see the publication of the reform reports.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: If the member will allow, I will make a little more progress.

In the context of this debate—this is important—it is encouraging to see how many learners have taken advantage of the breadth of choice that is now available in the senior phase. That is reflected in the fact that the proportion of school leavers gaining vocational and technical qualifications at Scottish credit and qualifications framework level 5 and above has gone up again. The figure is 20 percentage points higher than it was in 2013-14.

Let us be clear that the diversification of learner pathways and qualifications is not at the expense of achievement in relation to national qualifications. Last year, we saw one of the strongest ever sets of qualification results in an exam year.

Therefore, as I have said on a number of occasions, Scottish education has strong foundations. However, the Government is ambitious to see real transformational change that will ensure that all learners have the opportunity to

undertake courses that best match their abilities and aspirations and that offer a sound footing for their route through and beyond secondary school. The world around us has changed beyond recognition over the past few years, and our learners and those who support them deserve a system that listens to them and their needs and that is flexible and adaptable to change.

That is why I have committed to an ambitious education reform programme, which is on-going and is now starting to demonstrate in a number of ways how we are putting learners at the centre of all that we do. I look forward to the publication of the vision for Scottish education following the national discussion that took place last year. That provides us an opportunity to establish a 20-year vision for education in Scotland that can drive decision making right across the system. Members from across the chamber should have confidence in what comes from the national discussion, because it has children and young people at its heart.

Fergus Ewing: Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The national discussion was jointly convened with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, was independently facilitated by Professor Carol Campbell and Professor Alma Harris, and received more than 5,700 responses. The national discussion’s publication in the spring will produce a vision for the future—a unifying vision against which we will test all further reform. It will provide an opportunity for Scotland as a nation to be clear about the purpose of education.

Fergus Ewing: Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: That vision is not just the Scottish Government’s. It provides the opportunity for everyone who is involved in Scottish education to start the next chapter with a clear and shared goal—and everyone absolutely will always include Fergus Ewing, so I will give way to the member.

Fergus Ewing: I thank the cabinet secretary for not forgetting about me.

I want to raise an issue that was raised with me yesterday by Chris Dowling, who is the co-ordinator of the developing the young workforce programme in Highland and who is responsible, through Inverness Chamber of Commerce, for employing 20 school co-ordinators. Their contracts are on a year-to-year basis, and the year is up at the end of this month, but they have not had notice of the capital allocation. I know that Sandy Begbie and Joe Griffin are working hard on the issue, as are other officials, but will the cabinet secretary look into getting that information out? A year-to-

year contract means that people have no job security, they cannot get a mortgage and they are inclined to go for another job, so they are not really able to give their full contribution to the role.

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

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

I believe that the Minister for Higher Education and Further Education, Youth Employment and Training has had meetings on and discussed that issue. I can assure Fergus Ewing that I, too, am aware of it. We are keen to ensure that the hard-working people involved in developing the young workforce have the reassurance that it is possible to give them at this time. I assure the member that that is already on my radar.

I move on to the work of Professor Louise Hayward and her on-going independent review into qualifications and assessments. I am supportive of the review's vision to create

"An inclusive and highly regarded qualifications and assessment system that inspires learning, values ... diverse achievements ... and supports all learners into the next phase of their lives, socially, culturally and economically."

I welcome the significant levels of engagement in that review, particularly with learners. We have also heard strong voices from higher education, further education and industry, which are critical to ensuring that any future decisions create a qualification system that is recognised and valued right across further education, higher education and employers. I am clear that we need to find a way of making it a reality that there is parity of esteem between vocational and technical qualifications and national qualifications so that Scotland can adapt to meet new global challenges.

The skills delivery review, which is led by James Withers, is also relevant in this context. We know that, right across the country, we need to prepare learners to gain skills to better prepare them for their futures, and that the skills landscape is important in that.

Vocational and technical qualifications provide learners with important practical skills as well as knowledge of the world of work, important experience and a chance to develop the attributes that we know that employers value greatly. In fact, the most recent Scottish employer perspectives survey, in 2021, found that the majority of employers found school leavers to be well or very well prepared for the world of work. We see the benefits of our significant investment in young people through developing the young workforce and the young persons guarantee. Scotland has higher employment rates and lower unemployment

rates among 16 to 24-year-olds than is the case in the rest of the UK.

The Minister for Higher Education and Further Education, Youth Employment and Training, in closing the debate, will share more with the Parliament about what we have done through school-college partnerships, foundation apprenticeships and other elements of the developing the young workforce programme to transform work-related learning and to enable the significant expansion of the range of vocational and technical courses.

We have ensured that the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework Partnership continues to be supported, as it has a very important role here. There is also an important role in awards, including the Youth Scotland youth achievement awards, the Saltire awards, the Duke of Edinburgh awards and the Young STEM Leader awards. Those are important recognitions of the further work that goes on in our schools.

I will mention one example: that of Barrhead high school in East Renfrewshire, which has greatly expanded its curriculum. In the past two years, 100 per cent of Barrhead high school's leavers have progressed into employment, further or higher education or training or have taken another positive step. I pay credit to the work that that school has done and that other schools do across the country.

I hope that today's debate is a real opportunity for us to celebrate what we can do in Scottish education and to see what the challenges are—but also to acknowledge and celebrate the real progress that has been made in expanding the vocational and technical qualifications on offer in Scotland's schools.

Of course we can go further, and of course there is more to do, but if we deliver and implement our education reform agenda, we will do just that.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises the wide range of courses, including vocational and technical qualifications, on offer to Scotland's senior phase learners, providing them with a breadth of options to develop their abilities and aspirations in order to reach their full potential; welcomes that Scotland's secondary school learners are now undertaking a much wider range of courses than ever before, with 27.2% of school leavers in 2021-22 gaining vocational and technical qualifications at SCQF Level 5 and above, compared with just 7.3% in 2013-14; acknowledges that young people undertaking vocational and technical courses and qualifications, often facilitated through school-college partnerships, reflects the strengths of the Curriculum for Excellence and provides learners with the best chance of success in further learning, life and work; celebrates that a record number of young people were in work, training or further study after leaving school in 2022, with 95.7% of school leavers in a positive destination three

months after leaving school; acknowledges the significant impact of Developing the Young Workforce (DYW), Scotland's youth employment strategy, which was launched in 2014; pays thanks to the DYW regional groups and DYW school coordinators for their work in increasing opportunities for, and participation in, work-based learning for young people; recognises that each individual's learner pathway is different and should be celebrated in equal measure, and commends teachers, schools, colleges, universities, employers and third sector organisations across Scotland for their commitment to improving the opportunities for young people to undertake vocational and professional qualifications in Scotland.

15:11

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): These past few weeks have been chaotic for the Scottish National Party. The veil of pretence of the past couple of decades has been ripped away. It has been like the scene in "The Wizard of Oz" when all is revealed, and the people of Scotland are left saying, "We can see you."

A week from now, we will have a new leader of the SNP, so this could well be the last time I have the pleasure of speaking in a debate opposing Shirley-Anne Somerville in her role as the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills—who knows? We have had our differences, but, although she is a political opponent, she is not and has never been my enemy. Regardless of what transpires next week, and in all sincerity, I offer my best wishes to her personally.

Extending this conciliatory tone, I am pleased to say that there is a great deal of consensus that can be struck around this important subject that we are debating if we push aside the usual dollop of hubris in the Government's motion and in the cabinet secretary's speech. We will support the Government's motion and Labour's amendment, and I hope that the Government will support both of the amendments.

Scotland flourishes when the opportunities of our young people are maximised. For their futures and for all our futures, we need to address the significant challenges that our nation faces: the need for better productivity, the need for skills to take advantage of automation, artificial intelligence, the transition to net zero, and an increasingly volatile global situation. That is why we should consider the report "Choice, Attainment and Positive Destinations: Exploring the impact of curriculum policy change on young people", which was published recently by the University of Stirling and the Nuffield Foundation. It speaks to a need to ensure that Scotland's young people get the broadest possible general education covering the broadest possible range of subjects. We cannot afford to narrow their choices, because we need the talent of every single child regardless. That is why the shortages—already highlighted—of science, technology, engineering and mathematics

teachers must be addressed. We need to do everything we can to attract people with specialist skill sets into the teaching profession. We need inspirational teachers to lift the gaze of our young people and to show them a world of possibilities.

The Scottish Government's social research report "The Impact of Scotland's Developing Young Workforce Strategy on Education", which was published last week, speaks well on the need to move beyond the attainment of qualifications and to focus on meta skills. A big part of my leadership role in business before I was elected to public office was about building talent. It was about the recruitment and retention of talented people. Employers are always on the lookout for people with skills in team working, group leadership, thinking outside the box and problem solving. There is a real cost to businesses when they cannot recruit skilled people. There is the cost of recruitment itself, but there is also the opportunity cost of lost productivity that is down to poorly skilled workers and missed business opportunities.

We need businesses to be engaged in our schools—that is clear—and we do our young people a grave disservice when we fail to properly expose them to the real world of work. We fail them because we do not allow them to see the vast possibilities that exist for them. We fail them when we do not help them to understand that the world of work is crying out for people who have their talents, skills and passions.

That is why we need to expose our children and young people to the world of work, and I cannot see why we cannot do that from the earliest years. Play is a very effective way to make that introduction. We can give our young people a vision of their possibilities, reinforce that vision by bringing them into contact with a whole variety of businesses, sectors, roles and career choices throughout their years of broad general education, and then help them to be personally equipped with the confidence, resilience and skill sets that they need to take advantage of the opportunities that exist.

Businesses can and must make that investment in our classrooms. There is no doubt that it is in their best interests to do that, but we must be sure that, when businesses make the investment—when they prepare to provide support—they do not come up against a brick wall and there are not barriers to their getting into schools. Although there are examples of schools opening their doors to the local business community and interacting with all kinds of businesses and organisations, there are also places where none of that happens. That must change. There cannot be a postcode lottery in matters as important as these.

The social research paper that I mentioned finds that a barrier to curriculum-based work-related learning is that teachers feel overburdened as it is and they lack the confidence and resources that they need to build work-related learning into their lessons. Therefore, we need to support our teachers and help them to make that possible, because it is the kind of innovative approach that shows what Scotland's educational experience should be. It needs more support and it needs to be rolled out across the country, so that all our young people can benefit. We need wider recognition of the importance of sound career guidance from secondary 3 onwards. I welcome the work that is being done in the area, but I want us to go further.

We also need to recognise the importance of personal mentoring, especially in the senior phase. That should not be a tick-box exercise. We should draw on all available talent from across the community—from businesses, professional bodies and organisations in the area. I have nothing but praise for all those who are already mentoring young people across Scotland, very often in a voluntary capacity. Let us overinvest in helping young people to see what their options are and in helping them to get to the places they want to get to.

We will all be winners when we help young people to win, but there is a disparity that is holding us back. Traditional, ingrained attitudes towards technical subjects and technical and professional qualifications are holding us back. Too many people still believe that there is a best pathway for a child that involves passing highers and advanced highers and then going to university. For some young people that is the best path, but there are other paths that are just as good.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): What you are talking about is making me think about what is happening locally in Dumfries and Galloway, where businesses—Jas P Wilson in Dalbeattie is one of them—are engaging with schools and the kids are being valued for choosing whatever path they want, which might not be university; it might be vocational skills. Would you agree that there is work being done out there that is exactly what you have been on your feet, gaun on about for the past few minutes?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Through the chair, please, Ms Harper.

Emma Harper: Apologies, Presiding Officer.

Stephen Kerr: Emma Harper is right in saying that there is, indeed, some really good work going on, but it is not equally distributed across Scotland and there are gaps. Filling those gaps should be a priority. [*Inaudible.*]—possible educational

experience. As long as we hold on to the old out-of-date ideas about the value of different pathways that are available to young people, we will hold ourselves back as an economy and a society.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): Similar to my colleague Emma Harper, I notice that a lot of great work is taking place in Inverclyde—my party does not control Inverclyde Council. Will Stephen Kerr name the local authority areas where there is a problem that he would like to be fixed?

Stephen Kerr: I will not do that, for obvious reasons. That is not the purpose, and it is not a good use of my time.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: In the spirit of consensus, and just in case this is our last debate, I welcome Stephen Kerr's remarks on the matter. I encourage him, if he has not done so already, to read the interim report by Professor Louise Hayward, which is trying to get to how we see not just one right or successful way through school, but a myriad of ways. We must reform to be able to capture that in its widest sense.

Stephen Kerr: I agree with the cabinet secretary in respect of Louise Hayward's work. I look forward to the full report coming out in, I think, May.

I challenge the Government that, if it truly wants to ensure parity of esteem—I think that we all do—it has to start with parity of funding. We should fully fund our young people's choices, whether they go to university, to college or into an apprenticeship. That would go a long way towards addressing the funding issues that our colleges have. That is the real world, and I hope that the minister who responds to the debate will not seek to deny that there is a financial challenge.

I am making an appeal to social justice and the common good, because the issue is equality of opportunity. That is what is needed. Regardless of who somebody is, what their background is or what postcode they live in, they can achieve what they want to achieve, be what they want to be and do what they want to do. That is what being a young Scot should mean.

That is the philosophy on the Conservative benches, and we will support all measures to make it a reality for every young person in Scotland. When we invest in our young people, we invest in the future of our nation. To have a Scottish education system that is worthy of its heritage and of the young people that it serves, we must build a system of education that offers diverse opportunities to engage with work, different ways of learning and the possibilities that the future holds.

I urge all members to support the amendment in my name.

I move amendment S6M-08291.2, to insert at end:

“; urges the Scottish Government to take immediate steps to address the shortage of teachers in STEM subjects; notes the verdict of the recent report published by the University of Stirling and the Nuffield Foundation, co-authored by Marina Shapira, Mark Priestley, Tracey Pease-Hughes, Camilla Barnett and Michelle Richie, titled *Choice, Attainment and Positive Destinations: Exploring the Impact of Curriculum Policy Change on Young People*, on the negative consequences for young people from curriculum narrowing in relation to attainment, transitions, the subsequent study in school, and destinations beyond school; acknowledges that the Scottish Government Social Research report on *The Impact of Scotland’s Developing the Young Workforce Strategy on Education* calls for teachers to be afforded the capacity to develop and implement work-based learning and feel confident to build in work-based learning across the curriculum, and calls on the Scottish Government to support a national campaign to raise awareness of the support available through DYW, involving the full range of national employer organisations, and a common core set of services and opportunities, outlining the advantages of participation for employers; calls on the Scottish Government to provide further support to employers to engage with young people with additional support needs to create employment opportunities; believes that the Scottish Government should tackle the disparity of esteem between different post-school pathways by raising awareness of the range of qualifications and routes to work that are valued by employers; recommends that the Scottish Government works with Skills Development Scotland (SDS) and the DYW programme to ensure the creation of person-centred digital careers services, leading to a flexible and personalised career service offer, and urges the Scottish Government to use its forthcoming Purposes and Principles statement to provide clear strategic direction to Scotland’s colleges as to what it expects and needs colleges to deliver.

15:22

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): I had hoped to start this speech with some observations on the positions on education of the various candidates for First Minister, so we tuned in on YouTube. Unfortunately, they had absolutely nothing to say about education, so we turned over to the new “Luther” film, which was slightly less aggressive.

Scottish Labour is always happy to debate the educational needs of our young people and the skills that they need to succeed in our future economy and to build Scotland’s future. To be frank, the Government motion provides an extremely narrow picture of what is happening in our schools, colleges and workplaces. It is too narrow to be deemed appropriate, representative or, in many areas, responsible.

Rather than opening up choice and opportunity, the Government has waged a 15-year campaign to collapse them. The recent report from the University of Stirling and the Nuffield Foundation,

“Choice, Attainment and Positive Destinations”, lays that bare. It lays bare the impact of the policy choices that have been made by the Government over 15 years: botched curriculum design and implementation, failure to recruit teachers in core subject areas and the stripping out of huge amounts of resources. As ever, the consequences weigh most heavily on the poorest people. Options might exist in theory but, for far too many, they are not real. I will tell members how.

At the start of 2021, Government data showed that an average S5 pupil in Dundee was enrolled in 3.5 subjects, which was an entire subject less than in 2014. In Braeview academy, the average was 2.5 subjects, which is among the lowest in the whole of Scotland. Just down the road, at the far more affluent Grove academy, it was four subjects. That is the real story of the options that are available to young people in Scotland.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The Nuffield and Stirling report is important, and I enjoyed my time speaking to Professor Priestley about it, but does the member recognise that it is about national qualifications and that, therefore, it does not include much of what we are talking about today? The entire point of the debate is to celebrate the wider aspects that are now available within our schools, as well as the national qualifications. Those wider aspects are equally important.

Michael Marra: In 2021, just one candidate achieved a qualification in engineering practice at SCQF level 5, 46 achieved one in construction skills and 250 did in cybersecurity. By comparison, there were 44,000 candidates for English. If the cabinet secretary really thinks that that is a significant broadening of the choice and availability of options that are being taken by young people, I am flabbergasted.

When we consider the rapid and accelerating change in our economy and in wider society, the stakes could not be higher. The challenges posed by climate, demographic and technological changes, and the ubiquitous innovations in AI and machine learning make it clear that we urgently need to strengthen the workforce in those key areas with skills and qualifications in STEM subjects. Those qualifications are notionally available in the areas that I have just outlined but, in reality, they are far too limited. The untapped potential of young people in such vital areas should kickstart immediate and meaningful action from the Government if we are to avert a national skills shortage that will threaten our future economic viability.

The Minister for Higher Education and Further Education, Youth Employment and Training (Jamie Hepburn): Will the member take an intervention?

Michael Marra: No, thank you—not at the moment.

Audit Scotland's damning "Planning for skills" report, which was published in January 2022, was abundantly clear on the issue. Responsibility for setting a direction lies with Government ministers, and they have utterly failed to do so. Audit Scotland said that ministers did not provide the necessary leadership for progress. Despite the fact that a commitment in 2017 to improving skills planning clearly articulated to Skills Development Scotland and the Scottish Funding Council what it expected of them in working together to implement skills alignment, ministers are failing abjectly to provide any vision, strategy or guidance.

The Government is also failing the future of our colleges. So many of the qualifications that we are talking about today and that are hailed in the Scottish Government motion are taught and awarded in partnership with our further education sector but, time and again, ministers prove to be incapable of providing adequate funding or strategic direction to the college sector. The SFC's "Coherence and sustainability: a review of tertiary education and research", which was published in 2021, called for a clear, strategic and long-term vision and intent for the future of tertiary education that

"responds better to current and future needs of pupils, students, employers and broader economic and social drivers".

In response, the Government said that it welcomed the review and broadly accepted its recommendations. That was another review. Now, years on, the practice and principles documents are still unpublished and colleges are waiting for a light at the end of the tunnel in the hope that it is not a speeding train in the form of yet more savage cuts.

Today, a college funding crisis is unfolding, with no money for agreed pay awards and voluntary severance schemes being opened across the country, and that is underpinned by the real threat of compulsory redundancies.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: When, during the budget process, did the Labour Party come forward with fully costed proposals and alternatives? Is all this not just a bit more hot air from the Labour Party, which offered nothing constructive during the budget process when it mattered?

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

Michael Marra: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

We have had plenty of hot air on that point from the Government. It was quick to trumpet £26 million of additional funding for the college sector

in the 2023-24 budget but, months later, the purpose of that funding is completely unclear to the SFC and colleges. It has been referred to as transition funding, but no one has determined what colleges are supposed to be transitioning to. I have asked the minister, and he said to ask the SFC. I asked the SFC and was told to ask the minister. It is a shambles of indecision, dither and hopeless delay.

Jamie Hepburn: Will the member take an intervention?

Michael Marra: No, thank you. Perhaps the minister will address the issue in his closing speech. In the absence of any strategic direction from the Government, and without guarantees that the £26 million will become core funding, colleges are taking difficult financial decisions with no idea of whether they are the right ones. I hope that the minister does answer those questions today, because he has had numerous opportunities to answer them in the chamber and in committee.

Without swift, decisive action, it will soon be difficult for our young people to benefit at all from school-college partnerships. Scotland's young people need a Government that is willing to face up to the current challenges in our education system and is prepared to do the hard work to engage in genuine reform. That is the change that Scotland needs.

I move amendment S6M-08291.1, to insert at end:

"; notes with concern the findings of the recent report published by the University of Stirling and the Nuffield Foundation, which found that curriculum narrowing and a reduced choice of school subjects under the Curriculum for Excellence is affecting outcomes for Scotland's young people, with those attending schools in areas of high deprivation most affected; understands that broadening learning and training opportunities for Scotland's pupils cannot happen effectively without proper resourcing from the Scottish Government; recognises the important role that colleges play as providers of vocational and technical training opportunities and considers this role to be even more important considering the narrowing of subject provision in schools; calls on the Scottish Government to provide urgent clarity on whether additional resources for colleges in the 2023-24 budget will be mainstreamed or for what purposes this funding can be used; further calls on the Scottish Government to urgently publish the promised Purpose and Principles of Post-School Education, Research and Skills report to afford colleges strategic direction at a time when they are considering budget decisions, and calls on the Scottish Government to deliver genuine reform to Scotland's education system, ensuring that all young people have access to vocational qualifications in a school setting, and delivering parity of esteem between academic and vocational qualifications in Scotland."

15:30

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): It is important to recognise when education is making

progress. I go to schools almost every week, and I commend teachers and pupils for the work that they do. However, this place is about driving improvement. It is not just about self-congratulation and should not be filled with speeches, as I am sure that we will hear later, that list massive achievements when there are significant challenges that must be addressed.

Today's motion, like the debate so far, is self-congratulatory. The superficially attractive increase in the numbers taking foundation apprenticeships and other routes is positive, but the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development was critical of the fact that the Scottish Government had hardly any substantial data on destinations, on the value that young people find in those courses, on the value that employers do or do not find in those courses or on whether there is a uniform offer across the country, particularly in rural areas or in areas that do not have a local college. Michael Marra has rightly identified the different numbers of subjects being taken in different schools and the sometimes pitiful number of courses that young people are taking. We have no real data on any of that, and we need a far more substantial body of evidence before we can spend time in this chamber congratulating ourselves on how successful we have been.

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development has been striking in its criticisms of the approach so far. It highlights the fact that employers feel that young people coming from school are poorly prepared for work. That story has lasted for generations, but we seem to be incapable of addressing that substantial issue. There are big gaps in recruitment, and there is an imbalance between graduates and those who take alternative routes in their education. A significant number of graduates are underemployed, because they are not employed in the areas that their education and training should help them into.

Jamie Hepburn: Mr Rennie mentioned what the CIPD report said about employer perspectives on the readiness of pupils for the world of work. Will he reflect on the 2021 Scottish employer perspectives survey, which said the opposite? A majority of those employers found that young people were ready for work.

Willie Rennie: That is exactly my point. A substantial body—the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development—has highlighted, with evidence, that there is a challenge. Instead of addressing that issue, the minister comes up with some counter-evidence that he believes knocks down that of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development. It is important that we recognise the challenges that Scottish education faces and that we address those problems, rather

than dismissing evidence that is put forward by an authoritative body.

Jamie Hepburn: Will the member take another intervention?

Willie Rennie: Not now.

The Construction Industry Training Board highlights a lack of parity of esteem—even among those who take alternative routes such as foundation apprenticeships—between construction and other qualifications. How can we meet the challenge of reaching net zero if we do not have parity of esteem even among those who are taking foundation apprenticeships?

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Willie Rennie: No—I am sorry.

Those apprenticeships are not available in all schools, and only pitifully small numbers of pupils take up those options in schools.

Fergus Ewing: Will the member take an intervention?

Willie Rennie: Not just now—I will come back to Mr Ewing in a second.

The construction industry reckons that we require an extra 19,550 workers. The industry recognises that 22,500 people will have to be trained and given new roles in order to meet our net zero obligations. That is an enormous number, but so few are taking up those opportunities in schools.

Fergus Ewing: Mr Rennie rightly mentions the importance of preparing young people to enter the workforce. I do not want to disappoint colleagues around the chamber for failing to raise this matter. Does he agree that one way to prepare young people for work of all sorts is to endow them with the skills of touch typing so that they can communicate clearly, precisely, swiftly and effectively? Moreover, it is an incredibly inexpensive thing to do and an enormous legacy that we could give our children for the future.

Willie Rennie: We do miss Fergus Ewing on the Education, Children and Young People Committee, with his incisive questions about touch typing. I am sure that the world will hear his plea and respond appropriately.

There are powerful forces at play here. We have been trying to get people not to go down what we might call the traditional or academic route for a number of years, but we have failed for a number of different reasons. There is significant peer pressure in schools, societal pressure and family pressure to aspire to do better—apparently,

people do not succeed unless they go to university.

Pupil choice is an important factor, too. We must ensure that young people have the choices available to meet their needs, as well as, of course, the economic needs. I have already highlighted the mismatch between those whom we are training and the needs of the economy.

We clearly need capacity in the system, too. Far too few schools have qualified staff who are able to deliver courses. Sometimes, schools do not have a local college that they can tap into through a school-college partnership. Schools might not have the equipment that they need to have available, and the guidelines are not clear, either.

There is also a shortage of STEM teachers. That situation is getting to crisis point, as we saw last week with the uptake of young trainee teachers.

Stephen Kerr: Will Willie Rennie give way?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I think that Mr Rennie is bringing his remarks to a conclusion.

Willie Rennie: Yes, I am. I am sorry, Mr Kerr—I will not be able to take the intervention.

As far as solutions are concerned, Louise Hayward's parity of esteem options are a potential positive way forward. The careers review is a welcome step, because I think that it would help to have a comprehensive approach to careers that includes work experience. We need some clarity for our colleges; I do not know why we are taking so long to give them clear direction with a purpose-and-principles approach. We have been dithering on that for ages, as we have on skills alignment. We should be looking to countries such as Germany, which, through its economic strength, has a great partnership between industry and the state to ensure that there is a fantastic offer for vocational study.

Those are the things that we should be looking to. We should certainly not be complacent or fill this chamber with congratulatory speeches.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate. I advise members that we have a bit of time in hand, so anybody who takes an intervention should get the time back.

15:37

Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): I thank the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills for securing the debate. Hailed among the pioneers of 21st century learning, Scotland's curriculum for excellence was designed in the wake of extensive public debate, which I remember well as we came towards the end of the five-to-14 curriculum. The aim was to provide a

holistic approach to education that would equip our young people with the skills that are needed to flourish in a rapidly changing world.

As a teacher, I have often felt and been told that the immense benefits of practical training and skills-based courses are too easily overlooked. That sentiment is echoed in Professor Ken Muir's 2022 report "Putting Learners at the Centre: Towards a Future Vision for Scottish Education". According to college students who the report refers to,

"Some vocational routes such as Duke of Edinburgh were viewed as being for the misbehaving kids and not valued or seen to be as important as for example Maths or English, if you weren't taking exams, then you're looked down upon."

Such perceptions are changing, and our youngsters are being nurtured and developed as a result of a carefully constructed system that takes into account the incredible range of talent that we see in our schools. The system offers opportunities for qualifications across a wide variety of sectors from financial services, engineering and digital marketing to event management and hospitality. There are many courses available that are industry tailored to prepare students for a successful future in the workforce.

Those routes are really important as part of wider measures to address areas that are experiencing the skills and workforce shortages that colleagues across the chamber have mentioned. Ensuring the provision of such courses is also essential to the Scottish Government's long-standing commitment to promoting inclusivity and assisting those who are most in need, as is reflected in the developing the young workforce strategy.

Gordon Stobart has highlighted that Scotland's inclusive practices were demonstrated by its early move away from selective schools to comprehensive schools, which has meant that a typical classroom will enjoy—as I enjoyed—having students from a variety of cultural, social and economic backgrounds, as well as students with a broad spectrum of interests and attainments. The use of varied formats is key to serving a more diverse student body. Having worked in education previously, I whole-heartedly agree that offering greater choice and learning flexibility remains a key way—and one of the most effective ways—of boosting attainment and reducing wider inequalities.

As we have heard today, a record number of young people were in work, training or further study after leaving school in 2022. In that regard, I pay tribute to two schools in my Glasgow Kelvin constituency—the Glasgow Gaelic school and Hyndland secondary school, both of which

achieved 100 per cent positive destinations for senior phase pupils.

The Glasgow Gaelic school offers several options for its learners. From S4, it offers part-time placements, through working with its three partner colleges. It is also supported by developing the young workforce colleagues, Skills Development Scotland and, I hear from the teachers, a great careers adviser. The school says that one reason why it has achieved those positive destinations is that it knows its children and their families and it can work with them to get the best outcome for each and every individual.

I put on the record my thanks to the strong staff team in the senior phase, which is led by deputy head Ms Julie MacNeil. The school's fantastic achievement and accomplishment is a testament to the hard work of pupils and staff following what has been an incredibly difficult and unsettling time. This is not about self-congratulation; it is about acknowledging fully and whole-heartedly the continuing hard work of all our teachers, which has been cited by my colleagues.

Stephen Kerr: Kaukab Stewart says that this is not about self-congratulation. I am looking forward to hearing where she feels that we need to do much better, as has been highlighted by a number of speakers so far.

Kaukab Stewart: I thank Mr Kerr for his intervention. I am about to come on to suggestions that I am happy to push for.

Of course, there remains much work to be done. I welcome the cabinet secretary's ambition to continually advance and reform our education programme, which is demonstrated by the independent review of qualifications and assessment in Scotland that began last year. The Hayward review is primarily focused on ensuring that those who are aged between 15 and 18 have an enhanced and equal opportunity to demonstrate the breadth, depth and relevance of their learning. It aims to provide a new model for qualifications and assessment that is fit for the 21st century.

The interim report suggests that a better and more clearly defined integration of academic and vocational qualifications will be required, with careful consideration of the language in course descriptors. I believe that, if that is adopted, it could go some way towards addressing the challenges that are associated with outdated perceptions and move us towards the parity of esteem for vocational and academic courses that Ken Muir's report referred to.

I am glad to hear the cabinet secretary's commitment to ensuring that parity of esteem for all our learners' qualifications and achievements will be at the heart of the reforms. We must

progress from valuing only what we measure, and data, to measuring what we value. We absolutely value our learners and all that they bring not only to our economy but to our society and our culture. I look forward to hearing about the progress that is being made on that.

I encourage the Scottish Government to continue to take pragmatic steps to ensure that all our young people will explore and develop their curiosities, hopes, skills and interests and, ultimately, find a pathway into employment that works best for them.

15:44

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): As a huge advocate for the expansion of technical and professional qualifications in Scotland's secondary schools, I am delighted to contribute to the debate on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives. Schemes such as developing the young workforce show the considerable merits of work-based learning for young people. Nearly all employers in the DYW evaluation emphasise the importance of the development of soft skills that create adaptive learners. Such skills create added value for both learners and employers. I think that we therefore all agree that the expansion needs to happen; it is just a matter of how we get there.

The Government's motion refers to the close partnership working between schools and colleges in delivering vocational learning and the subsequent pathways into jobs. However, that comes from the same SNP Government that is cutting college funding in real terms. Unfortunately, colleges await the detail of how they might deploy the non-recurrent £26 million that was announced in the budget, but we have all seen reports of colleges undertaking voluntary redundancy programmes.

With fewer lecturers come fewer classes.

Bob Doris: Will the member give way?

Pam Gosal: If I can finish my point, I will come back to Bob Doris.

I therefore hope that the Scottish Government will outline how it expects levels of school and college activity to be sustained in the current environment. It should also confirm its position on the undertaking by colleges of compulsory redundancy programmes—because, unfortunately, that is the likely next step, given the financial and funding pressures that colleges face.

Bob Doris: In my contribution, I, too, will talk about the financial challenges for colleges, but will Pam Gosal tell me whether the Conservatives proposed any additional cash for colleges during the recent budget? If so, how much was that, and

where was the money to come from? Otherwise, what we are hearing could be hollow rhetoric.

Pam Gosal: It is clear that I was speaking about the £26 million—money that the Government is giving and which it cannot even provide direction for. My colleague Michael Marra mentioned that as well. It is important that the Government give some direction about the £26 million. Although the Government talks about budgets, we should look for direction for the money that it has given, never mind the money that is needed and the big gap in colleges, about which they are speaking directly to me and, I am sure, directly to the cabinet secretary and the minister.

Like Scotland's colleges, employers are fundamental to the delivery of technical and professional qualifications. Many simply do not have the administrative capacity to wade through the hordes of red tape or the financial leeway to incur the associated costs. One large employer in Glasgow said:

"It's very heavy admin and not easy to navigate. There are so many hoops to jump through to get funding."

In addition, the demand for work-based learning and apprenticeships is significantly outpacing the SNP Government's funding. The Scottish Training Federation and the Construction Industry Training Board are calling for more apprenticeship places, so the onus is on the SNP to act by increasing apprenticeship—[Inaudible.] The sound is not working.

Members: Try again.

Pam Gosal: The Scottish Training Federation and the Construction Industry Training board are calling for more apprenticeship places, so the onus is on the SNP to act by increasing apprenticeship places. That is particularly important if all young people are to be offered the same opportunities.

Jamie Hepburn: Will the member give way?

Pam Gosal: I need to get on.

I draw to the Parliament's attention the need to support employers to provide opportunities for all young people, including those with additional support needs. Although that can represent a challenge for both the young person and the employer, it can make a true difference to the learner's future.

I was pleased that the motion mentioned parity of esteem for all post-school pathways. Exposing pupils to a range of pathways is vital to ensuring that no young person is left behind

Last year, when I read the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development's report on overqualification, I was not surprised that pupils felt that careers services frequently push the

higher-education narrative, with more than half not being exposed to apprenticeship opportunities.

I will give a quick real-life, personal example. A couple of years ago, my son was missing school as he was not enjoying it. He felt that it was not listening to him and he did not know where he was going. He left to go to college without knowing his direction or where he was going. He did not have the pathways individually explained to him in relation to what he was looking for.

After a year of being at college, my son wanted to drop out. He said, "I thought college was hands-on learning." It was only then that I, as a mother, understood that he was looking for an apprenticeship. When I spoke to him, he was happy to go down that route; he wanted an apprenticeship. I offered to help him, but my son went out and got his own apprenticeship. He wakes up at 5 am and takes three trains to get to his apprenticeship. He really enjoys it and absolutely loves the fact that he is doing mechanical engineering. He talks about it with such passion, because that is what he wants to do.

However, my child was like many other children and students who get left behind because the pathway is not tailored to them. I really hope that the cabinet secretary and the minister listen to my example. Although it is a personal one, I have heard many such examples from other people. I urge the Scottish Government to work with Skills Development Scotland and developing the young workforce to expose young people to alternative pathways.

The economy in Scotland has been stagnating for some time. If we want to build a truly dynamic economy, we can no longer accept the status quo. Change requires exposure to technical and professional qualifications, which need to be weaved throughout a young person's learning journey; a reformed careers service that is tailored to each child's unique needs; more collaboration between further and higher education; and the removal of barriers that prevent employers from taking on young people.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you very much, Ms Gosal. We have now used up a lot of the time in hand that we had, so any interventions will need to be brief, and it might not be possible to recompense speakers entirely.

15:52

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): It is a pleasure to speak to the Government's motion today and to recognise the success of the education system in Scotland—not for self-congratulation but in gratitude to teachers and staff, and to pupils, their parents and their families.

It is a fact that a record number of our young people are now in work, training or further study after leaving school. In 2021-22, 95.7 per cent of school leavers were progressing their studies or careers within three months. We must now build on and strengthen that demonstrable success.

In preparing for today's debate, I had a wee look back at previous times that we have debated vocational and technical qualifications. In 2018, which was the year of young people, I welcomed the fact that the headline target of the strategy to reduce youth unemployment by 40 per cent by 2021 had been met four years early.

At that point I noted that, although the broad target had been met, a bit of work was still to be done on addressing gender imbalance and on improving opportunities and outcomes among particular groups, such as those who are disabled, care experienced or from minority ethnic backgrounds. I will focus my remarks on that today.

Last week, I was pleased to hear confirmation from the First Minister in her answer to my Education, Children and Young People Committee colleague Graeme Dey that improvements have been made in attracting disabled young people to apprenticeships, with figures showing that significant progress has been made.

Skills Development Scotland provides enhanced funding contributions for disabled apprentices in training until the age of 29. The most recent statistics, which SDS published on 14 February, report that the disability rate for modern apprenticeship starts by the end of quarter 3 was 14.8 per cent—two percentage points higher than in quarter 3 of the previous year. Just under 3,000 individuals had known disability status or a self-identified impairment, health condition or learning difficulty, which was a 23.5 per cent increase compared to the same point last year. That is good, particularly for the individuals who are taking in apprenticeships, but a lot more work is still to be done.

I hope that, with continued strong partnership working between employers, schools and universities, supported by the developing the young workforce groups, that will continue. I have highlighted the following example before, but I make no apology for doing so again, as it illustrates well that joint working. I think that Stephen Kerr will appreciate the example. Martin & Son Builders is a small family business based in Kilwinning.

"The owner of the business, Martin, is profoundly deaf after losing his hearing five years ago, and one of the reasons why he was keen to be involved with DYW Ayrshire was to demonstrate to pupils that that has not stopped him from running a successful business.

Martin visited St Winning's primary school for five consecutive days to give each of the five classes an insight into the building trade. Pupils participated in a series of interactive tasks, including using laser levels, sizing, measuring angles and calculating thermal heat loss. The young people were also introduced to bricklaying and watched a live demonstration of a small wall being erected. As well as introducing pupils to this career area and allowing them the opportunity to engage in interesting, hands-on activities, Martin sent a powerful message to those pupils at a young age about overcoming challenges and achieving success."—[*Official Report*, 11 January 2018; c 76.]

The Education, Children and Young People Committee has been looking at the experience of disabled children and young people, particularly their transitions, as part of our scrutiny of Pam Duncan-Glancy's member's bill. On a recent visit to Ayrshire College, I heard about the successful project search courses that the college runs in collaboration with its partners at University hospital Crosshouse and the National Trust for Scotland at Culzean castle. The courses provide supported learning students with 800 hours of immersion in the facilities of each host business to prepare them to be work ready. The college told me that many students have progressed from the intensive work focus of project search to achieve paid employment. For example, at University hospital Crosshouse, several learners have completed the course and then been successfully employed on site for 16-plus hours per week as domestics, porters and admin assistants.

Other learners have taken up apprenticeship schemes with local authorities in admin, information technology and outdoor activities, building on skills first identified during project search. Several learners have gained employment with other employers outwith the host organisations. Employment at retail outlets and supermarkets has helped many students gain their first paid work and build resilience to eventually increase their working hours. Ayrshire College currently employs a previous project search student as a cook in its canteen facilities and is delighted that the student has maintained that position for several years.

At a time when a record high number of young people are now in work, training or further study after leaving school, it is appropriate not only to celebrate that success but to be clear that it is time to build on it for all our young people. We need the talent of every single one of them, not just for them to flourish and have a good experience but for the success of our country.

15:57

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): In a month when the Government is using parliamentary time to try to spin out as many good news stories as possible, it is surprising that it has,

today, chosen to defend its record on education and, in particular, vocational and technical qualifications. As other members have indicated, we can all pick out good news stories, but our job in this place is to look at the broad picture across Scotland and be real about what is actually happening for young people.

I have some more real stories. Earlier this month, I met striking teachers from Dumfries and Galloway and the Borders who wanted to make it clear to us, as their representatives, that subject choice is narrowing—and narrowing quickly. One teacher told me that, because subject choice is so limited in rural areas, her sons cannot study the subjects that will allow them to pursue the future that they wish to have. It is her sons who are having to adapt and not the Government.

Of course Scottish Labour supports the expansion of vocational and technical training, but the reality on the ground in Scotland is that this Government is failing to get the basic things right. It is no longer the case that only choice is limited; there is now a limiting of opportunity. Where someone lives and the background that they come from now dictates their future when it comes to their health, their access to public services and definitely their education. That is SNP Scotland. That is the record of the past 15 years.

The importance of the role that colleges play in the delivery of vocational and technical training cannot be overstated, as other members have said. However, as my colleague Michael Marra mentioned, there is confusion over how colleges can spend their budget allocation for 2023-24—confusion that, again, has arisen as a result of a lack of ministerial direction. That is an important point: colleges need direction and leadership. Any progress that is made on vocational qualifications will undoubtedly be put at risk by the lack of direction provided to the college sector from the Government. That is a risk that Scottish Labour is absolutely not willing to take, and it should be the same for Government ministers, who should address it. Therefore, as my colleagues have done, I encourage the Government to reach out to the college sector and provide such clarity quickly.

I suggest that it might be worth their while for the cabinet secretary and the minister to consider how the Scottish Government can utilise its relationship with NHS Education Scotland, which Ruth Maguire spoke about, to ensure that more health-related vocational training in that sector becomes available to our young people in the senior phase. I appreciate that Scottish vocational qualifications are already available in, for example, dental nursing, but the Scottish Government knows that it can—and should—go further. Many professions are looking for paths to vocational training, and the skilled team at NES could be a

route to pursuing that. We are only too well aware of the challenges that our NHS and social care services face on recruitment and retention. Perhaps offering more courses that would encourage young people to consider careers in either health or care services would, in the long term, help us to fight such challenges. However, I repeat that the delivery of strong vocational and technical training must be widely and—which is important—equally spread. There cannot be a postcode lottery for people for whom such training is available and those for whom it is not. We can do better, and the point is that we must do so.

I do not want to contribute to the debate without mentioning the role of women in science, technology, engineering and mathematics—STEM—and the importance of encouraging women and girls to undertake vocational and technical training linked to STEM subjects.

In his recent address to the British Computer Society, the minister admitted that the proportion of digital technology roles held by women is less than a quarter and that a significant pay gap between women and their male counterparts still exists. Anyone who goes and reads the speech that he gave will be shocked by the gap. Therefore, although it is absolutely important that we encourage girls to study STEM subjects in school and to take up vocational training in the field, we must also make their future in that field more attractive. Entering a male-dominated field where men are paid more is not an attractive option, and so our approach to expanding vocational and technical training must include a multilayered approach to pay and future opportunities for young girls and women. Only by ensuring that there are equal opportunities and such career paths from the start, and throughout, will we see parity of esteem between academic and non-academic qualifications.

As other members have mentioned, for too long in Scotland there has been a failure to recognise the importance of vocational qualifications. We must see greater action in that area on tackling barriers related to geography, gender and income. The cabinet secretary was right to talk about positive outcomes, but honesty is absolutely crucial. This is not a time for the Government to stop and pat itself on the back. We have a very long way to go, and the challenges facing our education system on the Government's watch are becoming greater. Genuine reform of the system for delivery of qualifications could provide opportunities for young people and long-term solutions that would address skill shortages in key areas.

16:04

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde)

(SNP): First, I would like to touch on a point that Stephen Kerr highlighted towards the close of his remarks. He spoke about the education system as being worthy of its heritage. I disagree with Mr Kerr on that. If we consider the many people with dyslexia, in generation after generation, whom the education system in Scotland has failed, I genuinely cannot accept Mr Kerr's comment about it being worthy of its heritage.

Stephen Kerr: I agree that the system has not always responded to people's needs. I was referring to the worldwide reputation that Scotland's education system enjoyed for generations. That is where it needs to be now.

Stuart McMillan: I absolutely agree on that point. I know that that is what Mr Kerr was referring to. However, I am a member of the cross-party group on dyslexia and, over my many years as a parliamentarian, many constituents have contacted me to say that the education system failed them for generation after generation. There is an impression that, in the past, Scotland's education system was of the highest order, but it clearly was not, given that it failed people with dyslexia.

I wanted to speak in the debate because secondary schools in my Greenock and Inverclyde constituency are already offering a range of technical and vocational opportunities. Before I highlight some local examples, it is important to mention, as colleagues from across the chamber have done, how vital technical and vocational qualifications are. They not only provide young people with the opportunity to gain skills through on-the-job training; they are an instrumental way for businesses to future proof their workforce.

A C Whyte & Co Ltd—an organisation that is based in Barrhead, which is obviously not in my constituency—is an outstanding example of how that can be done. In 2018, it set up a programme with West College Scotland that offered training opportunities, and people were guaranteed a job at the end of the programme if they completed the full training. The programme is on-going, and I warmly welcome that type of joined-up approach.

Just yesterday, I met representatives from Action for Children, which provides support for young people and their families in Inverclyde across three main areas: criminal justice, employability and wellbeing. They outlined how, by taking a person-centred approach to employability support and by focusing on developing relationships with young people, they provide a holistic service that delivers better outcomes. The wraparound service ensures that young people are supported in engaging with employability

programmes and gaining qualifications while completing unpaid work orders, such as the construction skills certification scheme card. In recent years, that industry has struggled to attract people. That shows that, although the work of Action for Children is primarily about supporting young people into sustainable employment, it can also reap benefits for industry and the economy.

Action for Children is also an example of how the third sector can help young people—and their families—who are caught up in the criminal justice system to break that cycle and to take a different path. However, in our meeting, staff highlighted that one-year funding cycles for the third sector are a challenge, because they mean that organisations struggle to plan and do not know whether they can provide long-term services in an area. Fergus Ewing touched on that point.

That situation is comparable with the situation that there was for third sector organisations that support people who have previously faced substance misuse issues. Following cross-party support from across the chamber, the Minister for Drugs Policy, Angela Constance, took those concerns on board and delivered multiyear funding opportunities for third sector organisations that work in that area. Action for Children works with young people who face many barriers to employment—including, in some cases, substance dependency—so I would like there to be a move to multiyear funding for the models that it relies on, such as the no one left behind approach. That would enable the organisation to do long-term planning and to support more young people in my constituency into sustainable employment through technical and vocational courses.

The point about breaking the cycle is hugely important. It was highlighted yesterday that, irrespective of the economic situation, 5 per cent of hard-to-reach young people are trying to get to positive outcomes, but when there are economic challenges and an economic downturn, the percentage increases and the situation only gets worse. If we are to get things right and help every young person, organisations such as Action for Children will be hugely important.

The Scottish Government motion touches on developing the young workforce, and I want to put on record my thanks to the west team for all that they do in Inverclyde.

The Deputy First Minister came to West College Scotland in August 2019 to congratulate four pupils from Inverclyde academy who, with the help of the DYW west team, took part in the Greenpower challenge earlier that year. The programme helped those young individuals with technical skills, vocational skills, teamwork and skills for working on their own. I was at the school last year and asked where those four young men

were, and I was pleased to hear that they were working and had gone on to positive destinations. That is another example of schools, colleges and other organisations working together in partnership to help our community and young people.

Presiding Officer, I am conscious that I am well over my time, so I thank you very much.

16:10

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): Vocational and technical qualifications are vital to the success of the Scottish economy and the levelling up of every part of Scotland, but the number of college students has fallen by more than 140,000 since the SNP came to power. Under the SNP, funding per college student is more than £2,500 lower than funding per university student. The First Minister said that she wanted to be judged on her education record, and on that basis, she has failed, particularly due to the lack of investment in vocational and technical qualifications.

There is no doubting the vital role that further education plays in supplying Scotland with a steady flow of the skilled people that are essential for a thriving economy. Those people are not just school leavers, but include thousands of older people seeking to re-enter the workplace or retrain—something that many of us will face in a digital era in which there are no guarantees of a career for life, never mind a job.

A full post-pandemic recovery will be impossible without the training that is offered by Scotland's 26 colleges, but at a time when we need more qualified workers than ever, student numbers are decreasing.

No one underestimates the scale of the economic challenges that we face as food and energy costs soar, but it is not enough to simply expect Governments to write ever-bigger cheques. In the Scottish college sector, the clear message from the experts is that empowering institutions to work more closely with private enterprise could produce better results—and limit the pressure on the public purse—than their being solely reliant on taxpayers' money.

Flexibility and industry collaboration are crucial, because that is the best way to keep pace with employer demand, especially in digitally driven workplaces where the rate of change is breakneck.

Jamie Hepburn: Is the member aware that colleges are entirely able to drive commercial income and raise it through interaction and relations with industry if that is what they want to do?

Sue Webber: The Education, Children and Young People Committee's college regionalisation inquiry report that was published today makes reference to the lack of flexibility in funding, and asks for more flexibility in funding for our college sector.

Our committee recognises the importance of colleges, students and employers being able to respond effectively to the needs of the local economy. The committee believes that it is the responsibility of business and key sectoral bodies to proactively engage with colleges and universities, as that will allow colleges and universities to respond more effectively to help develop the work force. However, the committee acknowledges the challenges that small and medium-sized enterprises can face if they do not have a sectoral body to help set out their skills needs. The committee recommends that colleges must further develop their engagement with local SMEs to take account of their needs, which are dynamic and change across various sectors.

Scottish apprenticeship week aims to shine a light on the role that apprenticeships play in Scotland and how they affect people, businesses and the economy. As part of Scottish apprenticeship week last year, I visited Glenmorangie in West Lothian, and this year I visited Livingston Mechanical Services. Those are fantastic businesses with great opportunities for those who want to do an apprenticeship.

Glenmorangie offers a tailored apprenticeship qualification, which demonstrates its commitment to the programme and the value that it brings to its business, as well as the opportunities that it presents to young people. It offers a balance between learning and hands-on experience in a team environment that nurtures and coaches apprentices through the 14-month programme.

The apprentices came from various backgrounds. Some had come from school and others—if I recall rightly—had graduated from university, with degrees in subjects ranging from English literature to forensic chemistry. Apprenticeships are for everyone. Speaking to those apprentices gave me a real insight into the invaluable opportunity that those positions present to them. Earning while they learn and gaining formal qualifications will accelerate their development, create a real springboard for their careers, and support our economy.

The morning that I spent at Livingston Mechanical Services was particularly relevant regarding the messages that we continue to hear from businesses and young people. Livingston Mechanical Services offers apprenticeships in the electrical engineering sector. The apprentices told me of the invaluable insight and experience that they gained from installing electric vehicle

charging bays at Royal Bank of Scotland at Gogarburn and the construction and installation of air-conditioning units from flat sheet metal. That was quite inspiring. What struck me was how much value the young people place on their opportunity and how committed the business's senior leaders are to supporting, training and retaining those young people in their business.

However, the route that those young people took to get their apprenticeships was of grave concern to me. I caveat that by stating that they were from across many geographical areas—West Lothian, Glasgow and Lanarkshire. Without exception, those young people found out about those invaluable apprenticeships from their own family or social networks. The school careers guidance teachers had no role at all. I would be hard put to find anything positive from that part of the conversation with the apprentices to share in the chamber today.

There is no doubting the vital role that further education plays in Scotland, but more must be done. The Scottish Conservatives will restore excellence in Scottish schools, and we want more investment in vocational and technical qualifications so that every child has the chance to succeed, no matter what their background is.

16:16

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): This is a timely debate. The convener of the Education, Children and Young People Committee, Sue Webber, illustrated that. Our committee report on college regionalisation was published just today.

The debate is an opportunity to celebrate the increased prominence and importance of vocational and technical qualifications in Scotland's secondary schools. That is important not for self-praise by Government but to raise the profile and status of such vocational and technical skills and the parity of esteem that members across the chamber want them to have. It is important that we celebrate success, to ensure that we tackle and address the status gap and put parity of esteem at the heart of what we do in government.

In looking at the impact, we must look at outcomes. Are young people leaving schools equipped to take on the opportunities that exist in the workplace for further learning? Statistics from 2021-22 offer strong evidence of positive outcomes, with 95.7 per cent of those finishing school in that year progressing their studies or careers within three months of the end of the school year. That strong performance by our young people is an improvement on the previous year.

I acknowledge Stephen Kerr's point. We would welcome some longitudinal data on where young people are one, two or three years down the line, so that we can be positive while challenging on how we can do better. There is light and shade in the debate—maybe that is something that we have still to develop in the chamber.

It is also hugely encouraging to learn that, when it comes to people from the most deprived backgrounds securing positive destinations, the gap has reduced by two thirds since 2009-10 and sits at just 4.4 percentage points.

Of course, our students and their schools must be commended for their success; we should also commend the role of Scotland's colleges. Indeed, the report—it is hot off the press; it was published today—from the Education, Children and Young People Committee, on which I sit, is clear about the strong links between colleges and schools. We believe that those links have been strengthened in recent years.

John Paul academy, which is a secondary school in Summerston, Maryhill, in my constituency, provides a very good example in that respect. Its inspection report from the inspectorate, which was published just last month, says:

"The school's provision for vocational pathways shows particular strength and gives an appropriately high status to these options. Staff actively promote the wide range of options linked to apprenticeships. They work well with a range of partners to offer relevant vocational pathways. This has a positive impact on those young people who are furthest from the job market and living challenging lifestyles."

That is factual and evidence based, and it shows that there is good progress and success in our schools.

Colleges are key delivery partners with schools in developing the young workforce initiatives. Since 2016, under developing the young workforce, foundation apprenticeships have been used to provide young people with a strong start in a career by providing industry-recognised qualifications and the experience that employers are looking for. For example, Glasgow Kelvin College, which is based in Springburn in my constituency, offers foundation apprenticeships in civil engineering, mechanical engineering, social services for children and young people, and creative and digital media.

Michael Marra: Will the member take an intervention?

Bob Doris: Will I get the time back, Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Yes, Mr Doris.

Michael Marra: Like me, the member will have heard the calls from colleges in Glasgow regarding the £26 million of funding in the budget. Does he believe that it is incumbent on ministers to provide clarity on what that money can be spent on to support the colleges that serve his constituency?

Bob Doris: I am actively engaged on that exact point, and I will address it later in my speech.

I am sure that the key partnership between schools, colleges and business, underpinned by the support of the Scottish Government, is one factor that has led to Scotland having, for example, a higher employment rate, a lower unemployment rate and a lower inactivity rate for 16 to 24-year-olds, when we compare its figures with those of the rest of the UK.

The Scottish Funding Council, college principals and senior figures from developing the young workforce have highlighted that, as a result of the strengthened relationships between colleges and local schools, more support is now available for young people transitioning from schools to colleges.

The former commissioner for fair access, Sir Peter Scott, has said that when colleges work more closely with schools, that allows pupils to combine academic and vocational courses, which is vital in addressing the issue of status and parity of esteem. He said that that can

“ease the transition from school to post-school study ... in further education”,

and potentially offer

“students from more socially disadvantaged backgrounds”

the opportunity to progress into higher education. That is absolutely the case.

We should of course look at colleges’ financial position, and we should not deny the financial challenges that Scotland’s colleges face. A different budgetary decision could have been taken, but we should be frank in saying that no one in this chamber—from the Government or the Opposition parties—suggested a different budgetary path for Scotland’s colleges. It would be wrong to suggest otherwise. The additional £26 million that was identified during the budget process came from Government, not the Opposition, and it was warmly welcomed by the college sector.

However, we need clarity about that £26 million. Will it be embedded in future financial settlements for the sector? That would make a significant difference to choices that colleges make now, as they plan for the following academic year in relation to course provision and student numbers. I am absolutely happy to put it on the record that we need clarity on that.

We have also heard about the budgetary position in relation to apprenticeships. I would love to have a light-and-shade discussion in the chamber about how we as a Government and as a society can flex up apprenticeship numbers to respond to the changing business needs and demands in the wider economy. However, that has a budgetary implication. We should not simply demand it but then not will the cash that follows to support it.

There is a lot of great success in relation to vocational and technical education. We should celebrate that, not to praise Government but to praise the schools, young people, students, colleges and businesses who are doing outstanding work in difficult conditions.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Doris, I have already given you a bit of latitude.

Bob Doris: If we want the Parliament to spend more, we have to will that cash and not just assert that we need it.

16:24

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab):

The subject of vocational education and training is a hot topic everywhere across the world, for some very clear reasons. As Willie Rennie pointed out, we are in the middle of huge economic change. The need to drive towards net zero means that we need to skill people up with a different set of skills compared to those in the current workforce. Technological change is such that we need to ensure that people in whatever profession or trade can use technology and computers.

Above all, we are living in an age in which we have a declining population. That means that we cannot simply afford to sit back and see where people might end up; we need to ensure that every single person is employed using their capacities and talents to the best of their ability. We cannot afford to do otherwise.

That does not just apply here. In Germany, Denmark, Austria, France and across the world, Governments are challenging and asking fundamental questions of their vocational education and training systems. It is not really good enough for the Government to lodge a motion that just sets out what we have done and what is good, without setting out the challenges and vision. No country can afford to do that.

The reality is that, across the OECD, 42 per cent of secondary education students are enrolled in vocational education or training courses, whereas in Scotland we cannot quite compare the numbers when it comes to who is studying in vocational courses and nationally certificated

courses. We do not have that clarity. Therein lies the problem and the challenge.

Stephen Kerr: The member will, I hope, share my concern that we know of some colleges where the principals are talking about laying off one in four of their lecturers and are perhaps even envisaging closing down whole departments. That is not a scene that would fit with what the member is talking about.

Daniel Johnson: Absolutely: I share that concern. Naturally, colleges are seen as hubs for vocational learning. College principals have told me that they cannot meet the demand that is being placed on them by employers. We have an issue there.

We need a vocational system in which we boost uptake, increase the usefulness of schemes and achieve wider acceptance. We should start with clarity. When we look at the Scottish Qualifications Authority website and Government statistics, it appears that we do not have a clear and comparable basis for looking at the numbers. We almost got that acknowledgement from the cabinet secretary this afternoon.

We saw progress with SCQF, with everything being put on a common benchmark, but we do not have the equivalent vocational qualifications, so that we can point to the equivalent of a national 5 or a higher, which we all understand and trust. Ultimately, we need to get to a situation where our grannies know, trust and understand the value of the qualifications that our young people are undertaking.

In other countries, the situation is clear cut—people understand it. In Switzerland, 65 per cent of people go through vocational education and training programmes, in the main through a two-year programme, while others undertake a federal diploma that takes four years. People understand the system there, and they can point to the numbers. We cannot do that here.

When we look at other international comparators, we can see what we need to do. First, we need integration between academic and vocational systems. The French baccalaureate is split into three streams: academic, technical and vocational. That is an element that has been missed in the debate: the difference between technical education and vocational education is completely absent from our debate. However, it is a fundamental difference, judging from the debate in other countries.

Secondly, such schemes need to be employer led. That is the fundamental basis that drives the utility and value of the Swiss system, both for those who participate in schemes and for the businesses themselves. In Switzerland, 26 per cent of businesses take part in apprenticeship

schemes, compared with 16 per cent in Scotland. I note that the proportion in the rest of the UK is 19 per cent; that is something for us to think about.

The final point is on clear progression into work. We have made progress through the developing the young workforce programme and foundation apprenticeships, but we do not necessarily have that same seamless integration between the different stages of vocational training and moving into work. We need people to have the ability to obtain qualifications at school that allow them to access work immediately in a seamless way that is understood—and, indeed, led—by employers. That is clearly what employers are saying. According to the CIPD survey, 52 per cent of respondents said that they struggled to get relevant skills, and only 20 per cent viewed schools as being effective. There is clearly a huge need for change.

I posit one suggestion. I have already pointed to the French baccalaureate and how the French integrate their vocational training. Around 120 people take the Scottish baccalaureate. It is a feature of the Scottish education system that has been forgotten about. Why could we not look at a Scottish baccalaureate that integrates academic and vocational learning, putting them on a comparable basis, through which people could study both academic and vocational qualifications at the same time?

Ultimately, what is important is that vocational qualifications are seen as being as important, robust, rigorous and valuable as academic learning, and that vocational learning is reinforced by academic learning. We want the people who are studying to be electricians to study mathematics and physics, too, with the two elements working hand in hand, integrated and sharing not just equality of esteem but equality of rigour, in a way that will be of value to business as well as to the learners.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Emma Harper is the last speaker in the open debate.

16:30

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I welcome the debate and have enjoyed listening members' contributions. The benefits of the Scottish Government's significant investment in young people are evident, thanks to the developing the young workforce strategy and the young persons guarantee.

In 2021-22, a record number—95.7 per cent—of school leavers were progressing their studies or careers within three months of leaving school. Youth employment and vocational qualifications are one part of the Government's strong and demonstrable track record of achievements in

education. That record speaks for itself, but I will focus on vocational qualifications in our rural sector, the jobs of the future and the skilled green jobs that we need to protect our future in terms of the climate emergency.

I think that I am the only member to mention rural skills so far in the debate. I think that they are really important. The Scottish vocational qualification in agriculture at SCQF level 5 provides learners with the knowledge and skills that they need for agricultural work with crops or livestock. The SVQ covers areas such as monitoring and maintaining health, safety and security, developing an awareness of environmental good practice, and how to manage and improve the rural business environment. It also includes optional units on topics such as preparing and operating farm vehicles, preparing feed and water supplies for livestock, and monitoring and maintaining the healthy growth of crops. Upon successful completion, learners will gain an internationally recognised qualification that guarantees that they have the knowledge, skills and abilities that are required to carry out their roles successfully. Rural employers will also benefit from their employees being proficient in the skill set required.

Last year, I joined Tracey McEwan at Tarff Valley Ltd in Ringford in Dumfries and Galloway and at a dairy farm near Gelston, along with careers advisers from the local secondary schools. Tracey and the team explained and demonstrated to the careers advisers what rural employment opportunities are available to young people across Dumfries and Galloway. The feedback from the insight day was extremely valuable.

Young people take part in courses such as the one that I described at Tarff. They cover a range of mentor-supported topics and complete on-farm direct workplace assessments to show competence in specific tasks. Tarff also offers pre-apprenticeship programmes that allow young people of school age to be supported in their placement by a mentor who helps to prepare them for work.

The apprenticeship programmes are really important in getting people into agriculture, particularly as the sector has an ageing workforce. The sector is absolutely vital for our nation's food security, especially given the current economic and Brexit challenges that it faces. I therefore ask the cabinet secretary and the minister always to keep rural skills and rural education at the forefront of on-going education and skills work.

I turn to green skills. As we continue to recover from the pandemic, we must build a fairer economy that delivers the skills, opportunities and jobs for the future that will help to secure our just transition to net zero and tackle the climate

emergency. Scotland is already investing in green skills and attracting new green job opportunities.

The launch of the green jobs workforce academy is a welcome step in preparing our current and future workforce to seize the opportunities afforded to Scotland as part of the just transition to net zero. The academy, supporting people across multiple locations and online, is guiding people of all ages through a process of identifying the skills that they have and the skills that they will need to find and secure green jobs for the future. I am keen to see that the south of Scotland plays a part in that green skills strategy.

Recently, I visited the Hawick campus of Scottish Borders College, where I saw first hand the work that the college is doing to support people into green skills jobs and to upskill those who are already in the sector. It is leading vocational courses on building properties to passive house standard, installing ground source heat pumps and electric charging infrastructure, and solar panel installation and repair. However, one of the limitations that the college related to me is that the funding model to get those courses up and running is restrictive and if it wanted to offer them to pupils in school, the funding would not support it. Therefore, I ask the minister whether he would be open to meeting me and Scottish Borders College to discuss the specific funding issues that were highlighted during my visit last Monday.

It would also be remiss of me not to mention the work of Dumfries and Galloway College. The Stranraer and Dumfries campuses both support green skills, particularly in the wind turbine engineering sector, and I commend the work that they are doing.

I could probably expand a little but I prepared a shorter speech expecting that some folk would intervene, especially because I am the only person talking about rural skills, which are an absolute necessity for us in Scotland.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): Emma Harper spoke a lot about positive destinations. Does she agree that they should be measured over a longer time than 12 months, particularly for rural jobs and jobs that affect climate change and our environment?

Emma Harper: I thank Meghan Gallacher for that intervention. It is important that we gather data in many different ways, so data on 12 months-plus—longer-term data—would be valuable. It is useful that we explore how we manage the data and then what we do with it.

The Scottish Government has succeeded in achieving its goal to reduce youth unemployment by 40 per cent after actively pursuing the DYW

youth employment strategy. Building on that, the Government is continuing to expand the opportunities that are available to young people. I repeat that agriculture and green skills have a crucial role to play in that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to closing speeches.

16:37

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): It is a pleasure to close the debate on behalf of Scottish Labour, which—like everyone around the chamber and, indeed, across Scotland, the United Kingdom and the world—supports the expansion of vocational and technical education in school settings. It is common sense.

If we look far into our past—way before Scottish education was heralded as great in the world—we see that vocational training for a young person lay at the crux of their childhood. It is right that we serve all our children: not only those who want to pursue an academic future but those who want to pursue a vocational and technical one. We should trust the choices that our young people make and allow them to grow up in an environment where they have those choices—one where they can see them and dream about a better future that fits in with what they want.

We heard a powerful discussion from Pam Gosal about her experience with her son. That was about somebody being able at last to communicate to adults the sort of learning that they want to do so that they could have the sort of future that they want. That was incredibly powerful to hear and I compliment her and her son on sharing it. Out of all the speeches in the debate, which has been wide ranging, that spoke to what vocational training should be for our young people.

How have we got to where we are? Interestingly, the debate strayed far from the vocational training that is available in our secondary schools and ranged through apprenticeships—apprenticeship week was the week before last—to our colleges. The debate went back to our colleges again and again—rightly so.

It is interesting to look at where we are. The Muir report sought answers with regard to our whole education system. Professor Muir received evidence that there is confidence in curriculum for excellence up until the senior phase. The senior phase has been the great unanswered part of curriculum for excellence from when it was first introduced. We never really addressed that, perhaps because it was too great a challenge or perhaps it is down to the lack of parity of esteem between people who want to do vocational training and those who want to pursue an academic path.

Fergus Ewing: Would Mr Whitfield and the Labour Party have some sympathy with the idea of including in the curriculum in Scotland the extension of the provision—or, preferably, the universal provision—of the skill of touch typing to our children in schools? Is that an idea that the Labour Party might wish to espouse?

Martin Whitfield: I am grateful to Fergus Ewing for that intervention, although he spoils the fact that I was going to refer to his earlier intervention and share with him my belief that touch typing, like many other fundamental skills, should be available to our young people to make their future easier.

I move quickly to the Hayward review and the senior phase leaving certificate that is raised in the interim report. A number of members echoed that when they spoke about the need for better and more clearly defined integration of academic and vocational qualifications. It speaks volumes to the language of vocational training that, as Daniel Johnson so aptly put it when he mentioned the granny test, if someone's granny does not understand what they are doing, she might not put the beans on when they get home. If she does understand it, however, she will push them and get them out of bed and to school for their vocational training. We are still long way from a true understanding across all our communities about vocational training, the language that we use about it and the opportunities that are available to our young people.

It would be remiss of me not to mention Willie Rennie, especially as I was going to use what he said as my link to Mr Ewing's intervention. It is right to say that the debate should not be about self-congratulation. There is a desperate need for better data on where our young people are going, rather than a snapshot that is taken three months after they leave school. I am aware—admittedly, this is subjective—of young people who found themselves unemployed and in challenging positions not long after that three-month snapshot was taken. They sought support from their school, and although the school tried to give it, it was outwith what they were required to do, which is disappointing.

Pam Gosal rightly talked about the £26 million for colleges—many members mentioned that in their speeches. It would be nice to know whether colleges can spend it and what they can spend it on.

Ruth Maguire spoke about the debate in 2018 and the work on gender balance and balance in other groups. That speaks a lot to what we have heard today, particularly from Stuart McMillan. I echo his comments about people who suffer from dyslexia and the challenges that they face. Our pathways need to work for the disabled, for those

who have invisible disabilities and for every young person in Scotland.

Carol Mochan talked about the narrowing of the choices that are available to our young people. That is a reality, and it would be helpful if the Government would admit to it. All the evidence suggests that, in the schools that serve our poorer communities, the choices are narrower than those that are available in other areas.

Time is tight, so I will say to Emma Harper that I have not been trauchled with the debate at all. It was a great pleasure to read her email on the use of Scots, and I thought it worth putting that on the record. She was right to speak about our agricultural vocational training and its huge value not just across the south of Scotland but in large areas of Scotland. The great value of vocational training is that we can offer our young people what they want and what they imagine. It cannot be beyond the wit of the Scottish Parliament and the Government to address their needs in the years to come.

16:43

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con):

As a Scottish Conservative, I believe in aspiration, but aspirations can be met only when Governments provide people with the tools to succeed in life. My own education journey hit speed bump after speed bump and, at some points, I thought about giving up completely. When I was at school, there was no proper support network or careers advice, which resulted in many young people in my home town falling through the cracks in the education system, and I could have been one of them.

For a high school pupil in the mid-2000s, not getting a place at university was a sign of failure. There was never a mention of, or focus on, vocational and technical qualifications—if someone said that they wanted to go to college, it was because they were not intelligent enough to go to university.

The truth is that I had no idea what I wanted to do when I was in sixth year. That, combined with the stigma around non-academic subjects, meant that I lost interest in schooling during my senior years. That resulted in my not obtaining the grades that I should have and becoming one of the few Scots to have repeated their final year at high school. I ended up going to university because that was the done thing, not because it was right for me. Things did turn out okay, but some of the friends that I went to school with dropped out of university. There was no support and no clear pathway for them.

I am therefore pleased to close this debate on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives not only

because I almost fell through the cracks, but because this Government must do more to support our young people. We must keep telling our young people that there is no wrong path and that success should not be measured by the number of degrees someone obtains.

Professor Louise Hayward's interim report has been referred to several times today, and I welcome the outward thinking about engaging young people in choosing their own future.

Daniel Johnson: I apologise if this is a bit of a tangent, but I think that the question is not about vocational or university education. I think that we should challenge our universities to deliver skills and demonstrate their vocational relevance regardless of what subject someone studies.

Meghan Gallacher: I could not agree more with Daniel Johnson. It is incumbent on all of us to challenge the narrative in our universities.

Stuart McMillan: Will the member accept an intervention?

Meghan Gallacher: If the member will let me make some progress, I will come back to him.

When we consider the expansion of vocational and technical qualifications, we must understand the environment that our young people currently experience. Almost 1,000 schools have not been inspected; there are 140,000 fewer college places; students are worth almost £2,500 less if they go to college instead of university; there is a widening attainment gap between the poorest and richest pupils; and there are 1,699 fewer teachers. Those are the reasons why young people fall through the cracks.

Stuart McMillan: Meghan Gallacher spoke about her own experience. I imagine that I am a wee bit older than her, and people of my generation who grew up in the west of Scotland in the 1980s had no opportunity of apprenticeships because apprenticeship schemes had been scrapped and jobs had been lost. The only offer available to many people was to attempt to get to university. Does Meghan Gallacher agree with that?

Meghan Gallacher: I do not disagree with that at all. There are different career paths and we can all understand that young people face challenges as they grow up. As we have heard from Sue Webber and Pam Gosal, it is still challenging for young people to get into apprenticeships now, and many young people can access an apprenticeship only by reaching out to friends and family. We must look at the overall picture. I talked about my experience as being just one of the many experiences of young people in the education system.

This Government must do more to provide young people with the tools to succeed. The cabinet secretary began her contribution by congratulating young people on their successes, which we all applaud, but she did not say that those achievements were made despite the problems within an education system that this Government has presided over for 15 years.

My colleague Stephen Kerr pointed out the many challenges that Parliament faces in ensuring that our young people flourish. He is right. We need talent, and that must be addressed by attracting people into our education sector to inspire the next generation.

Michael Marra spoke about the broadening of subject choice for young people, saying that the stakes have never been higher for many of the young people who are trying to enter college or university.

Fergus Ewing: Does Meghan Gallacher agree that the challenges that young people face could well be addressed by extending the skills that they can acquire to being able to touch type, which is so useful in a range of areas? Is the Conservative party, like the Labour Party, attracted to that policy?

Meghan Gallacher: Mr Ewing ruined the punchline of my Labour colleague and has now ruined mine. We absolutely support his cause and will back his mission to ensure that that is seen as a core skill.

I understand that time is ticking away, and I hope that members will forgive me for not taking any more interventions so that I can make a couple more points.

Sue Webber talked about people who choose to enter education later in life and the challenges that they face in looking for a job or career. They need this Government's support.

Pam Gosal mentioned her son and his experience of finding a pathway that works for him. I am really pleased that he has managed to find an apprenticeship that is right for him, but, as we have spoken about so frequently today, too many people are falling through the cracks because they have not been signposted to the right place for support.

Before I conclude, I want to raise the issue of how positive destinations are recorded. I completely understand why positive destinations are recorded, but—this is a huge but—we record data only within the first three months of young people leaving school and then 12 months after their leaving. In 2020-21, 71 per cent of school leavers who had left within the past year were in a positive follow-up destination, which was down from 86 per cent who were in a positive initial

destination. We know that there was a decrease, but we have no idea about the journey of the young people thereafter. As it stands, there is no concrete data. I would be grateful if the minister would expand on that in his closing speech and explain why the Government currently focuses only on the first year after leaving school.

As always with education-related debates, it has been a lively afternoon with many passionate speeches. However, the reality is that, although we talk about the expansion of vocational and technical qualifications in Scotland's secondary schools, there will be young people who are facing an uncertain future as they approach their final exams. I challenge the next Government to back our young people by making sure that they have the tools to succeed in life and by putting their priorities first and proving to them that, regardless of what they want to do in life, the Government will support them.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Jamie Hepburn, the Minister for Higher Education and Further Education, Youth Employment and Training, to wind up the debate on behalf of the Scottish Government. If the minister would take us to decision time, that would be much appreciated.

16:51

The Minister for Higher Education and Further Education, Youth Employment and Training (Jamie Hepburn): I welcome the contributions that have been made. I hope to pre-empt Fergus Ewing's impending intervention by saying that the Scottish Government recognises the importance of touch typing.

On the tone of the debate, can I—

Fergus Ewing: Will the minister give way?

Jamie Hepburn: There was a purpose to me pre-empting the intervention, but why not?

Fergus Ewing: Mr Hepburn is generous, as always. I commend two maxims to the minister. First, if you can't beat them, join them. Secondly, it is better to jump than to be pushed. In that spirit—I put this kindly—would the Scottish Government be willing to reconsider its current approach, which appears to be not to actively advance the universal extension of touch typing skills to all children in our schools?

Jamie Hepburn: Mr Ewing will be aware that we do not have a set curriculum. However, I am sure that teachers the length and breadth of the country will be interested in his perspective on the advantages of touch typing.

To return to the debate and its tone, I recognise that it is incumbent on—and entirely fair and right for—Opposition members to raise concerns. I

would not suggest for a moment that there are no challenges in our education system, and it is incumbent on us to recognise and respond to those concerns. Part of the purpose of the debate is to explicitly celebrate the achievements of young people in Scotland, and there is something to be said for having such a debate. We have heard some of that but not enough of it over the course of the debate.

I thought that Willie Rennie got off to a good start when he mentioned that he visits the schools in his constituency, but I did not hear one word—not a single utterance—from him about the achievements in those schools. Not once did I hear anything specific about achievements in the area of vocational and technical qualifications.

Willie Rennie: I could deliver my whole speech again if the minister would like. I hear cries of “Yes”.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There is no time, Mr Rennie. [*Laughter.*]

Willie Rennie: I have repeatedly praised my local schools and the contribution that they make, and I referred to that in my speech, too. However, the Parliament is about change and improvement, and I wish that the Government would do a little bit more of that.

Jamie Hepburn: Perhaps what I should have said is that I did not think that Mr Rennie got the balance quite right; that is my perspective on the matter.

It is important for us to place the debate in the current context. We have heard from members about the importance of vocational and technical qualifications. I agree that, sometimes, a false distinction is drawn between the pursuit of supposed academic qualifications and the pursuit of supposed vocational education—there has been a sense of that in the debate. In that sense, the messaging that we send out from here is important. We should be pressing the issue of parity of esteem for multiple purposes so that people know that, of the various options that young people have in school—there are an increased range of options; I will come to that in a minute—none is better than any other. They are all good options for young people to pursue.

In that regard, I note Bob Doris’s point that the message that we send out during this debate is important as well. We have to make sure that we are sending out the message loudly and clearly that there is parity of esteem across the provision in our education system.

Daniel Johnson: Given the comparison with France, where there is complete integration, does the minister agree that we need to aspire to that? Does he agree that we should have vocational

qualifications and should be able to point to them being equivalent to highers? Is that what will ultimately deliver the parity of esteem and understanding?

Jamie Hepburn: We have that in our system now. Louise Hayward is looking at more activity in that regard, but foundation apprenticeships are set at SCQF level 6 in the same way that highers are. We have that ability to look across and compare.

I will comment on the progress that we have made in that regard. I take Mr Johnson’s point that other countries in the OECD have much higher proportions of vocational provision in their school systems, but if we consider the journey that we have been on, we can see that we have made tremendous progress. In 2013-14, only 7.3 per cent of school leavers achieved one or more vocational qualifications at SCQF level 5 or above. In 2021-22, the figure was 27.2 per cent. That represents significant progress, and each and every one of us should welcome it.

Stephen Kerr: On the basis of what the minister is saying, why do we not spend every penny of the apprenticeship levy that comes to Scotland on apprenticeships? Why is there a cap on apprenticeships? When everyone in industry is saying that the cap is too low, why does the minister not respond and raise the limits?

Jamie Hepburn: First, we do not have precise sight of the manner in which the apprenticeship levy is raised. It was introduced by the UK Government and not by the Scottish Government, and I could not earnestly tell the member the global sum that we would have at our disposal, because we do not collect it. Also, it would fundamentally alter the provision of our skills system. I know that Mr Kerr was not elected at the time but, when the levy was introduced, it was unwelcome to those who had to pay it and they said to us that we should not spend it all on the provision of apprenticeships. They said that we should have more plurality of provision.

If Mr Kerr wants to talk about apprenticeship numbers, I am happy to reflect on the position over the past five years. We certainly have some way to go back given the Covid disruption. Five years ago, there were 27,422 apprenticeship starts. In 2021-22, the number was down to 26,567, which represented a 3.2 per cent drop. However, the number will be up again this year. If we look at what happened in England under the Conservatives’ tenure—[*Interruption.*] I see that Mr Kerr is not interested in that, but I am interested in it, because this is about the apprenticeship levy and the money raised by the UK Government for the express purposes of its policy of increasing the number of apprenticeships in England. In that same period of time, there was a 7.1 per cent decline in the number of apprentices in England.

I turn to colleges and their interaction with schools. Colleges play a vital role in the provision of interaction for senior-phase pupils in technical and vocational qualifications, and I am pleased to see the range of activity that happens across Scotland's colleges in that regard.

Mention was made of the additional funding that we have provided. That will be provided to colleges in the usual fashion through budget allocations by the SFC. As we would expect, there has been dialogue between the SFC and the college sector. We asked them to undertake that work, and that will become clearer in short order.

Michael Marra: Will the minister give way?

Jamie Hepburn: I will not give way to Mr Marra because I am feeling petty and immature and he did not give way to me on two occasions, so I will carry on with what I was going to say.

Emma Harper may have asked me in the wrong week to commit to meeting her and visiting Borders College, but I am happy to commit either myself or my successor to meeting her.

We heard from many members about the range of activity that we see in Scotland's schools. I have been pleased to see that when I have been out and about. In January, I visited Oban high school, where I saw the first-class provision of vocational learning. Tomorrow, I will go to the developing young workforce roadshow in Edinburgh, which schools from across the city will attend, to see some of that activity. Just this morning, I was at Gorgie Mills, a school in Edinburgh for pupils with additional support needs, which is undertaking activity to make sure that its young people are better prepared for the world of work.

That is what we should be talking about. There is excellence in our education system when it comes to the approach of developing the young workforce and promoting and advancing the provision of technical qualifications. At the end of the day, that is what we should be focused on.

I finish with one message: there should be no wrong path for young people in our country. Irrespective of their preferred end destination, it is incumbent on us to make sure that we do everything that we can to support them. That is exactly what the Government is committed to and will remain committed to, to make sure that our young people have the best chance in life.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): That concludes the debate on the expansion of vocational and technical qualifications in Scotland's secondary schools.

Points of Order

17:01

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

On 16 March, the Deputy First Minister announced yet another delay, of an additional six months, to vessels 801 and 802. He said that the ferries would be "handed over" to CalMac Ferries in autumn 2023 and autumn 2024. He chose his words carefully—because, of course, "handed over" does not mean that the ferries will be operational. When I pressed him on that specific point, he said that he was unable to answer, leaving CalMac to confirm that the vessels would not be operational for a further two to three months.

Presiding Officer, you have said that, as a matter of respect to one another, members should answer questions truthfully. It is clear that, by refusing to answer my question, the Deputy First Minister was hiding the fact that he knew that the ferries would not be operational for another two to three months after the dates that he had given. I seek your advice on how a member can get honest and full answers when it is clear that some ministers do not show members the respect that you have asked them to show.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I thank Edward Mountain for his point of order. The "Scottish Ministerial Code" states that it is "of paramount importance" that ministers give full and accurate information to the Parliament, correcting any inadvertent factual errors at the earliest opportunity. If a minister is not in a position to provide an answer to a question at the point at which it is put, it is acceptable to offer to follow up with information in writing. If a member has a question about the factual accuracy of another member's contribution, they should raise it directly with that member in the first instance. Edward Mountain will be aware of the Parliament's procedure and how it operates.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

I seek your guidance. This afternoon, the Minister for Environment and Land Reform, Màiri McAllan, misled Scotland's coastal communities. The existing network of marine protected areas covers approximately 37 per cent of Scotland's seas. The Greens and the Scottish National Party, through their Bute house agreement, intend to designate 10 per cent of Scottish seas as highly protected marine areas. At least part of that 10 per cent will be over and above the 30 per cent that are already designated as marine protected areas.

In comparison, the European Union's approach is to designate strictly protected areas within the 30 per cent that are already designated as MPAs.

No other EU country has implemented HPMAs to the extent of the proposal from the Greens and the SNP. There is no evidence to demonstrate that the HPMAs will achieve their aims. Minister McAllan is being disingenuous in stating that Scotland is in line with the EU. That matters, because fragile rural communities are under threat once again, just as they were during the Clyde cod box debacle. It is no good throwing around inaccurate data that undermines the seriousness of the SNP-Green Government's unevidenced policy approach and ignores the concerns of stakeholders and coastal communities.

Presiding Officer, I regret that this is becoming a regular occurrence, with SNP ministers frequently misleading the chamber, and I would appreciate your advice on this very serious matter.

The Presiding Officer: As I have previously drawn to members' attention, a mechanism exists whereby those who have provided information on the record have an opportunity to correct that information if they believe that a factual error has been made.

The member has had an opportunity to raise her points in the chamber, and they will therefore be on record.

Decision Time

17:05

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There are three questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that amendment S6M-08291.2, in the name of Stephen Kerr, which seeks to amend motion S6M-08291, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on the expansion of vocational and technical qualifications in Scotland's secondary schools, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division. There will be a short suspension to allow members to access the digital voting system.

17:05

Meeting suspended.

17:08

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We move to the division on amendment S6M-08291.2, in the name of Stephen Kerr. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is closed.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I was unable to connect to the digital platform. I would have voted no.

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

We have a point of order from Brian Whittle.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): [*Inaudible.*—yes.

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

For

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)

Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O’Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)

Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-08291.2, in the name of Stephen Kerr, is: For 53, Against 64, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-08291.1, in the name of Michael Marra, which seeks to amend motion S6M-08291, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on the expansion of vocational and technical qualifications in Scotland’s secondary schools, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

Brian Whittle: [*Inaudible.*]—Presiding Officer. I would have voted yes.

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

For

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foysof (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Against

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

Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-08291.1, in the name of Michael Marra, is: For 54, Against 65, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-08291, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on the expansion of vocational and technical qualifications in Scotland's secondary schools, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament recognises the wide range of courses, including vocational and technical qualifications, on offer to Scotland's senior phase learners, providing them with a breadth of options to develop their abilities and aspirations in order to reach their full potential; welcomes that Scotland's secondary school learners are now undertaking a much wider range of courses than ever before, with 27.2% of school leavers in 2021-22 gaining vocational and technical qualifications at SCQF Level 5 and

above, compared with just 7.3% in 2013-14; acknowledges that young people undertaking vocational and technical courses and qualifications, often facilitated through school-college partnerships, reflects the strengths of the Curriculum for Excellence and provides learners with the best chance of success in further learning, life and work; celebrates that a record number of young people were in work, training or further study after leaving school in 2022, with 95.7% of school leavers in a positive destination three months after leaving school; acknowledges the significant impact of Developing the Young Workforce (DYW), Scotland's youth employment strategy, which was launched in 2014; pays thanks to the DYW regional groups and DYW school coordinators for their work in increasing opportunities for, and participation in, work-based learning for young people; recognises that each individual's learner pathway is different and should be celebrated in equal measure, and commends teachers, schools, colleges, universities, employers and third sector organisations across Scotland for their commitment to improving the opportunities for young people to undertake vocational and professional qualifications in Scotland.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

A9 (Dualling)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-06478, in the name of Jamie Halcro Johnston, on road improvements and the dualling of the A9. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes with concern the number of incidents that have taken place on the A9 over recent months and led to road closures, and injuries and fatalities; recognises the Scottish Government's commitments to dual the A9 from Perth to Inverness by 2025, which stand alongside other commitments to road improvements, such as dualling of the A96 by 2030, to support road safety, and provide the economic advantages of connectivity; notes the view that commitments and proposals on investment in the road network have not progressed at pace in recent years and that questions have been raised about the commitment of the Scottish Government to these proposals following the agreement between the Scottish Government and the Scottish Green Party Parliamentary Group; acknowledges the belief that work on the A9, in particular, is clearly not on schedule, and notes the calls for the Scottish Government to reaffirm these commitments on the basis of an updated and achievable timetable that should be presented to the Parliament as soon as possible, in order to reassure communities in the Highlands and Islands and across other regions that committed investment will take place.

17:15

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I thank colleagues who signed my motion when I lodged it in November; it has now been rather overtaken by the events that it predicted. I thank all those who are taking part in the debate to highlight concerns about the A9 and other routes in my region and in their own areas.

My motion recognised

"that work on the A9"

was

"clearly not on schedule",

and it noted

"calls for the Scottish Government to"

provide

"an updated and achievable timetable"

to

"be presented to ... Parliament as soon as possible".

That was prescient, given that on 8 February, Scotland's worst-kept secret was finally revealed: that the Scottish National Party's promise to dual the A9 in its entirety between Perth and Inverness by 2025 would not be achieved.

It was a surprise to no one: not to those of us who, as politicians and as road users, have been

campaigning for dualling for more than a decade; not to the communities who live alongside the route and rely on it as they go about their daily lives; not to the businesses for which the A9 is a vital link from and to the Highlands and Islands; and certainly not to the Scottish Government, which—even though it may have repeatedly given the impression otherwise—knew that the project was badly off track and years behind where it should have been.

Only weeks after that announcement, the Scottish Conservatives used our allotted party business to bring ministers to the chamber to answer more questions on why the project had gone so badly wrong, and why, when it was clear to all that the deadline was not going to be met, ministers kept pretending that all was fine.

That debate was a chance for Parliament to show its anger that the date would be missed, and for MSPs from across the Highlands and Islands, and from all parties, to stand up for their constituents. It was a chance for us to send a clear and unified message to the Scottish Government that our constituents were angry too and wanted answers, and that there should be no more excuses and no more delays.

However, that did not happen, because not one Highlands and Islands MSP from either the SNP or the Greens came along to the debate. When it came to the vote, every one of those members—bar Fergus Ewing, who I know had a valid reason to miss the debate—followed their whip and voted down any criticism of the Scottish Government for the A9 debacle. It was shameful.

I am pleased to see that Mr Ewing is in the chamber, and I look forward to hearing his contribution. I know that there are other MSPs from the region attending the debate too.

In that Conservative debate on 22 February, we finally learned when Scottish ministers had first been told that the 2025 target was not going to be met. Following an intervention, Jenny Gilruth told me that it was in late December 2022, and then—after appearing to have consulted the Deputy First Minister—she raised a point of order to put on record that it was actually on 7 December that ministers were first made aware. That clarity was welcome, although it took another three months for the Minister for Transport to inform Parliament of that.

However, we still do not know when Transport Scotland finally made the call that the target date would be missed. In a written response that I received earlier this afternoon—conveniently—the minister would say only that it was in late December. We still do not know when doubts were first raised in the Government and in Transport Scotland over whether that date could be

delivered. We still do not know when contractors or consultants who were working on the project first raised concerns that it might not be completed on time. We do not even know by how many years the project is behind. That is why, in our motion for the debate on 22 February, the Scottish Conservatives called for ministers to commit Transport Scotland to publishing

“a quarterly update setting out progress against published targets.”

Perhaps the transport minister will give that commitment today.

I return briefly to the date of 7 December, when ministers were first told that dualling by 2025 was not achievable. On 15 December last year, eight days after Jenny Gilruth had said that ministers had been informed that the dualling would not be completed as promised, the Deputy First Minister, during questions on his budget statement to Parliament, told me, in direct response to my question on the A9 dualling, that

“The Government’s position on the completion of the dualling of the A9 remains intact.”—[*Official Report*, 15 December; c 86.]

If the minister stands by the 7 December date that she has given, what does she think is more likely? Is it that the Deputy First Minister had, as he prepared and presented his budget, and as an MSP whose constituency the A9 runs through, been kept out of the loop on a key manifesto commitment—one with serious financial implications—and was not aware that the 2025 date had been shelved, or that he did know and so may have misled Parliament?

As I spoke of in the previous debate on the A9, there are many reasons that the road needs to be dualled. Those are economic and social, and they are about connecting our communities and regions, but we must also never underestimate the safety benefits of dualling the route. As Inspector Greg Burns of Tayside’s road policing unit said only last week:

“if we had a dual carriageway section all the way up it would certainly reduce the likelihood of fatalities there.”

I drove down the route on Sunday, and as two police cars with blue lights sped past me, it was hard to escape that thick dread that another family may be getting a knock on the door from a police officer. Too many lives have already been lost, and every month of delay risks more. I take the opportunity to thank those, including local police, paramedics and firefighters, whose job it is to respond to incidents on the A9 and other roads. I thank all those who, like Conservative members and members on all sides of the chamber, will continue to fight for the dualling to be completed as soon as possible. I thank the A9 dual action group in particular for their work.

I am sure that we can all agree on one simple message for this Government—and this is a call that I have made before in the chamber: no more delays, no more excuses. Get the A9 dualled.

17:21

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): I welcome the debate. In Inverness last Friday night, *The Inverness Courier* hosted a hustings for the three candidates in the SNP leadership contest. All three gave unequivocal commitments to dualling the A9, including prioritising the funding for it. That is welcome, but it is also essential because—to be candid and honest—I am afraid that the Scottish Government is in the last-chance saloon here. We need to deliver, and any more failure will simply not be forgiven.

It is hard to overstate the concern, and the anger, among my constituents and people in the Highlands about the issue, especially in the light—as Mr Halcro Johnston noted—of the tragic death and loss of so many people, with so many families whose lives have been devastated. That has hardened the anger to scepticism, which is growing and mounting. Yes, we have made progress, and I commend the minister for the effort that she, and her predecessor as the minister responsible for dealing with the issue, who is sitting beside me now, have put in.

Preparatory work has been done, two sections have been upgraded and design work has been done—although not for Dunkeld—but the pledge that was made to dual the road by 2025 has simply not been kept. In politics, sometimes we have to accept the reality, and I think that an apology from the minister would pave the way for good progress. We should just accept that we did not get it right—we got it wrong, but we will put it right. That is what people want.

The pledge to publish a timetable by autumn is far too slow. I have been calling for a timetable for the past two years, and it should have been published long ago. That process needs to be speeded up considerably.

There will shortly be an inquiry into the A9 by the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee, thanks to Laura Hansler from Kingussie. It is fitting that a citizen of Scotland who is affected by the issue in her daily life has lodged the petition, and the fact that the committee has sought to hold an inquiry is potentially a great step forward, so I praise Laura for her initiative.

What should the inquiry do? People want to see progress as quickly as possible, and two key elements are required for that. The first is funding, which must be put in place, or at least earmarked, beyond the term of the current Government. There is, I think, a will to do that across all the parties

that are represented in the Parliament, except one: the Green Party. There is no Green member present in the debate, unless somebody is contributing remotely, but all the other parties would support that. I think that the funding could be earmarked, even if it cannot be formally allocated, and that must happen.

Secondly, the method of procuring the contracts by Transport Scotland must be changed fundamentally. The present procurement strategy has plainly failed—the Tomatin to Moy tender is proof positive of that. I wonder whether the minister is confident that a re-tender—to be completed, she has said, by the end of this year—can actually be done in that time. Moreover, if it can be, does that not risk producing the same result? That is a serious risk, and we should be open and honest about that. I would be grateful if the minister could explain that.

The kernel is this. Numerous industry sources have told me—this will be no surprise to the Transport Scotland lead official who is here this evening—that the procurement method passes all the risks to the contractor. That has meant that at least one major contractor has simply exited Scotland. Others have limited appetite to bid for roads work, because, frankly, they have been stung in the past. I could give details, but now is perhaps not the time.

So how should things be done? They should be done with a framework contract, sharing the risk, as in England, and by removing the tender from the process, which takes about a year. It costs approximately £500,000 for each company to put in a bid. What is the point of, say, four companies putting in a bid and all doing the same work, spending £500,000 each? It also wastes a year. Contracts need to be done concurrently—together. If there is a risk of disruption, why not do the first stretch of the A96 at the same time as the A9? That would spread the disruption across two different roads and as a practical suggestion has much to commend it. I understand that there is acceptance at Transport Scotland that that needs to be done.

In my view—and I have been around for quite a while now—the Highlands deserve more, and Highlanders deserve better. We simply cannot let them down again. We must deliver. We must, as a Government, find the funding, and we must deliver the procurement changes that, in my view, are necessary to enable the swiftest possible completion of the dualling of the A9.

17:26

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I welcome Fergus Ewing being on the back benches and giving speeches such as that one

about things that are important in the constituency and region that we represent. The only problem is that, in speaking so eloquently now—where he did not speak before—he steals all the thunder of the members who follow him.

It would be fair to say that most people in the Highlands have, on their walls or in their brains, what was said in the SNP's 2007 manifesto, which was that the Government would

“publish a 10-year plan to transform Scottish road safety. The case put forward by organisations including the AA motoring trust proves that a range of measures—including dualling of key roads, such as the A9—would contribute to fewer lives being lost.”

Imagine if that had been done in 2007 or in the years after. Imagine the lives that would have been saved. Imagine the Highlanders and other people using the road who would not be attending the funerals of friends and colleagues killed on it. It is a truly startling fact, and it is something that we should bear in mind constantly when we talk about the project.

The project has been shovel ready for years, but it has been abandoned by the Scottish Government and kicked into the long grass. Sixteen years on from that manifesto promise and 11 years after the policy commitment, only 11 miles between Inverness and Perth have been dualled. That means that just 11 of 80 miles of upgrade has been completed, or two sections out of 11.

The Kincaig to Dalraddy bit that was done was delivered late. It was opened and, as those of us who travel the road constantly will remember, it was then promptly closed. It was opened to meet a deadline, closed to rectify the defects and then reopened. We need to do better than that.

I agree with Mr Ewing on the point that all the ministers or ex-ministers who are standing to be First Minister have had a finger in the pie. Humza Yousaf was minister with responsibility for transport and roads between 2016 and 2018, and Kate Forbes had her finger on the pulse when it came to the finances, but she could not deliver. Ash Regan did not have that, but when the candidates stood up at the *Inverness Courier* hustings—as referred to by Fergus Ewing—she said:

“In my first 100 days I will set out a new timeframe and get this work moving.”

Humza Yousaf said:

“If I am First Minister the first thing I will do is sit down with my finance secretary who I will appoint and say this is the priority and the budget has to reflect this.”

Kate Forbes insisted that she has been pushing for faster progress and would continue to push for it. The problem is that they all made those promises at the hustings but have all been in a

position to deliver the work. We should not forget that.

I echo something that Mr Ewing said about contracting out the work. I have watched the construction of the Aberdeen western peripheral route and the A9 dualling. The Government likes the idea of joint ventures. They might be good and might mean that one person is in charge, but if that person goes bankrupt, we have problems. If that one person is not prepared to pass on the money to all the subbies that are involved in the project, we have a problem. The problem is simply that no one will want to tender for any of the work that the Government has. That complicates the situation.

I hope that, in the next 10 days, the people who stood up at the hustings in Inverness and promised to deliver the dualling of the A9 get on and deliver it. They have not delivered it before and they need to get on and deliver it now because not only have Highlanders run out of patience, but they are running out of time and some people are losing their lives because of the delay.

17:31

Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I congratulate my colleague Jamie Halcro Johnston on securing the debate and associate myself with his remarks and those of Edward Mountain and Fergus Ewing. All have made passionate pleas to the Scottish Government not to abandon the projects that we are discussing and to ensure that the next First Minister makes them a top priority.

The A9 is my road home. I have driven it on countless occasions. It is clear to me and every other road user that the status quo is completely unacceptable. Even more, the sheer number of deaths as a result of accidents on the A9 is appalling and tragic in equal measure.

Last November, I recounted to Parliament that I attended that month the funeral of a friend of mine and Fergus Ewing's who sadly died as a result of a road traffic accident on the A9. Too many families have experienced tragedy on that road. Too many lives have been lost. I join others in imploring the Scottish Government to take urgent action.

I turn to an equally important stretch of road, also in the Highlands and Islands, that serves tens of thousands of people but remains one of the most unreliable routes in Scotland. Members will not be surprised to learn that it is the A83 Rest and Be Thankful. I do not apologise for raising the matter again. I have raised it time and again in the Parliament and will keep doing so until a long-term or permanent solution is achieved.

I reiterate my admiration for the work of John Gurr and the other members of the Rest and Be Thankful Campaign, who have successfully kept the issue alive. We have heard a lot of talk about the issue but, regrettably, there has been very little material action from the Scottish Government. It has been two and a half years since Transport Scotland announced the 11 possible replacement routes and two years since one of them was identified as the preferred option. Since then, scarcely anything has happened. We have seen some short-term fixes, but nothing of substance, which has been incredibly frustrating.

That is a pattern that the Government has repeated across Scotland. In Argyll, it is frustrating for local businesses that rely on the route to connect to the central belt, for people who use the road to travel to hospital appointments in Glasgow and for families who use it to visit loved ones. I understand that the Minister for Transport is due to make an announcement on the issue in the spring and I hope that she may be able to provide much needed clarity on the matter.

We talk about the main roads such as the A9 and the A83—the trunk roads—but let us not forget smaller and quieter local roads that might also have issues and challenges. I will address one in the Sandbank area in Cowal. The Scenic Sandbank group has been campaigning to introduce several road safety measures, including a new 20mph speed limit, at the A815 at McKinlay's Quay, just north of Dunoon. That follows several tragic road traffic accidents in the area, and I have been working with that local group alongside others to find a solution that meets the needs of the local community. I appreciate that the route is a local authority matter, but I ask the minister to outline any steps that the Scottish Government can take to assist Argyll and Bute Council and Scenic Sandbank to come to a resolution.

With a new First Minister due to be appointed next week, it is vital that a reset takes place when it comes to the Government's approach to our transport infrastructure, and that road improvements are prioritised by the SNP Government. Whether it be the A9, the A96, the A83 or others, our constituents expect the Parliament to take vital action now. I hope that the minister will make that case vigorously to the next First Minister.

17:35

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I thank Jamie Halcro Johnston for bringing the debate to the Parliament. When we last debated the A9 in the chamber, a petition had been lodged with the Parliament, and I hope that it will help to place a focus on the A9 and get some clarity on

progress and timescales. I hope that the relevant committee will ensure that there is a full inquiry into what has happened and what action needs to be taken to ensure that the road is dualled as soon as possible.

Even the SNP-led Highland Council has agreed a motion calling for immediate publication of a new dualling timetable for the A9. It also seeks a public inquiry into the long delay that is now faced.

As others have said, all candidates in the SNP leadership contest agreed that the A9 dualling is a failure of Government and must become a priority. Edward Mountain mentioned Ash Regan's commitment to publish an updated timetable for the work on both the A9 and the A96 in her first 100 days, should she win the leadership election. I hope that the other candidates will match her ambition, because waiting until the autumn is simply too long. That said, we should not have to wait for a new leader to point the way ahead. It was a manifesto promise back in 2007, more than 15 years ago. It is a promise that has been broken, and the SNP Government should be making every effort right now to make good on it.

The SNP seeks to blame the pandemic, inflation and the war in Ukraine, which are all things that would not have impacted on the project had it been at the right stage of development at that time. It is clear that the SNP never sought to meet its 2025 timescale.

Of the 11 stretches of road that need to be dualled, only two have been completed. This project went wrong long before the pandemic, but the Scottish Government hid the truth from us. The Scottish Government needs to get the project back on track, come clean about what went wrong and be truthful with my constituents.

The Scottish Government has committed £5 million for short-term improvements to the A9 to improve safety. Although that is welcome, it is no substitute for dualling. Last year, there were eight deaths on the 25-mile stretch near the Slochd in just three months. The total number of deaths between Perth and Inverness in 2022 was 13. The average cost of a fatal accident investigation is £2 million—that is £26 million last year just on the A9 south. That puts the £5 million on short-term improvements into proportion. Sadly, we cannot account for the heartache of families who have lost loved ones on that road.

The A9 does not stop at Inverness; the road north is also in a woeful condition for a trunk road. Despite that, the Scottish Government continues to centralise services, especially health and maternity services, to Inverness. That journey is always hazardous, and it is worse when made under stress due to illness or childbirth. The road is also treacherous in bad weather and can often

block with snow. Only eight women gave birth in Caithness last year, compared with the 202 women from Caithness who gave birth in Inverness.

Much of the A9 runs through the Highland Council area. In that area, there are 178 road projects needing attention, but the council does not have the money and can look to fixing only 13 of them within its current budget.

It is little wonder that people are frustrated with the A96, the A83 and the A82—the list goes on. In addition, the promise of shortened rail journeys from Inverness to the central belt has not materialised. This Government is high on promises but low on delivery.

17:39

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): I thank my colleague Jamie Halcro Johnston for securing this members' business debate. I absolutely back the calls for dualling as soon as possible, but my contribution focuses on what can and should be done between now and when that happens.

This evening's debate reminds us—if, indeed, we needed any reminder—that road safety remains of paramount importance to all of us. Everyone has the right to feel safe as they go about their daily lives. In Scotland, we are fortunate that that is generally the case, and the majority of us do not give road safety a second thought when we leave our homes. Sadly, some people live in fear and anxiety as soon as they step out of their doors, but that does not have to be the case.

The A9 has a horrific accident record—I believe that there have been more than 74 fatalities in the past decade alone. There has been a drop in the number of fatalities on the A9, which has been linked to the introduction, at the end of 2014, of average speed cameras between Dunblane and Inverness. The evidence from the pilot study on the A9, when speed limits were raised for heavy goods vehicle drivers, shows that that measure was of great benefit—there was a 10 per cent drop in the number of accidents and less driver frustration, and HGV drivers adhered to the 50mph limit.

Edward Mountain: One of the confusions for people who drive up the A9 is that trial speed limits of 50mph for lorries are still marked up. Because they have been there for so long, they are no longer trials. Would it not be better to sign those speed limits properly, so that cars do not feel that they have to stick to the 50mph limit, which causes further problems?

Finlay Carson: Yes, it would. We absolutely need reassurance that those pilots will be turned into policy. We need that type of intervention across the country, and as a matter of urgency on routes similar to the A9, such as the A82, the A77 and the A75. Maybe the minister could tell us why a successful pilot, which has significantly reduced accidents, is not being permanently rolled out.

For almost all of my life, I have lived next to a road that was once called Scotland's killer road. Sadly, since 1979, 2,500 serious collisions and 222 fatalities have been witnessed on the A75.

Let us look more generally at the impact of those roads on the quality of life of people who live by them, of whom I am one. Crocketford and Springholm in my constituency are two small communities that have the gross misfortune of sitting on the A75. Every hour of every day, their residents have to put up with HGVs hurtling past their doors—and, on many occasions, ignoring the 30mph speed limit.

As I have mentioned previously in the chamber, last year, two lorries collided in Crocketford, which resulted in one of the vehicles turning over and hitting three parked cars. Miraculously, the lorry stopped just centimetres before hitting a house. In a public meeting in the village, residents voiced their fears and demanded that road safety cameras be installed as a matter of urgency, in the hope of slowing down rogue drivers who speed through the communities.

This afternoon, I received a letter from Stewart Leggett, interim director of roads at Transport Scotland, in relation to the Scottish safety camera programme and "Scotland's Road Safety Framework to 2030", which says that the Government is

"committed to making Scotland's road travel safe for everyone",

and that there is

"a vision for Scotland to have the best road safety performance ... by 2030",

alongside the ambitious long-term goal for no one to be seriously injured or killed on our roads by 2050. One of the better interventions that might help to achieve those goals is the dualling of the A9 and other roads, such as the A75.

The strategic partnership board that oversees the delivery of the framework also gives consideration to changes to the guidance that are required to ensure that safety camera resources maximise their casualty reduction potential. Why should their deployment be considered only for areas with high collision and speeding profiles? Why can average speed cameras not be considered for communities that are adversely affected by those issues—for example, in places

where other methods of speed detection are simply inadequate or ineffective, because the police do not have sufficient resources? Cameras could play a huge part in protecting the health and wellbeing of roadside communities. I ask the minister to consider changes to the rules and guidance, so that cameras are put in place not only to prevent serious collisions, but to prevent the on-going unrecorded impact on rural communities.

I will close on a positive note. Given that it might be the minister's last appearance in her current role, will Jenny Gilruth join me in recognising the excellent work that is being done between the Scottish and United Kingdom Governments with regard to the A75? Will she commit to providing an update on when we can expect to see a completed business case for the route, which should lead to both our Governments investing in a route that is of strategic importance to not only Scotland but the whole of the UK?

The overriding message today is for the Scottish Government to keep its promises and commitments and start delivering a road infrastructure that is fit for the future.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Due to the number of members who want to speak in the debate, I am minded to accept a motion without notice, under rule 8.14.3 of standing orders, to extend the debate by up to half an hour. I call Jamie Halcro Johnston to move such a motion.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 8.14.3, the debate be extended by up to 30 minutes.—[*Jamie Halcro Johnston*]

Motion agreed to.

17:45

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I will start with a reflection on the debate so far. I was also at the *Inverness Courier* hustings on Friday. What struck me and, I think, a lot of the people watching was how great it was to have politicians in a national leadership contest talking about issues that we deal with every day and that matter to the people of the Highlands. The Highland News and Media team will probably be quite chuffed that that impact has now made its way into the chamber.

It will not be a surprise—or it certainly should not be a surprise—to anyone that I feel let down by the delay to the dualling of the A9. I do not have anything to add to this debate that I have not said before, but I realise that folk who are listening might not have heard me before, so I will repeat and expand on what I said in the chamber after the minister made her statement last month.

It is often very difficult for highlanders and islanders to feel that the Government here cares about us. That is a fact. I do not mind telling members that I quite often feel left out, too. My committee colleagues will be able to confirm that I constantly put my hand up and say, “Hey—maybe we need a rural or island voice in the room for this debate.”

A lot of work needs to be done to convince my constituents that folk in Edinburgh—whether they are from Edinburgh or they just come here three days a week—care about us, care about what matters to us, care about fulfilling promises that have been made to us and care about making my region better as much as they do about making the central belt better.

I really mean it when I say that it will be very difficult for highlanders to believe that the Scottish Government is committed to dualling the A9, and to them, in the face of another delay. That is a cold, hard fact that whatever Government we have in a week's time will have to address.

I have paid full attention to the Scottish Government's explanations and rebuttals on the issue. Of course, I understand the need to be sensible with taxpayers' money—I think that most people will understand that—but we cannot just blame a lack of bids and move on. We need to ensure that bids are possible, welcomed and supported because, if only one contractor is willing to do the work and is asking for a lot more money than expected, there are deeper problems at work.

We need to see urgency from the Government so that we get back on track, and we need clarity on how long that will take. I do not want to come back here in six months to ask why the rerunning of the bidding process has not resulted in movement. I want my constituents to have confidence that they know what will happen from here on in.

I welcomed the investment that the Scottish Government mentioned in a new railway station at Dalcross—along with the minister, I went there on the first train, and it was a cracking day. However, it should not be one or the other. It was not one or the other for Edinburgh, for Glasgow or for the dozens of other places that have managed to obtain significant rail improvements and significant road improvements.

We would not be talking about one or the other if the A9 south had been dualled 15 years ago, so previous Governments have to take some responsibility for the issue, too. It could have, and should have, been done a long time ago. I should be in this building talking about getting a move on with doubling the Highland main line so that freight and traffic could be moved off the already-dualled A9. It has been a huge trauchle up to this point,

and I do not want things to be dragged on any further.

The safety measures that the minister outlined will make a huge difference. I am glad that such measures are being taken, because there are things that we can do in the meantime to make the road safer. I am willing, as always, to discuss reasonably how we can move on, and I look forward to the meeting that the minister has committed to convening once the Moy to Tomatin section has been retendered.

I appreciate the Scottish Government's "resolute commitment" to finishing the dualling between Perth and Inverness, but I remind the minister collegiately—because I know that she wants it to be done, too—that we will need a bit more than words for folk to believe it.

17:49

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): I rise to make a short contribution to the debate about safety on the A9 more generally, in anticipation of the minister waxing lyrical about measures being taken on our A roads, in lieu of dualling, to improve safety.

I was contacted recently by a member of the public concerned about the platform at Dunkeld and Birnam station. He had discovered, on trying to get off the train, that the gap between the carriage and the platform is more than 2 feet. He drew that dangerous gap to the attention of ScotRail and was referred to the Office of Rail and Road, which acknowledged the risk. The ORR said that interim safety measures would be put in place pending

"major improvement work ... to eliminate large stepping distances".

However, it went on to say that such substantive work was entirely contingent upon, and could not be undertaken until, the dualling of the adjacent A9 trunk road—a project that the ORR set out will require significant changes to the railway and the station—is completed. It would appear, therefore, that this Government's abject failure to dual the road is compromising not only the safety of drivers but that of rail passengers, too. As long as there is this dither and delay, the railway's ability to sort out its safety will continue to be paralysed.

My second point goes towards any attempt to say that other safety measures are being looked at that mitigate the urgency and necessity of the A9's dualling. I should acknowledge here the efforts of Tarves community council, and Fin Carson's remarks earlier, because members will know that the A9, as with the A96 and the likes, sees a significant percentage of its use by HGVs. Safe overtaking opportunities on predominantly single carriageway roads such as those are rare.

In Scotland, goods vehicles of more than 7.5 tonnes maximum laden weight are restricted to 40mph. In England and Wales, it is 50mph. Another MSP wrote to the transport minister in June 2022 asking for that to be looked at. In response, the transport minister confirmed that there is no intention to change that "slower for Scotland" anomaly. However, it turns out that, in 2018, the Scottish Government did a study on the

"potential impacts of increasing speed limits for HGVs in Scotland",

which concluded that there were

"safety benefits and ... environmental impacts to increasing the speed limits for HGVs".

A further Transport Scotland trial in June 2018, specifically examining the impact of allowing HGVs to go at 50mph on the Perth to Inverness A9, showed—here, it is important that I quote the transport minister—"positive road safety benefits". In short, this Government did studies five years ago that showed that a mere stroke of a minister's pen to increase the speed limit for HGVs by 10mph would give "positive road safety benefits" on the A9. Yet, has the Government, in the five years since, increased those limits to deliver those safety benefits? No, it has not. If, in her closing remarks, we hear from the minister any attempt to exonerate this Government for the appalling consequences of its inaction on dualling the A9 by saying that more must be done, the people of Scotland will know that more could have been done but was not.

17:53

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I congratulate Jamie Halcro Johnston on securing the debate.

I have spoken in the chamber several times recently on the A9 issue, so I will make only a very brief contribution and what I hope are two quite significant points. Rhoda Grant, Finlay Carson and Liam Kerr talked about road safety improvements in the short term. I very much welcome the work that the minister has been leading in relation to short-term improvements on the A9 and her engagement with colleagues from across the chamber on that issue. However, it is important to understand that those short-term improvements should not be seen as a substitute for progressing the dualling project.

Earlier, Fergus Ewing mentioned his concern about the Green Party's approach to the issue. No one from the Green Party is here for this debate. I think that some of us would have a concern that the Green Party's involvement in the Scottish Government is a factor in the delay to the work on the A9 being progressed. Depending on who

becomes First Minister next week, that issue might no longer be there to concern us—who knows?

However, I have heard Green Party representatives say that there is an alternative to A9 dualling, which is lower speed limits. That is entirely the wrong approach, because the A9 dualling project is about road safety but also about better connectivity. It is essential that, as part of that better connectivity, we look to reduce journey times safely. Part of the project is also about improving connectivity for residents in Perthshire and across the Highlands. If we are serious about growing the economy, we must ensure that we are providing safe, secure and fast infrastructure. That is not something that the Green Party supports, given that it does not support economic growth in any form.

I have heard it suggested by Green Party representatives that we could reduce some of the issues on the A9 by lowering the speed limits to 50mph. That does not even answer the road safety question because, as we know, the classic serious accident or fatality on the A9 is a head-on crash on the single carriageway. Two cars travelling at 50mph that crash head on is equivalent to driving into a wall at 100mph. The chances are that those involved would not survive or, at the very least, they would end up very seriously injured. Therefore, that is not the answer and the short-term improvements, although welcome, are not a substitute for delivering the A9 dualling project. After all, that was what was promised.

My second and final point is in relation to what we have already heard about the death toll on the A9. During 2022, there were 13 deaths on the stretch between Perth and Inverness, 12 of which were on single carriageway sections. I have no doubt that we would have seen a substantial lowering of that tragic death toll had dual carriageways been in place instead of single carriageways.

Donald Cameron referred to attending the funeral of a friend who died on the A9. There have been too many such funerals, and there will continue to be too many funerals until the project is delivered. I hope that whoever becomes First Minister next week will deliver on the Government's pledges and that we will see real action to complete this vital road project.

17:57

The Minister for Transport (Jenny Gilruth): I congratulate Jamie Halcro Johnston on securing this important debate on the A9. As I think the member alluded to, I provided a statement on the A9 to Parliament on 9 February, and I responded

in a Conservative debate on the issue just over a month ago.

I have listened very carefully to the contributions from all parties, including my own. I very much acknowledge the strength of feeling today, as I have done previously, on the part of all parties—particularly in my own party—on the recent number of incidents and fatalities on the road, which are unacceptable.

I think that Fergus Ewing asked me to apologise at the start of the debate. I have previously apologised in the chamber, and I do so unreservedly again today. One life lost on Scotland's roads is one too many. I recognise the devastating increase in fatalities that we saw in the latter half of 2022. We need to move on now at pace. I think that that was one of the points that Ms Roddick alluded to in her contribution.

One of the worst things about being the Minister for Transport is that, every time a life is lost on Scotland's roads, I get sent an e-mail. When I was appointed in January last year, I was really struck by the number of emails that I was sent at the beginning of the year.

Currently, there are challenges on the trunk road network—not just on the A9, but across the network—in relation to road safety. We all need to be mindful of that. We must also be mindful of behaviour change, about coming out of the pandemic, and about how drivers are behaving, but also about how Government can help to improve road safety.

Murdo Fraser made a number of points. He has made a number of contributions on the A9 during my time in post, but I know that he has taken a keen interest in the matter over a number of years, noting his constituency interests. He is absolutely right that the additional £5 million of investment from the Government is not in any way a substitute for full dualling.

Members have raised a number of points. I will try to cover all of those in turn.

Finlay Carson spoke about the road safety challenges on the A75. I will meet Mr Carson next week, I think, and I am also due to meet my UK Government counterpart on that matter next week. It is important that we move forward at pace.

This morning, I attended the Road Safety Scotland event, which was also attended by Police Scotland. Members might be aware that part of the additional funding that is supporting short-term measures on the A9 is for campaigns and improving driver behaviour. For example, members might have seen our driver fatigue road safety campaign, which ended on 13 February, and today we launched our "Drive on the left" marketing campaign.

As minister, I cannot go into the specifics of fatalities that have occurred on the route, but I encourage members with a constituency interest to engage with local police on those matters, because that may help with understanding the causation factors behind some of the incidents that have happened on the road in recent months. There is some strong engagement work with constituency and regional MSPs. I was happy to chair the session towards the end of last year that Mr Fraser alluded to and, if I am still in this position in the coming weeks, I will be happy to continue that engagement work, because it is vitally important that we get this right.

Mr Halcro Johnston started his speech by talking about dates. I want to go back to that point. We discussed the issue in the debate a month ago, and I corrected the record, because I think that I said that I had been told for the first time that the date was not achievable in late 2022, but it was, of course, 7 December. I reiterate that point today. I think that the Tomatin to Moy tender had not yet completed at that stage, and it was important to update Parliament on the totality, which is why I gave the update on 8 February. That is a period of about two months—although Mr Halcro Johnston might think that that is inaccurate.

I recognise that it would have been preferable had those dates been closer together, although there was a challenge in relation to the Christmas break period and in relation to some of the governance around the tender. I have spoken to Transport Scotland about that at length, and I am more than happy to ask officials to speak to members about that, too.

Mr Ewing touched on funding. It is important to underline that the Government has already invested significant funding in the A9, although, clearly, we will have to invest more. We have rehearsed some of the challenges in recent times in relation to the pressures on the Scottish Government budget, but we will need to prioritise the capital investment for the completion of the dualling programme.

Edward Mountain: Surely one of the ways in which the Government can ensure the prioritising of funding and ensure that everyone understands its approach to getting the job done quickly is by having compulsory purchase orders along the whole route. There is a limited timescale, and it would focus everyone's mind on getting the job done if the Government stuck to that timescale.

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

Jenny Gilruth: I am not sure that I can do that as a minister, because statutory processes are required to be completed, but I am more than happy to check that matter with Transport

Scotland officials and write to the member in detail. It sounds like a reasonable proposition but, as transport minister, I know that statutory processes around building consents for new roads sometimes look easier than they are.

The issue of procurement was raised in my statement to Parliament, in the previous debate and by many members today. Many members across the chamber accept that it is pretty unusual for a contract to attract only one bid. Our design and build contracts have been used pretty successfully for more than 20 years, but it is fair to say that we have seen a decline in the number of tenders, which we know is due to risk transfer, as set out in the contract—Mr Ewing alluded to that point. As a result, we are reassessing the design and build contract. We have to achieve the right balance in the tenders to attract more competition to ensure that we get a deal that works better for taxpayers.

Fergus Ewing: Will the reconsideration of the sharing of risk be applicable to the intended retendering process for the Tomatin to Moy section? I am concerned that that process could lead simply to the same result of perhaps one offer that is not acceptable.

Jenny Gilruth: I am not aware of whether it will be applicable to the retendering, as the member has alluded to. I am more than happy to speak to Transport Scotland again regarding that point. However, given the number of meetings that I have held with Transport Scotland on the matter in the past few weeks, I know that it is working directly with industry to ensure that we attract far more bids this time in relation to the tender.

Donald Cameron referred to the Rest and Be Thankful, which we have discussed at length. I chaired the task force in Argyll at the start of this year. As the member alluded to, we will announce the preferred route for the long-term option in the spring, so I cannot give a further update on that point today. However, I wanted to put that on the record.

Mr Cameron also raised a specific query in relation to a local road in Argyll. I will ask Transport Scotland officials to speak to Argyll and Bute Council in relation to that matter.

Liam Kerr raised a challenge that I was unaware of in relation to improvements at Dunkeld train station. I have not seen the advice from the Office of Rail and Road. The member may or may not be aware that I am actually recused in relation to the A9 section at Dunkeld. However, I will ask the cabinet secretary to raise that matter directly with the ORR and with Transport Scotland, should that be needed.

Members have repeatedly raised the timetable for the completion of the dualling programme. As

members will recall, I have committed to update Parliament on the new timetable for completion when I receive advice on the options to complete the programme, which is expected in the autumn of this year. Mr Ewing tested that timescale—I am happy to be tested on it and to again request Transport Scotland to expedite the process. I have already done so, but I am more than happy to continue to consider whether we can truncate the process and bring forward the advice to Parliament sooner than the autumn.

I have announced the Government's intention to urgently commence a new procurement for the Tomatin to Moy section, and I am pleased to report that the preparations for that stage of procurement are progressing well, with a target date for awarding a new contract before the end of 2023. As I mentioned in my response to Mr Ewing, part of that process involves Transport Scotland officials engaging with the market on the terms and conditions of the contracts. I very much welcome the positive response from the market to that engagement.

Officials are continuing to work on the outstanding statutory consents that remain in relation to the Pass of Birnam to Tay crossing project, which is the only one that has not yet gone through the statutory processes. That is worth putting on the record.

I do not shy away from the challenge in relation to the completion of the dualling of the A9. Investing in our roads will always be important, and we have to get that right as a Government. I have apologised, and I absolutely recognise the challenge—as transport minister, I take it very seriously. We now need to move forward at pace. We will do that by outlining to Parliament an updated timescale. I look forward to, I hope, being able to bring that back to Parliament later this year and to giving Parliament an update in relation to the Tomatin to Moy tender.

Meeting closed at 18:06.

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