



**OFFICIAL REPORT**  
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

# Meeting of the Parliament (Hybrid)

**Wednesday 27 January 2021**

**Session 5**



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**Wednesday 27 January 2021**

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# Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 27 January 2021

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

## Portfolio Question Time

### Constitution, Europe and External Affairs

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Graham):** Good afternoon. I remind members that social distancing measures are in place in the chamber and throughout the Holyrood campus.

The first item of business is portfolio questions. We start with questions on the constitution, Europe and external affairs. I remind members that questions 2 and 7 have been grouped together. If a member wishes to ask a supplementary question they should indicate that by typing R in the chat function during the relevant question—not before it, please. Obviously, if your supplementary is to question 2 or question 7, please type R after those questions have been asked.

#### Support for Businesses (Brexit)

**1. James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what progress has been made on its discussions with the United Kingdom Government regarding support for businesses in Scotland that have been impacted by Brexit. (S5O-04945)

**The Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans (Graeme Dey):** The Scottish Government is deeply concerned by the emerging evidence of the severe impact that Brexit is having on the ability of Scottish businesses to trade effectively and competitively with the European Union, with lasting consequences for our economy.

The Scottish ministers are in daily contact with UK ministers to press the need to support businesses that are being adversely impacted. The Scottish Government will continue to work hard to address problems and blockages, where it is in our power to do so. We will also continue to do all that we can to ensure that businesses in Scotland have concrete and up-to-date information about the new arrangements, through our [www.prepareforbrexit.scot](http://www.prepareforbrexit.scot) website and other resources.

**James Dornan:** The EU has set up a Brexit adjustment reserve fund to counter unforeseen adverse consequences for the sectors that are

worst affected by Brexit in member states. Scotland appears to be receiving no extra funding for such a purpose, but I understand that Ireland is set to receive about €1 billion in support. Does the cabinet secretary agree that, at a time when the EU continues to show solidarity with its member states, the UK Government's insane Brexit strategy and continued contempt for Scotland show how much better it will be when Scotland rejoins the EU as an independent country?

**Graeme Dey:** The disruption to the seafood sector, in particular, offers a clear example of the delays, costs and devastating losses that are associated with becoming a third country and dealing with new and untested processes. The media report daily that many businesses' profit margins will be slashed because of the new borders and customs requirements, and that other businesses will simply close altogether.

James Dornan will be aware that the UK Government has announced a £23 million compensation scheme for UK businesses. Having made repeated calls for such a scheme, we welcome the announcement, but we remain concerned that it is little more than a sticking plaster. I am most concerned about the scope of the scheme, which is designed to cover businesses that have suffered direct export losses that can be evidenced. It is essential that the UK Government provides further clarity as soon as possible and that timescales for applications and payments are made clear. The same goes for the previously announced £100 million for the fishing industry.

I absolutely concur with James Dornan about the contempt that is being shown and about the need for Scotland to rejoin the EU and the merits of our doing so.

#### European Collaboration Post-Brexit

**2. Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what steps it has taken to continue positive collaboration with European countries following the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union. (S5O-04946)

**The Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, Europe and External Affairs (Michael Russell):** [Inaudible.]

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Cabinet secretary, your microphone is muted.

I will come back to questions 2 and 7. Let us move on to question 3.

#### Support for Businesses and Sectors (Brexit)

**3. Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD):** To ask the Scottish Government what support it will

provide to the businesses and sectors most directly impacted by Brexit. (S5O-04947)

**The Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans (Graeme Dey):** As well as pressing for urgent streamlining and simplification of trade arrangements, the Scottish Government continues to call on the United Kingdom Government to introduce fair and meaningful support for the businesses that are most affected by Brexit.

Complex new procedures and untested systems are having a disastrous impact on the ability of Scottish businesses to trade effectively and competitively with the European Union, with lasting consequences for our economy. That is, of course, occurring at a time when business resilience is already severely stretched by Covid.

The Scottish Government will continue to do everything that we can to help businesses in a practical sense to address the immediate problems arising from Brexit where it is in our power to do so.

**Liam McArthur:** As the minister will be aware, seafood exporters have faced some of the most serious problems since the turn of the year. In some respects, the Orkney Fishermen's Society is fortunate because it ships frozen products and has loyal customers in France, and it is doing all that it can to help to maintain supply, but urgent steps are needed to reduce bureaucracy that serves no purpose and adds delay and burdens on staff and cash flow.

Will the minister therefore ask the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Tourism to look at how paperwork can be cut and processes made more efficient? In particular, I urge the Government to look at what is required for catch certificates and invoicing, much of which serves no useful purpose whatsoever.

**Graeme Dey:** I did not catch all that, but, of course, I will ask the relevant cabinet secretary to respond in detail to Liam McArthur. To answer his general point, I say that the Scottish Government is committed to dealing with the practical aspects of the issue on which we can have an impact. For example, we are providing, through Food Standards Scotland, practical and pragmatic help to everyone who is affected, and we are using our enterprise agencies to assist wherever possible.

I undertake to get my colleague to respond directly to Liam McArthur on the points that he raises.

**Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP):** There have been recent reports of UK Government advisers telling businesses that the best way to avoid border issues and VAT problems is to set up a new company within the EU single market. Does the minister agree that the best way for Scotland

to protect its businesses and their ability to trade is to rejoin the European Union?

**Graeme Dey:** Sandra White is absolutely right to highlight that issue. It is ironic that the Government that created this boorach is suggesting ways to work around it. We recognise that the way to resolve the issue in the medium to long term is through Scotland returning to the European Union fold as an independent country.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I think that we now have the cabinet secretary back, so we will move to question 2.

### European Collaboration Post-Brexit

**2. Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what steps it has taken to continue positive collaboration with European countries following the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union. (S5O-04946)

**The Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, Europe and External Affairs (Michael Russell):** I hope that you can hear me now, Presiding Officer.

The Scottish Government rejects the isolationist and damaging approach of the United Kingdom Government's hard Brexit policy. We remain committed to European values and to working collaboratively with European Union member states, in line with the views of the people of Scotland. Despite Brexit, we continue to proactively seek opportunities to collaborate in areas of mutual interest such as climate change, the just transition, hydrogen, green jobs and investment, education and the wellbeing economy.

**Colin Beattie:** What further steps have been taken to ensure that EU residents living in Scotland continue to feel safe and welcome here?

**Michael Russell:** The First Minister has again indicated her enthusiasm for our continuing to welcome EU citizens to Scotland. That is a point that is stressed with EU consuls and ambassadors on every occasion. Indeed, the minister who is responsible for migration, Jenny Gilruth, and I spoke with consuls this morning at one of our regular update sessions, and we will continue to do that.

Let me be clear—I hope that members in the chamber will agree—that European citizens are very welcome to stay in Scotland. We wish them to be here when we rejoin the EU, as we will.

### Scotland-European Union Relations Post-Brexit

**7. Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how it will

maintain close ties between Scotland and EU member states now that the UK has exited from the EU. (S5O-04951)

**The Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, Europe and External Affairs (Michael Russell):** The Scottish Government deeply regrets the fact and manner of the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union. It is more important than ever that we continue to engage with EU institutions and member states, and we are determined to maintain our close ties with our EU neighbours, with whom we have such close political, social and economic relationships.

The commitment is being delivered in a range of ways, including by using a network of offices in Europe—in Berlin, Brussels, Dublin, London and Paris—that work to promote Scottish interests and enable us to demonstrate our commitment to the values of co-operation, democracy, equality and the rule of law as we pave the way for Scotland's return to the EU as an equal independent member state.

We will continue to celebrate our culture with others, as I did last night at a whisky tasting and Burns celebration with EU ambassadors that was hosted by Scotland House in London.

**Gillian Martin:** I am pleased to hear what the cabinet secretary has said. Keeping pace with European standards on employment, the environment and human rights, and maintenance of close trading ties with EU member states will be fundamental to Scotland's future.

In these early stages of our exit from the EU, is there any indication that Scottish Government ministers will be directly involved in continued negotiations with the EU, as the UK Government irons out the outstanding and continuing issues arising from our departure?

**Michael Russell:** A plethora of arrangements have been put in place by the UK to continue dialogue with the EU but, unfortunately, we have not had notification that we will be involved in any of them. Indeed, since the end of the arrangement, on 31 December, there has not been a meeting in which we have been told about those issues. It is important now that we press our case on those issues and, of course, that we have our own direct conversations. Scotland is not mute and is well recognised within the EU. Therefore, we need to ensure that we have dialogue directly and that we attempt to influence what is taking place elsewhere.

**Dean Lockhart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** In terms of the on-going trading relationships with our EU partners, can the cabinet secretary confirm that the vast majority of the SNP's trade offices in Europe, which he mentioned, are located at British embassies and consulates, and does he agree

with me that that joint working and sharing of resources with the UK Government is a good example of working together with the rest of the UK?

**Michael Russell:** Where it is appropriate to work with others, we will do so. However, I would not take location to indicate assent; quite clearly, we have different priorities and views. It is possible to have that and to work alongside others, but also to seek one's own opportunities and advantages. I am sure that the Conservatives recognise that; I certainly do. However, to try to read into the situation some deep satisfaction with the UK would be foolish self-delusion.

#### **European Union (Post-Brexit Discussions)**

4. **Linda Fabiani (East Kilbride) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with European Union member states following the end of the Brexit transition period. (S5O-04948)

**The Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, Europe and External Affairs (Michael Russell):** As I have just indicated, despite the United Kingdom Government's disastrous Brexit policy, we continue to retain close links with EU member states and will continue to do so. The Scottish Government has participated in a number of discussions with European partners at ministerial and official level, both bilaterally and multilaterally in recent weeks. A number of those discussions have been focused on measures that we should take in the short term to protect trade and critical supply chains and reduce the risk of disruption to goods and people crossing borders, which has been a feature of the past few weeks, because of the actions of the UK Tory party, supported by the Tory party in the Scottish Parliament; and to provide as much information, advice and support as possible to EU citizens in Scotland, who have also been discriminated against by the Tory party in Scotland and in the UK.

**Linda Fabiani:** It is clear from the post-Brexit experience that Scotland is already suffering particular disadvantages—fishing, seafood and agriculture are just a few areas in which we see examples of that. Obviously, there have been discussions, in partnership with Wales, about the Erasmus+ education programme, which I hope will soon bear fruit. Is there scope for constructive discussion directly with EU member states on other Scotland-specific issues?

**Michael Russell:** There is, indeed, scope for those discussions, and I welcome Linda Fabiani's mention of them. I am strongly in support of what my colleague Richard Lochhead and his Welsh colleague are doing on Erasmus+, and I want to say a particular thank you to those many members of the European Parliament who have written a

letter in support of that. That shows not only the affection in which Scotland is held but the respect with which our educational institutions and youth work activities are held. We will continue looking for opportunities to have direct dialogue on matters of concern. Of course, that is a preliminary to our desire to re-enter the EU.

#### **European Structural Funds (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn)**

**5. Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what impact European structural funds have had on the Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn constituency in the last 15 years. (S5O-04949)

**The Minister for Europe and International Development (Jenny Gilruth):** European structural funding has had a significant positive social and economic impact nationally and locally within Bob Doris's constituency. Approximately £11 million has been invested through the current 2014-2020 European funding programme to support individuals into meaningful employment and to support businesses across Glasgow. An additional £2 million has also been invested from the programme to support the installation of new, affordable low-carbon heating systems in social housing developments in Glasgow.

**Bob Doris:** I know well the benefit that European structural funds have had not just in my constituency but across Scotland, with an estimated €944 million invested in the past seven years.

Does the minister share my concern that the United Kingdom Government's planned replacements—the so-called shared prosperity and levelling-up funds—might mean less financial support coming to Glasgow and the rest of Scotland as a result of the UK Government's post-Brexit stance on structural funds, as well as less democratic control and influence, because the UK Government, unlike the European Union, seems intent on bypassing the Scottish Government?

**Jenny Gilruth:** The decision by the UK Government to bypass the Scottish Government in the development and roll-out of the shared prosperity fund demonstrates a complete disregard for devolution. The UK Government has kept us at arm's length throughout the process. It has provided no clarity on the fund's objectives and delivery plans and no evidence as to why a clearly devolved matter should no longer be run or administered in Scotland. In respecting the devolution agreement, the Scottish Government is best placed to ensure that replacement funding is allocated to meet the needs of Scotland; ignoring the devolution agreement puts at risk all that we have achieved.

#### **Visa-free Travel to the European Union**

**6. Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what representations it has made to the United Kingdom Government and the European Union regarding the extension of visa-free travel to the EU to professions that are not currently exempt. (S5O-04950)

**The Minister for Europe and International Development (Jenny Gilruth):** Freedom of movement has benefited Scotland's economy, culture and communities, and the ending of that freedom is already causing difficulties. On 14 January, the Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Fair Work and Culture wrote to the UK Minister for Immigration to highlight the impact on those who work in our cultural and creative sectors, and she called on the UK Government to seek extensive reciprocal mobility arrangements with the EU for those who work in those sectors and to seek an urgent meeting.

The Scottish Government and this Parliament have been clear that the UK immigration system does not meet Scotland's distinct needs. It is deeply regrettable that, on numerous occasions, the UK immigration minister has refused meetings with Scottish Government ministers to discuss Scotland's unique migration needs.

**Sandra White:** The minister will be aware of the culture in my constituency, particularly with regard to Celtic Connections which, obviously, has been slightly different this year. Celtic Connections opens its arms to thousands of artists throughout Europe and that arrangement is reciprocal, with artists—musicians, in particular—from Scotland also going to Europe. Has the Scottish Government had any discussions with the UK Government or the EU about getting some form of transition period for the musicians and other people who take part in such fantastic cultural events to be able to travel freely in Europe?

**Jenny Gilruth:** I enjoyed watching Blazin' Fiddles and Admiral Fallow this weekend as part of this year's virtual Celtic Connections festival, and I know how important the festival is to Sandra White's constituency.

In February last year, the Scottish Government hosted an international festivals visa summit in Edinburgh, at which we explored the challenges that festivals face and identified a range of solutions. We put those solutions to the UK Government, but we have not yet received a satisfactory response. As previously mentioned, on 14 January, the Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Fair Work and Culture wrote to the UK Minister for Immigration on that issue. As of today, we have not received a reply to that letter. From a Scottish Government perspective, at the least, the UK Government should expand the permitted paid



engagement visas from four weeks to six months as well as extending and clarifying the activities that that route permits.

The Scottish Government has provided £10,000 to Arts Infopoint UK, which is a pilot mobility system that will provide support to artists who are coming into the UK, giving them advice on issues such as visa applications, tax and social security. However, this situation is a direct result of a political choice by the UK Government, so it is imperative that the UK Government sorts out a solution with the EU.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I ask for a brief supplementary question from Beatrice Wishart.

**Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD):** As Sandra White has alluded, new complicated arrangements and additional costs make planning harder for established musicians who want to work in Europe—never mind those who are starting out—as well as for international musicians who want to come to Scotland for events such as the Shetland folk festival. Will the Scottish Government produce accessible guidance for musicians who are trying to navigate new processes at home and abroad?

**Jenny Gilruth:** That is a sensible and reasonable suggestion from Beatrice Wishart. I will take it away and write to her regarding the work on that issue.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Thank you very much for the brevity.

### Scottish Independence (Mariano Rajoy Comments)

**8. Rachael Hamilton (Etrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to recent comments about Scottish independence by Spain's former Prime Minister, Mariano Rajoy. (S5O-04952)

**The Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, Europe and External Affairs (Michael Russell):** I am unaware of recent comments by Mr Rajoy. I am aware of his past comments, although there have, of course, been a range of positive comments from people across the European Union who recognise and support Scotland's continued commitment to shared EU values. They know that Scotland occupies a unique position as a country in a voluntary union of nations in the United Kingdom that has been removed from the EU against its will, and that the people of Scotland now have the right to choose their own future and escape the disastrous hard Brexit that the Conservative Party and Rachael Hamilton are so keen to force upon them.

**Rachael Hamilton:** I will enlighten the cabinet secretary on what Mr Rajoy said. He said:

"I want to be very clear. Scotland does not have the competence to negotiate with the European Union."

That view has been echoed by many other European politicians.

Does the cabinet secretary accept that Scotland would be rejected for EU membership due to its current deficit of 8.6 per cent of gross domestic product? In order to bring down the deficit, a strict programme of austerity would have to be adopted, with increased taxes and cuts to public spending on top of the already dire post-pandemic outlook. As well as that, the euro might have to be adopted. Has the cabinet secretary been clear with the people of Scotland about those criteria?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I ask members in the chamber not to mumble. I am trying to hear over the connection.

**Michael Russell:** I am not sure which is worse: the barrage of rubbish that we have just heard from Rachael Hamilton or her clear delight that there might be a way in which our fellow citizens would be unable to take their full place on the world stage. It is extraordinary that the Tories continue to salivate on such matters.

Rachael Hamilton also fails to understand the language of diplomacy. It is quite correct to say that Scotland does not, at present, have the competence to negotiate with the EU, because Scotland does not have legal personality. However, if Scotland were to choose to be independent, that independence would allow us to enter into those negotiations. Her visible excitement at a negative about the country in which she lives might be diminished when she understands what has been said.

### Economy, Fair Work and Culture

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I remind members that questions 5 and 7 have been grouped together. As usual, if members want to ask a supplementary to a question, they should put an R in the chat function when the question is being asked. With regard to questions 5 and 7, members will have to wait for answers to those questions before asking a supplementary.

#### Workers' Rights Post-Brexit

**1. Gil Paterson (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its engagement with trade unions and the United Kingdom Government regarding workers' rights post-Brexit. (S5O-04953)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Fair Work and Culture (Fiona Hyslop):** We are committed to fair work and do not want any

reduction in workers' rights or protections that were secured under European Union membership. Last week, the First Minister and the Scottish Trades Union Congress issued a joint call to the UK Government to preserve the protections that are enshrined in the working time directive. We are committed to working with trade unions to protect the health and wellbeing of the workforce.

We continue to engage with the UK Government on its plans relating to post-Brexit labour market reforms, including the planned employment bill, and we take every opportunity to promote our progressive fair work agenda. Our ability to tackle unfair working practices and to fully protect our workers' rights is limited by the fact that employment law is reserved to Westminster. We will continue to do all that we can to promote fair work within the powers that we have while calling for the devolution of employment law.

**Gil Paterson:** The news that the United Kingdom Government is reviewing how UK and European Union employment rights protections could be changed after Brexit is concerning, is it not? We have only to look at our fishing industry to see that it is clear that the UK Government will break any promise and sell out any group of workers, no matter the cost. Does the cabinet secretary agree that when it comes to protecting workers' rights, the Tories simply cannot be trusted?

**Fiona Hyslop:** The Scottish Government rejects any regression on workers' protections. It will come as no surprise that I agree with the member. I raised concerns directly with the UK Government's business minister, Paul Scully, in a meeting last week, and I have written to the new Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, Kwasi Kwarteng, on that and other issues.

Although the UK Government may say that the review is about cutting regulations and red tape without affecting workers' protections, those self-same regulations provide the protections that workers need. It would be naive to believe that a UK Government review of EU workers' rights would automatically lead to better protection for workers, given, as the member said, the broken Brexit promises that we have recently seen. That is just more evidence that full powers over employment should be transferred to the Scottish Government, so that the Scottish Parliament can set priorities that benefit those who live in Scotland.

I will be clear: the review presents the greatest risk to workers' rights since the introduction of the Trade Union Act 2016, and we will continue to work with trade unions to protect workers' rights from a race to the bottom on standards.

## Discretionary Business Support Funding (Guidance)

2. **Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government, in light of the increased restrictions on business due to Covid-19, what direction and guidance it offers to local authorities regarding using discretionary business support funding. (S5O-04954)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Fair Work and Culture (Fiona Hyslop):** That funding is to be used entirely at the discretion of local authorities, based on the specific needs of their local economies. However, local authorities requested guidance on how the funding should be distributed while giving them the flexibility to use their local knowledge to support businesses. We worked closely with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities in developing that guidance, which has now been established and shared with local authorities.

**Emma Harper:** I have dealt with a number of cases in my region in which the local authority could have used discretionary funding to provide lifeline support but opted not to do so. In the light of that, will the Scottish Government consider giving further direction to, or developing a framework for, local authorities to ensure that that discretionary funding goes into the bank accounts of those who have fallen through the cracks and need it the most?

**Fiona Hyslop:** Giving local authorities the autonomy to spend their allocations on the basis of the criteria that they have developed in response to the assessment of need in their local economies is a principle that underpins the discretionary fund. It would therefore be inappropriate if the Scottish Government mandated where local authorities directed that financial support.

At the request of local authorities, the Government issued non-statutory guidance to support them in the distribution of that funding. The guidance established that getting financial support to businesses that have not received other forms of direct funding from the Scottish Government since October is an important principle of the fund.

**Maurice Golden (West Scotland) (Con):** The Scottish National Party said that it aims to make business support payments within 10 working days, so why are businesses now waiting for over three months to receive those payments?

**Fiona Hyslop:** I think that the member is referring to the original grants under the very simple system that existed during March and April. With regard to the distribution of funds, which I know we will come to in later questions, there have been significant payments for January in the

past few days and weeks, which many businesses will have welcomed.

Instead of attacking local authorities and councils and their hard work in distributing those funds, the member should recognise the contribution that they have made in getting £3 billion-worth of support that has been allocated to businesses processed, planned for and ready for distribution, with the bulk of it already distributed.

### **Retail Workers (Prevention of Assaults)**

**3. Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government how it plans to make staff and customers aware of the measures that are proposed to prevent assaults on retail workers. (S5O-04955)

**The Minister for Business, Fair Work and Skills (Jamie Hepburn):** The Scottish Government works closely with trade unions and retail organisations through membership of the retail working group that co-produced the coronavirus retail sector guidance. The guidance includes advice on risk assessment, security and employee health and wellbeing. Trade unions, retail businesses and organisations are also represented on the retail strategy steering group, which met for the first time on 20 January.

In partnership with Crimestoppers, Fearless and the Scottish Grocers' Federation, we are developing an information and awareness campaign that will highlight the real impact that threats, abuse and violence have on retail workers. The campaign will ask people to think about how they interact with retail workers and will encourage anyone experiencing unacceptable behaviour to report it directly to the police or through Crimestoppers or Fearless. The initial phase will run from February to March 2021 and will run again later in the year, prior to the commencement of the forthcoming legislation.

**Daniel Johnson:** I am pleased that my bill to protect retail workers was passed last week. However, my real concern is that social distancing and other critical measures are causing problems for those workers. The Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers estimates that acts of violence and abuse against retail workers have doubled as a result of the pandemic.

What specific measures are being brought forward by the Government to help retail workers implement social distancing measures and to make customers aware that they must comply with those?

**Jamie Hepburn:** In addition to the retail guidance that I referred to, the same group has also created customer guidance, which clearly tells customers that they should behave and that

abusive behaviour will not be tolerated and, at its worst, could constitute criminality.

We must constantly reinforce that message to the public. People are, by and large, adhering to the restrictions that are in place and are respecting retail workers, but we know, as Daniel Johnson has suggested, that some are not. We must all reinforce the message that that is not acceptable. We will keep working with our trade union partners to communicate that message. The campaign that I mentioned in my answer will also play a role in that.

### **Fair Work Agenda (Partnership Working)**

**4. Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government how its fair work agenda can help it to take a collaborative and partnership approach to working with workers and trade unions during the Covid-19 pandemic. (S5O-04956)

**The Minister for Business, Fair Work and Skills (Jamie Hepburn):** The Scottish Government is committed to working with our trade union partners as we respond to the pandemic. In July, the Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Fair Work and Culture issued a joint statement with the Scottish Trades Union Congress and other partner organisations reaffirming our shared commitment to fair work. Ministers engage regularly with the Scottish Trades Union Congress and its affiliates to help manage the impacts of the Covid-19 crisis on workers and in workplaces. That includes a weekly meeting attended by me and by the Minister for Older People and Equalities.

The First Minister also has a biannual meeting with the STUC affiliates, the most recent of which was held on 18 January. Through our flagship fair work first approach, we are asking employers to adopt fair work practices, including providing appropriate channels for effective worker voice, such as trade union recognition.

**Mark Griffin:** Teachers, retail workers, transport staff and all key workers have continued working in high-risk settings this year, with many falling ill and too many dying as a result of that. A number of unions, including the GMB, the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers and the Educational Institute of Scotland, have called on the Government to vaccinate those on the front line.

Is the minister having such discussions in his meetings with trade unions? Are those calls being heard? Is the Government looking at prioritising workers who are at higher risk of contracting the virus in the workplace?

**Jamie Hepburn:** We have discussed those matters. The STUC and its affiliates understand

that we must work in accordance with the priorities set out by the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation. There is also a continuing discussion about how we move into the next phase of vaccination. I assure Mr Griffin that the voices of trade unions are being heard.

**Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):** The issue of construction workers being unable to work in a safe environment has been raised directly with the Government by Unite the union. Many construction workers have raised that issue with me. Is the Government looking at that?

**Jamie Hepburn:** We have discussed that issue. We are seeking to balance the various harms to the economy. Mr Rowley knows that we are dealing with economic harms and want to facilitate economic activity where it is safe to do so.

The Health and Safety Executive has reported only two coronavirus outbreaks within the construction sector. I can say freely that Unite has raised other concerns with me. I have requested it to provide that information to us, because if there are incidents happening out there, we must hear about them. We do not want workers to be working in unsafe conditions. If evidence is presented that we need to consider, of course we will do so.

### **Business Support Funding (Covid-19)**

**5. Maurice Golden (West Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the distribution of Covid-19 business support funding. (S5O-04957)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Fair Work and Culture (Fiona Hyslop):** Since the start of the pandemic, the Scottish Government has allocated more than £3 billion to help businesses. That includes £2.3 billion through 383,000 business support awards between March and the beginning of October 2020. More than 90 per cent of the funds allocated to business support since October are now live, with the bulk of funding going to support businesses that are affected by legal restrictions under the strategic framework levels.

In addition to January's strategic framework grant payment, retail and leisure businesses have now received additional funding of £9,000, with up to £25,000 per premises for hospitality businesses. We estimate that approximately 50,000 business premises are currently eligible to apply to the strategic framework business fund.

That all means that, in the first month of this year, more a third of the consequentials have been paid out, with the bulk of the remaining two thirds of consequentials available to help businesses that are required to close over the next two months. The support includes a number of

bespoke schemes for specific sectors, with three of those schemes launched in the past week.

**Maurice Golden:** McLaren Vending Ltd is a family-run business that has been operating in Scotland since 1963. Its application for business support funds was refused by Glasgow City Council, and its director, Paul McLaren, has said:

"If no help is provided, I can see no path other than unnecessary job losses."

Will the cabinet secretary agree to look at support for that family business as well as for the wider vending sector?

**Fiona Hyslop:** Clearly, I do not know the background to that individual application. In his capacity as a local MSP, Maurice Golden can take the matter up directly with Glasgow City Council.

We have the discretionary funds to enable support to be given, particularly to supply chain businesses. The business that Maurice Golden described sounds as if it is part of the supply chain for the hospitality sector. Although such businesses are not legally required to close, demand for their products will have been limited. That is one of the reasons why the discretionary fund was established and such support was enabled.

If Maurice Golden has not contacted the council, I encourage him to do so. However, if he also writes to me, I can contact the city council to understand how it applies its discretionary funds and whether the position of wholesalers or suppliers in the context described could be revisited.

### **Support for Businesses (Covid-19)**

**7. Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the support being provided to businesses that have been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. (S5O-04959)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Fair Work and Culture (Fiona Hyslop):** In January alone, we have launched our £57 million taxi and private hire fund, the £6 million Scotland inbound tour operators fund, the £25 million wedding sector fund and the £4 million grass-roots music venue stabilisation fund and, as I have just said, we have paid out the majority of our hospitality, retail and leisure top-ups. That is in addition to the on-going support that has been paid out through the strategic framework business fund. Yesterday, we announced additional support for breweries, travel agents and indoor football centres. Funding for mobile service providers, newly self-employed people and tourism and culture organisations will also be provided this month.

**Finlay Carson:** Why is the Scottish National Party Government adopting rigid and unfair criteria for Scotland's 15,500 self-catering businesses, denying them business-saving grants of £6,000, whereas their counterparts in other parts of the United Kingdom have received top-up grants as high as £21,500? According to the Association of Scotland's Self-Caterers, there has been a lack of clarity, and the Government has provided inadequate guidelines. Pubs and restaurants get a £6,000 top-up to their SFBF support, so why has that not been extended to the self-catering sector?

**Fiona Hyslop:** The member will be aware that £104 million has been allocated to tourism and hospitality. The self-catering sector will have funding available to it. I understand that an additional £10,000 will be available for larger self-catering establishments.

Of course, given the current legal restrictions, the sector is also eligible for the regular strategic framework funding. For example, depending on their size, establishments that have been closed during the period from November 2020 to January 2021 could have received, in addition, several thousand pounds, with some receiving up to £9,000. That will not necessarily apply to individual self-catering companies that Finlay Carson might have in his constituency, but the funding is available.

Fergus Ewing, the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism, is championing the cause and case of self-catering to ensure that establishments get the support that they require to sustain their position, so that they can reopen when the market improves.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Colin Beattie has a brief supplementary question.

**Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP):** It is very welcome that the Scottish Government is working to ensure that targeted support is available to sectors that are facing on-going challenges, such as the wedding sector. Can the cabinet secretary provide any further information about the types of businesses in the supply chain that might be eligible for support?

**Fiona Hyslop:** As the member is aware, in recognition of the on-going challenges that the wedding sector faces, an additional £10 million has been added to the original £15 million that was announced in December 2020.

The additional funding will be launched tomorrow, 28 January, and made available from then. It will provide one-off grants of up to £25,000 to eligible businesses in the sector that have been impacted by the restrictions. Wedding venues, photographers, caterers and suppliers will be able to apply. The three enterprise agencies—South of

Scotland Enterprise, Scottish Enterprise, and Highlands and Islands Enterprise—will administer the funds.

### Employment of Veterans (Support)

**6. Maurice Corry (West Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government, in light of the impact of Covid-19 on the economy, what efforts it has made to raise awareness among businesses of the support available to assist them in employing veterans, where vacancies match their skills and experience. (S5O-04958)

**The Minister for Business, Fair Work and Skills (Jamie Hepburn):** Through community jobs Scotland, the Scottish Government supports third sector employers to recruit ex-service personnel. The Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations, which delivers the programme on behalf of the Government, works closely with those employers to promote the available opportunities.

The veterans employability strategic group was refreshed in 2020, with two new co-chairs considering a new and ambitious purpose. The group will continue to build on its partnership approach to employability and skills. Working in collaboration, it will identify and strengthen pathways into employment for our service leavers and veterans, identifying ways to promote the value, skills and attributes that they bring to workplaces. That work includes developing the relationship between the Career Transition Partnership and Skills Development Scotland, to avoid service leavers "falling between the gaps", ensuring that they have seamless access to SDS while getting support from the Career Transition Partnership and once that support ends.

**Maurice Corry:** Given the uncertainty facing the labour market, what progress is the Government making to engage with local authorities and small and medium-sized businesses to create and better support mentorships and training programmes that target skills shortages and gaps and are particularly for British armed forces' veterans?

**Jamie Hepburn:** I assure Mr Corry that I am in regular engagement with Scotland's business community through the various business organisations. I am always happy to discuss the matter with him.

We continue to lead by example, having offered veterans and service leavers fixed-term appointments. We appointed a number of ex-service personnel to fixed-term appointments last year to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic. We very much lead from the front and will continue to work with and encourage employers across the country to follow that lead.

### Support for Businesses (Covid-19)

**8. Bruce Crawford (Stirling) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what consideration it is giving to providing further support to painters and decorators and food production and distribution businesses in light of the Covid-19 restrictions. (S5O-04960)

**The Minister for Business, Fair Work and Skills (Jamie Hepburn):** The £30 million discretionary fund is specifically designed to target small businesses and the self-employed who have not received direct financial support through other Scottish Government financial support schemes, such as those in supply chains. We have also committed £15 million for newly self-employed people to mitigate the financial challenges for those who are unable to access the United Kingdom Government's self-employed income support scheme.

**Bruce Crawford:** Is the minister aware that the Scottish National Party-led Stirling Council is one of the first councils in Scotland—if not the first—to open up its discretionary business fund to applications? Will he join me in welcoming that development? Will the Scottish Government consider refining its objectives for the strategic framework business fund to include businesses that, although they have not been told to do so by law, have significantly modified their operations to enable them simply to survive, but which have yet to receive financial support?

**Jamie Hepburn:** I join Bruce Crawford in welcoming Stirling Council's getting its scheme up and running. I, too, congratulate it. We have asked a tremendous amount of local government, and have worked with local authorities to deliver various forms of support scheme across the period of the pandemic. The way in which they have responded has been tremendous, and it is good to hear that Stirling's scheme is up and running.

The discretionary funding scheme is designed to support businesses that might not be eligible for other forms of assistance. I point out that some of the businesses to which Bruce Crawford referred in his supplementary question should be looking to that scheme as a source of funding. My response to the fundamental aspect of his question is that we continue to consider the applicability and operation of all our forms of support. Such matters will remain under constant review.

## Education and Skills

### Remote Learning (Analysis of Pupil Engagement)

**1. Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what analysis it undertook during the first Covid-19 lockdown

regarding pupil engagement, and how the findings affected its decisions regarding the current remote learning measures. (S5O-04961)

**The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney):** On 13 January 2021, the Scottish Government published an equity audit. That work, which draws on international research as well as an in-depth study of 54 schools across Scotland, assessed the impacts of school closures against a number of factors, with a particular focus on children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Its findings provide clear indicators for supporting children and young people in the next phase of remote learning and in planning for the return to schools.

Alongside the publication of the equity audit, I announced a new package of £45 million of support to help local authorities to deal with the challenges of remote learning.

Her Majesty's inspectors of education have also developed a national overview of practice in the delivery of remote learning through engagement with local authorities, schools, parents, children and young people. The first review was published on 22 January 2021, and such reviews will continue throughout the period of remote learning.

**Johann Lamont:** I am sure that the cabinet secretary will accept that the closure of schools is having a disproportionate impact on disadvantaged young people. The consequences for their attainment will be huge if action is not taken to tackle the scale of inequality in education that the pandemic is simply reinforcing. The cabinet secretary has outlined some of the steps that he has taken, but has he assessed fully the lack of engagement where need was shown to be highest geographically? What resources, particularly extra teachers and support staff, are now being targeted towards making real contact with such groups not only to encourage young people to engage with remote learning, but to understand and address the causes of such lack of involvement?

**John Swinney:** Some of the factors that Johann Lamont has highlighted are ones with which we constantly wrestle in our education system as we ensure that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are able to secure the necessary engagement in their learning. On that point I unreservedly agree with Ms Lamont that engagement in learning is a fundamental part of how we support young people in overcoming the disadvantages that they face.

One aim of our strategy is to ensure that schools are well supported in engaging with their learners. That is why we have put in place two separate tranches of financial support. The first

secured the recruitment of more than 1,400 new teachers in our schools. The second is designed to give local authorities the flexibility to recruit staff, enhance connectivity or support other aspects of family-based learning so that young people are sufficiently engaged to sustain their learning. Those two different tranches of financial support are designed to address the real issues that Johann Lamont has raised, which I am determined to tackle. Without that support, we would see further growth in the attainment gap, which is the opposite of what the Government is trying to achieve.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Jamie Greene has a brief supplementary question.

**Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con):** The cabinet secretary will be aware of serious concerns over how teachers are expected to produce estimated grades or perform remote assessments while remote learning continues. Why is full guidance on that still not forthcoming to teachers, and what exactly is the Scottish Qualifications Authority doing differently this year so that we do not see a repeat of last year's exams fiasco?

**John Swinney:** First, the SQA was asked, as a consequence of the Priestley review, to engage the whole education system in developing guidance to ensure that there is whole-system buy-in to the approach that we are taking in these difficult circumstances. I think that any casual observation of the process would indicate that the SQA has done exactly that. It chairs the national qualifications group, which involves local authorities, directors of education, professional associations and Colleges Scotland, to make sure that the approach that we take is not just created by the SQA but bought into by the whole education system. I suggest that Mr Greene acquaint himself with the approach that has been taken in the light of the Priestley review.

Secondly, guidance has been given about the alternative certification model in the education system. We are, of course, wrestling with the challenges that have come with the recent onset of remote learning in the course of January. Earlier today, the national qualifications group indicated that more time would be offered to enable the formulation of estimates by teachers. The deadline for receipt of those estimates has now been put back to 18 June, to maximise the time available for learning and teaching as well as for assessment of the achievement of learning that can then underpin certification for young people, which I am determined to ensure takes place in this school year.

### School and Nursery Places (Lockdown)

**2. Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what percentage of children and young people are accessing places at school and nursery during the current lockdown period. (S50-04962)

**The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney):** The number of children and young people who are attending schools and childcare services fluctuates daily. However, the latest figures show that, on Monday 25 January, around 7 per cent of pupils were estimated to be physically attending local authority schools. That equates to around 50,000 children and young people. On Tuesday 19 January, responses to a survey from around half of childcare providers showed that at least 18,500 children were attending a childcare setting.

**Keith Brown:** The guidance advises that the number of children taking up those places in schools during the strict lockdown period should be kept to the absolute minimum that is necessary. The advice to employers is to think critically about what staff they consider to be key workers and to ruthlessly prioritise those providing absolutely essential services to the public in this time of emergency.

However, I have been contacted by constituents whose employers are requiring them to attend work when they could work from home, as well as constituents whose employers are refusing furlough, which would allow parents to keep their children at home. Will the Deputy First Minister join me in urging all employers to be as flexible as possible with their employees, allowing them to work at home whenever possible, and to utilise the furlough scheme to ensure that as many people as possible can stay at home, protect the national health service and save lives during this lockdown period?

**John Swinney:** I agree whole-heartedly with Keith Brown's point. It is essential that we keep the number of children who are attending schools to the absolute minimum, to ensure that we are doing everything that we can to suppress the circulation of the virus.

That requires deep engagement by employers, and I would encourage employers to exercise maximum flexibility to enable their staff to work from home in order to reduce the number of children who have to be in our schools and early learning settings. If they do that, we will be able to return to a much more familiar pattern of life in our society, because we will have successfully suppressed the virus, which is the key objective of the strategy that we are pursuing.

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

Two weeks ago, I asked the cabinet secretary about attendance in schools—particularly in additional support needs schools. However, I am still hearing concerns from teachers and support staff about perceived health risks and safety. The cabinet secretary has said that he looks at the data daily. Is that on an education authority basis? What evidence would support a move to more blended learning?

**John Swinney:** I look at the data on a local authority basis, so we can see the patterns of attendance in individual areas. The question that Claire Baker raises is important because, clearly, any circumstance in which children are attending school must be safe for everyone concerned—staff and pupils alike.

As we have confirmed to Parliament, we are exploring arrangements for ASN staff to be part of the cohort of health and social care workers who are vaccinated, because of the similarity of the roles that they perform. Those issues are being taken forward in Government. I assure Claire Baker that the issue is being looked at carefully to ensure that there is a safe approach for everybody concerned.

As I have said in some of my comments over the past few days, we are looking at the arrangements for the return of additional support needs pupils, because, clearly, there will be a number of scenarios in which it would be better for such pupils to be in a school setting. We are evaluating and considering how we can do that safely.

**Supply Teachers (Lockdown)**

**3. Lewis Macdonald (North East Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what arrangements are in place for supply teachers during the current lockdown period. (S5O-04963)

**The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney):** The recruitment and employment of supply teachers in local authority schools are matters for individual councils. The Scottish Government has already provided £80 million of additional investment in education staff, which is sufficient for the recruitment of around 1,400 additional teachers and 200 support staff this year.

Last week, I announced a package of £45 million of new funding to support the delivery of remote learning. The new funding can be used to recruit further staff, which might include teachers, classroom assistants, administrative staff, home school link workers or other support workers. I therefore expect more supply teachers to be recruited where they are needed.

**Lewis Macdonald:** Unfortunately, the evidence from my constituents is that that is not happening. The concern is that, although there was a job retention scheme for supply teachers in the first lockdown, no such arrangement is in place in the current lockdown. Will the cabinet secretary discuss the matter with the Scottish Negotiating Committee for Teachers, with a view to ensuring that supply teachers who cannot obtain employment are protected from the drastic loss of income that they otherwise face?

**John Swinney:** I will ensure that those issues are discussed with the SNCT. I am conscious that there have been discussions on the subject already, or that such discussions are scheduled.

I am troubled to hear of the experience that Lewis Macdonald is raising. I would appreciate it if he would provide me with further details so that I can pursue the issue. I can see absolutely no reason why there would not be opportunities for supply teachers in the current context, in which we are doing everything that we can to expand the teaching workforce. Indeed, at the last meeting of the education recovery group, one of the directors of education who was present made a plea for any available supply teachers to, in the words of that director, be pointed in their direction. That is quite simply because that director is keen to maximise their teaching workforce.

If Mr Macdonald has evidence that is contrary to that, I would welcome seeing it so that I can take steps to ensure that supply teachers have opportunities to engage in teaching during these difficult times.

**Home Schooling (Support for Teachers)**

**4. Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what support it has put in place to help teachers to deliver home schooling during the Covid-19 pandemic. (S5O-04964)

**The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney):** As well as a range of support that has been in place throughout the pandemic through Glow Connect and the national e-learning offer, Education Scotland has hosted several drop-in sessions in January to support practitioners in their planning and preparation for remote learning. Since March, more than 7,500 practitioners have engaged in the 134 webinars that have been delivered by Education Scotland digital officers, focusing on the delivery and creation of online learning. The Scotland learns website continues to be updated with new learning activities and materials for practitioners to support at-home learning during this time.



In addition, Education Scotland has provided a named contact for every headteacher in Scotland, thereby allowing headteachers easy access to a single point of contact who can quickly point them in the direction of Education Scotland resources and guidance or the team that is best placed to provide the support that they require.

**Brian Whittle:** I thank the cabinet secretary for that response, but teachers have raised with us issues such as lack of information technology equipment and the challenge of home schooling their own children while trying to teach their pupils. Some have even had problems keeping in touch with pupils with special needs. What further support can the Scottish Government give to teachers to tackle those specific issues?

**John Swinney:** The Government has taken a number of steps to ensure that schools are well supported. As I indicated in my earlier answers, we have put in place tranches of new funding. We have put in place £80 million to recruit 1,400 more teachers and 200 support staff, and £45 million to give flexibility to local authorities to enable them to provide support to those who need it in the education system, whether that is through provision of devices, connectivity or additional teaching resources. The Government has also provided £25 million to support the connectivity of about 70,000 pupils in the education system.

I note that Fife Council—if my memory is correct—indicated in response to some media coverage that any teacher who did not have appropriate connectivity would be provided with a device by the council. I cannot see why any other local authority around the country would not be in a position to provide such assistance to enable teachers to fulfil their teaching complement.

If there are specific examples of problems that are troubling Mr Whittle, I will pursue those matters with the relevant local authority, if he would be so good as to write to me about them.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Iain Gray has a brief supplementary.

**Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab):** The Education Scotland report that was published last Friday, which Mr Swinney referred to earlier, points out that although councils have provided many learners with personal devices,

“All local authorities are experiencing challenges in relation to the sufficiency and supply of information and computing technology resources, including devices and Wi-Fi access”.

Therefore, the support that has been put in place is not enough. That is what Education Scotland—not the media—has reported. What will the Deputy First Minister do to address that?

**John Swinney:** We have already done a number of things. We went through a data-

collection exercise with local government, which identified that 70,000 pupils had digital connectivity issues. We put in place resources to tackle that, and that issue has been addressed. We are aware of other issues that have emerged, so the £45 million of resources that I made available to local authorities last week was allocated with sufficient flexibility to enable local authorities to address those challenges.

There have been issues with supply of some technology, which is why I was pleased that the Government acted so swiftly in ordering 25,000 devices last year, which were delivered before the start of the school term in August. I am conscious that some local authorities ordered later than the Government and that some of those orders have not been fulfilled because of global pressure on device supply, which is quite understandable given the volume of demand for digital connectivity.

The Government acted swiftly to identify the volumes of devices that were required and has delivered those. We have also provided additional financial support to local authorities to enable them to plug the gaps.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I ask for slightly shorter answers so that we can fit in the rest of the questions.

#### **Learning Disabilities (Early Years Support)**

**5. Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on whether all children with learning disabilities in early years education are being identified and diagnosed to ensure that they are receiving targeted support. (S5O-04965)

**The Minister for Children and Young People (Maree Todd):** The Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 places duties on local authorities to identify, provide for and review the needs of all children with additional support needs in their area, including children in early learning and childcare. If a child requires support, their early learning and childcare provider should help to explore the reason for that and provide them with the support that they need as early as possible.

In its inspections of ELC settings, the Care Inspectorate inspects the quality of care and support to ensure that all children receive the support that they need to achieve their full potential. As part of our ELC expansion programme, all settings that are delivering the 1,140 funded hours will be required to achieve a “good” rating or better in all Care Inspectorate inspection themes.

**Edward Mountain:** I note the minister’s response, but NHS Highland has confirmed that on 16 December 2020 463 children were on the

waiting list for neurodevelopmental assessment, with a waiting time of 18 months. Those children simply cannot be getting the best educational start in life, which they should be getting. Will the minister confirm what actions are being taken to ensure that children who are in that position receive appointments as quickly as possible, in order that the additional support that they obviously require can be fully assessed?

**Maree Todd:** We acknowledge the obvious operational difficulties that child and adolescent mental health services might be having due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the associated restrictions. Although boards have responded very creatively, and have continued to treat significant numbers of children and young people, their priority has been to ensure that emergency and urgent cases are seen, which has meant, regrettably, that some people have had to wait for longer.

CAMH services are now working hard to return to previous activity levels and to deal with backlogs that have developed. We see that in the most recent waiting-time triggers, CAMHS activity is higher than it was in the same period last year. Boards have also increased access to CAMHS online, and the services are now the largest mental health user of NHS Near Me, which is Scotland's healthcare videoconferencing platform. I know that Sir Edward Mountain will welcome that, knowing, as he does, the Highland connection with that platform's development.

It is important to stress that children do not need a formal assessment or diagnosis to access additional support for learning. When a child is identified as requiring extra support—through practitioners' observations or conversations with parents or carers—support should be put in place immediately, even if the underlying reasons for that are still uncertain.

### **Climate Emergency Preparation (Education System)**

**6. Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to Teach the Future's call for a review into how the whole of the formal education system is preparing students for a climate emergency and ecological crisis. (S5O-04966)

**The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney):** I have met representatives from the Teach the Future Scotland campaign to listen to their experiences of climate education. We are supporting education around the twin global climate and ecological crises through implementation of our learning for sustainability action plan, which provides a very positive context in which to address climate education.

We are always looking to strengthen and improve practice. With that in mind, the Scottish Government is considering its detailed response to all the asks of the Teach the Future Scotland campaign, and we will respond to campaign representatives shortly.

**Claudia Beamish:** I thank the cabinet secretary for that welcome response. I, too, have met Teach the Future representatives virtually. In this context, I particularly want to highlight the importance of one of its asks that it stressed to me, which is for initial teacher training and possibly even a new professional teaching qualification to help to ensure that skills are developed for future innovation in education in our climate and nature emergencies. Does the cabinet secretary have a view on that?

**John Swinney:** Teach the Future Scotland has raised a range of issues to do with initial teacher education, curriculum content and assessment, and the Government is actively exploring all those issues. It is essential, and it is one of the foundations of Scotland's curriculum, that we properly equip young people to address the challenges of our days and of the future. The contribution of Teach the Future Scotland will be very influential in how we take those issues forward in the years to come.

### **Future of Gaelic (Community Engagement)**

**7. Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how it has been engaging with Gaelic-speaking communities on the future—[Inaudible.] (S5O-04967)

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I think that that question is on the future of the language, cabinet secretary.

**The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney):** The Scottish Government is committed to on-going development of the Gaelic language. Our engagement with Gaelic-speaking communities is essential to that, and in October I initiated two consultation events with representatives of various island communities to hear from them how they feel communities could be supported to ensure that the Gaelic language thrives. I held a gathering of Gaelic-interested individuals on 17 December to consider next steps, and we will meet again on 1 February.

**Dr Allan:** I thank the cabinet secretary for his on-going engagement and commitment to the issue. As we will hear at next week's meeting, there is a good degree of consensus on the existential threat to Gaelic in some communities. We are fortunate that there is broad support across Parliament for supporting the language. What consideration is being given to putting new

emphasis on developments in the language at community level?

**John Swinney:** I very much welcome Dr Allan's engagement in the debate, in which he has advanced his concerns and aspirations around the Gaelic language. I am appreciative of Dr Allan and a number of other parliamentary colleagues—Donald Cameron, Rhoda Grant, John Finnie and Willie Rennie—for their engagement in the Gaelic gathering, and to the Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Kate Forbes, for her sustained interest.

Much of our focus on the Gaelic language has recognised that many aspects, such as digital, broadcasting and Gaelic-medium education, are going well. The area that is finding it tough is support for the vernacular community. I am looking carefully at what more we can do to support the vernacular community in development of the Gaelic language, and to make sure that there is a strong and nurturing environment in which to increase participation. We can reflect on some of those issues in our discussion on Monday.

#### **Additional Support Needs (Support for Teachers)**

**8. Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what additional support is being provided to teachers to support pupils with additional needs. (S5O-04968)

**The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney):** The Scottish Government has prioritised the needs of vulnerable pupils, including those with additional support needs, as part of our response to Covid-19.

Although schools remain closed for the majority of pupils, our guidance for the return to schools in January asked that schools remain open for vulnerable pupils and children of key workers. That means that some pupils with additional support needs will be learning in school. A wide range of guidance is available to aid school staff in supporting children and young people with additional support needs, including guidance on specific topics such as autism and dyslexia.

**Alexander Burnett:** Last week, *The Herald* reported that a survey by the Educational Institute of Scotland, the teachers union, found that almost 80 per cent of members believe that additional support needs provision in their school is inadequate. It was reported that there has been "an erosion" in the number of people with additional support needs qualifications. What levels of funding and support are being committed to combat that shortage?

**John Swinney:** There are two elements to the answer to Mr Burnett's question. The first is in relation to application of the principle of

mainstreaming. Our education system and, indeed, the Parliament have supported the principle that provision of additional support needs education should primarily be through the mainstream education system. That means that most staff have to be familiar with the challenges and issues that emerge in supporting young people with additional support needs. I am very confident that those skills exist in schools the length and breadth of the country, where staff are working very hard to meet the needs of young people.

The second aspect is specialist provision. It is important that such provision, which operates to a very high standard and is the subject of regular inspection, is able to meet the more complex needs of children and young people. I assure Mr Burnett that the resourcing and staffing of special schools is undertaken in a fashion that is designed to meet the needs of individual children and young people.

We are focused, in both the mainstream and the special school environments, on addressing the needs and aspirations of every child. That is our duty and that is what we must concentrate on doing.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Mr Findlay has a brief supplementary question. His persistence has paid off.

**Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab):** A number of teachers are assisted by additional support needs assistants, who work very closely on a one-to-one basis with children with additional needs. They are finding it extremely difficult to maintain distance from the pupils whom they work with very closely, and are asking whether they can be prioritised for vaccination.

**John Swinney:** [*Inaudible.*]—I indicated that we are actively working to include the critical staff whom Neil Findlay has referred to in the health and social care group of staff in our system. In many circumstances, staff in education settings will be carrying out tasks that are akin to health and social care support. We are actively exploring how that approach can be taken forward to ensure that staff can continue to do the very important work to which I know they are committed.

## Prioritising Covid-19 Vaccination and Economic Recovery

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Lewis Macdonald):** I remind members that social distancing measures are in place in the chamber and across the campus. Please observe those measures, including when entering and exiting the chamber.

The next item of business is a Conservative Party debate on motion S5M-23958, in the name of Donald Cameron, on prioritising Covid-19 vaccination and economic recovery.

15:17

**Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** As we gather today for this important debate, it is perhaps fitting to acknowledge the sombre fact that, earlier this week, we learned that deaths from coronavirus in the United Kingdom have surpassed the 100,000 mark. Over the past 10 months of this terrible pandemic, we have become used to hearing a plethora of statistics and numbers when it comes to the virus, whether they relate to positive cases, transmission rates or infections. The sheer enormity of the huge number of deaths is matched by the need to recognise that that number represents 100,000 individual lives, 100,000 grieving families and sorrows more numerous and infinite than can ever be counted.

This will be no comfort to those who have lost their beloved family members or their friends, but the future holds some hope for those who are still vulnerable to the virus. We know that, across the United Kingdom, more than 6.8 million people have now received their first dose of the Covid-19 vaccine and that just over 462,000 people in Scotland have received it—I am using figures from today. Some 470,000 people across the UK have received their second dose, too.

Three vaccines have been approved for use. Two are in full circulation, and the third is due to arrive in the spring. The last of those—the Moderna vaccine—is showing signs that it is effective against the known variants of the virus.

As was announced last week, the Army is working in close partnership with NHS Scotland to establish 80 additional vaccination centres across Scotland, with 98 military personnel working to set up the sites and get them running before they are handed over completely to the NHS.

Those are all positive developments, which I know will be welcomed by members across the Parliament. However, it remains the case that we are not out of the woods. In addition to the figure that I mentioned, according to National Records of Scotland, in the period to 24 January 7,902 deaths

were registered in Scotland in which Covid-19 was mentioned on the death certificate, and some 175,000 people have tested positive since the start of the pandemic. It is clear that cases remain stubbornly high and, given the concern that the new variants pose, it is right that we remain vigilant and continue to stay at home, protect the national health service and save lives.

None of us underestimates the challenges that the current restrictions present for people throughout Scotland. As a father of three young children of primary school age, I particularly sympathise with parents who are having to balance work with looking after their children and ensuring that they continue to receive a good education from home.

I also understand the frustrations of the many businesses in Scotland that fear for their future, as well as the fears of their employees, who do not know whether they will have a job to go back to. I represent the Highlands and Islands region and I have been contacted by many small hospitality and retail businesses, which in many cases are not receiving significant financial support and fear that they might go to the wall if restrictions are not eased soon.

We should continually acknowledge the sacrifices of the many people who are shielding. Whether people are facing loneliness, feeling worried about going to the shops and collecting medicines or simply frightened of catching the virus, the pandemic is taking its toll on many people in our society.

With that as a backdrop, and with all the anxiety and uncertainty that the situation entails, it is baffling that the Scottish National Party Government has spent days if not weeks trailing its plans for a second independence referendum. After everything that Scotland has gone through and is still going through, it beggars belief that the Government thinks that it is right to talk about indyref2 at this time. For some unfathomable reason, the SNP has chosen the middle of a global pandemic as the right time to serialise its never-ending obsession with independence.

It is not just unfathomable; it is unforgivable. Let us look at a timeline of recent events. In September last year, the First Minister presented her headline announcement in the final programme for government of this parliamentary session. She said:

“we will publish, before the end of this session of Parliament, a draft bill setting out the proposed terms and timing of an independence referendum as well as the proposed question that people will be asked in that referendum.”—[*Official Report*, 1 September 2020; c 19.]

At the time, the First Minister had announced significant new Covid-19 restrictions in three local

authority areas in the central belt, and it was clear that cases were on the rise again. However, she indicated to the Parliament not only that vital civil service time would be spent on drafting a new independence referendum bill but that the Scottish Government would be focus grouping on its referendum question.

Earlier this month, John Swinney told the BBC programme "Politics Scotland" that independence is "an essential priority". Let us fast forward to the middle of January, when the SNP announced that it would establish an indyref2 task force, which it described as

"the final piece in the jigsaw that will help deliver independence."

This weekend, the SNP made another proclamation when it produced its 11-point road map for a second independence referendum, which includes a proposal to hold an unlawful referendum after the Scottish Parliament elections.

Not only is all that breathtakingly irresponsible, it flies in the face of what the people of Scotland want. Just last year, polling showed that the constitution question was low on the public's list of priorities—it came in at seventh, with just 15 per cent of people listing it. It was not surprising to learn that people care more about improving our NHS, schools and economy than they do about the constitution—even when the current pandemic is taken out of the equation. Government is about making choices and, to its eternal discredit, this Government is choosing—of its own volition—to prioritise more constitutional division over the deep and pressing issues that are thrown up by the Covid-19 pandemic.

One such issue is the economy, and I am sure that other members on the Conservative benches will talk about the imperative to prioritise the economic recovery. I want to concentrate on vaccine roll-out, which should be the Government's immediate priority. The fact is that the vaccine roll-out fits a pattern in which the delivery of important health policies during the pandemic has been poor. Over the past year, regrettably, there have been a number of failures by the Government in relation to the Covid pandemic. In many instances, the Government has simply refused to take responsibility for those mistakes; all too often, Opposition parties and the media have had to force the Government to apologise for its failings and provide solutions for problems.

On care homes, the Scottish Parliament twice voted for an urgent public inquiry to take place when it was found that Covid-19-positive hospital patients were being transferred into care homes and other patients were being moved in without

being tested at all, putting care home staff and vulnerable residents at risk.

On personal protective equipment, the SNP has failed time and again to properly protect our front-line NHS and social care staff. I do not need to remind members that, at the beginning of the pandemic, more than 1,000 Scottish care workers wrote to the First Minister and said:

"We do not feel safe at work. By not giving us the PPE we need and by not testing front line workers, we are being forced to put not only ourselves but our family and our clients at risk."

As I noted in the chamber last week, BMA Scotland had raised concerns over protection against the new strain of Covid-19, stating that

"The currently recommended PPE may not offer the best protection in some clinical environments."

Similarly, we are seeing real and concerning failures in the SNP Government's handling of the roll-out of the vaccine. The Scottish Government has had months to prepare for this moment. We all want and need the roll-out of the vaccine to be a success, but on Sunday we saw the lowest published figure of people vaccinated since the daily figures began; it was less than half the number of people who were vaccinated on Saturday. Last week, the First Minister effectively conceded that the SNP Government's target of vaccinating 560,000 people by the end of January will not happen, saying that the target date has been "refined"—a convenient shorthand for the fact that timetables have slipped and the goalposts accordingly moved.

We know that the issue is not one of vaccine stock levels, despite the claims by the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport that vaccines were being "back-ended" by the UK Government. It is an issue of roll-out and blockages in the system here in Scotland. I will repeat the remarks of the BMA Scotland's general practitioners committee that I referred to last week, because they are important. That committee noted the

"variable and sometimes slow rate that vaccines were being made available to GP practices".

We also know that BMA Scotland asked the Scottish Government's interim chief pharmaceutical officer to consider allowing GPs to directly order the supplies that they need to vaccinate their patients, in effect bypassing health boards. We all accept the logistical challenges here, especially given Scotland's geography, but clearly something is not working.

The views of our GPs and other healthcare workers are vital to this debate, but so too are the stories of our constituents, and we will all have had those in our mailboxes. I have received some particularly distressing and worried emails from people right across Scotland. People feel that they

are in the dark. One lady from Perthshire emailed me on Monday to say that her parents are both in their mid-80s but have not yet been given a vaccination appointment. When she contacted the local GP to inquire, she was told that they did not know when they would receive more vaccines or how many doses would be available. Another lady got in touch with me to say that a 98-year-old family friend from Renfrewshire who lives by herself had not yet received an appointment. Today, someone emailed me saying that he is 85 years old and that, two weeks ago, he received a text from his surgery saying that he would shortly be called in for a vaccination; since then there has been silence, but his wife, who is 77, has received an appointment for next week at a nearby community centre.

Those are the real stories of people who are being impacted by both the lack of information and the lack of action. This is genuinely a postcode lottery between health boards, within health boards, and even within families, and it is affecting some very old and very vulnerable people and playing havoc with their hopes and expectations, given what is at stake.

When those aged 80 and over and their families see others elsewhere in the UK being vaccinated, it is only right that they will question what is happening in Scotland. All of that points to a disorganised and chaotic roll-out process with no clear direction or leadership.

It also does not bode well for the future, when we will get to the next priority groups in the coming weeks and months. That is why the Scottish Conservatives are today calling on the SNP Government to establish a vaccine task force. Such a task force must have a primary focus on supply and vaccination methods throughout Scotland. The task force should ensure that supplies get to GP surgeries and other places that are administering the vaccine within the right timeframe and it should aim to keep GPs informed of progress with supplies on a regular basis. It should also make recommendations on which methods are being used across the country to carry out the vaccination programme. That would allow any gaps to be seen quickly, the methods that are working best to be identified and best practice to be shared and used. We believe that that is critically important so that we can ensure that targets are met and, most importantly, that people are protected against this awful and deadly virus.

The Scottish Conservatives urge the chamber to support our motion. It is abundantly clear that the very last thing that Scotland should be doing at this critically important moment is planning for a referendum of any kind, let alone one carving Scotland out of the United Kingdom. People do not

want an indyref2 task force; they want a vaccination task force. The people of Scotland want all of us to focus on rolling out vaccines, reducing the number of deaths and cases of Covid-19 and rebuilding our economy. Regardless of our views on the constitutional debate, we urge the Scottish Government to pause, reflect and realise what is at stake if we take our eye off the ball at this critical juncture in the pandemic. Now is not the time to divide communities all over again. Instead, now is the time to unite people across the country, as we, hopefully, enter the final chapter of our collective struggle against the pandemic that has wrought much sadness across Scotland.

I urge the chamber to support our motion.

I move,

That the Parliament believes that planning an independence referendum in 2021, during an ongoing global pandemic, would be reckless and damaging; notes the Scottish National Party's plans to establish an independence taskforce and believes that this will divide Scotland when people should be united in tackling COVID-19 and supporting the economic recovery, and calls on the Scottish Government to instead establish a taskforce to speed up the roll-out of the COVID-19 vaccination programme across Scotland.

15:31

**The Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, Europe and External Affairs (Michael Russell):**

No one can doubt that we live in troubled and difficult times, and no one, no matter our political divisions, can fail to pause today and remember that, whatever we are debating, the UK has passed a terrible milestone this week, with 100,000 deaths. All of us must feel that, although, of course, not as much as those who will grieve for a long time. All of us must regret what has happened. All of us must work together to temper the lethal force of this pandemic in every way that we can, and that is what we are all trying to do.

I will start my contribution with two quotes. Yesterday, on "Good Morning Scotland", somebody said:

"NHS Scotland is doing a tremendous job, as is NHS Wales, Northern Ireland and England ... The supply"—

of vaccine—

"has been lumpy, and is the limiting factor on deployment by NHS Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland."

On Sunday, somebody else, speaking on UK television, said:

"this is a complicated manufacturing process. We are getting it in as quickly as we can from the two manufacturers ... The NHS, across the whole of the UK, is supplying it and getting it into people's arms as people quickly as it comes in."

The first of those quotes is from the UK Tory minister with responsibility for vaccine deployment,

Nadhim Zahawi; the second is from the Tory UK health minister, Matt Hancock. I want to thank those two Tories for saying those two things. It is simply to be regretted that the Tories in Scotland are not saying them, too. For they, like their colleagues south of the border, should be paying tribute, at a time of so many deaths, to all those who are involved in the monumental task of ensuring that every citizen who wants the vaccine can receive it in a well-ordered and carefully planned risk-based programme, recommended by an independent and respected UK body, which is being treated by all four Governments of the UK as a matter of the greatest urgency and is being delivered with skill and dedication by the NHS in the four countries. However, alas, they are instead doing something else.

Yesterday, I was told about a GP surgery in my constituency that has just completed the vaccination of all of its over-80s. When the next supply of vaccine arrives, it will start on the over-70s, and those who are housebound are getting home visits. However, the surgery faces a problem: the difficulty of doing all that given the constant phone calls, often from vulnerable people who have heard some members in this chamber creating doubts about whether those people will get what they so keenly want: a vaccination that starts them back on the road to normality. Sadly, that distress and worry arises not from the programme but from the discreditable approach that we have just heard.

I like and respect Mr Cameron, which is one of the reasons why I think that his speech was not worthy of him. Whether they know it or not, he and his less reputable colleagues are causing the distress and, in so doing, they are not producing a better vaccination programme but interfering with the delivery of the existing one.

No one is saying that a programme of this size in any country—Scotland or anywhere else—will be without difficulty, or that a programme of such complexity could not and should not be constantly improved. Mass vaccination centres are up and running in a number of places and are being joined rapidly by others. Rural and island boards are looking at innovative ways of vaccinating whole communities. Of course, there can and should be scrutiny and suggestion from this chamber, but there should not be a desperate politicisation of such a crucial matter by a sleek, anonymous Tory Government source in London, aided, abetted and amplified, alas, by an unprincipled Tory party here.

At any time, this Government will act in the best interests of Scotland's people and work tirelessly to ensure their health, wellbeing and livelihoods. However, there are times when that obligation lies not just on Government, but on the whole

Parliament. This is one of those times and it is essential that every member measures up to it.

Data that was published today shows that NHS Scotland is now exceeding January's target of 100,000 doses a week. That is rising every week and, yesterday, more than 24,000 first doses were delivered. Numbers have risen by 41 per cent in the past week—about the same rise as south of the border. However, it is not a competition; it is a crusade in which we should be united and not divided.

The Scottish NHS has vaccinated 233,681 front-line health and social care workers, exceeding the target of 230,000 that was set by the health boards. More than 95 per cent of older care home residents have also been vaccinated. By early February, all residents and staff in care homes for older adults, front-line health and social care workers and those who are aged 80 or over and living in the community, will have received their first dose. By early March, everyone in Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation priority groups 1 to 5—more than 1.1 million people—will have had the first dose. By May, more than half of the adult population of Scotland will have received protection. That will account for more than 90 per cent of preventable mortality from Covid-19 in Scotland. We have already vaccinated a higher percentage of our population than most other countries worldwide, yet still the pace continues to grow and it will go on growing.

Sadly, the pandemic is not the only issue that the country has to deal with. The pandemic is an external crisis, but another crisis has been inflicted on us by the Tory UK Government. The UK Tory insistence, backed by the Scottish Tories, on a reckless decision to press on with the end of the transition period for leaving the EU, even in the face of that unprecedented economic, social and health crisis, has caused, is causing and will cause untold economic and social damage.

Less than four weeks since the new trading arrangements came into force, problems are multiplying and spreading. The UK Government calls those teething troubles and tries to pin the blame on anybody but itself, but the truth is that the hard Brexit that it chose has produced a hard outcome that will be permanent.

It is likely that those who export and import will get more used to the paperwork, increased costs and delays, but the UK is now a third country and will remain so; therefore, the trading arrangements will be those for a third country. That is not an accident; the Tories took a deliberate decision to leave the single market, which we should remember is seven times the size of the UK. The restrictions, bureaucracy and paperwork are a result of that decision.

A necessary flow of essential labour into Scotland will be massively reduced and even post-pandemic tourist travel will be harder. There is now no access to some essential law enforcement tools that keep us safe. Our young people are shut out of the life-changing experiences that Erasmus brought. There are cuts to our agricultural budget; an end to moneys that helped to develop communities, build infrastructure and support innovation; and the extravagant promises that were made to our fishing industry have been completely hollow. All that has happened not just during a pandemic but in the midst of the worst of the pandemic.

It has been hard enough to respond to the pandemic in economic terms, with the UK Government insisting on undermining devolution. Nonetheless, since March, we have committed more than £1.2 billion to support our economic recovery, on top of the almost £3 billion of funding that we provide in direct business support. Our programme for government includes radical and wide-ranging policies to help people, businesses and communities recover and rebuild. The Government is doing precisely what the motion calls for; we are tackling the pandemic, investing in economic recovery, delivering a vaccination programme that is saving lives and helping Scotland to return to some form of normality over the coming months.

Why did the Tories lodge the motion? They did so because of the Tory fear of democracy. Since the very start of the Brexit process, the voice of the people of Scotland and its elected representatives has been ignored. That experience leaves me in no doubt that, when the pandemic subsides, our voice will be ignored again when decisions are being made about how to build forward.

I believe—in my view, this is an unremarkable belief—that it is for the people of Scotland to decide what country and economy should be built following the pandemic. That is why, if, in the next parliamentary session, there is a majority for an independence referendum that would allow us to become a normal small state within Europe, living in harmony and equity with our neighbours, the Parliament has an absolute right to take the matter forward. That is democracy. No matter what I think of the current UK Government, I do not think that, in the end, after the pandemic, it will wish to take not just the Scottish Government but the voters of Scotland to court to try to cancel out their democratically expressed wishes. The actions of the Tories in bringing this debate to the chamber are not very creditable, but I do not think that even they would wish to be seen to be going that far.

I move the amendment in my name, confident that democracy and decency should, and will, prevail.

I move amendment S5M-23958.3, to leave out from “planning” to end and insert:

“the people of Scotland have the right to choose their own future and to escape the disastrous hard Brexit that Boris Johnson and the UK Conservative Administration are imposing on them; notes that the Scottish Government paused work on independence to focus on the pandemic in contrast to the UK Government, which recklessly pursued Brexit and ended the transition period at the worst possible time; supports the Scottish Government’s decision to follow the JCVI priority list for the first phase of the vaccination programme, which has been drawn up by independent experts to provide the greatest possible protection against preventable mortality from COVID-19; agrees that it is for the people of Scotland to decide what sort of country and economy should be built following the pandemic, and that therefore, should there be a majority in the next Parliament for an independence referendum after the pandemic, there can be no justification whatsoever to deny people in Scotland their democratic rights.”

**Mike Rumbles (North East Scotland) (LD):** On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I know that, in your role as Deputy Presiding Officer, you attend Parliamentary Bureau meetings. I know that it is not breaking the rules, because opening speakers are entitled to speak remotely, but I wonder whether you could mention to the bureau that MSPs such as me would find it helpful if, during a debate of the Parliament, opening speakers could speak from the chamber. Opening speakers are privileged, because they have a substantial amount of time to make their points. If they speak remotely, they make their speeches without the fear of taking interventions. It would be helpful, in order to allow for proper debate, if that issue could be raised at a bureau meeting.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Thank you, Mr Rumbles. It is for you to raise the matter with your business manager, and it is for business managers to make suggestions at bureau meetings. The procedures that we are following today have been agreed by the bureau. This week, speakers from across the parties are taking part in proceedings remotely.

I call Monica Lennon to speak to and move amendment S5M-23958.2.

15:42

**Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab):** Covid-19 is a vicious virus that does not care about politics or the constitution. It is a virus that harms and kills regardless of people’s opinions, and it has cost people their lives, their livelihoods and their health. More than 100,000 people in the UK have lost their lives. That is not a milestone; it is a national scandal and a human tragedy.



All along, Scottish Labour has called for swift action and for lessons to be learned. We are being failed by our Governments, which have been too slow on lockdown, too slow on PPE and too slow on testing and tracing. We cannot be too slow on the vaccine roll-out.

The goal of getting Scotland vaccinated should be uniting the Parliament. That is why it is so disappointing that the Scottish Conservatives are using precious parliamentary time to raise constitutional issues. The Parliament should be focusing on scrutinising the SNP Government's Covid response and improving it. We badly need a plan to eliminate Covid and safely ease restrictions. People in our country want to be brought together. The priority for all of us needs to be getting the vaccine into people's arms. That is what the people of Scotland want action on.

Let us look at some facts. We are almost in February, but half of Scotland's over-80s are still waiting on their vaccinations. In comparison, almost 80 per cent of over-80s across the UK as a whole have been vaccinated. Why are we lagging behind, and when will we catch up? At the current rate, we are on track to miss the mid-February target by more than a quarter of a million people.

We know that GPs are experts in vaccinating people, but they continue to raise concerns about complex layers of bureaucracy, so access to vaccines needs to improve. Will the cabinet secretary commit to simplifying the distribution process and let GPs order vaccines directly, as happens elsewhere?

Our country is in the grip of its worst crisis since world war two. This is a time for politicians to come together and work collectively in the national interest. Every week that passes is yet another week of pain for people, communities and businesses. We know that our economy faces a deep crisis. The staff who are involved in the vaccine roll-outs are working extremely hard and they deserve our thanks and support. We have people who are ready and willing to vaccinate, and people who are ready and willing to be vaccinated. We need to pick up the pace so that the vaccine wins the race against the virus.

The amendment in my name calls for 24/7 access to vaccinations as soon as possible. The Scottish Government said that it will pilot a 24/7 vaccination service, but when will it realise that there is an urgent need for speed, not more pilot schemes or task forces? That is why we do not agree with the Tories' motion. The virus does not sleep, so we just want to remove barriers for access.

My amendment also calls on the Government to publish an exit strategy from lockdown to suppress the virus effectively in the long term. The clear

priority should be to vaccinate as many people as possible, but that is not the only thing that the public need to hear or see from the Government right now. All the evidence so far suggests that there is much to be optimistic about, and that the vaccines will reduce transmission as well as the worst effects of the virus, if and when people still contract it. However, it is not enough for the Government to rely solely on the vaccine roll-out as an exit plan. I urge ministers to tell us, therefore, when we will have a comprehensive strategy for how to contain the virus and prevent a return to another devastating lockdown.

At the weekend, as deputy convener of the COVID-19 Committee, I attended the committee's citizens panel. We heard from people across Scotland who had detailed questions about both the vaccine roll-out and an exit plan for lockdown. People want to hear us addressing those issues in detail, not using precious parliamentary time to rehearse arguments about the constitution.

Alongside speeding up the vaccination programme, we need an expansion of mass testing, more resources for contact tracing and urgent provision of enhanced PPE for front-line workers—especially those who are doing health and care jobs, but also others on the front line—to protect them against emerging variants of the virus. I wrote to Jeane Freeman about this last year and spoke in the chamber about it last week: we need to take a precautionary approach on PPE. Once again, I urge the Scottish Government to heed the concerns of front-line staff.

The motion's title mentions economic recovery. We need to take action to invest in PPE and test and protect, and roll out the vaccine, so that we can get the economy moving again. We are still not using our full daily testing capacity, so we are missing opportunities to hunt down the virus and keep people safe.

Too many people are still being forced into workplaces and are not being kept safe. Financial support is not reaching people and businesses quickly enough. Life before Covid-19 was hard for too many Scots. Almost a quarter of a million households across Scotland were already struggling at the point when the pandemic started, and life has got even harder as a result of the virus and our response to it. Covid-19 has had a devastating effect on so many lives and livelihoods, and we must take action to get money into people's pockets and protect jobs through a people's recovery, because we cannot go back to the unequal Scotland of before. We have the powers to do that, and we will achieve it by getting on with the people's priorities and vaccinating the population, not by spending more time on the constitution here in Parliament.

The challenge facing us remains great, and the priority must be to get Scotland vaccinated. In order to do that, the Scottish Government needs to work constructively with those on the front line, and with other parties that want to contribute to the national effort. We need an honest assessment of our progress, not an insistence that there are no issues to see here, and we need urgent action to streamline access to the vaccine so that it can get into people's arms as quickly as possible. That is the mission on which the people of Scotland want us to focus, and I am determined that we should fulfil it.

I move amendment S5M-23958.2, to leave out from “; notes” to end and insert:

“and agrees people should be united in tackling COVID-19 and supporting the economic recovery; maintains that the national priority is getting Scotland vaccinated against COVID-19; agrees that this and not a referendum should be the focus of all the Scottish Government's efforts, and calls on the Scottish Government to urgently introduce 24/7 access to vaccinations and establish an exit strategy from the current lockdown restrictions to effectively suppress the virus in the long-term while supporting people back into work.”

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I call Willie Rennie.

**Mike Rumbles:** Go on—take an intervention. [*Laughter.*]

15:49

**Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD):** The pandemic has knocked the country sideways, with 100,000 lost lives, grieving families and broken friends. Unemployment is skyrocketing, children have lost out on precious education and thousands are waiting an age for hospital treatment. Waits for mental health support were already long, but they are now intolerable. It will take all our combined efforts, ingenuity and commitment to recover from the pandemic. It will take our undivided attention and a needle-sharp focus.

It beggars belief that anyone—even the most committed and dedicated supporter—should suggest that this country should now, as we start to plot a recovery, turn its attention to another independence campaign and referendum. We know what it was like last time: all consuming, divisive and costly. Brexit gives a more recent example of just how thorny, complex, prolonged, divisive and costly independence would be. It would be even worse than Brexit.

Young people who are desperate for work cannot wait for that. Children who are in need of a good education and people who are desperate for a hip operation or for mental health support cannot wait, nor can businesses that are on their knees.

They cannot afford to wait while the SNP has yet another independence campaign.

We have had a hell of a time in the past year. The past decade has been divisive. Let us make the next decade be about not only what unites us, but what makes our lives better. Let us put the recovery first.

I was going to compliment Mike Russell and say that he will be missed from the Parliament. Then I heard his diatribe; I cannot compliment that. To say that the problems of the vaccine roll-out are either those of the manufacturers, of the care homes because vaccination there takes longer, or of the Opposition for daring to ask questions is not worthy of Mike Russell or of his contribution to Parliament over the years.

The Government is increasingly evasive and secretive. Take yesterday, when I asked John Swinney about the number of vaccines in storage. In reply, I got a description of the ordering process to be followed by GPs. Trust in the SNP on the vaccine programme is at rock bottom. It is not me who is saying that—my inbox shows that people are genuinely concerned. They see the numbers. We are 140,000 vaccines behind England. England is speeding up, we are slowing down. For a Government that frequently points out how useless Boris Johnson is, that is a terrible record.

**The Minister for Public Health, Sport and Wellbeing (Mairi Gougeon):** I must counteract some of the nonsense that we constantly hear about supply and delivery, or comparing us to England or to other parts of the UK. We have followed a different path. The member is not comparing like with like. He suggests that we are not transparent. How often has the cabinet secretary communicated deployment information with all members? We are transparent in our use of published information. Mr Rennie may not like the answers that he has heard, but we have nothing to hide. Those are the answers.

**Willie Rennie:** There are lots of words, but very few facts come from the Government. I can give an example from care homes. There are only 30,000 care home residents in Scotland, but we are 140,000 vaccinations behind. What the cabinet secretary said about care homes makes no sense. Do not blame the care homes for the Government's failure to get the vaccine rolled out.

GPs currently have one slot each week in which to submit their order to the local health board. The local health board then passes that on to the national organisation, which passes that on to Moviento, the distributor. Moviento eventually gets the vaccine back to the GP. There are two extra layers of bureaucracy that do not exist in England. That might be one reason why the Government is way behind on providing access to the vaccine.

The British Medical Association confirms that and says that it, too, wants direct access to the ordering process. It says:

“We’re having to go through quite a convoluted procurement process to get that vaccine into our fridges.”

Two weeks ago, the health secretary said that she had 200,000 vaccines in storage. This week, the UK Government said that that figure is nearer 500,000. The Scottish Government disputes that, but will not tell us what the number is. So much for open government. Please end the secrecy. Tell us that number and reform the ordering system so that we can catch up at last.

Last week, I asked the First Minister why the Government was always behind the curve on testing. Her response was to ask me why she would want to be behind the curve—more evasion. It is a serious issue and we can look at what has happened: the Government refused to test students before outbreaks on campus; it refused to test at airports before holiday makers brought the virus back from abroad; and it refused to test like Liverpool, claiming that that was only a political stunt by the Conservatives. Most devastating of all, it refused, despite repeated requests at the time from me and many others to the First Minister, to test new care home residents before they were admitted. Why is that important? It is because the Government must catch up on testing and the first thing that it must do is fully use the 65,000 PCR tests that it has at its disposal, rather than waste 50,000 every day.

The Government is even getting it wrong when it is giving away money. Last year was astonishing, and I give the Government full credit and compliments. Money was delivered to businesses with speed. It was a great success. Now, however, the funding schemes are delayed, full of holes and have complex criteria. Too many are missing out. Self-catering businesses, guest houses and the supply chain are all missing out on what they truly need and it is taking an age to get the money to them. The Government has taken far too long to develop the schemes; they have been announced several times, but many are still not open for application. Businesses are on the edge and the good work of last year is about to be undone unless the Government moves faster.

Whether it is on vaccines, testing or business, the challenges for this country are considerable. They need our undivided attention, not another divisive, distracting, costly and exhausting campaign for independence. We must put recovery first.

15:57

**Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green):** The Conservatives could have brought a motion for

debate that was purely about the Covid response, and they might well have found that they could win majority support for such a motion. However, they brought one that is about the relationship between Covid and the independence question. I suspect that most people would agree that it would be wrong and unwelcome to most voters to hold a referendum on independence in the middle of a pandemic, but, of course, the Scottish Government is saying that a referendum should happen after the pandemic—that is as it should be.

Equally, though, it is clear that there is a simple democratic principle at stake: the people of Scotland have the right to decide when they are ready to revisit the independence question, and, if they express that readiness by electing a pro-independence majority to this Parliament in May, their decision should be respected and the question of independence put to them in a referendum that is recognised by both sides. No party and no Government should stand in the way of that democratic process.

Maybe the Conservatives simply long for a repeat of their 2016 election theme as the party that talks incessantly about independence while simultaneously demanding that nobody should be talking about independence. I do not think that that will take them far this time, because, although the immediate Covid response is indeed a matter for the moment and must, for better or worse, be dealt with under the limitations of devolution and in the face of a UK Government that has nothing but contempt for this Parliament, Covid recovery, on the other hand, will be a long-term agenda. Scotland has the right to decide what level of self-government will be needed for that long-term recovery.

I understand the frustration that the Conservatives are displaying. They look at the UK and Scottish Governments and, I imagine, find it hard to understand why most people in Scotland have such a low opinion of their Prime Minister but do not have the same view of the First Minister. After all, both Governments have sometimes made the same mistakes on the timing of lockdown measures, care homes, mass testing, school exams and international travel. Perhaps the answer is that people in Scotland know that mistakes have been made but simply want clarity and honesty from politicians who admit those mistakes, which the First Minister did today, unlike the Prime Minister, who claimed this week that everything that could have been done was done. We all know that that is not the case, just as we know that no Government could have been expected to get everything right. More clearly, I think that there are differing levels of trust because people want politicians who appear capable of expressing genuine empathy and who can

routinely speak in whole sentences. That should not be a high bar in politics.

Those who will never support independence regularly condemn what they call “nationalism”. In Scotland, that word is too often taken to mean supporting independence. Of course, many who support independence identify as nationalists, but the words are not equivalent. There are nationalists on both sides of the constitutional debate. Equally, there are people who reject nationalism—Scottish or British—but are clear about their view of our constitutional future.

It is the UK that has been most clearly in the grip of nationalism in recent years, seen most obviously in the withdrawal from the European Union, an act that internationalist Scotland rejected in the referendum and continues to reject.

The UK Government showed no willingness then to put divisive constitutional change on hold because of a pandemic. Although independence campaigning has been on hold here, the UK’s nationalism is still seen in the midst of the Covid pandemic, from Downing Street’s attempt to have tiny union jacks stamped on every bottle of vaccine to the British exceptionalism of ministers who have claimed the fruits of inherently international scientific research as though it is proof of national greatness.

That tendency is seen in trivial issues, such as a UK minister announcing that “British fish” are “happier fish”. It is also seen in deeply serious matters such as the vaccine programme, in which all eyes seem to be focused on any variation in the domestic roll-out and none focused on the urgent need to ensure that the world’s poorest countries can access vaccines at all.

Let us compare that with Norway. It is working with the EU, despite not even being a member state, to become one of the world’s first countries to share vaccine with the countries that need international help.

The Greens will continue to press the Scottish and UK Governments to step up their action where we think that their Covid response falls short. We will continue to assert Scotland’s freedom to choose our own future as the democratic right of the people who live here.

Although I support independence without calling myself a nationalist, I caution those who oppose it but have apparently nothing to offer in contrast except British nationalism. Although I believe that, given the choice, Scotland would choose independence, we deserve better than the false choice of one nationalism set against another. We deserve—and I believe that we are capable of—far better than that, as we ask ourselves what kind of country we want to be, what kind of country we will rebuild in the Covid recovery and what role we

want for ourselves in the European and international community.

16:03

**Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con):** A fanatic is someone who cannot change their mind and will not change the subject. The SNP will clearly never take a referendum result against independence as the settled will of the Scottish people. For the SNP, a referendum result is acceptable only when it is the one that it wants. If it is not, the public were sadly mistaken and simply must be asked the question again and again until they get the answer right.

With the best will in the world, defeating Covid-19 is of immediate importance to Scotland’s future. I defy any MSP in the chamber to tell me that ramping up a constitutional debate should be a bigger priority for Scotland’s Government than protecting its citizens’ health and livelihoods. Of course, the SNP considers that the time is right to expend political energy and public funds on splitting up the United Kingdom, but, for the SNP, the time is always right for that.

However, when we are seeing Scotland fall behind the other nations of the UK with vaccinations and businesses large and small are struggling to secure financial support to survive, focusing on anything other than getting through the pandemic and rebuilding our economy is, quite frankly, beyond irresponsible and highlights once again that this Government cannot distinguish between national and nationalist priorities.

**Mairi Gougeon:** If Brian Whittle feels that our sheer priority should be tackling the pandemic—which I agree it should be—how does he explain his party’s focus on Brexit in the middle of it?

**Brian Whittle:** Because the vote on Brexit took place before the pandemic, and the timetable for it was already set out.

This is not about denying the SNP its right to believe that Scotland should be independent; it is about its recognising that although that will always be its first priority, that does not automatically mean that it is Scotland’s.

As the First Minister has so often said in her daily briefing, we are in the middle of a pandemic and are dealing with a deadly virus. If, as she has also often said, the virus does not take a day off, why does she think it is acceptable for her Government’s civil servants to spend time drafting a referendum bill? Why does she think it is acceptable for her ministers to be focused on anything other than dealing with the pandemic and helping to restore Scotland’s economy and public services in its aftermath?

Every politician here will have heard stories from constituents who are worried about when they or their loved ones will have their vaccination or access to a test. Prior to the pandemic, the shortage of NHS staff was continually highlighted in debates in which it was said that we were hundreds of GPs and thousands of nurses and midwives short, or that we had a shortage of consultants or of mental health clinicians. That crisis has been starkly highlighted and exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Where is the 11-point plan or the task force to deal with that on-going crisis?

We have the worst drug deaths rate in the developed world: it is more than three times the rate in the rest of the United Kingdom under the same regulations. Only now, after 14 years of being dragged into the chamber on the subject, has the Scottish Government decided to take notice of it. Call me a sceptic, but I wonder whether that has more to do with the upcoming election than with any real attempt to deal with that crisis. Only last night we heard that deaths due to homelessness sit at twice the rate that exists in the rest of the United Kingdom. Where is the plan to tackle that? There is a mental health crisis in our schools, where waiting times for child and adolescent mental health services were far too long even before Covid and are only growing through the pandemic. Where is the big plan to deal with that?

Businesses will be the backbone on which our recovery must be built. Even before the pandemic, the SNP was failing Scotland's economy. Its half-hearted approach to supporting businesses and entrepreneurship has always been a let-down. It is certainly no friend to the business community. Even the Scottish Government's own advisory group on economic recovery recognised the need to improve relationships with Scotland's business community. However, time and again during the pandemic, we have seen the consequences of the Scottish Government's failure to work with businesses large and small. New business grants are continually being announced to great fanfare, followed by an interminable wait for those seeking grants as guidance on the new funds grinds its way through the system.

It is not unusual for the Scottish Government to overpromise and underdeliver when it comes to support for business, but that has never been less forgivable. Yet, at the weekend, the SNP launched its 11-point road map for a second independence referendum. How about consideration of a task force to plan our road map out of Covid restrictions, as the vaccination programme protects more of our most vulnerable citizens? Yesterday, I asked the Deputy First Minister that very question, but he gave no answer and there was no plan. How about a plan to give—

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I encourage Mr Whittle to conclude his remarks.

**Brian Whittle:** I am sorry, Presiding Officer. I thought that I had six minutes.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** You may carry on.

**Brian Whittle:** How long do I have?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** You are absolutely right—my apologies.

**Brian Whittle:** How about a plan to give loved ones access to care homes as our most vulnerable people are vaccinated? Again, we have had no answer and no plan.

Education was supposed to be the Scottish Government's priority.

"Judge me on my record"

said Nicola Sturgeon at the beginning of this parliamentary session. It did not take long to ditch the flagship education bill. We see inequalities and the attainment gap continue to grow, but there has been no task force and no 11-point plan on that.

The SNP's calls for independence are a smokescreen to distract the people of Scotland from its woeful track record in government. I heard Michael Russell bullishly suggest that the SNP should hold its own referendum and dare the UK Government to challenge it in court. I would have thought that the inside of a courtroom would be the last place that the Scottish Government would want to see, given recent events. We saw the ill-fated "the state is watching you" named persons scheme defeated in court. Of course, the SNP's former leader and First Minister Alex Salmond has dragged it through the courts towards another embarrassing defeat, and that saga rumbles on. However, at least the SNP will be on first-name terms with all the court officials by now.

The SNP knows that it cannot defend its domestic record. It also knows that it has no cards to play, so it cries for independence in the hope that that will galvanise its support and deflect attention from its appalling record in government. The irony is that the people it pretends to represent with its reckless policy are the very ones whom it will let down the most. Nicola Sturgeon, Mike Russell et al know that there will not be a referendum in 2021, because to spend time and money on anything other than post-Covid recovery would be unthinkable. After the election they will spin up their next cock-and-bull story—anything to get them through the election. The more the SNP pushes that agenda, the less it acts like a Government and the more it acts like a protest group. Scotland deserves and needs so much better.

16:10

**Shona Robison (Dundee City East) (SNP):** It was a year ago to the day that China reported its first death from coronavirus. No one knew then how quickly the virus would spread and become a global pandemic—or, of course, the tragic effect that it would have on so many people's lives. Today is a solemn reminder of just how many lives—something that should surely unite us, even if only briefly.

It has not been easy for anyone, and the response, not only in Scotland but globally, has evolved as our knowledge of the virus has grown. I sincerely believe that all have done their best to combat and tackle a threat of unimaginable proportions that no one could have foreseen. I pay particular tribute to those on the front line of the battle against Covid-19.

I believe that the Scottish Government has always tried to follow the evidence, such as the decision to follow the JCVI priority list for the first phase of the vaccination programme. That list has been drawn up by independent experts to provide the greatest possible protection against preventable mortality as a result of Covid-19 by vaccinating residents and staff in care homes first. The percentage of that group who have received vaccinations is now standing at more than 95 per cent and we are on track to deliver the first vaccination to all those aged over 80 by 5 February. That is surely to be welcomed.

Donald Cameron talked about the importance of GPs' views but then conveniently forgot to mention—because it does not suit the narrative—the comments of Dr Andrew Buist, chair of the BMA GP committee, who said:

"I believe our plan is good ... Covid19 vaccination is not a sprint, it's a long-distance race".

Dr Buist is right.

Will mistakes have been made? Undoubtedly, and I am sure that we will learn from them, but to listen to the Opposition, people would think that every single thing that the Scottish Government has done has been a disaster. There is never any praise for the successes—not once—which is not lost on our hard-working health and social care staff. The Scottish Government has quite rightly committed to a public inquiry to learn lessons from the pandemic and to ensure that we are better prepared for any future public health crisis.

I turn to the motion that is before us. Frankly, it is difficult to know where to start—the words "confused", "muddled" and "simply undemocratic" spring to mind. The motion is also terribly hypocritical. It appears to confuse the setting up of a task force to explore and promote independence by a political party so that it can present that to voters ahead of a democratically scheduled

election with the actions of a Government. At the same time, the Tories presumably believe that it is okay for the UK Government to set up a special union committee, chaired by Cabinet Office minister Michael Gove, in addition to a union unit at No 10. The Tories are setting up a committee at the heart of a Government to fight against Scotland's right to choose independence. There is no mention in the Tory motion of that being a distraction for the UK Government in fighting the pandemic.

The motion says that there should be no discussion about independence during the pandemic, despite the Scottish Government pausing all work on independence during the pandemic, while, at the same time—as others have pointed out—the UK Government has persisted with its damaging Brexit obsession without any delay.

For the Tories, political discussion about independence is described as "reckless and damaging", but apparently that is not so much the case for Brexit. It appears that democracy is "reckless and damaging" only when it applies to Scotland's future.

The true impact of Brexit is now beginning to be felt, adding further pressure and challenges to our economy, which has already been impacted by the pandemic. In 2014, the Tories told us that the only way to protect Scotland's place in Europe was to vote no; in 2016, Scotland voted to remain in the EU, yet our voice was ignored.

Those broken promises and the material changes have led to renewed calls for a referendum on independence. The Tories seem to believe that it is only the SNP that is calling for the referendum, but poll after poll show that the Scottish people want to have a choice about their own future, and the Scottish people deserve the right to choose their future. Their voices must and will be heard, and the SNP has been clear that, at the next election, there will be a commitment to hold a legal referendum after the pandemic—that is democracy.

The Scottish Government's focus has been completely on dealing with the pandemic and, in truth, the Opposition knows that to be the case. Today's motion seeks to deny Scots the right to self-determination and the right to debate the merits or otherwise of independence, as they see it. That is simply undemocratic and unsustainable.

Having the full powers of independence in this Parliament is not some abstract concept. In recovering from the pandemic, it will be fundamental to have control over the economy and things such as welfare to ensure that our recovery is fair and socially just. I urge members to support the Scottish Government amendment.

16:15

**Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):** I begin by recognising the massive challenges that our country is facing and the incredible pressure that individuals and families are living under, with a constant threat from a public health pandemic that, to date, has killed more than 100,000 people across the United Kingdom and resulted in unemployment rising at a rate that has not been experienced in decades. Businesses up and down our country are in serious trouble and are struggling to stay afloat, and people are worried sick about the prospect for the future, not knowing whether they will be in a job next week or next month.

Against that backdrop, we have the hope of the vaccine, and I am 100 per cent behind the Government in getting the vaccine rolled out as quickly as possible. As Monica Lennon said, our number 1 priority is getting the vaccine to as many people as we can as quickly as we can. That is the key point of our amendment.

Our amendment also makes clear that more work must be done on the exit strategy. A few weeks ago, I asked the First Minister about the exit strategy, and she told me:

“The exit strategy ... is the vaccine”.—[*Official Report*, 4 January 2021; c 34.]

I am not so sure. I would not want us as a country to put all our hope in one basket.

We still do not know much about the effectiveness of the vaccines and the mutations of the virus. New strains of the virus are emerging, and scientists are worried that the vaccines will not be effective against them. That is why we need an effective plan for exiting the lockdown that learns from the last one, that does not have us eating out to spread new variants of the virus and that locks down our borders and enforces basic rules while operating the most effective test, trace and isolate programme that can be put in place.

We must be able to suppress the virus, which is something that, to date, the UK Government and the Scottish Government have failed to do. That is why we are among the worst countries in Europe when it comes to Covid death rates. It is also why Scottish Labour believes that for the Scottish Government to launch a campaign and plan an independence referendum in 2021 while the people of our country are facing such difficult times is not only irresponsible but beggars belief, and must be called out for what it is.

No matter our view on the constitutional future of our country, now is not the time. The silent majority must be encouraged to speak out about such crass incompetence and hypocrisy from the Scottish National Party Government. The public health crisis is deepening. Our national health

service cannot cope, as waiting lists grow. Masses of businesses are shutting down and jobs have been lost. Our elderly are terrified in their own homes, and tens of thousands more people are relying on charity for food. The SNP’s answer to that is to hold an independence referendum. I believe that that is not acceptable to the large majority of the population, who want the Government to focus on the crisis that we are in.

On the question of the constitution, I want to be clear. The Scottish Labour Party believes and has set out that

“It is the sovereign right of the people of Scotland to determine their future, and the right of the people of Scotland to determine the form of government suited to their needs.”

Of that there should be no doubt.

I ask SNP ministers to listen to the people, face up to their responsibilities, recognise that we are not doing as well as we should be in tackling the virus, and make the public health crisis and the economic fallout from it the priority of Government until we get through this uncertain and very worrying time. If they are listening to the people, they will know that that is where the majority of the people are at.

I pose the question: why on earth would anyone want to politicise this Covid period? Why on earth would the Government take its focus off Covid in order to have a debate on the constitution? Why would it want to divide people and communities at a time when we need the whole country to come together? Why, oh why?

The Tories are equally guilty of diversion. We are told that the worst UK Prime Minister ever, Boris Johnson, is heading to Scotland this week to stoke the flames of division. What is it that he and his cronies do not understand about the current crisis? We should tell Johnson to stay away.

I ask members to support our amendment and ensure that we focus all our time and all our efforts on tackling the public health crisis and the economic fallout that our country is facing.

16:21

**Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP):** I agree with colleagues’ comments about the sad deaths of more than 100,000 UK citizens as a result of Covid. With every death, families mourn and communities hurt. I, too, offer my condolences to them.

It is therefore important that we pull together across the chamber, across the four nations, across the European continent and globally to deliver the vaccines to help to get society back to a better place. That will certainly help the economy

as well, notwithstanding the hard Brexit that we are now dealing with.

I believe that independence will be part of the recovery from Covid and Brexit. I also believe that it is right that a referendum is held, so that we can make Scotland the country that we want it to be. Now that Labour and the Lib Dems have signed up fully to Brexit and have rejected rejoining the European Union, along with their Tory colleagues, it is clear that economic recovery lies with independence and rejoining the EU.

Sadly, it has not taken long for the Tories to bring the constitution into the vaccine roll-out. Daily, and for months, the First Minister has stood in front of the media corps and rejected constitutional questions—and quite rightly so. Sadly, this week, the Tory Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, Matt Hancock, could not do likewise. Previously, there was the nonsense about putting a union flag on the Oxford-AstraZeneca boxes. I did not see any campaigning to get the Turkish, the German or the Belgian flag on the Pfizer boxes, nor should there be any such campaigning.

Brian Whittle touched on the First Minister's comments in her daily briefings. He was correct to say that she has focused on Covid, not on an independence referendum, and I am pleased that he recognises that.

Covid is a global pandemic, and any narrow nationalism that is offered by the UK Government is unwarranted and, quite frankly, appalling. Countries should be working together, and, in the main, that has been the case so far. That must continue. That is why I welcome the fact that all four nations in the UK are working to the same target of completing the vaccination of JCVI priority groups 1 and 2 and, by mid-February, groups 1 to 4. By early May, everybody on the JCVI priority list, including those who are over 50 and younger people with underlying health conditions, will have been vaccinated.

The Scottish Government has provided Parliament with regular updates, and that will continue. That is the correct course of action. One thing is certain, though—we might be going about it in a slightly different order, but we are all following the same targets. It is astounding to think that, today, the Tories are trying to place false differences between the four nations of the UK. They really should consider their actions.

I believe that it is important to highlight the scale of what is going on in the vaccination programme. I will touch on just a few of the things that are happening. The JCVI has advised that an age-based programme will likely result in faster delivery and better uptake among those who are at the highest risk, and the Scottish Government's

aim is to have 400,000 vaccinations taking place in Scotland every week from the end of February.

The Scottish Government aims to vaccinate people who are aged 70 or over by the middle of February. Those who are aged over 65 and those who are clinically extremely vulnerable will receive their first doses by the beginning of March. That period covers priority groups 1 to 5 on the JCVI list, which represents just over 1.4 million people.

There are many other aspects, but I will make just one final point on the vaccination programme. Large centres will be capable of delivering over 20,000 vaccinations per week. The task is clearly on a mammoth scale, and I support all the actions of everyone who is delivering the programme day in, day out, as well as the organisation behind it.

On the issue of a referendum, it is up to the people of Scotland to decide our future. Discussions about a referendum are clearly important, but what is absolutely not for discussion is the fact that, if Scotland votes on 6 May for a legal referendum, that is what it will get. I firmly believe that Scotland's referendum must be beyond any legal challenge in order to ensure legitimacy and acceptance both at home and abroad. That is surely the best way to become an independent country.

That is why, in May, the SNP is going to seek the authority of the Scottish people to hold a legal referendum—after the pandemic, crucially, but in the first part of the next session of Parliament—in order to give the people of Scotland a right to choose a better future. Fundamentally, it is not about what Boris Johnson wants; it is about what the people of Scotland want, and the increasing evidence is that they want independence.

Opposition parties clearly have a right to oppose independence, but they certainly do not have a right to deny the people of Scotland the chance to determine their own future. The Tories are clearly utterly terrified of the verdict of the people of Scotland, but the Scottish electorate will not accept this Trump-like attempt to deny the results of a free and fair election. It is astonishing that what is left of the anti-independence campaign is still peddling some of the nonsense and is backtracking at every turn, even after its list of broken promises and whoppers has been laid bare for all to see.

Day in, day out, MSPs rightly ask this Scottish Government what it is going to do on a wide range of issues. It is therefore quite embarrassing that some politicians do not want the SNP Government to undertake that activity. In fact, we have had 20 opinion polls that have highlighted support for independence.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani):** Will you come to a close, please?



**Stuart McMillan:** That is something that the population is talking about, and it is clearly an issue for people.

As we know, it has been obvious for many, many years that the Labour Party is utterly incapable of offering any solutions or vision for Scotland—

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Will you come to a close, please?

**Stuart McMillan:** —but it has resorted once again to telling people a lot of nonsense.

I know that the population of Scotland wants a referendum after the pandemic. The actions of the Scottish Government are very important—

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Will you come to a close, please?

**Stuart McMillan:** —and I support the amendment in the name of Michael Russell.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I have to ask members to be a bit more cognisant of the time that they are taking, as we are running short.

16:28

**Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con):** First, I reiterate my party's thanks to all key workers and front-line health workers.

I am shocked and astounded by the reckless tone of the SNP amendment in the name of Mike Russell. We are in the middle of a pandemic and at the heart of a public health and economic crisis, yet the nationalists' top priority is independence. Colleagues across the chamber are rightly surprised by the negligent and time-wasting constitutional drum banging. Meanwhile, small businesses go wanting, young people are left behind and elderly people wait in desperation for a vaccine. Labour and the Liberal Democrats agree with all those points and I urge them to support our motion.

The UK Government has been devastated by this ravaging and virulent pandemic. The most vulnerable in our society have been adversely affected by the disease and we, the elected members of the Parliament, have a duty to the people of Scotland. We have a duty to our country, yet the party in Government—the SNP democracy deniers—is distracting from its duty to put the pandemic recovery first, ahead of pursuing its goal of separatism.

I must get to the main points that I would like to raise. Over the past few weeks, I have been moved by countless letters from worried over-80-year-olds who are seeking reassurance that they will shortly receive their vaccine. I do not accept

the cabinet secretary's disgraceful comments—it is under his Scottish Government's watch that older people have been failed. Furthermore, I have been contacted by small bed-and-breakfast business owners who are pleading for financial support and by parents who are concerned that their children will be a lost generation.

There are three areas of concern. I appreciate that the virtual nature of my contribution does not allow for debate, but perhaps the SNP would like to explain, in the closing speeches, why they have failed so badly on these issues. On vaccinations, as my colleague Donald Cameron said, we are simply not going fast enough. The number of daily vaccinations—at just 24,192—has declined from the peak of last week's figure. Nicola Sturgeon spoke of "ramping up" the vaccine roll-out, but we see progress stalling. Scotland is hardly firing on all cylinders, unlike other parts of the UK, which are racing ahead. We could have seen more mass vaccination centres, a streamlined vaccination application process and better co-ordination from the Government.

What about supply? Reports yesterday said that the UK Government has supplied to the Scottish Government nearly a million vaccine doses in total, of which the SNP has used just 462,000—just under half—leaving around half a million in storage. That is, quite frankly, a shambles.

Everyone stands ready, except this Government, which seems more concerned with the colour of an envelope than the rate of vaccination. NHS staff, volunteers and our armed forces are working hard to deploy the vaccine, but the Government just cannot get the job done. On that point, can somebody say why the Scottish Government has snubbed the offer of more help from the British Army? Our economic recovery depends on Scots having the vaccine sooner rather than later. Delaying that will be to the detriment to those currently further down the JCVI priority group list.

Colleagues will see through the SNP's launch of an 11-point plan on indyref 2. My party was not surprised by the timing of that predictable distraction. Families with children, grandparents and young people are asking why there is not an 11-point plan on education, health or any domestic matter over which the Government has control. What about an 11-point plan to restart the economy and promote a robust recovery?

Patrick Harvie is entirely wrong in saying that the UK Government has contempt for the Scottish Government—far from it. It has shown what we can do as a family of nations, with the furlough scheme, the business bounce back loans and £8.6 billion of up-front funding for Scotland. Here, in Scotland, some businesses are still waiting for that

funding—funding that they deserve. They have not received a penny since the pandemic began.

On numerous occasions, we have called on the SNP to listen to business. For example, the traditional self-catering industry has been a mainstay of Scotland's tourism offer for a generation, yet it has not been granted the support that it deserves by the Government. Problems were evidenced from the very outset of the first lockdown, as many operators were deemed ineligible for grants. Self-catering once again proved its value to our tourist economy by leading the way with the re-opening of tourist accommodation in the summer, using Government-backed cleaning protocols. Once restrictions were tightened, from the autumn onwards, many were again left without support. Larger providers have been left with nothing since September 2020, and it is still unclear when the funds from the £7 million self-catering grant, which was announced in December 2020, will make their way into operators' bank accounts.

The Scottish Government has consistently overlooked, undervalued and excluded this key sector. That has again been evidenced by the recent decision to exclude self-catering operators from the hospitality top-up funding. The Scottish Government should be consistently backing businesses that will form an integral part of the eventual recovery of Scottish tourism.

Right now, we need to see the SNP Government building up the UK, not breaking it up. As part of an 11-point plan for the economy, we could have seen an extension to 100 per cent of non-domestic rates relief for hospitality and tourism businesses. On that point, I draw members' attention to my entry in the register of members' interests. Perhaps there could be Swedish-style job councils, as has been suggested by the Scottish Conservatives.

**Linda Fabiani:** Come to a close, please.

**Rachael Hamilton:** Nicola Sturgeon said that independence transcends everything. The SNP should be ashamed that it is taking our beloved country to groundhog day again. The First Minister must pull up her sleeves and commit to rebuilding Scotland as part of the United Kingdom.

16:35

**Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP):** I was saddened to hear that 100,000 people have now lost their lives to the virus. I offer my thanks to all health and care workers throughout Scotland for their efforts to stop the spread of the virus and to treat those who have Covid-19. They have been working above and beyond the call of duty, doing extra shifts and weekend shifts, and they must be commended.

I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests. I am a registered nurse. Over the Christmas recess, I completed the required training and returned to work as a member of NHS Dumfries and Galloway's vaccination team. I have injected into the arms of folk from Stranraer to Dumfries, and I will continue to help as much as I can, as needed.

The pandemic is the overriding priority at the moment, and I have been on the front line of it. Everyone I speak to knows that the pandemic is the top priority. Stuart McMillan was right when he said that the First Minister has repeatedly said in the briefings that the pandemic is the top priority. However, we also need to plan for the future—for when the pandemic is over. We need to plan and prepare to repair the damage that the Westminster Conservatives' dithering has caused in relation to the pandemic and Brexit. Michael Russell has raised the issues of Erasmus+ and the Brexit damage to our economy. We need to plan for the future. Planning is proper.

The Conservatives had four and a half years to plan for how we would leave the EU. They parried, dawdled and delayed for four and a half years—until Christmas eve, when they had to agree to a really bad deal. The Conservatives' fisheries minister did not even read the Brexit deal on Christmas eve, because she was too busy with a nativity trail. Planning for the future is necessary.

Two businesses in my South Scotland region have suffered because of the lack of Brexit planning by Westminster Conservatives. The Ethical Dairy is no longer going to ship its artisan cheese to Northern Ireland because of the lack of planning by the UK Government and its lack of communication with businesses. West Coast Sea Products in Kirkcudbright, which is a huge local employer, has had major challenges in shipping its much-prized scallops to France because of tax registration requirements. That is what a lack of planning results in.

Monica Lennon's amendment demands the urgent introduction of 24/7 vaccinations. I question that suggestion—it might be very irresponsible and dangerous. I am in a unique position to give members an update on the front line of the vaccination programme. My front-line experience might not be the same as that of other vaccinators, but it would be useful to share it.

The vaccination team that I have worked with is around 50 per cent nurses, physios, occupational therapists and podiatrists who are already working full time in NHS jobs, and the other 50 per cent of the team is made up of retired nurses and midwives who have come out of retirement to help. Everyone is putting in long hours, extra shifts and weekend shifts. Monica Lennon now wants them to stay up all night long.

Obviously, there are challenges in rolling out the vaccines. There are the complexities of supply chains and rurality, and there is the need to have safety at the forefront of vaccine injections. The need for more advance notice of vaccine vials and intended delivery has been highlighted to me by one of our local GPs. Of course there are challenges, but 24,000 first doses have been injected, we have run extra clinics and worked extra shifts and we are now doing back shifts and weekends. The language about speeding up the process is an attack on front-line workers and vaccinators, and it is not helping. The professional team to which I belong is competently and safely vaccinating at the required pace.

I spoke to an accident and emergency surgeon who works in Glasgow. He said that doing vaccinations in the middle of the night might be helpful in large population centres such as Glasgow but would not work everywhere else. Where would the staff come from? Need I remind members that, because of Brexit, the UK has lost thousands of EU nurses and that, because of the UK's anti-immigration immigration policies, it is difficult to attract nurses to move to Scotland? In addition, how will a single parent go to a vaccination appointment at 3 am? How many women will want to travel alone in the middle of the night to get vaccinated? I encourage members to vote against Monica Lennon's ivory-tower amendment.

The cabinet secretary is right to highlight democracy. The planning for Scotland's recovery needs to be in the hands of Scottish people. This is about choice, planning and democracy. Nobody is saying that we will have a referendum the morn. Boris Johnson should take note of what happened to his pal Donald Trump when he rejected democracy.

Any normal Government should be commended for planning, not condemned.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I apologise to Mr Lochhead and Mr Adam for sending confused messages.

16:41

**George Adam (Paisley) (SNP):** Apology accepted, Presiding Officer.

We say this all the time: we live in strange and difficult times. Who would have thought, even this time last year, that we would be living as we are at the moment? I was talking to a friend recently about the Covid deaths figures and I was struck by how easy it was to talk about them as if they were just a string of numbers as opposed to people—family members and people who loved and were loved. We need to remember that all the time

when we have debates such as this one, here or anywhere else.

How we deal with the pandemic now and in future is an important aspect of the debate. We in the Scottish Parliament might disagree but we need to show leadership for everyone, because we must ease, not stoke, the fears of the people we represent.

It goes without saying that tackling Covid-19 as efficiently and safely as possible is the Scottish Government's top priority. To say otherwise is churlish, petty and plainly inaccurate. However, how we generate economic recovery in future is a debate that we must have. How we move forward as a nation is important.

It is ironic that the Tories in this Parliament lodged the motion that we are debating, given that their Westminster colleagues have left a lot to be desired in their handling of the coronavirus pandemic and the difficulties that it has created for people. However, since the beginning of the pandemic, I have believed that we should never use Covid-19 in a party-political way and I will continue in that spirit, because too many people are struggling through grief, financial instability and personal hardship right now and it is important that we, their representatives, focus on what we can do to help our constituents and lead them through those challenges.

A beacon of light, which is giving people confidence that there will be an end to the pandemic and the restrictions under which they are living, is the development and roll-out of Covid-19 vaccines. The scientists who are involved in vaccine research and development have given us hope that we are starting a journey that will eventually let us return to some form of normality.

The vaccination programme that is being implemented across Scotland is following the independent advice of the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation. The Scottish Government is delivering the vaccine as quickly as possible and is making the best use of the supply that is available. The statistics speak for themselves; we can see that people in priority groups have already been vaccinated. The Scottish Government's aim is that at least 400,000 vaccinations will take place in Scotland every week from the end of February and that, by early May, everyone on the JCVI priority list, including those of us who are over 50 and younger people with underlying health conditions, will have been vaccinated. The numbers suggest that the Scottish Government is making vaccination the top priority.

It is simply wrong to suggest that giving people a choice on how they wish to proceed as a nation would be a barrier to a safe and effective

vaccination programme, because that is clearly not the case. The Tories claim that everything will be neglected, but they do not complain about the fact that our constituents will not be given the right to choose their way forward.

The economic recovery is another issue. During the pandemic we have found that our tethers to the United Kingdom and the Westminster Government have hindered Scotland's economic recovery and priorities. The damaging effects of Boris Johnson's extreme Brexit, which we in Scotland did not vote for, will be seen for what they are; as others have said, the Tories felt that it was right to carry on and drag us out of the EU in the middle of a pandemic and a global economic recession. That was after we weathered 10 years of Westminster cuts and austerity during which Scotland was ignored and left out of any discussions or decisions. We may have been completely ignored by Westminster throughout the Brexit process, but we do not have to sit back and blindly accept the Tory Brexit decline.

The people of Scotland have the right to determine their own future and protect the interests of their community through independence. Independence is essential to give our constituents the opportunity to build the fairer and more prosperous country that we all want to see. If the SNP is returned to office in the upcoming Scottish parliamentary elections in May and there is a pro-independence majority in Holyrood, there can be no democratic or moral justification whatsoever to deny people their democratic right to choose a better future.

The Tories accuse us of scaremongering over warnings that our fishing communities would be sold out, workers' rights and NHS protections would be under threat and our economy would be left worse off if the transition period was not extended beyond the pandemic, yet now all those Tory broken promises have been exposed.

Scotland has the right to be treated as an equal partner and, should it wish, to be an independent nation. I will always advocate for my friends and neighbours to have the democratic right to choose their way forward—a better way forward—and move away from the current UK regime that is not working but is hindering our ability to succeed. Ultimately, Scotland's future is not about what Boris Johnson, Michael Gove or Gordon Brown want or think is best for us; it is about what the people of Scotland want, and the increasing evidence is that they want independence. The SNP will allow the people to have that choice if re-elected in May.

Above all, the Scottish Government's priorities ensure the best for our country, which is why I have no doubt that the First Minister and the SNP Government will continue to combat the current

threat as effectively as they have been doing since the beginning of the pandemic. We will give the people of Scotland the opportunity to decide their own future and destiny.

16:48

**Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab):** I would have hoped that the Tories would have had some humility today, with 100,000 of our citizens dead. It is my view that the Scottish people have the right to self-determination; if the people want a referendum, so be it, but it should be a multi-option referendum, and I would take part in that by positively making the case for devo max.

However, with 7,000 Scots dead, I have to ask the Government whether a referendum really is its priority. If you speak to people in working-class communities who have suffered most from Covid, you will hear how shattered and economically broken they are, with cuts to already low pay, cuts to hours worked, unemployment and bosses at British Gas, Tesco and Wilko exploiting the crisis to slash pay and conditions.

Food bank use is up 47 per cent—can you imagine what it is like to look at your children every day wondering how you will put food in their mouths and hearing that lockdown is being extended again?

There is a mental health crisis; young people full of energy and vitality have been cooped up and unable to meet their pals, they are missing out on the structure of a school day and their education is suffering. They are unable to enjoy the liberty of being young, and their mental health is suffering—they need help.

There is a physical health crisis; people have stopped going to their GP and stopped going for a smear test or a breast screening appointment, which is storing up a huge backlog of cases and people who need treatment, diagnostic tests, operations and care.

There is an elderly crisis, with the on-going human rights scandal in our care homes.

There is a social care crisis, which was there before Covid but has been exacerbated by it.

There is a staffing crisis, as health staff, council staff, service workers and others who have been on the front line for a year without any real break are exhausted and traumatised by the experience and need a rest.

There is a crisis of confidence, with people afraid and scared. They need reassurance and certainty to enable them to rebuild their confidence, businesses, relationships and families.

There is a coming housing crisis, because, when lockdown is lifted, there will be evictions,

homelessness and repossessions. Those issues will return unless there is direct and huge intervention.

There is an emotional crisis, especially for those who have lost a loved one. People have been unable to give their loved ones a dignified and fitting funeral. How will they ever get rid of the haunting image of going to a funeral with only a handful of mourners present? Those people have not been able to mourn properly. They have not been able to get together to share stories and memories, visit graves, scatter ashes and do all the things that people naturally do when a loved one dies.

I have only scratched the surface of the million-and-one crises that are out there in our society. Ministers should put themselves in the place of a young single mum trying to cope, or in the shoes of an 80-year-old wife of a dementia sufferer who has not seen her husband for a year, or in the place of an NHS worker who has had to deal with the sick and dying while putting their own life at risk every day, and they should ask themselves whether their priority should be an independence referendum or whether it should be to rebuild the country socially, economically, physically, mentally and emotionally. People desperately need all the time, energy and money of the Government to go back into rebuilding. When that is addressed, let us move on to discussing our constitutional future.

16:51

**Richard Lyle (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP):** The Covid-19 pandemic, as our First Minister has said, is the overriding priority of the SNP Government, of its ministers and, in my view as a parliamentarian, of us all.

My heart goes out to those who have suffered a loss. None of what is said in the debate will detract from the mission of Government to continue to steer our country through this pandemic, deliver the vaccine to our population and communities across Scotland, and build a recovery that is fair and delivers for all. However, we must be clear that, when the pandemic subsides, it is the people of Scotland who must have the right to decide how best to rebuild our country. It is not for Boris Johnson or any Westminster Government that we do not elect to have the right to decide the kind of country that we should have as we recover from the pandemic; it is for Scotland's people to decide that.

Time and again, the people of Scotland are being ignored by Westminster Tories and the branch offices of the unionist parties in Scotland as they continue to support that position. Our overwhelming vote to remain in the EU is being ignored and here we are now, with a far harder

Brexit than could have been imagined when the EU referendum took place, damaging and disrupting this country's economy and society at the worst possible time.

The Scottish Government is doing everything that it can to mitigate the consequences of the UK Government's actions, but it cannot avert every negative outcome. It is a compounding problem, because we know that businesses are already struggling under the burden of Covid-19 and are now faced with the additional burden of Brexit. Indeed, the Tory Government is wilfully damaging people's jobs, businesses and the economy at the worst possible time, during a global pandemic and economic recession. With each and every day that goes by, more devastating details emerge of the long-term damage that this Tory hard Brexit will do to people's incomes and living standards and to the economy. Therefore, I say again that the people of Scotland—not Westminster, which we do not elect—will have the right to decide the kind of country that we will have as we recover from the pandemic.

I want to highlight something. I know that we have all heard, and will hear today, from the other parties that the focus should not be on independence and on how it can be used to recover from the pandemic, but that, instead, we should forget the whole idea. However, as I look upon the actions of other parties across the chamber, I must say that hypocrisy is on display, whether that is in the blue corner, the red corner or even the Willie Rennie corner. The SNP, as a party, has been talking about Scotland having the right to choose how to recover after the pandemic and, as a Government, has been tackling the pandemic. In contrast, in the middle of the pandemic, with little preparation, the Westminster Tory Government—and its unquestioning party in Scotland—is pushing through Brexit, Labour is demanding and voting for the Westminster Government to do so and the Lib Dems are meekly accepting it from the Tories. Their argument is not just hypocritical and one of double standards, it is downright irresponsible, and we are having none of it.

In the time that I have left, I will recognise and focus on the latter elements of the Tory motion, because it is right that it talks about Covid-19 vaccination progress.

I got my letter yesterday. I am over 70; I will be going for my vaccination and I encourage everyone else to do so. I thank the minister and all the Government ministers for the work that they have done and continue to do during the pandemic, not least on the Covid-19 vaccine programme. The roll-out of the Covid-19 vaccine is the biggest and undoubtedly most significant logistical operation in Scotland's post-war history.

Although it is a welcome milestone in the collective fight against the pandemic, and I am very grateful to all those who have worked hard to ensure that Scotland is ready to deliver those Covid-19 vaccinations, there should be no doubt as to the challenge. Science has given us hope, and we are making progress on our journey, which will eventually allow us to return to the lives that we want to lead.

However, to those on the Opposition benches, I say that this SNP Government and our vaccination programme will follow the independent advice that has been received from the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation, which recommends prioritising those with the greatest clinical need. We will continue to follow the science, as we have done through the pandemic, and progress is being made. Vaccine supplies permitting, this SNP Scottish Government hopes to have vaccinated all those on the JCVI priority list by the end of spring 2021, and progress is under way. The Scottish Government continues to ensure that the programme is rolled out as quickly and effectively as possible. That is what a responsible Government should do and that is exactly what is happening.

That is a far cry from the manufactured grievance and comparisons of England versus Scotland on the Covid-19 vaccination figures. The reality is that we are following the JCVI prioritisation and getting the vaccine quickly to the most vulnerable.

I will end by paying tribute to all those in the Government and across health and social care. They are the real people on the front line, caring for those with Covid, delivering the vaccines and providing the support. They are to be thanked and I want my final words in the debate to be for them. Thank you for what you have done, are doing and will continue to do to help us to keep safe and to bring normality a step closer.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** We move to the closing speeches. I call Anas Sarwar to speak for six minutes.

16:57

**Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab):** I remind the chamber that, last night, we got the devastating news that 100,000 of our fellow citizens have lost their lives in the Covid pandemic. That means that 100,000 families have been devastated by the Covid crisis, and lives and livelihoods are still at risk.

The public expects its Parliament and elected representatives to pull together in the heat of the crisis and fight against the virus. Lives and livelihoods are at risk and will still be at risk for many more months to come. The idea that any of

us are debating anything other than Covid-19 will seem ridiculous to the families who have been devastated by the crisis.

I send my heartfelt condolences to all the people who have lost a loved one in the crisis. We have all been touched in individual ways, but I offer a sincere and heartfelt condolence to everyone who has lost someone directly.

I also send a huge thank you to all our front-line NHS and care staff, the retail workers and those who are involved in food production and delivery, who are keeping our country going. We should be debating and discussing those people and their lives in this Parliament, not powers or petty party politics. People expect us to come to the Parliament and work together to challenge, scrutinise and respond to the crisis and that is what I want to focus the majority of my contribution on.

Our collective focus should be on virus suppression. The Government should be working on how to bring down the virus. There are three parts to the virus-suppression strategy. The first is about restrictions, the second is about testing and the third is about tracing. I will speak about the vaccine in a moment, but suppression is about restrictions, testing and tracing.

The First Minister and the Government announce the restrictions, but it is the people's responsibility to live by and implement them. The vast majority of our citizens have followed the restrictions through their role in trying to suppress the virus.

However, 11 months on, the testing and tracing systems—the two parts for which the Government is responsible—are simply not good enough. Willie Rennie said that only a fraction of our testing capacity is being used every day. Where is the mass testing programme that we were promised 11 months ago, so that we can hunt down and then suppress the virus? Why is our tracing system, which we need in order to isolate cases of the virus and reduce the spread, still failing?

We were promised that the last lockdown, as well as being about saving the NHS, saving lives and suppressing the virus, was about giving us time to build the testing and tracing systems so that we could avoid going into lockdown again. The Government patently failed in that aim. Those systems are still not good enough; they are still failing far too many people. For example, I know of home carers in Glasgow, who are still not being tested every week, being forced to go into Covid-positive homes in order to do their job. That all relates to virus suppression.

Virus elimination relates to the vaccine. We need a mass-mobilisation effort if we are to deliver the vaccination programme across the country.

That is how we will get out of the crisis. I welcome the Government's ambition to carry out 400,000 vaccinations a week but, if we are honest, we are nowhere near reaching that ambition. Carrying out 400,000 vaccinations a week will require a mass-mobilisation effort involving NHS staff, our armed forces, vaccination centres and volunteers. I am sorry, but I say to Emma Harper that it will also involve 24/7 vaccination. That does not mean that NHS staff will have to work 24/7—people work shifts—but it means that the NHS will have to work 24/7, so that we can vaccinate our way out of the crisis.

To people who think that talking about an independence referendum right now is the right way forward, I say that a referendum or independence is not a light switch moment. We cannot just say one day that we will have a referendum or independence and then the process is over. It would take energy and the capacity of ministers and civil servants. Would we not all wish that all that capacity was being used on our Covid recovery, on suppressing the virus and on getting people back to work? That is what our focus should be on.

I would much rather that all of us across the chamber—whether we are members of the SNP, the Tories, the Liberal Democrats, the Greens or the Labour Party—say that in the national interest, not the nationalist interest, we will collectively resolve to defeat the virus and to make the next Parliament a Covid-recovery Parliament that focuses on an economic recovery, a jobs recovery, a climate recovery, a communities recovery, an education recovery and an NHS recovery, so that we never again have to choose between treating a virus or treating cancer. That is what the Scottish people expect of this Parliament, and it is what they deserve from their parliamentarians.

17:04

**The Minister for Public Health, Sport and Wellbeing (Mairi Gougeon):** I am really glad to follow Anas Sarwar's speech, because I find it difficult to disagree with a lot of what he said. I agree with, and would get behind, many of the sentiments that he expressed.

I want to be clear from the outset that beating the virus is the Government's priority. Right now, there is absolutely nothing that is more important to me in my job, or to my colleagues across Government, than delivering the vaccination programme and ensuring that we do everything we can to improve people's health and tackle the issues that have arisen throughout the pandemic.

There is a lot to cover, because many points have been raised in the debate, but I will try to get

through as much as I can. To address the point of the Tory motion directly—in particular, its call for a vaccination task force—I will ask Conservative members the following questions. Exactly how much time and effort should the Government take away from delivering the vaccination programme to put towards finding the people to populate another group to get such a body up and running? Who should we pull away from the work that they are already doing in delivering the critical vaccination programme?

**Dean Lockhart:** Part of the answer might be to use the resource, time and effort that the Scottish Government is dedicating to the task force for independence. Perhaps the time and money that is dedicated to that task force could instead be diverted to a task force for the vaccine.

**Mairi Gougeon:** That intervention was complete nonsense, because all the resources—all the money and all the time—are going into tackling the virus, as I said at the start of my speech. Adding another layer of groups and meetings would do nothing but eat up crucial resource and focus. We already have something that is akin to a task force, although it is not a task force by name. We are in direct daily contact with boards, we have the Army and logistics experts involved, and we are in regular contact with all relevant bodies. Everybody is doing what they can to ensure that we get people vaccinated and that we roll out the programme as quickly as possible.

We started delivering the vaccine on 8 December. Yesterday, our management information report showed that 24,192 doses had been delivered, which brought the total number of people who had received their first dose of vaccine to 462,092.

**Dean Lockhart:** Will the minister give way on that point?

**Mairi Gougeon:** No—I have already taken an intervention from Dean Lockhart.

Thanks to the tireless work at national and local levels, the rate of vaccination is accelerating. I thank all our staff and the volunteers who have been involved in delivering the programme. That includes our very own colleague Emma Harper, who has joined the vaccination effort.

Health boards are now progressing plans to step up with larger vaccination centres. This week, mass vaccination centres will open in Dumfries and Galloway, Fife, the Western Isles and Forth Valley health boards, and NHS Lanarkshire and NHS Grampian are planning to use mass centres from this week onwards.

We are also looking at how to make best use of centres, including a trial of 24/7 vaccination to see whether round-the-clock availability of

appointments can accelerate delivery. We continue to deliver the vaccine in primary care settings—

**Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** Will the minister take an intervention?

**Mairi Gougeon:** I will not, at the moment. I really need to make some progress.

We continue to look at how we can support smooth supply to primary care settings, including GP surgeries.

That is why it has been so frustrating and disappointing to hear over the past few weeks, and again in the chamber today, the same highly misleading claims—that Scotland is failing to make use of its supply or that it is slow to deliver. That is just not the case. The First Minister and the cabinet secretary have responded to such claims time and again. Scotland's NHS is drawing down the supplies that it needs to vaccinate priority groups, according to the JCVI priority list. We have a plan for every single vaccination that has been allocated to us and we are still on track to meet our targets in the coming weeks.

**Willie Rennie:** Perhaps the minister can clear this matter up. How many vaccines do we actually have in storage?

**Mairi Gougeon:** I am glad that Willie Rennie asked that question. He, along with other members, likes to continually raise that point. We, in the Scottish Government, would absolutely love to publish the figures, which would show not only how much has been allocated to Scotland, but that the vast majority of that supply is either already in people's arms or has been drawn down by health boards and sent to GPs to vaccinate people in the coming days. We do not sit on supply. The UK Government has asked us not to publish that information; we made that agreement with it in good faith.

I see that Mr Rennie is shaking his head. If the UK Government is telling him the figures, it would be nice if it would allow us to publish them. We are looking at ways to make that information available publicly and transparently to all. We have stood by the agreement, but some are not willing to do the same. *[Interruption.]* I will not take an intervention, because I need to make progress.

Our focus is exactly where it needs to be: on dealing with the pandemic. Nonetheless, I cannot let lie unchallenged some of the points that have been raised in the debate. Donald Cameron talked about it being “unfathomable” and “unforgivable” that we discuss anything other than the pandemic, which is absolutely true, at this point. Brian Whittle said that we cannot, or should not, do anything but focus on the pandemic.

It is a shame, therefore, that the Tories did not care about the impact on businesses and our economy when they decided to plough on with leaving the EU right in the middle of the pandemic, while ignoring every single plea about business readiness and preparedness. We are now seeing, and are having to deal with, the fall-out from that, whether it is in relation to seed potatoes, the fishing industry or the businesses that are now simply giving up on trading because of the new procedures that have been thrust on them, and for which they had no time or warning to prepare—*[Interruption.]* I will not give way. I need to make progress.

The Tories can sair protest all they like. The fact is that I was at meetings with the Cabinet Secretary for the Rural Economy and Tourism, Fergus Ewing—literally, over years—outlining our significant concerns about the impact on industry in Scotland. We had pages of unanswered questions that we took to every meeting. None of them has been answered, to this day.

I will not stand here and be lectured by the Tories about what is reckless and damaging; rather, I will tell them what is reckless and damaging. It is a UK Government that ignores the pleas of industry and businesses and it is UK ministers who sign up to deals that they have not read, because they are too busy, but that affect those industries and businesses.

We also have a UK Government that ignores Scotland's migration needs to suit its own right-wing narrative, as was highlighted by Emma Harper. Ministers of that Government will not engage with their ministerial counterparts on the issues, but instead flat-out ignore every request to meet to discuss them.

That Government also actively seeks to undermine our equal partners at every turn. I gave evidence at the Health and Sport Committee yesterday about one of the proposed common frameworks. That is work that all the nations engaged in in good faith, seeing it as a positive way of working. That work has, however, been undermined by the biggest threat to devolution since the creation of this Parliament: the UK Internal Market Act. That legislation gives the UK Government the right to overrule devolved Governments and unilaterally to force us to accept products and standards that we do not want in Scotland.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Come to a close, please.

**Mairi Gougeon:** Scotland deserves more and better. That is why, as we look to rebuild our country, economy and NHS from the crisis, the people of Scotland should be free to choose that future. If there is a majority in the next session of



Parliament to pursue that path, that is exactly what will happen.

17:11

**Dean Lockhart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):**

I join my colleague Donald Cameron and other members in expressing condolences to every person and family devastated by the impact of the pandemic. I also extend our thanks to NHS and other front-line workers in Scotland for all that they do.

The political differences and constitutional views of the parties in the Scottish Parliament are well rehearsed. At a time of crisis and the worst public health emergency in a century, we must put constitutional arguments to one side and instead work together to fight the pandemic, vaccinate the vulnerable and rebuild our communities. That is what our motion calls for.

We want the SNP to establish a task force, not for independence but to roll out the vaccine as soon as possible. We also want the SNP to drop its plans for an unlawful and unwanted referendum. The SNP's plan for an unlawful, wildcat referendum is a road map to on-going constitutional conflict, rather than to the co-operation and unity that we desperately need for Scotland to recover from the pandemic.

Co-operation across the UK has delivered one million doses of the Covid vaccine to Scotland. We have a world-leading vaccination programme that has been researched, developed and funded by the UK Government, meaning that vulnerable people across Scotland have the chance to be vaccinated before those in almost any other country in the world.

However, as we have heard, the SNP is falling seriously behind on that vaccination programme. There are increasing concerns over the pace of the vaccine roll-out, some of which Donald Cameron highlighted in his opening speech. One million doses of the vaccine have been delivered to Scotland by the UK Government, but fewer than half of those have been used. The deadline to vaccinate the over-80s has been delayed, and the BMA Scotland GPs committee has highlighted the slow rate at which vaccines are being made available to GPs. Willie Rennie mentioned the convoluted and confused supply chain that the Scottish Government uses, which is no doubt a factor in those delays. Brian Whittle was right to say that the SNP is failing in its most important job as Scotland's Government: to protect the vulnerable from the pandemic.

Behind every delayed vaccine, there is a vulnerable person who might suffer the devastating consequences of the coronavirus as a result of the delays. Therein lies the disgrace of

the SNP's decision to prioritise plans for another divisive referendum at the height of the pandemic. Every pound, minute or person involved in planning another referendum is an invaluable resource that is diverted away from the pandemic, the vaccination programme and Scotland's recovery.

The SNP ministers who are now busy setting up an independence task force are the same ministers who repeatedly declined our calls for a public inquiry into care home deaths. At that time, Nicola Sturgeon said:

"We've got far too many things to do to keep the system going to keep people well."—[*Official Report*, 29 October 2020; c 9.]

There was no time for a public inquiry to learn the devastating lessons of the care home crisis, but now the SNP has found time to plan for another referendum. That tells us all that we need to know about the real priorities of the SNP Administration—an impression reinforced by Mike Russell's utterly dismal opening speech, which was just another rant on the constitution with not a single mention of how the SNP plans to speed up the vaccination programme.

It is not just SNP ministers who will be dedicating time to a divisive referendum, because the civil service will also be distracted from fighting the pandemic. In advice given to the Scottish Government, the permanent secretary, Leslie Evans, said that

"Preparing for ... the referendum ... will require focus and careful management",

and the civil service will

"identify where we see scope for de-prioritisation of activity".

There we have it: clear and unambiguous advice from the head of the civil service in Scotland that planning another referendum will result in Government business in other areas being deprioritised.

It does not have to be that way. Constitutional division is not inevitable; it is the SNP's deliberate political choice to pursue that division. That is why in our motion we call on the SNP to reverse its plans to create a task force for independence and instead create a task force for the vaccination programme, as I said to the minister. Every person and every pound diverted from the vaccination programme will put vulnerable people in danger, and such a task force should ensure that the vaccination is rolled out across Scotland as soon as possible.

Our motion also calls on everyone across Scotland to work together to help Scotland recover from the pandemic, which is what the public expect political parties and MSPs to do. That work

must include the SNP working constructively with the UK Government to fight the pandemic. Over the past 12 months, the UK Government has introduced a series of unprecedented measures to help Scotland tackle the pandemic.

In addition to the delivery of a million vaccines, the British Army has been deployed to assist in the roll-out of the vaccination programme, helping to set up 80 vaccination centres across Scotland—yet another example of what co-operation can achieve. The UK chancellor has delivered historic levels of spending in Scotland—close to £20 billion in total, including one of the world’s most generous and effective job-retention schemes, which has helped to save 1 million jobs and livelihoods across Scotland. The Scottish budget, which will be announced tomorrow, will be the highest-ever budget since devolution as a result of that additional UK spending.

Steve Barclay said in his letter to Kate Forbes that

“the overwhelming majority of Covid support to businesses and people ... is and will continue to be delivered through the UK Treasury. It is disappointing that ... your public comments ... fail to mention the depth of support that has been ... provided”

by the UK Treasury. That is indeed disappointing, but it is not surprising, because the SNP is not interested in working constructively with the UK Government; instead, as we have heard today, it is hell bent on pushing its agenda for breaking up the country.

**Mairi Gougeon:** Working constructively, as I outlined in my earlier remarks, is exactly what we engaged in on the common frameworks. Maybe Dean Lockhart would like to tell members why the UK Government then brought forward the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020, which sought to undermine that process completely and overrule the work and positive engagement that had been done.

**Dean Lockhart:** It is interesting that the minister talks about constructive engagement on the internal market process, because the cabinet secretary walked away from the negotiations 18 months ago. What is constructive about walking away from negotiations? That is typical of SNP members: if they do not get their own way, they walk away.

John Swinney said last week that independence is an essential condition if Scotland is to rebuild. That is fundamentally wrong—[*Interruption.*] Sorry—I will not take an intervention; I need to make progress.

The SNP already has all the powers necessary for Scotland to build back from the pandemic—powers across education, health, infrastructure, transport, social security, justice and economic

development. However, as Rachael Hamilton pointed out, the SNP wants to distract attention away from its abysmal track record across all those areas.

There are declining standards in education, which was meant to be the First Minister’s number 1 priority.

There is a legacy of incompetence and failure in transport and infrastructure, with the Queensferry crossing closing every time that there is a build-up of ice and two ferries on the Clyde running at more than £200 million over budget.

On the economy, the SNP has presided over the failure of Burntisland Fabrications and has failed to allocate hundreds of millions of pounds to thousands of small businesses across Scotland that are on the brink of closure, which will result in long-term scarring of the economy.

On Justice, we have seen the reputation of the Scottish justice system tarnished by malicious prosecutions undertaken by the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service and the SNP’s on-going obstruction of the Alex Salmond inquiry.

On health, there is a chronic mental health crisis. There was already a major crisis before Covid, but matters are getting worse by the day. Furthermore, Edinburgh’s Royal hospital for sick children is nine years behind schedule and still not open.

Those are the real priorities that the people of Scotland want their Government to focus on, not planning a divisive and unlawful wildcat referendum at the expense of the health and wellbeing of the people of Scotland.

I support the motion in Donald Cameron’s name.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** That concludes the Conservative Party debate on the Scottish Government’s Covid-19 response.

At this point, I ask members to bear in mind that they should not cross the well of the chamber while Parliament is in session. Thank you.

I suspend the meeting before we move to the next item of business, which is a Committee of the Whole Parliament.

17:21

*Meeting suspended.*

## Committee of the Whole Parliament

Standards (Sexual Harassment and Complaints Process) Bill.

*Meeting closed at 17:23.*

*[The Convener opened the meeting at 17:23]*

**The Convener (Ken Macintosh):** As I open this meeting, we are sitting as a Committee of the Whole Parliament to consider stage 2 proceedings of the Pre-release Access to Official Statistics (Scotland) Bill.

For the purposes of this meeting, my role is as convener, rather than as Presiding Officer.

### Pre-release Access to Official Statistics (Scotland) Bill: Stage 2

**The Convener (Ken Macintosh):** No amendments have been lodged, so the only requirement is to consider and dispose of the five sections of the bill and the long title.

I invite any members who have questions on the procedure to be followed to raise them now before we proceed. No one does—that is good.

*Sections 1 to 5 agreed to.*

*Long title agreed to.*

**The Convener:** That ends stage 2 consideration of the Pre-release Access to Official Statistics (Scotland) Bill.

### Scottish Parliamentary Standards (Sexual Harassment and Complaints Process) Bill: Stage 2

17:23

**The Convener (Ken Macintosh):** We are again sitting as a Committee of the Whole Parliament for the next item of business, which is stage 2 consideration of the Scottish Parliamentary Standards (Sexual Harassment and Complaints Process) Bill.

No amendments have been lodged; the only requirement is to consider and dispose of the five sections of the bill and the long title.

Again, I invite any members who have questions about the procedure to raise them now before we begin. No one does—that is good.

*Sections 1 to 5 agreed to.*

*Long title agreed to.*

**The Convener:** That ends stage 2 consideration of the Scottish Parliamentary

17:24

*On resuming—*

## Meeting of the Parliament

### Business Motions

**The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh):** The next item of business is consideration of business motion S5M-23969, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme.

*Motion moved,*

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

Tuesday 2 February 2021

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

*followed by* Parliamentary Bureau Motions*followed by* Topical Questions*followed by* Ministerial Statement: COVID-19*followed by* Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee Debate: Inquiry into Construction and Procurement of Ferry Vessels in Scotland*followed by* Stage 3 Proceedings: Scottish Parliament (Assistance for Political Parties) Bill*followed by* Committee Announcements*followed by* Business Motions*followed by* Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.05 pm Decision Time

Wednesday 3 February 2021

12.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

12.30 pm First Minister's Questions

2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.30 pm Ministerial Statement: Brexit Update

*followed by* Scottish Green Party Business*followed by* Business Motions*followed by* Parliamentary Bureau Motions*followed by* Approval of SSIs (if required)

5.15 pm Decision Time

Thursday 4 February 2021 (Virtual)

1.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

1.00 pm Portfolio Questions: Health and Sport; Communities and Local Government; Social Security and Older People

*followed by* Ministerial statement: Infrastructure Investment Plan and Capital Spending Review 2021-22 to 2025-26*followed by* Stage 1 Debate: European Charter of Local Self-Government (Incorporation) (Scotland) Bill*followed by* Business Motions*followed by* Parliamentary Bureau Motions

4.15 pm Decision Time

*followed by* Members' Business*followed by* Members' Business

Tuesday 9 February 2021

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

*followed by* Parliamentary Bureau Motions*followed by* Topical Questions*followed by* Ministerial Statement: COVID-19*followed by* Scottish Government Business*followed by* Business Motions*followed by* Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

Wednesday 10 February 2021

12.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

12.30 pm First Minister's Questions

2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.30 pm Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party Business

*followed by* Business Motions*followed by* Parliamentary Bureau Motions*followed by* Approval of SSIs (if required)

4.30 pm Decision Time

Thursday 11 February 2021 (Virtual)

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Question Time: Finance; Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform; Rural Economy and Tourism

*followed by* Scottish Government Business

4.45 pm Decision Time

*followed by* Members' Business*followed by* Members' Business

(b) that, for the purposes of Portfolio Questions in the week beginning 1 February 2021, in rule 13.7.3, after the word "except" the words "to the extent to which the Presiding Officer considers that the questions are on the same or similar subject matter or" are inserted.—[*Graeme Dey*]

*Motion agreed to.*

**The Presiding Officer:** The next item of business is consideration of business motions S5M-23970, on a stage 1 timetable for a bill, S5M-23971, on a stage 2 timetable for a bill, and S5M-23974, on referral of a Scottish statutory

instrument. I call Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move the motions.

*Motions moved,*

That the Parliament agrees that consideration of the European Charter of Local Self-Government (Incorporation) (Scotland) Bill at stage 1 be completed by 12 February 2021.

That the Parliament agrees that consideration of the Redress for Survivors (Historical Child Abuse in Care) (Scotland) Bill at stage 2 be completed by 26 February 2021.

That the Parliament agrees that the Single Use Carrier Bags Charge (Coronavirus) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2021 [draft] be considered by the Parliament.—[*Graeme Dey*]

*Motions agreed to.*

## Parliamentary Bureau Motions

17:24

**The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh):** The next item of business is consideration of five Parliamentary Bureau motions. I call Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move motions S5M-23973, S5M-23975 and S5M-23976 on approval of Scottish statutory instruments, motion S5M-23977 on committee meeting times, and motion S5M-23978 on designation of a lead committee.

*Motions moved,*

That the Parliament agrees that the Criminal Legal Aid and Advice and Assistance (Counter-Terrorism and Border Security) (Scotland) Regulations 2021 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Restitution Fund (Scotland) Order 2021 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Victims and Witnesses (Scotland) Act 2014 (Supplementary Provisions) Order 2021 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that, under Rule 12.3.3B of Standing Orders, the Committee on the Scottish Government Handling of Harassment Complaints can meet, if necessary, at the same time as a meeting of the Parliament on Tuesday 2 February 2021 and Tuesday 9 February 2021 from approximately 3.30pm to Decision Time.

That the Parliament agrees that the Justice Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the legislative consent memorandum in relation to the Financial Services Bill (UK Legislation).—[*Graeme Dey*]

**The Presiding Officer:** The questions on those motions will be put at decision time.

The next item of business is consideration of motion S5M-23988, on another Scottish statutory instrument.

*Motion moved,*

That the Parliament agrees that the Single Use Carrier Bags Charge (Coronavirus) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2021 [draft] be approved.—[*Ben Macpherson*]

## Decision Time

17:25

**The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh):** Before I put the first question, I remind members that, if the amendment in the name of Michael Russell is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Monica Lennon will fall.

The first question is, that amendment S5M-23958.3, in the name of Michael Russell, which seeks to amend motion S5M-23958, in the name of Donald Cameron, on prioritising Covid-19 vaccination and economic recovery, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

**Members:** No.

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

I suspend the meeting to allow members to access the voting app.

17:26

*Meeting suspended.*

17:31

*On resuming—*

**The Presiding Officer:** We will go straight to the vote. I remind members that we are voting on amendment S5M-23958.3, in the name of Michael Russell, which seeks to amend motion S5M-23958, in the name of Donald Cameron, on prioritising Covid-19 vaccination and economic recovery. This is a one-minute division.

The vote is now closed. If members have any issues, please let me know by raising a point of order.

**The Minister for Europe and International Development (Jenny Gilruth):** On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I was not able to vote, but I would have voted yes.

**The Presiding Officer:** Thank you very much, Ms Gilruth. We will add your name to the register.

**Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab):** On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I would have voted no. I was not able to type in the PIN today, for the first time.

**The Presiding Officer:** Thank you, Ms Beamish. I note that you would have voted no. That will be added to the register as well.

A number of members online are asking for confirmation that their votes were registered. We are just checking that.

## For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)  
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)  
 Allan, Dr 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)  
 Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)  
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)  
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)  
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)  
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)  
 Denham, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)  
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)  
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)  
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)  
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)  
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)  
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)  
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Green)  
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)  
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)  
 Freeman, Jeane (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (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)  
 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)  
 Lyle, Richard (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)  
 MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)  
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)  
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)  
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)  
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)  
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)  
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)  
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)  
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)  
 McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)  
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)  
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)  
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)  
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)  
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)  
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)  
 Ross, Gail (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)  
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)  
 Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)  
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)  
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)  
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)  
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)  
 Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)  
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)  
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)  
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)  
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)  
 Wightman, Andy (Lothian) (Ind)  
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

**Against**

Baillie, Jackie (Dumarton) (Lab)  
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)  
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)  
 Ballantyne, Michelle (South Scotland) (Reform)  
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 Bowman, Bill (North East Scotland) (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)  
 Chapman, Peter (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)  
 Corry, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)  
 Davidson, Ruth (Edinburgh Central) (Con)  
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)  
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Golden, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)  
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)  
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)  
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)  
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)  
 Harris, Alison (Central Scotland) (Con)  
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)  
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Kelly, James (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 Lindhurst, Gordon (Lothian) (Con)  
 Lockhart, Dean (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Macdonald, Lewis (North East Scotland) (Lab)  
 Mason, Tom (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)  
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)  
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)  
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)  
 Rumbles, Mike (North East Scotland) (LD)  
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)  
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)  
 Smith, Elaine (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)  
 Tomkins, Adam (Glasgow) (Con)  
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)  
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)  
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

**The Presiding Officer:** The result of the division on amendment S5M-23958.3, in the name of Michael Russell, which seeks to amend motion S5M-23958, in the name of Donald Cameron, on prioritising Covid-19 vaccination and economic recovery, is: For 65, Against 56, Abstentions 0.

*Amendment agreed to.*

**The Presiding Officer:** The amendment in the name of Monica Lennon is therefore pre-empted.

The next question is, that motion S5M-23958, in the name of Donald Cameron, on prioritising Covid vaccination and economic recovery, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

**Members:** No.

**The Presiding Officer:** There will be a division. This will be a one-minute division.

The vote is now closed. Please let me know if you believe that your vote was not registered or counted.

**Claudia Beamish:** On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I still could not type in the PIN. I would have voted no.

**The Presiding Officer:** Thank you, Ms Beamish. Your vote will be recorded and added to the register.

**For**

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)  
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)  
 Allan, Dr 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)  
 Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)  
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)  
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)  
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)  
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)  
 Denham, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)  
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)  
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)  
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)  
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)  
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)  
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)  
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Green)  
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)  
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)  
 Freeman, Jeane (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (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)  
 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)  
 Lyle, Richard (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)  
 MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)  
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)  
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)  
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)  
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)  
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)  
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)  
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)  
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)  
 McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)

McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)  
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)  
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)  
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)  
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)  
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)  
 Ross, Gail (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)  
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)  
 Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)  
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)  
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)  
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)  
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)  
 Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)  
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)  
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)  
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)  
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)  
 Wightman, Andy (Lothian) (Ind)  
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

### Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)  
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)  
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)  
 Ballantyne, Michelle (South Scotland) (Reform)  
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 Bowman, Bill (North East Scotland) (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)  
 Chapman, Peter (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)  
 Corry, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)  
 Davidson, Ruth (Edinburgh Central) (Con)  
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)  
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Golden, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)  
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)  
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)  
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)  
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)  
 Harris, Alison (Central Scotland) (Con)  
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)  
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Kelly, James (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 Lindhurst, Gordon (Lothian) (Con)  
 Lockhart, Dean (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Macdonald, Lewis (North East Scotland) (Lab)  
 Mason, Tom (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)  
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)  
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)  
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)  
 Rumbles, Mike (North East Scotland) (LD)  
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)  
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)

Smith, Elaine (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)  
 Tomkins, Adam (Glasgow) (Con)  
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)  
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)  
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

**The Convener:** The result of the division on motion S5M-23958, in the name of Donald Cameron, on prioritising Covid vaccination and economic recovery, as amended, is: For 65, Against 56, Abstentions 0.

### *Motion, as amended, agreed to,*

That the Parliament believes that the people of Scotland have the right to choose their own future and to escape the disastrous hard Brexit that Boris Johnson and the UK Conservative Administration are imposing on them; notes that the Scottish Government paused work on independence to focus on the pandemic in contrast to the UK Government, which recklessly pursued Brexit and ended the transition period at the worst possible time; supports the Scottish Government's decision to follow the JCVI priority list for the first phase of the vaccination programme, which has been drawn up by independent experts to provide the greatest possible protection against preventable mortality from COVID-19; agrees that it is for the people of Scotland to decide what sort of country and economy should be built following the pandemic, and that therefore, should there be a majority in the next Parliament for an independence referendum after the pandemic, there can be no justification whatsoever to deny people in Scotland their democratic rights.

**The Presiding Officer:** The next question is, that motions S5M-23973 and S5M-23975 to S5M-23978, all in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, be agreed to.

### *Motions agreed to,*

That the Parliament agrees that the Criminal Legal Aid and Advice and Assistance (Counter-Terrorism and Border Security) (Scotland) Regulations 2021 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Restitution Fund (Scotland) Order 2021 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Victims and Witnesses (Scotland) Act 2014 (Supplementary Provisions) Order 2021 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that, under Rule 12.3.3B of Standing Orders, the Committee on the Scottish Government Handling of Harassment Complaints can meet, if necessary, at the same time as a meeting of the Parliament on Tuesday 2 February 2021 and Tuesday 9 February 2021 from approximately 3.30pm to Decision Time.

That the Parliament agrees that the Justice Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the legislative consent memorandum in relation to the Financial Services Bill (UK Legislation).



**The Presiding Officer:** The next question is, that motion S5M-23988, in the name of Roseanna Cunningham, on approval of a Scottish statutory instrument, be agreed to.

*Motion agreed to,*

That the Parliament agrees that the Single Use Carrier Bags Charge (Coronavirus) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2021 [draft] be approved.

**The Presiding Officer:** The final question is the one that we deferred from last Thursday. The question is, that motion S5M-23916, in the name of Emma Harper, on the Dogs (Protection of Livestock) (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill at stage 1, be agreed to.

*Motion agreed to,*

That the Parliament agrees to the general principles of the Dogs (Protection of Livestock) (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill.

*Meeting closed at 17:39.*



This is the final edition of the *Official Report* for this meeting. It is part of the Scottish Parliament *Official Report* archive and has been sent for legal deposit.

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