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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 3 June 2021

[The Presiding Officer opened the meeting at 12:00]

First Minister's Question Time

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Good afternoon. I remind members that social distancing measures are in place in the chamber and across the Holyrood campus. I ask that members take care to observe those measures, including when entering and exiting the chamber. Please use the aisles and walkways to access your seat and when moving around the chamber.

Scottish Qualifications Authority

1. Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Does the First Minister have full confidence in the Scottish Qualifications Authority?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Yes, I do. On this year's qualifications, it is important that I and the Government recognise, first of all, that this is a really anxious and difficult time for pupils—and, indeed, their parents—across the country. It is really important that we and the SQA continue to listen. We are doing our utmost to continue to deliver fair grades in what are very difficult circumstances.

If there are further questions on the issue today, I will try to answer them all as clearly as possible, because scrutiny and understanding are important. However, I will try to stay away from partisan politics, not least because many of the arrangements that we are putting in place are very similar to those that are being put in place in England and in Wales under Governments of different parties. That reflects the fact that this is a difficult situation.

In setting that important context as we go—as I am sure that we will—into the detail, I can perhaps do no better than quote Jim Thewliss, the general secretary of School Leaders Scotland, who said:

"The system that replaced the exams was never going to be perfect but all the way along no one has come up with a better way of doing it than the alternative certification model."

This is a difficult set of circumstances, but the Government continues to do all that we can to support pupils in these difficult times. That approach will very much continue.

Douglas Ross: The First Minister said that she has full confidence in the Scottish Qualifications Authority. Her answer will not be shared by the tens of thousands of pupils and parents across

Scotland who were so badly let down by the SQA and its exam grade disaster last year. It will also not be shared by the thousands more who are facing what looks like another year of grades chaos and confusion.

Last night, Leon Cameron of Glasgow Youth Council said:

"We are extremely angry at the people with authority—the Scottish Government, the SQA—that they keep saying that everything is ok, when it is not. They are clearly in denial over this issue."

He continued:

"We have been put through hell."

The First Minister said that she would answer all questions on the issue clearly. Does she agree with Leon Cameron that her Government and the SQA are in denial?

The First Minister: I do not agree with that. It is my duty to persuade young people and their parents across the country that although no Government can take away all the impacts on our young people of a global pandemic, this Government—working with teachers, local authorities, representatives of pupils and parents and, of course, the SQA—is doing everything that we can, in a highly challenging set of circumstances, to deliver fairness for pupils. That work will continue.

The alternative certification model was developed by the national qualifications group, which brought together teacher representatives, parents and pupils. We are often asked, rightly, to listen to teachers. The Educational Institute of Scotland said that the model gives pupils

"the best opportunity to demonstrate what they have learned."

I and the Government will continue to listen to young people. That is why, for example, the SQA has put in place an appeals process that gives every young person a direct right of appeal, free of charge.

There have been some very difficult decisions to take—for example, on whether to have a no-detriment appeal system or a symmetrical appeal system. The SQA has proposed a symmetrical system, which is the same as in England and Wales.

We are listening carefully to the concern that has been raised about the specific grounds of appeal and the fact that there is no ground for appeal that takes account of exceptional personal circumstances. The reason for that is that we do not think that a young person who has suffered exceptional circumstances should have to rely on an appeal. That is why an exceptional circumstances arrangement has been built into the model. Therefore, if somebody—because of, for

example, a bereavement—cannot put forward assessment by the date in June, they will have a window of time until September to do so.

We continue to work to take account of the concerns and to put in place the best possible arrangements in a highly imperfect set of circumstances. I take very seriously the responsibility that we have as a Government to listen, on an on-going basis, to young people. For example, this year, one of the key changes from last year's unacceptable situation is that grades will be based on teacher judgment, informed by the work of pupils, not on algorithms, statistical models or historical performance of schools. Important changes have been made, and we continue to work hard with everyone in the education system to make sure that concerns are properly addressed.

Douglas Ross: So the First Minister will not agree with young people. Instead, she will—in her words—try to explain to them and “persuade” them that they are wrong. That is absolutely appalling from a First Minister who is unwilling to listen to criticisms of her Government and its handling of this fiasco from the young people who have been most affected.

Last summer, it took a week before the Scottish National Party finally admitted that its grading system was broken and made a U-turn. This year's children should not have to go through the same issues all over again. Swinney is out, Somerville is in, but it is the same old shambles. The SNP Government needs to learn from its mistakes but, instead, it is determined just to repeat them.

On the threat of downgrading, the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland has said that it is

“an unnecessary and disempowering barrier to young people”.

That concern will be echoed in homes and classrooms right across Scotland. Is the First Minister seriously going to defend an appeal system that risks pupils receiving lower grades and which demands that they gamble on their future?

The First Minister: What is appalling is for Douglas Ross to mischaracterise what I have said. I did not say that the Government's job was to persuade young people that they were wrong; I said that it is the Government's job to engage with young people and—yes—to seek to persuade them that the arrangements that are in place are the right ones, but to listen as we go.

For example, it is because we have listened to young people that a fundamentally different system is in place this year—one that is based not

on algorithms but on teacher judgment, informed by the attainment of young people and the work that they have done.

We are often challenged to listen more to teachers. According to the EIS,

“Although some schools have made use of SQA assessment instruments, teachers are able to draw on whatever evidence they regard as valid in determining grades ... unlike ... exams, the evidence does not need to be produced in a one-off event”.

That is a critical point, as is the fact that the judgment of teachers cannot be challenged by the SQA.

We have also given young people the direct right of appeal, free of any cost, which was also called for.

I have three points to make on the important issue of whether to have a no-detriment system, in which appeals can only be upgraded, not downgraded, or a symmetrical system. First, the symmetrical system is one that ensures that the attainment of pupils is central to the process, which is the fairest way of proceeding. That is not new—it is the approach that has been taken in past years. Douglas Ross says that it is indefensible, but exactly the same approach has been taken by the UK Government for the English system. That is another important point.

A point that is perhaps more important for pupils is the fact that past experience shows us that the downgrading of grades is exceptionally rare. In 2019, out of more than 11,000 appeals, only two resulted in downgrading. In 2018, when there were 13,000 appeals, seven resulted in downgrading. It is an exceptional occurrence. The approach ensures that we have a system that, from start to finish, is intended to focus on the actual attainment of pupils.

Of course, the appeals system should be used only in exceptional circumstances—not because we want to put pupils off using it, but because we want to get the grades right the first time. That is why the judgment of teachers at the centre of this is so important.

Douglas Ross: This year has been difficult for everyone, but especially for young people. What have this Government and the SQA done for them over the past 15 months? We have exams replaced by exams and an appeals process that is late and flawed. No lessons have been learned, and there is no understanding and no fairness. Pupils have been dismayed, and they have been punished for being ambitious. Teachers are scunnered and their concerns are being ignored. Parents are furious with this Government for not listening to them.

Will the First Minister do the right thing, concede that she has got this badly wrong and guarantee that no pupil who appeals will be downgraded? No matter how rare she says that is, it will be a risk for young people if they appeal. Once she does that and finally agrees that no pupil who appeals will be downgraded, will she start to fix the deeper problems in Scottish education, beginning by replacing the SQA?

The First Minister: On wider reform of education including potential reform of the SQA, I note that the Parliament will debate those issues this afternoon, and the education secretary will say more about all of that when that debate happens later.

We will continue to listen to young people, teachers and parents and continue to address concerns as far as we can. This is—I am afraid that this is inescapable—a highly imperfect situation because we are in the midst of a global pandemic that has made exams impossible, so we have to put in place an alternative. As Jim Thewliss, whom I quoted earlier, said, no alternative is going to be perfect, but nobody has suggested a better one than this.

I recognise that we have different education systems, but all the things that Douglas Ross says are fundamentally wrong here are actually, by and large, exactly the same arrangements that are being put in place in England and Wales under Governments of different parties. That reflects the fact that we are all trying to do our best for young people in very difficult circumstances.

We have learned lessons from last year. Teacher judgment has replaced last year's algorithm approach, which was fundamentally flawed. We have recognised that there must be a much more accessible appeals system, but also that at its heart must be the attainment of pupils.

This approach has not been easy for anybody, and particularly not for young people. Of all the impacts of the pandemic that I wish I could take away, the impact on our young people is very near the top, if not at the top, of the list. We are all doing the best that we can, and we will continue to engage with young people as we seek to do that.

Covid-19 (Government Response)

2. **Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab):** Last week, we heard damning evidence from Dominic Cummings about the United Kingdom Government's response to Covid-19. He painted a picture of chaos and confusion, poor preparation and almost criminal levels of negligence that led to avoidable deaths. He outlined a series of failures—a lack of personal protective equipment, insufficient testing, Covid-positive patients being sent into care homes, and inconsistent and

delayed decision making. At First Minister's questions last week, the First Minister was rightly critical of the chaos that Dominic Cummings described, but does she accept that many of the same decisions were made in Scotland by the First Minister and the Scottish Government?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I have always accepted that we made mistakes in the handling of the pandemic. I have never tried to shy away from that. I made my point last week not to point the finger at any politician but to make the general point that one of the lessons that all of us in decision-making positions should have learned over the past period—more than a year, now—is that taking quick decisions is really important. That applies to me just as much as it does to anyone else. We have sought to learn lessons as we go and as our understanding and knowledge about the virus have developed, and we have candidly said that we perhaps made mistakes in how we did things in the early part of the pandemic. I have been candid about that.

There will be, as is right and proper, a process of full and robust scrutiny of that, both in the interest of accountability, which is important, and in the interest of learning lessons for the future, because we need to make sure that the lessons of the pandemic are there for future generations—hopefully, none of us will have to deal with another pandemic—to use. All of these things are important and I have not and will not shy away from the responsibility that I bear for every aspect of the handling of the pandemic.

Anas Sarwar: I welcome the First Minister's response and I recognise what she says about the importance of making good decisions quickly.

Today, we are publishing a timeline comparison that shows that, at key moments and on the big decisions, the UK and Scottish Governments were in lockstep. It is important to stress that none of that was the fault of our hard-working national health service and care staff. What we are questioning is the Scottish Government's decision making.

Let us look at some of those specific decisions. In early March 2020, both Governments were talking about a herd immunity strategy. On 12 March, 47,000 fans attended a European football match in Glasgow; that same day, the Scottish Government said that stopping mass gatherings was not the best way to contain the virus—11 days later, they were made illegal by both Governments. Untested and Covid-positive patients were being sent into care homes. The UK Government announced routine testing on 15 April; the Scottish Government waited until 21 April. The result was one in 10 of our care home residents in Scotland losing their life to Covid—that was not a "protective ring". That was 3,774

deaths—a third of the total. Does the First Minister agree that those decisions were made in Scotland by the First Minister and the Scottish Government?

The First Minister: I am glad for Anas Sarwar that he has the time to do timelines. There is nothing that he has just told me that I do not know, and there is nothing that I have sought to shy away from. I lived through that period as the lead decision maker in the Scottish Government. I take responsibility for all the decisions and I have never tried to shy away from that. I will live with the consequences of those decisions for as long as I live, and those decisions will be subject to serious scrutiny. That is right and proper.

We sought, all along, to do the right thing, based on the knowledge and the understanding that we had. In the light of developing knowledge, if we could turn the clock back, we would do some of these things differently. In addition, as I have said all along, we will have made straightforward mistakes, and I will forever regret any mistakes that we made.

I do not know what point Anas Sarwar is seeking to prove. I have taken responsibility and will continue to take responsibility. Every single day of the pandemic, I have done my level best to get the decisions right.

If I could turn the clock back, would we go into lockdown earlier than we did? Yes, I think that we would. We moved on mass gatherings and we announced the position on schools slightly before the UK Government did. When we look at the different pandemic curves, we see that, although we went into lockdown on the same day as the rest of the UK, it was slightly ahead of the pandemic curve for Scotland.

If I could turn the clock back, there are many things that I would love to have the opportunity to do differently. Of course, the irony is that many of the same people who criticised me—perfectly legitimately—for not acting quickly enough or for not being cautious enough at an earlier stage often criticise me now for being too cautious and going too slowly in lifting lockdown restrictions. That is what comes with the responsibilities of this job. I am not complaining about that, but this is not an easy situation for anybody to be in. I will continue, as I have done from day 1, to take the best decisions that I can, and I will never shy away from the responsibility for that.

Anas Sarwar: I am not sure why the First Minister is critical of our development of a timeline. I would hope, given the scale of the civil service, that there would be a Scottish Government timeline of decision making, so that we can learn from and not repeat mistakes.

Large events matter. On the day that we had 47,000 fans in Glasgow, Ireland was announcing an end to large gatherings. Herd immunity matters, because New Zealand took a very different approach and had very different outcomes. A University of Edinburgh study has shown that, if Scotland had acted earlier, we could have prevented 2,000 Covid deaths. Those are important points that we should be bringing to the chamber and asking Scotland's Government to respond to.

I gave three examples of decisions that were made in Scotland, on strategy, mass gatherings and care homes. I could have given more, such as a failure to have adequate PPE supplies, a failure to adequately ramp up testing, a failure to introduce strict testing and quarantine at our airports, and ineffective contact tracing.

NHS and social care staff, and the Scottish people, deserve more than just rhetoric—they deserve answers. They deserve more than being told that the Government cares—they deserve answers. We cannot allow Scottish exceptionalism to stop us from learning critical lessons. It is always easier to focus on failures elsewhere.

The Presiding Officer: Question, please.

Anas Sarwar: We must learn from mistakes here, at home. We do not need to wait for the UK Government. Work can begin right now to establish a judge-led, Scotland-specific public inquiry into the decisions that were made in Scotland. Surely, after everything that she has just said in her answers, the First Minister agrees with that.

The First Minister: People can make up their own minds whether what they hear from me is an inability to face up to mistakes or Scottish exceptionalism. What people hear from me is a candid admission that, like many other Governments across the world, we have not got everything right, and they hear a willingness and a desire to face up to that and to learn from it.

I could paper the walls with timelines, but my focus now as First Minister is on delivering the vaccination programme to keep people safe in future and on ensuring that we take the right decisions, although we are criticised by many for being too cautious and too slow, to keep people safe because we could be at the start of a third wave of the virus. That is my responsibility as First Minister. Of course we have lessons to learn—I have never said otherwise. Perhaps Anas Sarwar is saying that, if he had been standing here back then, he would have got everything right. Who knows? Perhaps he would have done, but I suspect that, like everyone else, he would have grappled with those difficult decisions.

I have given a commitment to a judge-led public inquiry. That commitment stands. I want to see the inquiry up and running before the end of this year. The UK Government has announced plans for a public inquiry and has asked for four-nations discussion about its remit and about where there might be overlaps. I usually get encouraged by Labour members to take part in constructive four-nations discussions. We have agreed to do that. The commitment to a public inquiry is there and is firm and strong. I think that I was the first of the UK First Ministers to make that commitment.

I have led the country to the best of my ability—far from perfectly—through the pandemic. I, as much as anyone, want to ensure that we learn the right lessons. It is very easy when you are not the one taking the decisions and when you have the benefit of hindsight—if I was in opposition, I would no doubt do the same—to tell us what we should have done. When you are taking decisions in the moment, you have to act on the basis of the best information and advice that you have. That is what we have done. We will learn lessons. We will be judged. We have just been judged on our leadership of this so far in the election. We will be judged with full scrutiny, but my focus now is on continuing to lead the country as best I can through an on-going pandemic.

The Presiding Officer: I am very eager that we involve as many members as possible in First Minister's questions. I would be grateful for succinct questions and responses.

Green Recovery

3. Lorna Slater (Lothian) (Green): Today the First Minister will attend the United Kingdom recovery summit. I welcome the fact that she will ask for the furlough scheme to be extended. That is essential for Scottish workers, but much more needs to be done.

The Trades Union Congress this week published analysis of public spending on the green recovery and on job creation in G7 countries. Predictably, the UK is far behind, with Germany investing three times more per person and France four times more. Failure to invest in a green recovery would be a disaster for our planet and for our economy as businesses and workers will be held back by Tory austerity while our European neighbours race ahead.

Yesterday, the Parliament voted in favour of my call for a major increase in public investment in Scotland and across the UK to secure a green economic recovery. Will the First Minister assure us that she will make that demand at the recovery summit today?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I will. In our use of the Scottish Government's resources,

we are maximising our investment in the actions that are needed to support a green recovery and to transition to net zero. In the previous session of Parliament, we established the Scottish National Investment Bank, which takes that transition as its primary mission. We should continue to be challenged to do everything that we can with the powers, responsibilities and resources that we have.

It is not my choice, but there is no doubt that much of what we can do is determined by the spending decisions of the UK Government. This afternoon, as well as asking for public health to be kept to the fore and for furlough to be extended for as long as necessary, I will also ask for commitments on public spending so that we have certainty and clarity about future public spending and clarity that we will not see austerity cuts imposed by the UK Government. That is important for green recovery, and for many other reasons.

Lorna Slater: I share the doubt that the UK Government will deliver, but this issue could not be more important. I hope that the First Minister will keep demanding the investment that we need, working in partnership with the other devolved countries, just as the Scottish Government did to secure an extension to the furlough last year.

However, we can still do more here in Scotland, with the powers that we have, to secure a green recovery. Look at the industry that I come from, as noted in my entry in the register of members' interests. Scotland could be a world leader in marine renewable energy, but the industry was undermined by the Tory Government when it scrapped essential tariff support in 2015. The Scottish Government has long committed to establishing a public energy company, which could provide tidal energy with the demand that it needs—

The Presiding Officer: Question, please.

Lorna Slater: Tidal energy technology was developed in Scotland. We are the world experts in it but, if we do not act now, we will lose that industry to other countries. When will the First Minister deliver a public energy company?

The First Minister: There are a range of different ways in which we will support the vast renewable energy potential that Scotland has, and which Lorna Slater is absolutely right to point out. Indeed, I hope that those issues will feature in the discussions that she and I will have about the co-operation between our parties over the course of this parliamentary session.

Scotland is a world leader in renewable energy. However, we need to do much more in terms of generating energy and ensuring that we properly seize the economic benefits that come from that. Candidly speaking, we have not done well enough

in that area. There is a lot of work to be done here, and we are determined to get on with it as we lead up to the 26th United Nations climate change conference of the parties—COP26—and then move beyond that. I very much look forward to working with the Greens—and, indeed, with others across the chamber—to ensure that Scotland continues to lead the world in renewable energy and in the wider transition to net zero.

European Union Settlement Scheme

4. Siobhian Brown (Ayr) (SNP): I congratulate you on your new role, Presiding Officer.

To ask the First Minister what engagement the Scottish Government has had with the United Kingdom Government regarding the extension of the deadline for application to the EU settlement scheme. (S6F-00048)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I take this opportunity to welcome Siobhian Brown to the chamber and congratulate her on her first question.

We have been very consistent in calling for the European Union settlement scheme to be replaced by a declaratory system, which would alleviate the risks of EU citizens becoming unlawfully resident here. In my view, EU citizens simply should not have to apply to retain their rights.

Due to the pandemic, many people have struggled to obtain identity documents or retrieve required evidence. We know that many have yet to apply to the scheme, and there is also a backlog in processing applications.

We will continue to do all that we can to support EU citizens. The Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development has already raised the issue with the UK Government on more than one occasion. However, let me put this simply: the UK Government has, I hope, learned the lessons of the Windrush scandal, and it must make sure that it does everything that it can to avoid repeating that scandal. Part of that must involve extending the 30 June deadline.

Siobhian Brown: There are grave concerns that some EU citizens, such as the elderly, the infirm and children in care and foster homes, will fail to apply for settled status by the deadline of 30 June, either because they are incapable of doing so or because their guardians are unaware of the deadline.

How has the Scottish Government, together with local authorities, worked with local care homes and children's care services to prevent any miscarriages of natural justice over the issue, especially given the life-changing consequences that missing the deadline could have?

The First Minister: That is an important question, and the issue has the potential to impact on the lives of many people across the country. The Government has worked very closely with local authorities and care providers to increase awareness of the settlement scheme. That has included funding a caseworker at the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to assist vulnerable people who have contacted local authorities. There has been a particular focus on identifying and supporting looked-after children. In addition, Citizens Advice Scotland has written to care homes to alert them to the upcoming deadline. The stay in Scotland marketing campaign has also restarted. As well as using social media, it uses radio and local press to reach people who might not be online.

We will provide support and information, but it is vital that we also continue to press the UK Government to make the important changes to the scheme that are needed to safeguard the rights of EU citizens here.

Schools (Maximum Class Sizes)

5. Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): To ask the First Minister what steps the Scottish Government is taking to ensure there are sufficient resources in place to prevent schools exceeding its maximum class size limits during the next academic year, in light of reports that a number of schools are currently exceeding these limits. (S6F-00058)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): We are determined to do everything that we can to ensure that schools have the resources that they need, but it is important first to note that the law is clear. Other than in very specific circumstances, class sizes are mandatory and must be adhered to.

On resources, last year, teacher numbers increased for the fifth year in a row, and there are now more teachers than there have been at any time since 2008. The ratio of pupils to teachers is at its lowest since 2010.

Since the start of the pandemic, we have provided more than £200 million to councils to support the recruitment of 1,400 additional teachers and more than 200 support staff. During the first 100 days of the current parliamentary session, we will fund councils to increase teacher numbers by a further 1,000. That is part of our commitment to 3,500 additional teachers and classroom assistants being brought in during the parliamentary session, and it is over and above those who have been recruited during the pandemic so far.

Oliver Mundell: I thank the First Minister for her answer, but I want to talk about reality, not ratios. While the First Minister seeks to manipulate the

figures by including those whose main job is to support classroom teachers, schools across the country are being left with no choice but to cram extra young people into classrooms, which goes against everything that the Scottish National Party used to promise. How does the First Minister explain reports that suggest that numerous schools have more than 30 primary school children in a class at a time while the attainment gap widens?

With qualified teachers across Scotland looking for teaching posts, why will the First Minister not move faster in reversing teaching cuts and guarantee that this will be the final year in which we see our young people being so badly let down?

The First Minister: Teacher numbers have increased for five years in a row, and we are committed to continuing to increase teacher numbers.

I was talking about teachers and classroom assistants in terms of the number that we are recruiting, but my point about class sizes is clear: class sizes are mandatory. Primary 1 to primary 3 class sizes are set in statute, and class sizes for primary 4 to primary 7, including composite classes, are part of the terms and conditions of the Scottish Negotiating Committee for Teachers. Councils therefore have a duty—a legal duty, in many cases—to make sure that those limits are adhered to.

We have often worked hard, in past years, to deliver that in the face of the austerity cuts that have been imposed on the Government by the Conservatives at Westminster. We will continue to work hard to make sure that there are more teachers in our schools and that we support councils to deliver the education that children and their parents want and deserve.

Forced Adoption Apology

6. Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): To ask the First Minister whether the Scottish Government will consider issuing a formal apology to the historical victims of forced adoption. (S6F-00067)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Yes, we will consider that. Like everybody else, I feel deep sadness that, in the past, women were forced to give their children up for adoption because of prevailing moral and social attitudes. Major shifts have occurred in adoption policy and practice, ensuring that the focus is now placed on providing secure and permanent relationships for some of our most undersupported children.

We are engaging with campaigners who are calling for an apology, so that we can better understand their experiences and consider the

issue more fully. I give my commitment that we will continue to do that.

In recent years, we have come a long way in improving outcomes for looked-after children and young people, but I know that there is still much more to do. That is why I and the Government have committed to implementing the findings of the promise to ensure that all looked-after children will grow up safe, happy and loved.

Neil Bibby: My constituent Marion McMillan was one of 60,000 Scottish mothers who were compelled to give up a baby for adoption simply because they were unmarried. What they went through was horrific, and many of them have experienced a lifetime of grief and pain. Marion has worked with victims of forced adoption from around the world, has reunited mothers with children and has given evidence that helped to secure the world's first Government apology for forced adoption, in Australia in 2013. However, there has never been a formal apology for the injustice of forced adoption here, in Scotland and the UK.

Marion is now in her 70s and is terminally ill. Her dying wish is that the victims in Scotland receive the apology that they deserve and that it happen soon. I therefore urge the First Minister to take swift action to confront this shameful chapter in Scotland's history and, as soon as possible, deliver our formal statement to Parliament, issuing a Government apology for forced adoptions on behalf of our entire nation.

The First Minister: Yes, I give that commitment. I take the matter really seriously. I hope that Neil Bibby will accept—I am sure that he will—that it is important, when we do something like this, that we get it right and listen to the people who are, understandably, calling for an apology. I, too, have read about Marion McMillan's experience, and it is absolutely heartbreaking. It is not isolated and unique—that happened to too many women back in days when attitudes were very different from those that prevail today. I do not know all the detail, but I know that in the Republic of Ireland, for example, there was a concern that work around the issue did not deliver what campaigners had been calling for. Therefore, it is really important that we understand what an apology would seek to cover and how it can be framed in a way that gives the campaigners the closure—if that is an appropriate word—that they are looking for. I am very committed to considering the matter properly and fully and to doing so quickly but in a way that delivers what the campaigners feel is important to them.

Police Officers (Burn-out)

7. Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's response is to a recent survey stating that 29 per cent of police officers are experiencing moderate burn-out, and a further 16 per cent are enduring high levels. (S6F-00059)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I appreciate—as, I am sure, we all do—the hard work and dedication of our police officers and police support staff at all times, but especially throughout the pandemic. I support the initiatives that are being undertaken by the chief constable to ensure that officers and staff are physically and mentally healthy. That includes, for example, the introduction of wellbeing champions and a wellbeing hub to raise awareness of the support that is available. In addition, Police Scotland was one of the first police services in the United Kingdom to implement mental health and suicide intervention training for all officers. Officers and staff are doing an excellent job in difficult circumstances, and I welcome the fact that Police Scotland provides its workforce with a range of services to help them to look after their mental and physical health.

Liam McArthur: When we highlighted devastating research 18 months ago, ministers told us that they were “very satisfied” with the mental health support that was available for officers. Now, expert researchers have again concluded that many front-line officers are suffering from chronic stress associated with their circumstances at work. Police Scotland co-sponsored that long-term research, but I have learned that support was withdrawn because the research programme was keen to understand the impact of Covid on the workforce. Police Scotland said that it was “too soon” and withdrew support. Does the First Minister accept that Scotland's police officers have been badly let down and that they do not have the mental health support that they obviously need?

The First Minister: The chief constable and the Government have a duty to listen and respond, and we take that duty very seriously. Liam McArthur talks about 18 months ago. That, of course, predates Covid, which has exacerbated the stress, anxiety and trauma of many of our public service workers, including the police and their support staff. A range of support services are in place, and I mentioned some of them in my initial answer. It is really important that the chief constable—this is a matter for the chief constable, first and foremost—continues to listen to the experiences of the police service and delivers that support to make sure that, in the very challenging work that they do, our police officers have support to keep themselves mentally and physically

healthy. That work will continue and I fully support the efforts that the chief constable is undertaking.

The Presiding Officer: We move to supplementary questions.

Ferry Services (Stornoway to Ullapool)

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Last weekend saw major disruption to haulage—*[Inaudible.]*—technical issue with MV Hebridean Isles led to a backlog of lorries, many of which contained perishable goods and had to be left behind. Although the return of MV Loch Seaforth to the route should help, the incident raises wider concerns about what will happen when the next CalMac Ferries vessel either goes into dry dock or suffers a similar breakdown to the one that has seen MV Loch Seaforth out of action for seven weeks. Given all that, will the Scottish Government consider the charter of a freight vessel for the Stornoway to Ullapool route?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): First, I absolutely recognise and understand communities' frustration at that and other recent disruption and the impact that it has had. In relation to the issue with the MV Hebridean Isles, I understand that all goods were shipped early on Saturday morning on the MV Isle of Lewis. I can also update the chamber that the MV Loch Seaforth returned to service on 31 May and that, as of today, all vessels are back in position. The Minister for Transport has met the constituency member, other MSPs and other stakeholders to hear concerns and he has agreed to continue regular dialogue. We are actively exploring opportunities for chartering additional tonnage. In addition, we have confirmed new investment in ports and vessels to support and improve Scotland's ferry services over the next five years as part of our infrastructure investment plan.

Police Officers (Body-worn Cameras)

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): This week, Chief Superintendent Matt Richards said that a marked increase in the use of body-worn cameras by police officers will result in a “spike in guilty pleas” and reduce pressure on our much backlogged criminal courts. However, he warned that “financial and structural constraints” seem to have prevented the roll-out of the cameras thus far. Does the First Minister agree with that assessment of the situation? Are there any imminent plans to increase police protection and speed up the justice process by heeding the chief superintendent's recommendation?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): We will continue to discuss those matters with the chief constable. I certainly welcome Police Scotland's on-going work to consider how new or improved technologies can be harnessed to further

strengthen its ability to keep the population safe. We will continue to support that, but we will also consider the implications for police officers. It is important that we take the time to discuss and consider all the issues fully.

Covid-19 Vaccine (Minority Groups)

Foyso Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): I congratulate you on your new role, Presiding Officer.

With the spread of the new variant of Covid-19, the need to address low uptake of the Covid-19 vaccine among particular ethnic groups is crucial, especially for those who might be at higher risk. To do so, the programme must be accessible. Therefore, in which languages is information about the vaccine programme available in translation, and what targeted action is being taken to reach diverse minority groups in our communities?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): First, I welcome Foyso Choudhury to the Parliament. I very much agree with him about the importance of the accessibility of the vaccine programme. I will write to him personally—or I will ask the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care to do so—to give detail of the various approaches that are being taken to ensure high uptake among our minority ethnic communities, which include materials being made available in different languages.

I represent a constituency with a very high proportion of ethnic minorities living in it and where there has been a significant outbreak of Covid in recent weeks. Important work has been done there around surge testing and particularly around approaches to improving uptake of the vaccine—for example, there is a vaccine clinic based inside Glasgow central mosque. We can take learning from that to apply to other parts of the country.

Overall, uptake of the vaccine is extremely good at the moment, but we need to ensure that the national picture is fully reflected in all our communities, because the vaccine really is the most important thing that we can do now to guard against the virus and to get the country back to normality. Taking today's figures into account, more than 60 per cent of the total population in Scotland—60.2 per cent—has had a first dose of the vaccine and, obviously, we are now speeding up the administration of second doses.

Foyso Choudhury has made important points that we will continue to take into account.

Covid-19 Delta Variant (NHS Dumfries and Galloway)

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): What is the First Minister's response to the eight cases of Covid-19 B.1.617.2, or delta, variant—formerly

known as the Indian variant—that have been identified in the NHS Dumfries and Galloway area, given that the variant has been described as a variant of concern by the World Health Organization?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care has told me that he spoke to NHS Dumfries and Galloway yesterday.

Unfortunately, new variants of the virus will occur, but it is really important that we take the same basic steps to contain variants as we have taken to contain the virus all along. We now think that the delta variant represents well over half of all new cases in Scotland, so we will see the same situation in many parts of the country, including of course the NHS Dumfries and Galloway area. However, the way that we stop the virus spreading is the same for every variant. It involves all the basic measures that we know about, such as hand hygiene, wearing face coverings, distancing and making sure that we all follow the guidance that is in place. Of course, it is also about testing regularly—everybody can now access lateral flow tests—and people coming forward for vaccination as soon as they are invited to do so. The best protection that any of us can have against this virus is to have two doses of the vaccine.

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (Waiting Times)

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): The latest figures for waiting times for child and adolescent mental health services are deeply disturbing. In NHS Borders, the average wait for CAMHS is 31 weeks, and only 48 per cent of young people are treated within the 18-week target; in NHS Lothian, the target was missed by more than a third. The figures also show that one in five children are still being completely turned away from CAMHS.

Three years ago, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport described the present system of rejecting referrals as “completely unacceptable”, yet there has been no improvement. When will the First Minister and her Government get a grip of the children's mental health treatment crisis in Scotland?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I welcome Craig Hoy to the Parliament.

I will turn to waiting times for mental health services for children and adolescents and to rejected referrals in reverse order. The Scottish Government accepted all the recommendations in the 2018 audit of rejected referrals, and we are working to deliver on all of them. That work includes asking Public Health Scotland to work with health boards to develop a new patient-level data set, so that we understand not just the overall

numbers but the reason for rejected referrals. The service standard makes it clear what should happen if a particular referral does not require specialist treatment. Work is rightly on-going to tackle rejected referrals.

In summary, our approach to waiting times more generally is two-fold: first, to invest more into CAMHS; secondly, to redesign the service so that much greater support provision is in place for young people in communities so that, hopefully, they do not then require specialist services. Given that I have limited time now, I am happy to ask the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care to provide more detail of all that. Those important strands of work are being taken forward with urgency.

Euro 2020 Fan Zone (Covid-19 Tests)

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): Can the First Minister say whether attendees at the Euro 2020 fan zone in Glasgow will require testing for Covid-19 ahead of entry, given the conflicting information that the Scottish Government and the organisers of Glasgow Life provided?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Again, I will write to Pam Duncan-Glancy and make the information about the arrangements that are in place available to the whole chamber. Those arrangements are still under consideration to ensure that any fan zone proceeds safely with all the correct mitigations in place.

On the issue of testing, I repeat that our advice to the whole population—not just people who attend a particular event—is for people to order lateral flow device tests for free through the NHS inform website and test themselves twice a week so that it can be identified whether they have the virus without symptoms. If the LFD test is positive, people can go for a confirmatory polymerase chain reaction test, which helps us break the chain of transmission. It is really important to get that message across to the public at large, not simply in relation to particular attendances at particular events.

Just Transition (Oil and Gas Sector)

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): Scottish communities are, to this day, paying the price of the scorched earth policy that Thatcher and her hypocritical Scots Tories inflicted on Scottish industries in the 1980s. What assurances can the First Minister provide to my constituents who work in the oil and gas sector that no one will be left behind as we make a necessary and just transition to renewable energy?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I take the opportunity to welcome my good friend Jackie Dunbar to the chamber. She has just

demonstrated in that question what a powerful contribution she will make here—I am not sure that the Tories will like it, but I think that most of the rest of us will.

The issue is really important. I grew up in Ayrshire in the 1970s and 1980s and saw firsthand the impact when a government did not care about protecting individuals and communities from the impact of economic transformations. We must not make that mistake again. Failing to plan for the transition to net zero is not an option, which is why we are working with trade unions, businesses and communities to develop just transition plans to ensure that our approach is a fair one.

That commitment to just transition is vital: I have already appointed our first just transition minister, and we will implement the recommendations of the just transition commission and maintain that commission to advise us throughout this session of the Parliament. I believe that a majority in the Parliament is committed to that transition to net zero; I also hope that a majority is committed to making that transition fairly, because that is in the interest of every individual and community across our country.

Covid-19 Quarantine (Overseas Energy Workers)

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): In February, I asked the First Minister when there would be a review into the issue of oil and gas worker quarantine, to avoid them spending, in some cases, 10 out of 14 days, and three quarters of their wages, in a hotel on their return from work overseas. I received no clear answer. I asked again in March, and received no clear answer.

As travel restrictions ease, is the First Minister now in a position to give our key energy workers the review that they so desperately crave, and at least permit those essential workers to isolate at home?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): We will continue to keep all such matters under review. Earlier in FMQs, we heard perfectly legitimate questioning and criticism of the decisions that we took at an early stage, and suggestions that such decisions might not have been cautious enough. First and foremost, we need to make sure that we are protecting people as much as possible against the spread of the virus. That is particularly important when it comes to international travel, because, right now, the key risk of international travel is the importation of new variants. The issues that Liam Kerr mentioned are difficult for anybody who is having to quarantine in a hotel; however, public safety and public health are paramount here, and I hope that the Tories would accept that.

The Presiding Officer: As with last week, I have been unable to call all the supplementary questions that I would prefer to. Therefore, I intend to discuss that with business managers and to look at ways in which I can ensure that more members are able to participate in FMQs.

12:51

Meeting suspended.

14:00

On resuming—

Education

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Good afternoon. I remind members that social distancing measures are in place in the chamber and across the Holyrood campus. I ask that members take care to observe the measures, including when entering and exiting the chamber. Please use the aisles and walkways to access your seat and when moving around the chamber.

The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-00204, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on education. I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak button now or as soon as they can, and those who are joining us online to put an R in the chat function. I call Shirley-Anne Somerville to speak to and move the motion.

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Shirley-Anne Somerville): My statement yesterday was an opportunity to lay out the Scottish Government's views and direction on qualifications and appeals. I am pleased to have the opportunity to highlight again today the exceptional efforts that have gone in across our education sector to support learners during this pandemic, and to outline the steps that we will take to ensure the best possible outcomes for all Scotland's children and young people over the coming years.

Due to the supreme endeavours of many, the education of our children and young people has been sustained despite the very significant disruption of Covid-19. I express my appreciation for the extraordinary efforts of all those in the education workforce who have gone to great lengths to continue learning and teaching, and to support the safety and wellbeing of our young people and their families. Parents and carers have contributed significantly to supporting the education of our children, often while balancing other commitments. Above all else, I especially thank the children and young people of Scotland for their resilience and hard work through this, and I assure them that we are listening to their concerns and hopes around the way forward.

Before I look forward, however, let me first take us back to 2015, when the First Minister underlined the Government's aspiration that all children in Scotland should have the best start in life and that there should be no better place in the world to be educated than here in Scotland. That remains the commitment of the Government.

In taking that forward, we build on the achievements of recent years. Those start in the

early years, where we are delivering transformational change through the expanded provision of early learning and childcare, which I will say more about shortly. Across the system, our policies, including the initial £750 million Scottish attainment challenge, resulted in Scotland investing more in education per person than elsewhere in the United Kingdom. Teacher numbers are currently the highest they have been since 2008, with the number of primary teachers the highest since 1980. On outcomes, 93.3 per cent of school leavers in 2019-20 were in education, employment or training three months after leaving school, which is up from 87.7 per cent in 2009-10. I thank the Deputy First Minister for his tireless work in building that platform, and I look forward to taking it on to the next phase.

However, we absolutely still face challenges, and we know that there is much more to do. In the short term, we must continue to manage the risks of Covid as we hopefully move towards a greater sense of normality. I will continue to take expert advice and work with stakeholders to ensure the best possible educational experience for children and young people as we emerge from the pandemic.

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): What is the cabinet secretary going to do in relation to the university and college sector, which is urgently looking for guidance that would allow it to safely restart small-group, face-to-face learning in September?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I intend to come on to that area a little bit further into my speech. If Oliver Mundell will forgive me, I will therefore leave that until then. I also know that, in closing, the Minister for Higher Education and Further Education, Youth Employment and Training, who has specific responsibility for universities and colleges, will say even more about that than I can in my opening remarks. If Oliver Mundell bears with me, he will absolutely be reassured that we are taking that very seriously.

We know that the pandemic has had an impact on education globally. The issues that are being experienced in Scotland are common to countries across the world, and research shows us that Covid has had an adverse consequence on the health and wellbeing of some children as well as on their attainment.

In recognising those risks, the Scottish Government has already committed £400 million over 2020-21 and 2021-22 to support education recovery. Earlier this year, the Nuffield Foundation reported that the funding that had been committed per pupil in Scotland for catch-up was the most generous of all the United Kingdom nations. That funding has enabled local authorities to recruit an additional 1,400 teachers and more than 200

support staff, has led to around 70,000 devices and 1,400 connectivity packages being distributed to learners, and has ensured that no child has gone hungry, thanks to the free school meal alternative during the period of remote learning and school holidays. In addition to that, we have introduced the £20 million pupil equity funding premium for 2021-22, thereby increasing investment in PEF to £148 million this year.

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): I am looking for a bit of clarity on local authorities, given that they provide money to the Scottish Qualifications Authority on an annual basis. What element of that fee will no longer be required for this year? Should they expect to get some money back?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I will be happy to get back to Sue Webber on the details of the funding of the SQA in future years, and I will say more about the SQA later in my speech.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: If the member lets me make some progress, I promise that I will take an intervention from him in due course.

Looking ahead, we know that the health and wellbeing of our children must take primacy, and that that is the first step in supporting effective learning. In addition to the significant investment in support for the positive mental health and wellbeing of our young people that I outlined in the chamber yesterday, we will roll out a £20 million summer programme to help to restore the wellbeing of children and young people, especially those who have been most impacted by Covid. The programme will enable them to reconnect with one another and to play, be active and—importantly—have fun.

That support for wellbeing forms part of a comprehensive programme of education recovery that continues to be guided by the principles of excellence and equity, and underpinned by a high-quality and empowered profession. We owe it to this generation to be ruthless in our efforts to deliver that vision. As in the pre-pandemic period, we are prioritising additional support for pupils from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, which is why we have committed to investing more than £1 billion over the parliamentary session in closing the poverty-related attainment gap. I look forward to working with our partners to think about how best to use that investment to improve the life chances of children who live in poverty. I want to ensure that we take a joined-up approach across Government and society, because I strongly believe that schools cannot do that work alone.

Of course, we know that teachers and support staff are central to the quality of learning in our schools, and we were elected on a mandate to

devolve even greater powers to teachers and schools, and to intensify the empowerment agenda. In our first 100 days, we will fund councils to support the recruitment of a further 1,000 teachers and 500 classroom assistants as part of our commitment to providing 3,500 additional teachers and classroom assistants over the parliamentary session.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I promised Martin Whitfield that I would take him next, so if Sarah Boyack forgives me, I will keep that promise, if nothing else.

Martin Whitfield: I am very grateful. I am sure that the cabinet secretary will keep all her promises.

Does the cabinet secretary agree with Sight Scotland, whose “Time to Focus on Sight Loss” manifesto called for additional investment for specialist school support for pupils with visual impairment?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I read the Sight Scotland briefing with interest, and I take very seriously the points that it made. As we move forward in making progress on education, we absolutely must ensure that no child is left behind, regardless of what school and what part of the country they are educated in, and I look forward to working with Sight Scotland to see what can be done about that.

If Sarah Boyack still wants to make an intervention, I will be happy to take one.

Sarah Boyack: I would be delighted to. I warmly welcome the cabinet secretary to her new and important post.

The ability to plan ahead is critical for our council colleagues. Could the cabinet secretary give clarity on the location of and funding for the proposed new city centre Gaelic school for Edinburgh? The proposal in the Scottish National Party’s manifesto came out of the blue for councillors on the City of Edinburgh Council.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Cabinet secretary, I reassure you that we have a bit of time to play with, so you can, if you wish, be generous with interventions, and others can follow suit—there is time available.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I promise that I will do my best to be generous, Presiding Officer.

I have paid a great deal of attention to that since coming into post. I appreciate that the council will be going through a consultation process. It has put together a package and it is important that that is now put to parents and people across the city for them to have their say. The consultation is

exceptionally important and the Government should not be involved in that process. We look forward to hearing back from parents about what the council has had to say on the issues that are covered in the consultation and the recommendations. I will leave it there for the moment, but I am sure that we will come back to the subject once the consultation has closed.

We are also committed to ensuring that every schoolchild in the country has the access to the technology that they need to support their education during the current session of Parliament.

Those are big ambitions, but we will start delivering them early. That means that, in the first 100 days, we will make free lunches available to all primary 4 children in Scotland as the next step towards extending them to all primary school children all year round. That will extend to primary 5 children in January 2022 and will include the provision of free school meal approaches to all eligible children and young people in primary and secondary through all the school holidays. We are providing over £49 million in funding to our local authorities to support the implementation of those approaches in 2021-22, which represents a significant investment in the health and wellbeing of our children and young people.

To help families and give pupils the best start in life, we will increase both the school clothing grant and the best start food grant, which helps families with children under three to buy healthy foods, and we will take steps to remove charges for core curriculum activities and for music and arts education, including instrumental music tuition. We will also agree the first allocation of funding to councils for the refurbishment of play parks. Before we formally expand the Scottish child payment next year and prepare to double its value, we will provide interim support for eligible children, including a £100 payment near the start of the summer holidays.

I am proud to say that, during the first 100 days, we will also complete one of the major legacies of the previous session of Parliament. From August, all three and four-year olds, and two-year olds who need it most, will be eligible for 1,140 hours of free early learning and childcare each year. We know that high-quality early learning and childcare can make a huge difference to children’s lives, particularly when they are growing up in more disadvantaged circumstances, and it is a cornerstone of closing the poverty-related attainment gap. Collectively, we can now focus on realising the transformational benefits that the expansion will bring, including improved educational and development outcomes for children, enhanced family wellbeing and greater

employment and training opportunities for parents and carers.

However, we do not intend to stop there. In the current session of Parliament, we will expand childcare further, both by developing the provision of wraparound care and after-school clubs and by working with children and young people to enable them to develop their own charter for school-age childcare in Scotland.

Of course, in Scotland, we will prioritise fundamental children's rights. We will press on with the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child to the maximum extent that is possible and fight any legal challenge to stop children's rights.

I hope that that programme outlines our determination to deliver improvements with pace and urgency, but I also want to be clear with Parliament that I am open to considering what further reform is necessary with the clear purpose of doing all that we can to improve outcomes for children. That includes reducing the variability in the outcomes that children and young people achieve across the country.

I hope that I can reassure those who work on the front line in our education establishments that that will not mean extra pressure or work for them at this critical time, as we look to recovery. I do, however, want to look at options for reform that ensure that schools get the best possible support and challenge to enable them to improve further and to do what we all want to find—the very best for our children in their care. Enabling them to focus relentlessly on providing the highest quality of learning and teaching to our children must be critical to my work, as must ensuring that those who work in education and outwith schools are fully focused on doing everything that they can to provide the highest quality of support.

Today, I signal my intention to start that process by considering how to reform our two key national education agencies—the SQA and Education Scotland. That will include looking at their roles, their remits and the purpose of their organisations, as well as considering their functions and their governance arrangements. That will be a key priority for me and it will be informed by the findings of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development review, which will be published on 21 June, as I said to Parliament yesterday.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): I recognise that the process to reform the SQA is just beginning, but the issues with the SQA pre-date the current crisis and are founded in its complete lack of willingness to perform its duties transparently, from its refusal to return transcripts to candidates to the opaque way in which it

approached the alternative certification model. Does the cabinet secretary agree that transparency has to be at the root of reform of the SQA?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I will expand that and say that transparency has to be key to reform of education as a whole, not just the SQA. That is a principle that we should all hold. I have listened carefully to the comments not just from across the chamber but from academics, teachers and young people, who have spoken of their wishes for reform. What I hope I am signalling today is my intention to move along with a reform process. I look forward to working with stakeholders, teachers, parents and, particularly, young people to find the solutions, if we are joined in our willingness to reform these important institutions.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Oliver Mundell *rose*—

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I give way to Ross Greer.

Ross Greer: I apologise to Mr Mundell for having drawn the cabinet secretary's eye a few seconds before he got up.

In the spirit of transparency, can I ask why the SQA has not given young people an opportunity to directly ask it questions about this year's process, despite having given teachers and parents that opportunity some weeks ago?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The need for young people to have a voice is something that I certainly heard loud and clear. It is important to note that neither the Government nor the SQA will come to decisions that everyone will like—I am already rapidly learning that in my portfolio—but the very least that we can do is ensure that we are open and available to answer questions, and to make our reasons for our decisions very clear. The communication of that is exceptionally important, and it is one of the reasons why a letter is going out directly to learners about the support that is available to them. I am looking very closely at what other communications can go out, whether from the Scottish Government or the SQA, to ensure that we are accessible to young people in particular—although not just to young people.

So far, I have focused mainly on our work to improve outcomes for children and young people in early learning and childcare settings and schools. However, we are determined to deliver beyond that. For example, since 2012, we have invested more than £1 billion per year in Scotland's universities, meaning that a record 260,490 students enrolled at Scottish universities in 2019-20. In addition, since 2007, the college sector resource budget has increased by more

than 30 per cent in cash terms. In his closing remarks, the Minister for Higher Education and Further Education, Youth Employment and Training will say more about such issues, but I will cover some of them briefly.

I am acutely aware of the challenges that our colleges and universities have faced in the pandemic, and I appreciate the proactive, collaborative and innovative ways in which they have responded. I remain exceptionally grateful to staff and students for their continued patience, understanding and support as we move towards greater normality.

Looking ahead, we will continue to work collaboratively with the further and higher education sector as planning intensifies for 2021-22, including through the recently established advanced learning Covid recovery group and on the basis of expert advice provided through the new Covid-19 advisory sub-group on universities and colleges. Further and higher education institutions are key strategic assets in our economic and social recovery.

I will make two final observations. I am conscious of Audit Scotland's recent observations. It said:

"Those involved in planning, delivering and supporting school education were working well together prior to the pandemic. This strong foundation helped them to collaborate to deliver a rapid response to Covid-19 in exceptionally challenging circumstances."

As we move further into the recovery phase of the pandemic and beyond, our firm intention is that that strong collaborative approach will continue. Working together, we will ensure that all pupils are given the support that they need to recover their learning and health and wellbeing. That includes maximising how we support and challenge improvement and reduce the variability in what children achieve in different parts of the country. It is right that the voice of children and young people themselves is at the heart of that approach. I expect them to be engaged in every aspect of our policy considerations and know that they will bring to those discussions the energy and insight born of lived experience.

I am deeply conscious of the privilege of holding this office and of the challenges that go with it, and I look forward to working with colleagues across the Parliament and beyond as we continue to deliver a high-quality education system that ensures that all children and young people can achieve their potential.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises the difficult circumstances that children, young people, students and parents have faced over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic; commends the extraordinary work done by university, college, school and childcare staff over the last

year to maintain education and childcare; recognises that the pandemic has nevertheless had an impact on the health, wellbeing and education of many children and young people across Scotland, particularly the most disadvantaged; agrees that work to address these impacts, and remove the barriers to learning that too many still face, should be at the heart of Scotland's COVID-19 recovery efforts, and welcomes the Scottish Government's commitment to implement ambitious plans to support the education system during its first 100 days.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: As I indicated, we have some time to play with. I am conscious that a number of members will be making their first speeches in the debate, but I encourage other members to make, and to take, interventions as they will be given the time back.

14:20

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): Five years ago, in a statement to the Parliament on her Government's priorities following the 2016 election, the First Minister said:

"By the end of this session, through the action that we take to improve our most life-changing public services—education, health, social care and social security—we intend to ensure that many more people get the opportunities and the support that they need to fulfil their potential."—[*Official Report*, 25 May 2016; c 2.]

The whole chamber could unite around those words; that ambition was shared by every member of the Parliament, no matter which party they belonged to. Five years on, they remain largely just that: words. They have not been backed by action and the ambitions of far too many young people have been left unfulfilled. [*Interruption.*] Not right now.

The events of recent days and the failure of the SNP Government to restore confidence in this year's SQA assessment process show just how out of touch ministers have become. They have dug in and chosen to defend the SQA rather than stand up for young people, which makes it even harder than it already was to believe anything that they say about ensuring excellence and equality in our education system. The failure to call out the SQA's incompetence and to admit that our qualifications agency is fundamentally broken shows a complete disregard for young people and their teachers, who have been so badly let down.

Asking pupils to gamble their grades on an appeal is wrong in the context of the chaos that we have seen; admitting that there is a need for some reform around the edges after all that we have seen and after the First Minister today told the Parliament that the organisation has her full confidence is not convincing.

When it refuses to listen or learn, it is little wonder that the SNP Government has the undistinguished record of being an Administration

under which educational standards have stagnated at best but slipped back in many cases.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I am disappointed by Mr Mundell's response to what I have said is an expansive package of reform. I point out that nine out of 10 headteachers have reported progress in closing the gap in attainment or in health and wellbeing as a result of support from the attainment Scotland fund. There is progress; we are getting there.

Oliver Mundell: I am not sure that the young people whom the system is there to serve would agree with that.

The extent of the mismatch between the minister's rhetoric and the reality of the situation grows every day. We do not have another 100 days to waste. It is time for the real action that was promised and that the Government has been so slow to deliver. The ambition in First Minister's words from all those years ago will still unite the chamber, but that ambition must now be backed by deeds. If they are, there will be scope for constructive—and critical, where necessary—dialogue with the Opposition.

That is important because I believe that our best days can still lie ahead. Given how good my own education was at Moffat academy, a small rural state school that does not apologise for being ambitious on behalf of its pupils, I know what is possible everywhere.

We can and must do better as a country in the years to come. Our once world-leading education system can be that again. We can get back on our feet after the pandemic and we can avoid losing a generation to Covid. After all, despite 14 years of this SNP Government's educational underachievement, we still retain all the ingredients of success. We have a motivated and skilled workforce, talented young people, dedicated parents and carers and a social commitment to the importance of education. Nothing that I say today is a criticism of those people—quite the opposite. I applaud their commitment and professionalism.

As I have said here before, the only thing that we are missing is a Government that is willing to do what is needed to properly support them. Instead, we have a Government that is often more interested in promoting its own political agenda than getting down to the hard work of advancing opportunities for future generations.

Rather than recognising and supporting the time-honoured strengths of our system, the Government, as it does in so many areas, would rather do things differently simply for the sake of it. The Government believes that, in the place of ambition, the lowest common denominator will do.

It would rather blame others than acknowledge its own responsibilities and failings.

Excellence has been discounted as too difficult to aim for and been replaced by an attitude that being average or thereabouts—and maybe being better than some other countries, if we cherry pick the right statistics—will do. Likewise, equality is no longer about giving the maximum opportunity to all but has been reduced to ensuring that everyone is held back in equal measure. Our young people and their parents and carers, as well as educators, deserve better than that.

However, as I said, all is not lost; it is not too late. The key is simple: we have to return our focus to what happens in the classroom—teaching and learning. We cannot have a successful education system without teaching and learning. Instead of talking in the currently fashionable buzz words and jargon that have become the trademark of our education bodies, we need to focus on talking in the language that teachers and learners understand.

It means, in a very real sense, going back to the basics. It means restoring teacher numbers as a matter of urgency and not the First Minister patting herself on the back after the SNP cut teacher numbers to the bone and then seeking credit for incremental increases in the years that follow.

We have thousands of qualified teachers on temporary and short-term contracts and some recently qualified teachers who want to work but cannot find a job. Let us be more ambitious. Let us make the funding available now for all the roles that the Government has identified and train more teachers if we cannot fill them.

Focusing on teaching and learning also means admitting that curriculum reform has not produced the outcomes that we hoped for. It means respecting that all children need to learn the essential building blocks of knowledge to equip them through life and that the best way to obtain skills is through gaining knowledge. It means freeing teachers from the avalanche of paperwork and guidance that has engulfed them over recent years. Teachers do not need the 20,000 pages of guidance that accompanied the implementation of the so-called curriculum for excellence. They need the time and space to do the jobs that they are trained for, qualified for and dedicated to doing.

Of course, there is a more immediate concern, which has been brought on us by the unique circumstances of the global pandemic and that the Scottish Government must urgently face up to. Ministers need to recognise the learning that has been lost in the past year and not try to claim, as the previous education secretary did, that pupils' time at home has been universally beneficial. Over the past year, most pupils in Scotland have lost

out on an estimated 16 weeks of classroom lessons.

Although we pay tribute to the efforts of teachers and other school staff to provide the best possible online alternatives, the reality is that we have seen an unprecedented loss of learning, which risks widening the attainment gap between more affluent and less well-off pupils. There is a clear case for a comprehensive package of action to help recover that lost learning. That should include allocating additional funding to schools to provide effective interventions for individual year groups and the opportunity for individual disadvantaged pupils to get small-group tutoring. However, given what the First Minister has outlined of her 100 days plan, it would appear that nothing has been drawn up to help recover that lost learning.

For younger children and their parents, a summer of play will be welcome. However, for many older pupils, whose education has been adversely impacted through no fault of their own, the opportunity for a summer of learning is what they really need. Therefore, we urgently need to hear from the new education secretary what her plans are, beyond those already outlined, to give pupils a genuine chance to catch up.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As I laid out in my speech, we have invested very heavily through local authorities. Surely, it is right that local authorities, schools and headteachers, who know their pupils best, decide what the package looks like, instead of a diktat from here that assumes one size fits all. That would be the wrong way to go about it. Surely, we should empower schools. Surely, that is what the Conservatives should be supporting.

Oliver Mundell: I do not think that promoting the opportunity for individual tutoring after a pandemic has affected many individuals in different ways is dictating something that would be unwelcome by most schools and most young people.

If the answer is that the education secretary has no additional plans, parents and pupils across Scotland will be owed an explanation as to why no meaningful action is being taken to help recover those 16 weeks of lost classroom learning.

In closing, I return to what is, for me, the most important point. Further decline and stagnation are not inevitable. There is no reason to believe that all is lost, but after 14 years of SNP failure, we do not have any more time to waste. Every young person deserves the gold standard education for which Scotland was once famous, and until the SNP owns its mistakes, rather than trying to excuse them away, progress will be slow.

At the moment, teachers, learners, parents, and carers are being asked to pick up the slack. That is not good enough, and it is time for the Government to act. Reversing the decision to allow grades to be downgraded on appeal and axing—not reforming—failing education bodies such as the SQA, will send a strong message that the Government is in listening mode and ready to reset and rebuild trust. Inaction will simply confirm more of the same and reinforce the cosy arrangement that is at the heart of this SNP Government that lets everyone off the hook.

We will find out in pretty short order whether the education secretary is John Swinney 2.0 or if she is serious about making the hard choices that are needed to improve the life chances of our young people. For the sake of Scotland's pupils, parents, and teachers, and for the future of our country, we must all hope that it is the latter.

I move amendment S6M-00204.2, to leave out from "and parents have faced" to end and insert:

“, parents, families and carers have faced over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic; commends the extraordinary work done by university, college, school, nursery and childcare staff over the last year to maintain education and childcare; notes, by way of contrast, the absence of meaningful and timely support from the Scottish Government and its education agencies and the pressure and anxiety that this has caused; recognises that there were significant challenges in Scottish education before the pandemic as a result of the First Minister's broken promise to make education the number one priority, and calls on the Scottish Government to act with more urgency to reverse damaging cuts to teacher numbers, to bring all classrooms up to an acceptable standard and reduce class sizes, to put in place catch-up plans, including a tutoring scheme to make up for lost learning, to address the shortfall in college funding and to set out plans to enable in-person, small group learning at universities in order to prevent a generation of young people being lost to COVID-19.”

14:31

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): I start by putting on the record my thanks to the minister for the kind conversations that we had earlier in her tenure. She has the sincere and hopeful good wishes of the Labour Party. There is much to do.

It is vital that the debate, and the work of our Parliament, shapes the recovery of education from the pandemic. In the past 24 hours, the UK Government's adviser on educational recovery has resigned because of the paucity of ambition of that Government and its failure to grasp the scale of the challenge. I hope that we can give some expression to the truly epic scale of the challenge that we face in Scotland, and that we can begin to reveal some of its nature and agree that we will require there to be a radical comeback plan from the Government that is commensurate with what must be achieved.

However, today's debate will inevitably be informed, at least in part, by what happened yesterday and the general dismay that has greeted a process that fails every test set for it other than its mere existence. After eight months, six promises and two missed deadlines, we have a vague outline of an appeals procedure that does nothing to address the core concerns of all involved. We should not have been here in the first place. We should not have had to drag out of a reluctant Government a process that is demanded by natural justice, under the UNCRC, and mandated by the urgent review that was undertaken into the most recent SQA debacle.

Our amendment asks for an urgent review of the SQA. I am glad to hear that a review will happen, but it should be urgent. It is required quickly, particularly because the SQA's role has become untenable, given the repeated crises that it has faced and its role in the failure of our children, their generation and our future.

I know that a catalogue of cases is waiting on the minister's desk about young Scots who have been failed by the processes that were put in place last year, and many thousands will be suffering this year. They all deserve a future and the best chance of a better life.

I will address the core substance of the Green Party's amendment in my closing speech. We are strongly minded to support it, but I want to hear the debate and the minister's response in the meantime.

All our eyes should be fixed on what is at stake here. It is not just about blame; it is about making things right. That is why Labour has focused on the appeals process, on a resit guarantee and on a no-detriment policy for entry to college and university. Our amendment can help to put hope back into the hearts of young Scots who want a better future for themselves, their families and their communities.

Our response must be about remaking our future. The unique greatness of Scottish education is a founding myth of the nation as we conceive it, but it is no less powerful for being demonstrably untrue. The shape of our society economically, intellectually, emotionally and politically has been written by three great phases of expansion in education: elite professional education; mass secondary education; and mass higher education. Each phase changed the character and path of the nation.

The question that we should ask ourselves is this: do we have the imagination, ambition and moral drive to create a fourth great phase of universal education that could unlock the transformative potential of our population? Can we summon the collective will and common

endeavour to make universal digital education unlock Scotland's great potential?

That fourth great wave of educational expansion would be about universal digital skills, enhancing lives across our country. It would transform how, where and for whom we deliver education. The why is urgent. We are living through ever-accelerating change in the global environment and we must be prepared to change with it. Our values can endure, but they must be made relevant in a world that is moving at an astonishing pace. Technological change is happening at the fastest rate that it has ever been and at the slowest rate that it will ever be. Look at the returns delivered to investors in recent years and the rise of the digital giants. Think of the return on investment that we would receive in Scotland if we truly invest in our new generation of digital talent.

We have an economy that is detaching itself from physical roots, and the frictionless productivity of software. The Logan review, which was commissioned by the Government, begs the simple yet wicked question of how we can afford to put tech experts into our classrooms. How do we go about filling urgent skills gaps, such as those in the app development company in Dundee that would and could have delivered 300 highly paid jobs in the city in the past two years had software engineering skills been available? How can young Scots get those jobs? Education is the currency of the information age. It is no longer just a pathway to opportunity and success, but a prerequisite.

Wrapped around that challenge are two further deeply complex problems. The affront of educational inequality does much more than rightly offend our moral sensitivities; it holds back our country. That those people from the poorest backgrounds remain so ill-served must be addressed and we know that progress in doing that has not been made to any real extent. It is shameful that our debates, yesterday and today, around SQA appeals will be of no relevance whatever to the growing number of Scots who leave school with nothing.

The third challenge is that of the pandemic and the impact of lockdown, which has fallen disproportionately on people with the least and has made inequality all the greater. Many young people in this country have gone backwards in school performance in the past year. We need a comprehensive plan laying out a response that is commensurate with the great scale of the task, covering: childcare and early years services, where home working is breaking their business models; a loss of school time that is unprecedented since the advent of universal education; an already-precarious college sector that has students not completing courses, with

drops in applications and apprenticeship numbers dramatically down; and our universities, which are in need of an urgent route map to less restrictive physical distancing to ensure that applicants turn into students this autumn.

I say to the minister that the scale of the challenge is considerable. I do not believe that the rhetoric that we have heard so far, or indeed anything that I have seen published, grasps the true scale, across all our institutions, of dealing with the impact of the pandemic. All our efforts are required. Labour's amendment will help to stem some of the immediate problems that we face and, crucially, I hope that it will start to rebuild hope in the hearts of our young people whom we believe are the promise of a better Scotland.

I move amendment S6M-00204.3, to leave out from “, and welcomes” to end and insert:

“; recognises the need for an ambitious plan of National Recovery in the education system; calls on the Scottish Government to establish a National Tutoring scheme and a ‘resit’ guarantee, which offers young people impacted by the cancellation of exams in 2020 and 2021 the opportunity of a funded college place to take their qualifications again, and further calls on the Scottish Government to introduce a ‘no detriment’ policy for further and higher education access and institute an urgent review of the SQA.”

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Ross Greer to speak to and move amendment S6M-00204.4. Mr Greer, you have a generous six minutes.

14:39

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): Thank you, Presiding Officer.

“The evidence the committee has received from teachers should give the SQA serious cause for concern.”

That was the first conclusion of a report that was unanimously agreed by the Parliament's Education and Skills Committee in January 2017. I sat on that committee throughout the inquiry and have done so in the years since. I do not think that any of us could say with honesty that the performance of the SQA has improved in that time. It is quite clear that the opposite has been the case.

The specific concern that was raised in that instance was about the apparent breakdown in trust between teachers and the SQA. The committee recommended that the SQA

“review its approach to engaging with teachers to enable candid communication from those with criticisms”,

and it said that the SQA needs to be able to demonstrate how those views are taken into account,

“in order to improve trust.”

It is obvious to all of us that trust in the SQA has plummeted in recent years instead of improving. I do not believe that that trust has ever been as low as it is now, not just among teachers but among pupils and the public as a whole. That was not the only cause for concern in the 2017 report—I will come back to some of the other concerns later.

Underperformance by the exams authority certainly has not been limited to the period of the pandemic, as Daniel Johnson said—I will address the unique nature of recent challenges in a moment—as the SQA's failings have been a constant feature of the Parliament's scrutiny work for years, since long before the 2017 report. Too often, the organisation has appeared to be more concerned with protecting its reputation and what it sees as the credibility of the system than with honestly explaining what is going on or with giving every individual learner a fair opportunity to succeed.

Oliver Mundell: Did the member find it as puzzling as I did to hear the First Minister say today that she has full confidence in the SQA?

Ross Greer: I thank Mr Mundell for that intervention. I would appreciate it if the cabinet secretary reflected on that point in her closing remarks, because I feel that there is a tension between what we have just heard from the cabinet secretary, which was an acknowledgement of the need for reform, and what we heard an hour or so ago from the First Minister, which was that she has full confidence in the SQA as it is currently constituted and operating. Those two things do not go together, and I think that we deserve an explanation from the Government as to which is its position.

To be clear, the past 15 months have been extraordinarily challenging for everyone, including those working at national agencies. I do not underestimate the difficulties that they have faced, and it is with genuine regret that I have lodged an amendment that expresses a lack of confidence in the SQA as an authority rather than in any individual. However, having scrutinised the authority's work throughout the pandemic and for years before it, I can come to no other view. We have now reached the inevitable conclusion of a process that is led by an organisation that does not trust teachers or pupils and that does not welcome constructive criticism, despite the Parliament's recommendations. The organisation has systemic issues with transparency, as Mr Johnson mentioned a moment ago, and it still clearly does not believe that last year's grading algorithm was a mistake—that was confirmed in the Priestley review. In many ways, the SQA seems to believe that it was the real victim of what happened last year, not the 75,000 young people whose marks were downgraded.

The SQA and the Government insist that this year's process is based on teacher judgment, but that is fundamentally untrue. The reality of the alternative certification model is that exams in all but name have taken place, with the burden of setting and marking them falling on teachers without their being given the professional autonomy fully to exercise their own judgment. A teacher must grade their pupils on rigid criteria set by the SQA. For example, a chemistry teacher who conducts the pseudo-exams required of them might, when they mark a pupil's paper, find that the pupil has achieved a C. However, that teacher might know that the pupil would have been more than capable of achieving a B had they not, say, suffered an immediate family bereavement or been ill with Covid themselves, and they could, if allowed to exercise their own political judgment, take that into account. It might be argued that such an approach could bring in a level of subjectivity that was not appropriate in the initial grading, but, if so, surely the appropriate place for taking such issues into account would be the appeal process under an exceptional individual circumstances provision.

Those who have advocated for young people's rights throughout the process have made it clear that such a provision is essential, which is why yesterday's announcement was bitterly disappointing. As a result, the Green amendment seeks to give the Parliament the opportunity to endorse the provision. After all, if the past year has not been one of exceptional circumstances, I cannot imagine a year in which the provision could ever be made to work.

Earlier today, the First Minister seemed to argue that there is no exceptional circumstances provision, because of the contingency measure that is in place. I am afraid to say that that comment verges on being misleading. In its own frequently asked questions guide, the SQA, in answer to the question whether the contingency arrangement is available to a pupil who has been

"extremely affected by disruptions to their learning"

and has

"achieved less than they were predicted"

says:

"No. This service is only for those who haven't completed all assessments. The learner can request an appeal, but this will only review the evidence that was used in deciding the provisional result."

That answer illustrates a wider issue with this year's appeal process: it is not really an appeal process at all.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The First Minister also said that teachers are able to have control over the type of assessments that they give and

their timing, which takes into account what has been happening during a pupil's year. Therefore, it is not necessary to look at the appeal process, because it is embedded in the alternative certification model itself. That is how we deal with it through the year—not through a potentially stressful time of requiring a pupil to appeal.

Ross Greer: I truly wish that that were true, but it is simply not the case according to the subject-specific guidance. It is clear that the requirements for the evidence to be produced are rigid, that teachers do not have the opportunity to exercise their professional judgment and that there are variations between subjects.

I appreciate that the cabinet secretary disagrees with me on that point. She should perhaps listen to Mark Priestley, who conducted the review of what happened last year. He said that the changes that the SQA made to the assessment and evidence criteria this year led to a system in which we have assessments that are exams in all but name—the inevitable result of the SQA's specific evidential requirements, reading below the headline.

Martin Whitfield: Is it not the case that, because the children have spent considerable periods of time outwith school, no evidence of work that was produced during that time can be relied on? The effect of Covid has hit many children as they have returned to school, making it too late for any earlier work to be drawn into the evidence for the conclusion.

Ross Greer: I thank Mr Whitfield for that point, which it is key to put on record in the debate. Many of the subject-specific sets of guidance that the SQA produced were published only in December, just before we entered the period of remote learning. So, when pupils were in school—albeit in a disrupted way—during the August to December period, the teachers did not even know what the evidential requirements would be.

Telling those pupils that the assessments were not exams was not the only example of their being gaslighted during that process. We have been told that the model has been co-produced by young people, but both the SQA and the Government know that that simply is not the case. Cameron Garrett MSYP said this morning:

"As the only young person who sits on"

the SQA's

"NQ21 group and the only member representing young people, I have not had an equal input into discussions around the appeals process this year at NQ group meetings. Young people have been let down and ignored by this process."

That was also the verdict of Liam Fowley MSYP, who sits on the education recovery group. He said:

“The appeals system announced today is simply not fit for purpose, it’s another example of young people being an afterthought. We’ve been tirelessly representing young people’s views and experiences for months - only for it to be ignored by the SQA. Young people have been let down.”

The Scottish Youth Parliament, the Children and Young People’s Commissioner Scotland and others are clear that the process does not uphold young people’s rights. The SQA has not even given young people the opportunity to directly ask questions of it, despite parents—quite rightly—being given that opportunity.

Something can still be salvaged through the appeal process, at least. If the Government and the SQA can accept now, rather than in August, that they have called this one wrong, they can immediately develop a process for appeals that is based on exceptional individual circumstances and adopt a no-detriment policy to avoid young people having to take a perverse gamble if they decide to appeal. This is an opportunity for the Government to prove to young people and to teachers that it has eventually started to listen.

I move amendment S6M-00204.4, to leave out from “and welcomes” to end and insert:

“but regrets the additional stress and anxiety felt by students, teachers, parents and carers as a result of the 2021 Alternative Certification Model; believes that this could have largely been avoided had the SQA taken on board the conclusions of the Priestley review into the 2020 Alternative Certification Model, and more effectively prepared for the impact of COVID-19 in 2020-21; further believes that the 2021 appeals process should adopt a no-detriment policy and that provision should be made for appeals based on exceptional individual circumstances; notes with regret the repeated underperformance of the SQA, and expresses its lack of confidence in the body’s ability to fulfil its duties.”

The Deputy Presiding Officer: After Beatrice Wishart we will move to the open debate.

14:48

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): In normal times, today’s debate would have been an opportunity to look to the next five years in Scottish education. Instead, it is difficult to see beyond the immediate crisis with this year’s exams. The frustration and anger is palpable; the comments made by young people this morning are utterly dismaying. I was going to quote Cameron Garrett, but Ross Greer beat me to it. Suffice it to reiterate that young people say that they have been let down and ignored in the process.

We are talking about a problem entirely of the Scottish Government’s and the SQA’s own making. All exams were cancelled six months ago and national 5s had been cancelled well before then. Everybody understood that working out a replacement model would be difficult. After what happened last summer, we expected that lessons

had been learned; that young people would be included in the conversation, and not pushed to the sidelines as if the decisions were about anyone else but them; that the SQA understood the danger of drip-feeding information, and the benefits of full and frank conversations at an early stage; that fairness to learners should be at the heart of the new process. As it turns out, with the very same people sitting in the very same jobs, the very same mistakes were made. We got more top-down decision making, and a culture of secrecy along with it. No minutes were taken of the meetings between John Swinney and the SQA, either this year or last. The result is not a credible alternative to exams; it is a cruel new obstacle course filled with needless stress and anxiety.

By contrast, teachers have shown what it means to be creative problem solvers during the pandemic. Everything had to change, and then it kept changing, but staff worked flat out to give everyone the best possible education. They worked tirelessly across levels and between schools, and they pulled together plans for remote learning, blended learning, in-person learning and everything in between. Often, they did so with next to no notice, working well beyond the brutal overtime that has been normalised for teachers in Scotland. For group work, school assemblies, sports days, school concerts, buddy systems, transition days and face-to-face parents evenings, creative solutions were found for impossible problems.

From speaking to one teacher, I heard that the loss of indoor physical education made way for outdoor orienteering through a partnership project among class teachers, PE teachers and active schools. From another teacher, I heard that instead of school singing, pupils learned sign language. Pupils worked with the teachers, adapting and enduring time and again, and I am proud of every single person who was involved in that effort.

It is against such efforts that the SQA’s alternative, and yesterday’s statement to the Parliament, are inadequate. I asked the cabinet secretary about extra support—I have done so three times now—and I am yet to be assured that meaningful plans have been made.

Fundamental questions have still not been answered. On the issue of the materials that have been leaked extensively on TikTok and Discord, the education secretary pointed to the fact that

“teachers and lecturers have the flexibility to decide how and when to use materials”.—[*Official Report*, 2 June 2021; c 6.]

Which is it? Are the SQA materials compromised or not? Do they still serve a purpose and save teachers a job, or can they no longer be relied on? If those papers have been compromised, one of

the only real supports on offer to teachers has been undermined by the SQA's faulty process.

For quite some time, it has been clear that teachers have been tasked with developing the entire alternative model themselves. One secondary teacher told me that the stress of that job has been met equally by the stress of not having job certainty for August. That is why Scottish Liberal Democrats have campaigned for a teacher job guarantee come August. We need the talents of everyone available to help with the education recovery. Instead, qualified teachers are starting to look elsewhere—to other countries or other jobs—because there is simply no work on offer here. That is a shameful way to treat those who have guided schools through the past 14 months.

Scottish Liberal Democrats have been constructive throughout the pandemic. We worked with the Government where at all possible, and secured an extra £80 million for education in the Scottish budget. However, enough is enough. The SQA and Education Scotland are simply not fit for purpose. In February, after years of campaigning, Scottish Liberal Democrats persuaded the Parliament of that fact. The organisations' shortcomings should have been addressed long ago, because without fundamental reforms, grounded in the teaching profession, we are set for more of the same. That is how to protect against repeats of the exams chaos that pupils and teachers have endured.

My amendment, which was not selected for debate, asked the Government to respond formally to those calls before the summer, so I thank the cabinet secretary for accepting the case that Scottish Liberal Democrats have been making for years. There is now a rare opportunity to take forward urgent reforms that have the backing of teachers, pupils, parents and the Scottish Parliament. John Swinney refused to listen and, as a result, lost their trust as well as any sense of how to get things back on track. More details about the remit and timeline of those reforms would be welcome before the summer recess.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Jackie Dunbar. This is Ms Dunbar's first speech in the Parliament. It will not always be the case, but I can offer you and other first-time speakers a very generous six minutes.

14:54

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): Thank you, Presiding Officer. I congratulate you on your new position, the cabinet secretary on her new role, and the minister on his new position.

As we emerge from the Covid-19 pandemic, we must ensure that we build back better than before.

That also applies to education. Our children and young people, as well as our local authorities' teaching and support staff, have risen above and beyond the challenge of online learning, and have been extremely resilient while dealing with the changing Covid restrictions. For that, I applaud each and every one of them. Education has been a priority for the Scottish Government and I am glad to see that it will continue to be so, both in the first 100 days and throughout the entire term of the Government.

Ensuring access to education is so important, and I welcome the Scottish Government's commitment to begin work to ensure that all children have access to a digital device—whether that be a laptop or a tablet—to allow them to work and learn from home. That will go a long way in assisting those families who would simply not have been able to afford a device for their children, and in ensuring that no child is disadvantaged or cannot do their homework just because of their household circumstances.

I thank the Scottish Government for not only taking stigma away from those families, but making the commitment to levelling the playing field for all our children across the country—first through the introduction of the baby box, then through the expansion to 1,140 hours of early learning and childcare, and now through access to digital services.

On that theme, it is incredibly important that all children go to school ready to learn. That means not being hungry. I applaud the Scottish Government's plan to extend free breakfasts and lunches to primary 4 pupils, with a view to expanding the provision to all our primary school pupils. That will mean that no pupil has to start their day hungry, which again shows the Government's commitment to cutting down the barriers to education and to levelling the playing field for all our children across Scotland.

Given that this is my first speech, I feel that it is only right that I focus on my constituency. Aberdeen Donside is a diverse area, which lies to the north of the granite city, from Kingswells to Woodside, Dyce to the Brig O' Don, and aahin in atween. It is the honour of my life to have been elected the MSP for Aberdeen Donside, the area in which I have lived and raised a family over the past 30-plus years. I thank the good folk of Aberdeen Donside for putting their faith in me, and I pledge to them all to do my very best for them, for our constituency, and for our country, over the next five years.

I also pay tribute to Mark McDonald for all his tremendous work during his time as member for Aberdeen Donside. He most certainly did a fantastic job of representing his constituents, and I wish him all the best for the future.

I am the third SNP MSP to hold the seat, and I pay a personal tribute to the late Brian Adam, who first won the seat for the SNP back in 2003. I first met Brian not long after I joined the party, in 1990. At the time, he was the local councillor for the area in which I live. He went on to be a regional MSP, until he won the Donside seat in 2003. I am proud to say that I have followed in his footsteps. I am a councillor for the same area, and am now also proud to be the MSP.

My constituents have very long memories and, out on the campaign trail, I was regularly asked how I planned to live up to Brian's legacy. My response was, and is, simple: Brian was my friend and mentor; he taught me everything I know; and I will always aspire to live up to his high standards. To Brian's family, I say "thank you"—for their continued support, kind words and good wishes.

I am proud of the Scottish Government and the pledges that it has made. The national digital academy will benefit so many people who, like me, for whatever reason, did not finish their education. What an opportunity! How I wish that I had had that opportunity, while my daughter was young, to go back and finish what I had started in school. Enabling people to access education to a higher level, at any age, no matter their caring responsibilities or work commitments, in their own time and at their own pace, will be transformational for so many people.

Education is a right and should be easily accessible to all. The Scottish Government is committed to ensuring that further and higher education remain free for all and that children and families are supported to improve educational outcomes. Providing a device for every child is huge: it takes away stigma and goes a long way towards ensuring that no child is left behind or left out because of family circumstances.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Dunbar. I think that you are also the MSP who denied me my majority in the Parliament 10 minutes after the declaration of the result in Orkney, but I will not hold that against you.

I call Pam Gosal, who will also be making her first speech in the Parliament. Ms Gosal will be followed by Kaukab Stewart. Ms Gosal, you too have a generous six minutes.

15:00

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): Thank you, Presiding Officer. I, too, congratulate you on your new role.

I stand here today as a British Asian woman from the Sikh community. People like me do not often get into such positions, so I feel a

tremendous amount of responsibility on my shoulders.

I am an Asian woman who went to a state school in Glasgow. I am a daughter of immigrants and am now the first Indian woman in the Scottish Parliament. Nothing was ever just handed to me and times were often very tough. I lost my father suddenly, then in my teenage years I lost my elder sister to a heart and lung transplant. They were both the strength and stays of my family and both were gone. There was no time to grieve; I had to step up for my family—my mother and my siblings—and I had to become their strength.

I stepped in to run the family business. I had to grow up fast, to earn respect in a male-dominated sector and to become the head of the family. That was not the norm in Asian society 30 years ago, but I knew I had to protect and provide for my family. Despite judgment by some people about my suitability for those roles, I powered through. About running my father's business at such a young age without experience and education, they said I could not. I did. About becoming the provider and carer for my mother and my siblings, they said I could not. I did. About gaining qualifications in my adult life, they said I could not. I did. About having a successful career, they said I could not. I did. Today, I am a member of the Scottish Parliament. They said I could not. I did. *[Applause.]*

My parents and our tragic experiences are why I am in politics today. I want to give back to society and to show other young women and girls like me that if they work hard and never give up, they can fulfil their dreams and ambitions. I would like to thank everybody who voted for the Scottish Conservatives and made history happen right here by electing not only one of the first women of colour in the Scottish Parliament, but the first Indian woman in the Scottish Parliament.

My ambition was to help others. Despite the fact that history has been made, we are measured only by the actions that we take while in office and the legacy that we leave and pass on. The achievement is not about winning the seat at the table: it is all about what we do at that table. That is what matters. That is why I will do everything that I can to protect the union that is so dear to me, and why I will do everything that I can to ensure that young people across Scotland have a fair crack of the whip and the chance to get on. I will do everything that I can to work with businesses so that education, training and skills are better aligned with business and economic needs.

Now let us talk about the union. I believe in the union because it has brought so much to me, my family and my friends—as it has for many others—in social and economic benefits and, above all, in

promoting the values of openness and inclusion. My parents were immigrants from the Punjab in India. Arriving in the United Kingdom in the late 1950s, my dad started out as a bus driver and my mum as a homemaker, in England. They moved to Glasgow from England to be nearer family. My parents started their own businesses here, because they wanted to provide better for their children, and were able to move freely around England and Scotland. Our story shows that the United Kingdom will always be the best place in the world for people from different backgrounds, religions and cultures to call their home.

I was made redundant from my job as a trading standards officer at Glasgow City Council and struggled, at the time, to find a job in Scotland. I did not want to rely on the state, so I went to work in England, so—thanks to the union—I stand here today with the experience and knowledge to help others. The benefits of the United Kingdom are why we need to unite, not to divide, and why we need to say no to separation.

I am especially proud to take up the role of shadow minister for further and higher education, youth employment and training, because education is very close to my heart. I know how difficult the pandemic has been for young people. My eldest son will graduate from the University of Glasgow this year after having completed his intercalated degree without having setting foot in the university. That situation will be being replicated all across the country and around the world.

Too often, young people are pressured to go to university as if it was some kind of marker of success in their future life, but some might want to get a job, to learn a trade or to start their own business. Whatever path a young person takes, we should be there to help, encourage and support them.

Further education was a vital lifeline for me. I left school with no qualifications or guidance, but fortunately, later in my life, I was able to choose a pathway that was right for me. It is never too late to learn, and I am a great advocate for lifelong learning; as I said, I handed in my PhD thesis last week.

There is no wrong path to take when leaving school. I say that now in the Parliament because I fear that it is not said often enough. I said earlier that we are judged by our actions. As an MSP, I want to lead the charge in making sure that young people across Scotland have the support, mentoring and advice that they need in order to get on.

I might be one of the first women of colour in the Scottish Parliament, but I will certainly not be the

last. I will hold that door open for others and I will endeavour to make you all proud.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I call Kaukab Stewart, who will make her first speech to the Parliament.

15:07

Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): Thank you, Presiding Officer. I welcome you to your new role.

It is a privilege to make my first speech as the member for Glasgow Kelvin. Having dedicated 30 years to educating our young people, I am honoured to contribute to today's education debate.

I congratulate the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills on her appointment. She brings a wealth of knowledge from her previous role as Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science.

I also thank her predecessor, John Swinney. Having known the Deputy First Minister for many years, I have no doubt about the extraordinary lengths that he went to for our young people. He is absolutely the right person to head up Scotland's Covid recovery.

That leads me to thank another inspiring servant of Scotland—Sandra White. She represented the people of Glasgow and Kelvin for the previous 22 years. Few members so resolutely and passionately champion their constituents. Sandra's parliamentary achievements include proposing legislation—the proposed responsible parking (Scotland) bill—and her efforts on the cross-party group on older people, age and ageing, which resulted in the Scottish Government creating a ministership. Sandra always stood up for those who needed her, whether they were in Partick, Gaza or Catalunya, and she always sought social justice and self-determination for all. Although she might have retired, I fear for Governments elsewhere that she might be just starting. We all wish her a very long and happy retirement.

I thank my family, campaign team and election agent extraordinaire, Councillor Kenny McLean. I offer my eternal thanks to all the activists for their hard work and good humour. I will do my level best to speak up for all the amazing vibrant and diverse communities of Glasgow Kelvin that I have been elected to represent.

Glasgow Kelvin not only voted yes in 2014, but has returned SNP MSPs and MPs in every election since 2011. There can be no denying where the majority of my constituents' constitutional beliefs lie, so I look forward to

putting the question to them formally, in a referendum, once again.

Out of the darkness of the past 18 months of Covid in Glasgow has come generosity of spirit, as communities found ways to support each other. My heartfelt sympathies go to all those who have lost loved ones. I thank all the key workers who continued to work throughout lockdown, and the incredible network of volunteers across Kelvin who mobilised overnight—literally—including the Annexe healthy living centre, the Language Hub, the Central gurdwara and the Glasgow City Mission. Kelvin stepped up and Glasgow stepped up.

Whatever our political colours, I am sure that we all respect the leadership that has been shown by our First Minister, who has steered us through the darkest of times and who has had to make the most difficult of decisions.

I turn to my previous profession—education—and acknowledge the extraordinary efforts of all staff across all sectors, parents and carers. From early years, to primary and secondary schools, to universities and colleges, our educators and support staff had to upskill rapidly and adapt pedagogy to ensure good-quality learning opportunities in the most stressful of times, they had to move to online learning and teaching platforms, and they had to staff school hubs for children of key workers. I ask the minister to join me in recognising the dedication of our education workforce at a time when they were also managing their own health and that of their families.

Remote learning exposed a digital divide. I therefore welcome the Government's additional investment to provide 40,000 more digital devices and a new digital learning academy. Our Scottish Government has committed to continue within its first 100 days to tackle the poverty-related attainment gap. Prior to the pandemic, progress was being made, so I welcome the first instalment of the additional £1 billion Scottish attainment fund to support and accelerate that progress.

I have every faith that schools have risen to the challenge and will continue to do so. However, they cannot do it alone. Poverty must also be addressed through social, economic and health policies. I ask the minister to ensure that the funds are also used to provide more recovery support to young people who have additional support needs, including those who are neurodiverse.

Government actions, including the special fund of £20 million for a summer support programme, an increase in the school clothing grant, free breakfasts and lunches for children up to primary 4 and the extension of that to all primary children all

year round are solid steps towards tackling poverty. Twenty thousand

“hungry weans will testify to that.”

All educational establishments have a duty to provide leadership that listens to the lived experience of our young people—from brash and overt racism to the more subtle, but equally harmful, microtransgressions and indignities that are suffered. As we develop our young workforce, the education profession needs to ensure for underrepresented groups equal opportunities in terms of recruitment, retention and promotion. I call on the minister to offer assurances that recruitment of the new 3,500 teachers and classroom assistants will reflect the communities that they represent and serve. The positive impact and benefits of that would be felt throughout society.

I am delighted to be part of such a diverse Scottish Parliament, but this is just the start; I look forward to helping to deliver. However, as the minister knows, I will not hesitate to push the Government further should I feel that it needs a bit of encouragement. The Government's bold and exciting education policy agenda will enable this and future generations to be hopeful and aspirational, as we recover.

The Presiding Officer: I call Martin Whitfield. This is Mr Whitfield's first speech in the Parliament.

15:14

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to speak in this education debate and to follow the most excellent first speech of Kaukab Stewart; a selfless speech in which she spoke highly of her love of her constituency—it was a pleasure to listen to it.

Rightly, as is the custom, I open by thanking voters in South Scotland who entrusted their list vote to Labour and thanking Labour members who entrusted their vote to me for my place on the list. South Scotland is a magnificent area that is home to beauty, history, culture and people who care for one another. It is an area that, sadly, is too easily forgotten or overlooked by those in Government, but I and my Labour colleagues Carol Mochan and Colin Smyth will ensure that that does not happen in the Parliament.

I thank Claudia Beamish, who represented South Scotland from 2016 until this year's election. Claudia was a true force in the Parliament. In 2016, she moved the first amendment to ban fracking, and only this year she reminded the Government that it has not gone far enough to tackle fuel poverty and energy efficiency or to create enough skilled green jobs. Her work on

climate change and her passion for caring for people and the planet will be remembered. I assure her that I and my Labour colleagues will continue to demand the same—and, indeed, more—from the Government.

I also thank Iain Gray, on his retirement as the constituency MSP for East Lothian. He was first elected to the Scottish Parliament for East Lothian in 2007, and he was re-elected in 2011 and again in 2016. In his time, he was Scottish Labour leader, held four ministerial posts and was convener of the Public Audit Committee. He was also shadow cabinet secretary for finance and then for education, skills and science. I owe much to Iain, and I believe that he fulfilled John F Kennedy's adage that one man can make a difference and every man should try. Iain more than tried. He made a difference to East Lothian, he made a difference to Scotland and he made a difference to people.

I need to turn to Covid, which is a subject that has touched everybody around the world. Far too many people—mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, friends and partners—have died. We will mourn that loss.

We rightly thank those who helped: those who worked in critical jobs, who volunteered, who went the extra mile and who walked the extra step. We applauded them and put up posters, but we must not forget that those individuals need our support in return. They need support in the form of safer employment, better wages, better houses and better physical and mental health support.

In my first speech, I would like to spend a few minutes talking about those who will bear the memory of Covid the longest: the youngest in our society. As a primary school teacher, I spoke to my class about how, in the future, they will be asked as adults to recall the events of now. They will be asked by future generations to talk about lockdown, home schooling, social distancing, face masks and the loss. It will fall to them to give the human remembrance, emotion and empathy to the pictures, news reports, books and, probably, films. Just as teachers today ask those who lived through the war to tell young people what that was like, that task will fall to those who are young today—the ones who were told that the virus would not affect them as badly, the ones who were told to go back to school, the ones who were told to socially distance and the ones who were told to bubble in school but to play with who they want outside.

When I have chatted to young people, they have said that what they really want is to be listened to. They want to be listened to about what scares them. They ask, "Can I bring the virus home to my family? What is my future going to be? What are you leaving me?" They want to be listened to

about their ideas. That is how we can get more state school pupils into university, and it is how the climate emergency can be combated. They want to be listened to about how they feel about exams. They want to be listened to so that they know that we understand their lives. As Stephen Covey, the American educationalist, said:

"The biggest communication problem is we do not listen to understand. We listen to reply."

As politicians, we frequently rush to be photographed with our young people, we meet them at climate rallies and we support their campaigns. However, I believe that our young have the right to be heard and considered. We would do well to remember that in Parliament. As article 12 of the UNCRC says, every child has the right to express their views on matters that affect them, and for those views to be taken into consideration, not just listened to.

Today, I once more give young people an assurance that I have tried to adhere to all my adult life. I will listen to them, not—as happens so frequently—as a tick-box exercise in consultation and as part of making the decision makers feel good because they have spoken to some young people, but so that their views are considered as a step to doing something, as an integral part of the solution and as a foundation of an idea from today to make tomorrow better.

To Ben, who emailed me, I say yes, I will hold to account those who have put you through exams by any other name. I know that you live in a society where your grades are the most crucial thing for what your future holds.

Let me quote a little bit of Ben's email:

"I apologise for how long and wordy this email has been. I find that I say quite a lot when I'm passionate about the topic! But I really hope you can understand where I am coming from with this and that you are able to do something so that progress can be made into changing Scotland's education system for the better."

Ben is a young person who knows the problem, but he seeks recourse not for himself but for other young people. I am reminded of Donald Dewar's words about this place. He said:

"This is about more than our politics and our laws. This is about who we are, how we carry ourselves."

For our young people, this is about more than politics and our laws. This is about the respect that we must have for our young people.

The Presiding Officer: Before I call the next speaker, colleagues will wish to be aware that we have a fair amount of time in hand, which means that there is plenty of time for interventions.

15:21

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): Presiding Officer, I welcome you and your colleagues to your new roles. As this is my first speech since the election, I also take the opportunity to thank my campaign team, activists and, of course, my family. I also thank my constituents for again putting their faith in me. I will never take for granted the faith and trust that they have put in me and I will always strive to be their voice here. That is why I will do today what I left off doing last term, and use much of my time to raise issues that my constituents in Coatbridge and Chryston have brought to me.

I welcome the Scottish Government's motion. I think that we are all agreed that there is no doubt that young people have borne the brunt of this pandemic, and that it is on their shoulders that restrictions weighed most heavily. We must remember that the nearly 15 months and counting of restrictions are a greater proportion of their lives than they are for us, as adults.

I will tell a wee personal story about my youngest son, who has spent roughly half of his life under restrictions. He was pre-verbal before the pandemic struck and I find his understanding of the virus fascinating. He speaks to me every night before going to sleep. When he said, "Daddy, I like the virus," I asked him why, and he said, "Because it now lets me go in gran and grandad's house." That is his understanding of it. Obviously, as time goes on, we will work through those things. Others, including the previous speaker, have talked about the impact on our young people, and I can certainly see that.

The other major issue is of course that the pandemic has exacerbated the poverty-related attainment gap. During the recent election campaign, I was proud to stand on our manifesto commitments that will help to address that gap and build on the work that was done during the last session under the previous cabinet secretary. We have already spoken about free school meals for all primary school pupils and free laptops to reduce digital inequality and increase access. I very much look forward to those commitments being rolled out in my constituency, where they will be very beneficial.

The approach as we build back has to be more than academic. I do not like the phrases "catching up" or "missed generations". Although I am sure that they are not meant this way when they are used, I feel that they are derogatory to our young people and our teachers who—bluntly—have worked their socks off. What our young people need is emotional support to make sense of the year that they have been through, which I am glad was reflected in the cabinet secretary's statement through examples such as the summer

programme, helping children and families to reconnect, and starting to make investment in outdoor play parks.

On that point, I think that outdoor education will be more crucial than ever—if that is possible—in the post-pandemic period. There is real potential for the Government and the Parliament to be innovative in how we provide such education. Yesterday, I was pleased to sign up to a cross-party group on outdoor education that is in the process of being formed. Liz Smith, who has been a fantastic advocate of outdoor education, is spearheading that.

I have been pleased to hear about investment in more teaching staff, which is very welcome as we build back. It is important that we continue to recognise that teaching can be a challenging job and that teachers can sometimes be in danger. I raise that issue because, last night, I had a telephone surgery conversation with a teacher from my constituency, who reported that she has had violence directed at her inside and outside school, to the point that she is now considering quitting. By all accounts, she is a very capable teacher who is well liked by her students. She feels that she has been supported by her school, but that there is only so much that her management and the police can do. Alex Rowley raised the matter at First Minister's question time last week, and I wanted to let the cabinet secretary know that I will write to her directly about the case in question. Any further support or advice that her office can provide will be much appreciated.

I want to conclude on an issue that has dominated my mailbox this week—that of nursery graduations. At the end of last week, parents started to get in touch with me to tell me that they had been advised by the council that they would not be allowed to attend those significant milestone events. What was striking was that many early learning providers had already made arrangements for those events to be held outside and to involve staggered groups, and for there to be distancing between parents, with masks available. Those are all the sensible mitigations to keep everyone safe that we have become used to. The parents who have written to me are rightly baffled. How is attending such an event radically different from standing outside at young children's football, waiting at the school gates or attending hospitality events?

No one is saying that such events should be unsafe. There are different kinds of transition events—it is likely to be more difficult to make safe a visit to a new school or centre, but it is surely possible to manage an outdoor nursery graduation safely. Centres that I have spoken to want to put on such events for their kids. We have all said that our kids have lost so much this year—we have all

noticed it. Some of that could not be helped but, as we build back, we should do what we can to ensure that our children are truly at the heart of our recovery.

I know that the guidance is loose and that some local authorities are allowing outside graduations, with mitigations, while others are not. I ask the Minister for Higher Education and Further Education, Youth Employment and Training to reflect on whether there is something that the Government could do about that, if he is able to. It might seem like a small thing, but it is not to the hundreds of families and parents of children who have contacted me and other elected members—for example, I know that Neil Gray has had a lot of contact on the issue.

We have an opportunity to show that we do not want to just talk about putting our children first, but that we will take steps to ensure that they are put first, even if we need to pause other activities for adults in order to make sure that we are all safe. Allowing kids to have a memorable graduation that they can share with their parents and guardians as they move to the next stage of their education is one way in which we can do that.

I support the Government's motion.

15:28

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I join other members in welcoming you to your new role, Presiding Officer. I also take the opportunity to congratulate all those members who have made their first speeches today. The quality of their speeches bodes well for an interesting next five years.

Before I move to the substance of my speech, I declare that I have a daughter who is a secondary school teacher. To be thorough, I declare that I also have a daughter who transitioned from primary 7 into secondary school during the Covid lockdown.

I am delighted to be back in the chamber and debating education, which is a subject that I think has a direct link to many portfolios, especially health, my previous portfolio. I have often said that education is the solution to health and welfare issues. The past 15 months has undoubtedly been incredibly difficult for so many people, none more so than our children, our teachers and parents, and those who are trying to navigate their way through higher education.

People have gone above and beyond during the pandemic, and none more so than our teachers. However, the support offered to them fell woefully short of where it should have been pre-pandemic, let alone during the pandemic, and that from a Government that declared at the beginning of the

previous session of Parliament that education was its number 1 priority.

We start the recovery from a position where there are 1,700 fewer teachers than there were when the SNP came to power, and many of those who are working are on temporary contracts. Schools are far from being back to the normal curriculum, with essential wellbeing subjects such as sport, art, drama and music not being available during normal school hours, let alone in extra-curricular settings. Our outdoor education system is, frankly, on its knees and there is a possibility that 40 per cent of those essential education centres will not reopen. That is important, because the first priority in our education system must be the physical and mental wellbeing of our pupils. How can we expect them to catch up with missed education if they are struggling with anxiety and poor mental health? The subjects that I mentioned are key to the delivery of positive mental health.

Here is the thing, Presiding Officer: surely no assessment that is done while a pupil is experiencing mental distress can have any value. Where is the SNP planning to help the increasing numbers of pupils who are suffering poor mental health? We know that more than 2,000 children are waiting more than a year for treatment. How can pupils attain under those circumstances?

I spoke to a teacher who said that the unprecedented number of pupils who are presenting with poor mental health is so high that they fear they could miss a sign that could lead to a tragedy. That is a dreadful cloud for teachers to have to work under. Mental health provision must be a prerequisite for the education recovery, and I ask the minister, Jamie Hepburn, to tell the Parliament when he winds up the debate what work he is doing with the health portfolio to deliver on that.

Other members have spoken about the continual issues with the assessment programme and the inequality of that system. I listened to an education expert, Lindsay Paterson, on Radio Scotland this week and he was scathing in his condemnation of the system that has been developed by the Scottish Government and the SQA. It is fundamentally unfair. Whether we liked the system of exams or not, pupils at least recognised that they were all being evaluated under the same criteria irrespective of where they lived in the country. Currently, however, there will be pupils who sit the assessments later than others who will have seen the papers beforehand, so it is no wonder that anxiety is so high. I do not think that the SNP has learned from last year.

However, what I really want to discuss is the opportunity that we have to reset Scotland's education system to deliver skills and opportunities based on future need. We have set a

net zero carbon target for 2045, so delivering on the economics of the environment and climate change should be a priority. We should have an education system that has the green economy embedded within it, but on examination we find that that is not the case.

Scotland has some of the best wind resource in the world, for example, but we do not develop the technology. We just invest in turbines, which are imported, and the skills to service them are far too often imported as well. Why are we not leading the world in the development and manufacture of such technology? Given Scotland's long and celebrated heritage in engineering, how can the Scottish Government justify importing so much of the green energy technology and skills that we need to hit the net zero target for 2045? Why are our schools and colleges not properly resourced to allow the development of those skills?

The 2020 Scottish Council for Development and Industry report "Manifesto for Clean Growth" notes that the shortage in green skills presents the biggest challenge to green growth. Engineering apprenticeships are readily available in my region, but there is a shortage of take-up, which requires companies to search overseas to fill apprenticeship places. Why do our pupils feel that they cannot fill those important roles?

In health, when my middle daughter applied to train in midwifery, there were more than 400 applications for 44 places. Applications outstripped places tenfold, yet we have a shortage of midwives. The same can be said of nurses, physios and many other allied health professionals and occupational health physicians. We have a shortage of doctors, yet we have mailbags telling us that straight-A students are unable to secure medical school places because the Scottish Government has a cap on Scottish student places in medical schools. Mental health practitioners are in demand, yet the opportunities for our pupils to train in that field are limited.

The same issue applies to digital, software and cyberspace, as Mr Marra said, because of the lack of teachers in information technology. We have a continuing issue with a lack of females studying STEM—science, technology, engineering and mathematics—subjects. In short, we are not resourcing our education system to deliver on future technologies and jobs.

In the previous session, the SNP put education as its main priority, then promptly dropped its education bill from the programme. That would have been an opportunity to reset our education system for the future and develop the skills and resources to deliver on our children's ambitions. Instead, we have a teacher shortage, an underfunded FE sector and a Scottish Government seemingly unable to join the dots up

and link future job demands with our educational output.

If we map our recovery programme, surely education has to mirror the job requirements of the future, and we must make sure that the resource is there to match that. It is about time that education is finally made the priority of the Government.

15:35

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): Presiding Officer, I formally welcome you to your position and the cabinet secretary to hers. Following on from Fulton MacGregor, I thank my campaign team and the people of Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale, who returned me with an increased majority. [*Interruption.*] Thank you, Ms Baillie.

I do not think that anyone needs to tell anyone here about the value of a good state education, least of all me. I was interested in Pam Gosal's speech. I kind of lost heart when she got on to the union, but we will dispute that in a civilised fashion as the months go on.

I say to Ms Gosal that this is not a competition, but decades ago—I am not asking her to count them—I was the oldest child of five living in a council house. I was the first girl to stay on at school beyond the age of 15. In those days, girls left at 15 and got married at 18, but I did not do either of those things. I was the first to attend university. A couple of degrees later and after two professions—as a secondary teacher and a solicitor—I, like others here, value state education, from early years through to university, and I want other people to have that.

I do not always commend the Government for everything, but I commend it for the 1,140 hours of early years education; for universal school meals, which are coming for primary schools and are part of the educational process; and for no tuition fees. Those are all good interventions.

It is a long time since I was a secondary teacher, and I would not dare say that I know what that job now entails, even though I have two sisters who are former primary teachers and a niece who is now a deputy head. During the tough lockdown days, secondary teachers delivered online tutoring and they turned up at family homes with paperwork. They are now back in our schools, lateral flow testing and delivering for their charges in their classes. Sometimes the whole school needs to be shut because of the invasive virus. Teachers are on the front line.

We rightly applauded our front-line social care and healthcare staff, and today, in this debate,

through our contributions I know that we will applaud the teachers and support staff who work in each individual—and individualistic—school community. Parents, grandparents and carers stoically became tutors, and we give our thanks to them, too.

It hardly needs saying that there is no doubt that the pandemic and its fallout have impacted on the wellbeing of Scotland's pupils, staff and the wider community—and indeed ourselves—perhaps more than we yet know. I say to Oliver Mundell, who failed to take my intervention—big mistake—that he completely sidestepped the impact of Covid on public services over these one and a half years. I am not saying that Governments do not make mistakes, but at least he could have mentioned that impact.

I want to focus on staff. What support is being given to them, given the stresses that they have had and continue to cope with? What issues have the various professional bodies raised with the cabinet secretary? We are asking staff to do a lot, so we have to maintain their wellbeing.

I turn to our children, for whom face masks—others have mentioned this—have become the norm. For a long time, the closest that they came to human interaction outwith their own household units was to sit at a computer, making friends with strangers. Each pupil had a different experience based on whether they had full-time access to the internet, especially in the early days; whether they had space at home in which to work and concentrate; and whether adults in the household had time to dedicate to them—although it was no fault of theirs if they did not.

I note that funding has been provided to local authorities to assist with the mental health and wellbeing fallout of our pupils. I believe in local democracy, but will there be an audit of how councils have utilised that ring-fenced funding so that outcomes can be measured? How is that funding being applied to vulnerable children and to those with additional learning needs?

I will digress slightly, because I did not get to ask the First Minister a question. In almost every walk of life, there is at least one bad apple. The cabinet secretary may be aware that some children in my constituency with additional needs were subject to sustained abuse by their teacher. That was denied by Scottish Borders Council years ago, when it claimed that an independent inquiry had exonerated her. Only a subsequent and recent criminal prosecution with a conviction, inter alia, of serious assault, and pressure from me as the local MSP have pushed the council to pursue yet another independent inquiry. Is there a role for the cabinet secretary or for her office in monitoring that? The cabinet secretary will

appreciate why the parents and carers of the affected children are sceptical.

Brian Whittle: Will the member accept an intervention?

Christine Grahame: Of course, because Mr Whittle will take one from me next time.

Brian Whittle: I would never dare not to take an intervention from Ms Grahame.

I am interested in Ms Grahame's tangent because I have a similar issue. Have her constituents experienced the destruction of evidence, or the council not taking or keeping evidence, as some of mine have?

Christine Grahame: I am glad that I took Mr Whittle's intervention. If there are others in the chamber who have experienced such issues on their patches, we should get together to talk about that. Parents are often overwhelmed by authorities saying, "There's nothing to see here." Politicians should not have to step in; I am not giving myself a pat on the back. I am angry that the system let them down for years and that a criminal prosecution was the only thing that brought the council to book, at least to some extent.

I note that there are suggestions south of the border that the school day should be extended to allow pupils to "catch up". I agree with Fulton MacGregor that that is an unfortunate and unhelpful term. I have reservations about the implications that that would have for the wellbeing of both staff and pupils. Children already spend long enough in school.

School is about more than the basics of academic learning and of exams. It is about socialising and—dare I say it?—having fun, although not at the expense of the class teacher, which I do not encourage.

Oliver Mundell: Will the member take an intervention?

Christine Grahame: No, thank you. *[Laughter.]* That was unrehearsed, Mr Mundell, was it not?

If the school week or day is to be extended I would suggest, as I have before, that we consider summer schooling, to include sports, music, gardening and simply playing. That could do more for the health and wellbeing of our children than keeping them between the four walls of the classroom for more hours. I was pleased that the cabinet secretary mentioned summer activity programmes. I would like to know more about that. I am beginning to commend Mr Whittle. This is not a team effort, but Mr Whittle constantly talks about the importance of physical activity for mental wellbeing and educational attainment. He is absolutely right and I support him in that. Not only do such activities support learning, anything done

outside is more resistant to Covid transmission. There could also be employment for outdoor activity businesses, which have lost revenue during lockdown, and additional transport opportunities and revenue for local bus services if things happen at night. Is the Government looking at that possibility?

There are no easy solutions to bring recovery for Scotland's pupils from nursery school through to tertiary learning. I have skimmed across a wide surface, but I return to where I began. The most valuable asset in a school or a nursery is its teaching staff—with the exception of the aforementioned bad apples and those who support them. Teachers have been asked to do so much over recent months and they have delivered. On behalf of my constituents in Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale, I extend my sincere thanks for all that teachers have done and continue to do in educating—in the broadest sense—those in their charge.

15:44

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

This has been a broad debate, and there are many areas of agreement. However, I share the concerns that have been raised about this year's exam programme.

I would like to focus on a few key issues, the first of which is deferral of primary 1 for children who are four and a half years old. The cabinet secretary will know that the legislation on that issue was changed in the previous parliamentary session, after sustained campaigning and evidence from the Give Them Time campaign. The change is welcome, but I make a plea to the Government to bring forward the implementation period for the policy. The current timescale is that it is to be fully introduced by 2023, to allow for pilots and for local authority delivery to be costed. However, there are strong arguments for the need to bring implementation forward, not least in light of the past year in education.

Much focus has been placed on schools this afternoon, but early years education has also been significantly impacted in the past year. Nurseries and early years centres have worked hard to keep in touch with families and children and to provide stimulus and engagement, but young children have missed out on so much opportunity for socialisation and learning. Those who are due to start school at four and a half are already disadvantaged by having only a year and half of nursery provision instead of a full two years. The isolation that children experienced in the past few months strengthens the argument that parents should have the right to continue with a funded nursery place if they believe that that is in their child's interests.

Implementation of the policy must be brought forward. The argument about whether nursery provision should match the parents' right to choose whether their child starts formal education once the child is five has been won; the question is when that right will be introduced. I cannot understand why the five local authorities that were chosen to pilot the programme are those that already grant 100 per cent of applications. Meanwhile, constituents across my region have been denied nursery places, or even charged for places in local authority nurseries. That seems ridiculous when the policy is on the brink of change and the principle behind it has already been accepted. Recently, the City of Edinburgh Council announced that it will grant all such requests. The Government needs to stop delaying the introduction of the policy and implement it now, so that the 2021 intake can take advantage of the change.

In the previous session of Parliament, mine was one of the voices that called for an equality audit, following concerns about the impact of the lockdown on school education. The first lockdown exacerbated the educational inequality that already existed. Children and young people from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds faced significant challenges in accessing online resources, children in need of additional support struggled to get that support remotely or at home, and there was a postcode lottery in the type and frequency of teacher support and learning available.

That equality audit was published in the previous session. It looked at the overall experience up to August 2020 and provided an analysis of certain schools up to November 2020. Since then, we have had a further period of school closures. We must have a focus on learning for all young people and an intensification of the support that is available for learning—and that must be a long-term commitment. The impact of the months of remote learning is broad, and we must ensure that the needs of all children and young people are met as education starts to rebuild and recover. We must not accept there being a lost generation because of the pandemic. Investing in our young people's futures is key to our recovery.

The equality audit showed that learners in better-off families spent 30 per cent more time studying than those in poorer families. The digital divide, access to adequate space and parental support were all factors in the quality of learning. The audit also recognised the impact of the intersectionality of poverty-related disadvantage with other disadvantages, such as additional support needs. We all recognise the efforts that teachers and schools made—other members have spoken about that, and I fully support their views—

but we cannot deny the impact of the past year on education.

In the second set of school closures, more structured learning was provided, perhaps because processes were more developed, but there was still a significant impact on the mental and physical health of children and young people. There were also impacts from the disengagement of too many children and young people who need the structure and discipline of the school day, and from the cancellation of exams. The impact of the last-minute introduction of exam assessments on children's futures is still unknown, and it is causing much worry and concern.

The audit points towards policies and mitigations, and the Government speaks about introducing some of them. I would like greater clarity on solutions. The report talks about youth work and the role of the third sector, the need for smaller class sizes, and increased tutoring and one-to-one learning. We need radical solutions, and we need to be innovative if we are to rebuilt children's lives and opportunities.

On the exam programme, I would like the Government to commit to a resit guarantee. Can it provide any assurances that the impact of Covid-19 will be taken into consideration in assessments? Other members have raised that issue this afternoon, and I look for clarity on it in the minister's closing speech. I am concerned that some young people who would otherwise have achieved results through school attendance have been unable to perform in the assessments. They were allowed no study leave, with assessments taking place during the school day, with there often being multiple assessments in different subjects on the same day.

Progress on closing the attainment gap has so far been glacial, and the challenges that we face now, following the experience of the past year, make progress even more difficult to achieve.

In the past few years, it has become standard in high schools for the academic year to start in June, to provide students with enough time to complete the curriculum before the following year's exams. My understanding is that that is not happening this year. What does that mean for students sitting exams in 2022 and their ability to complete their coursework?

I will close with some comments about further and higher education and the importance of additional funding support for students. The steps to provide extra funding for the extension of courses are welcome, but we must ensure that there is an equitable approach across different circumstances and courses. A key source of funding for students—for many, it is essential—is the employment that they can get during the

summer holidays. We must make sure that students who would normally work to support their studies are not prevented from continuing their courses as a result of Covid impacting their employment opportunities. I know that the student hardship taskforce has been looking at that and I would welcome information from the Government on any plans to provide students with tailored support solutions this year.

The Presiding Officer: I call Jim Fairlie. This will be Mr Fairlie's first speech in the Parliament.

15:51

Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP): Thank you, Presiding Officer. I, too, will take the liberty of extending my time and thanking various people in this, my first speech in our Scottish Parliament.

I thank the campaign team, who worked their socks off to make sure that we held the constituency of Perthshire South and Kinross-shire for the SNP. The efforts of every one of them were immense and they were greatly appreciated.

The seat was previously held very tightly and ably by the titan of the independence movement, Roseanna Cunningham. Given her 25 years of continuous service to Perthshire as an MP and as an MSP, and to the country as a minister and as a cabinet secretary, we all owe her a huge debt of gratitude. On a personal note, I put on record my sincere thanks to her for all her help and her counsel, and for her friendship, which continues to be invaluable.

As an aside, I wonder why, if we add John Swinney and Pete Wishart, they keep calling Perth a Tory toon, because it hasnae been that for a very long time.

I would also like to thank someone else—much to my shame, I forgot to thank her in my election day acceptance speech—and that is my fabulous wife, Anne. She simply makes my ability to do what I need to do possible. We all need a rock and a safe space in our lives, and Anne is undoubtedly mine.

Finally, I thank the constituents of Perthshire South and Kinross-shire, who put me in this place to represent them and the most beautiful, diverse and dynamic area of Scotland, which I have had the pleasure of calling home for my entire life.

The constituency is blessed with a food offering and a hospitality sector that are hard to beat. Farm shops, such as the Jamesfield organic centre, Loch Leven's Larder and Glogburn farm shop, give access to the best of local produce. I am very proud to have been the founder of Perth farmers market, which helped to establish markets and

farm shops such as those that I have mentioned right across the country.

The constituency is doubly blessed in having people who take that produce at the farm gate and turn it into artistry on a plate. I am immensely proud of my late brother Andy's restaurant at Gleneagles hotel, where Steve McLaughlin and Dale Dewsbury keep the flame burning very brightly in Restaurant Andrew Fairlie. It is still the only restaurant with two Michelin stars in Scotland.

The flipside of that is that we live in a society where there are still folk for whom even the simplest of meals is a struggle to secure. That is why there are charities such as Broke Not Broken, which has just received the Queen's award for voluntary service, the Letham Climate Challenge swap shop and Letham4All—they have come into their own.

Let us not be under any illusions. For all the brilliant work that such organisations carry out in our communities, the need for them is an affront to decency. It is a moral stain on our society that we still need food banks for the working poor, and that we still have second-hand recycling shops for people who find themselves with no cutlery and plates to eat off, let alone a table to sit at, a bed to sleep in or a chair to sit on.

I humbly give my immense thanks to all those organisations, while at the same time pledging to do everything in my power to make them utterly redundant and unneeded. When our constituents send us here, they do so in the rightful expectation that we will come to the chamber with purpose. That, surely, is one purpose that we can all get behind.

Presiding Officer, I have taken advantage of the degree of latitude that you allow first-time speakers, but the link between education, homelessness, poverty and poor life chances is real. If the education that we give our children and young people does not work for them, their life chances are reduced. School, for me, was purgatory. I was neither engaged nor enthused and I was given no vision or ambition for what I could achieve. No one tapped into my ability for entrepreneurial thinking, simply because I was not academic. I had ideas, ambition and imagination, but no one was listening to what those ideas were.

My daughters went to the same school that I did and when they told me that it was becoming a health-promoting school I took the opportunity to get involved. A health-promoting school tackles health holistically, covering the physical and mental health of the child, the health of the facilities and the health of the community in which the school resides; it includes the educators and embraces community involvement. I got involved with the principal aim of reaching out to the

youngsters who, like me, were disengaged and heading off on the wrong course.

We developed a school garden, grew vegetables and sold them to the home economics department, which used that produce to teach cooking. Then we went further. The young people were taught to understand the value of what they produced by establishing a link to Scone palace and selling tickets to a grand banquet. The food for the banquet was grown, cooked and sold for £30 a ticket by an engaged and vibrant group of young people, some of whom, like me, thought that school was purgatory. Some of them went on to join the hospitality industry. Those who did not still developed life skills and critical thinking that stood them in good stead. They all learned something. We ran the project for five years and improved it year after year.

I have an ambition that every child in my constituency will have learned how to make a pot of soup by the time they leave primary school. I have to be honest and say that I nicked that idea from Mike Small of the Fife diet. Anyone else who wants to do the same can get involved and help me make that happen. Claire Baker and I have spoken of it before, and Liz Smith is not present so I will catch her later. Mike is not precious about it. He just wants our kids to get a proper education.

I recently visited Comrie primary school, which has joined up with John Castley from the Wild Hearth Bakery in Comrie to grow heritage wheat. They will harvest and mill the wheat, and John will teach them the science behind making bread. The pupils at Comrie primary school have already been taught to make soup. They do it every week—and then they go into the woods for an outdoor learning session with a flask of soup that they made themselves. Such fabulous things are happening right across my constituency and right across Scotland.

What I have described is, in a tiny way, curriculum for excellence in action. The headteacher of Comrie primary school tells me that she loves CfE because it gives her the freedom and flexibility to teach her children holistically, based on the principle of delivering enthused, engaged and well-rounded young people who can think critically and practically for themselves. For that is what they do: when I was at Comrie primary school, the school eco group brought to my attention the fact that single-use plastic dinner trays are being used to serve them lunch and they want that stopped. I put Tayside Contracts on notice that I will be in touch, but that is a different debate for another day.

To the cabinet secretary, I say that, for all the pressure that she will come under—as she will—and all the howls of protest that will come from the Opposition, she should stick with it and be strong

and bold. Where this country leads right now, others will follow. Our education system is going through a transition, but so is every one of us. We should all embrace the fact that we are learning new stuff every day—learning never stops. Education is not just about the three Rs or academic qualifications; it is about teaching young people who they are and finding ways to engage their critical thinking, analysis and ability to problem solve. It is about giving them the practical skills to go into society equipped to take on whatever life throws at them—and let us face it: the past year has thrown something significant at them.

When Scotland takes the decision, which it will, to become an independent country, vibrant, thinking, entrepreneurial and ambitious young people will be the engine room of its success. My purpose in being in the chamber is to help to make sure that that vision becomes a reality.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Fairlie, for taking advantage of the latitude to speak for longer during your first speech in the chamber.

16:00

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): I thank all education staff for their work during the pandemic. For transparency, I point out that I have many teachers in my immediate and extended family. From changing plans at the drop of a hat to trying to enthuse and engage primary 1s through Teams, the pressure on teachers has, at times, been overwhelming, but they have often been the normality in a time of chaos for children and young people, and that should not be underestimated.

To pick up on Claire Baker's point about the Give Them Time campaign, I have had constituents contact me recently regarding deferral refusals, despite support for the deferral from education professionals. The worst of it is that those constituents are aware that, if they moved to the City of Edinburgh Council area, the deferral would, in all likelihood, be granted. It is time to end the postcode lottery for deferrals.

As we recover from Covid-19 and attempt to make up some of the lost ground in education, Scotland's colleges will play a central role. For many students, colleges are the best way to access and sit highers. Given the disruption to qualifications in the past two years, more young people than ever before may rely on that facility in the next academic year. Colleges also offer vocational courses that prepare people for areas that are key to the economic recovery or the delivery of policies for which there is broad agreement across the chamber, such as those on childcare and social care.

Those are all reasons why it is important that college staff are treated with dignity and respect. However, for many lecturers and support staff, that simply has not been the case, not only throughout the pandemic but for years beforehand. Instead of recognising how important the role of lecturers is, college management have repeatedly sought to undermine and downgrade lecturers in a crude attempt to cut costs. Management have sought to replace lecturers with instructor posts, in which people are on lower wages and have less time for preparation and marking, and for which there is often no requirement to have a teaching qualification.

Those repeated attacks on the role of lecturers have directly undermined the hard-won progress that has been made over the past decade by the Educational Institute of Scotland-Further Education Lecturers Association through negotiations and industrial action. Unfortunately, renegeing on previous agreements has become all too common a tactic for college management. On far too many occasions, an agreement has been reached between unions and management only for the trade unions to have to take further action simply to get management to honour their own deal. Five of the past seven years have seen major industrial action as a result of that. It is no way to run Scottish colleges.

One of the key challenges that the Government faces is how to break that cycle. In Central Scotland, Forth Valley College has been at the heart of the on-going dispute. The people involved are dedicated lecturers who support schools to deliver highers and advanced highers as well as other vocational courses. At school, my advanced higher biology labs were at the college, as was my sister's higher psychology course. We both went on to study those subjects at university, and they have had a large impact on our lives.

The college supports other local businesses by providing modules and courses for apprentices. This week, we have discussed the post-pandemic economic recovery, and we have to recognise how essential teaching staff are to that. A jobs guarantee for young people that provides progression and professional development in Central Scotland will rely on our colleges and, specifically in Falkirk, on Forth Valley College. Twenty-seven lecturing posts there have already been downgraded to instructor-assessor posts, which has been challenged by the lecturers' union.

Lecturers have been forced to choose between that downgrading of their position and redundancy. Pre-pandemic, that would have been an outrage but, now, forcing people to choose between having a wage and a fundamental change in their terms and conditions with no consultation is callous. That is the fire-and-rehire practice that

SNP MPs at Westminster are rightly campaigning against. So, where is the Scottish Government on the issue? Despite a national agreement on terms and conditions for lecturers having once again been agreed, the dispute at Forth Valley College continues, although some progress has been made and strike action is currently suspended as the dispute is reviewed.

Colleges are public bodies that the Government funds through the Scottish Funding Council. If the Government is serious about its own fair work agenda, why does that funding not come with stricter conditions on issues such as honouring agreements that are reached through national bargaining and the prevention of fire-and-rehire practices? It is clear that governance reform is needed at the individual college level and at the national level when it comes to negotiations.

For too long, the Scottish Government has appeared content to stick its head in the sand, hoping that disputes will resolve themselves. During the election campaign, we heard positive indications from the previous further education minister that that approach might change. For the sake of college staff, students and the economic recovery to which they are essential, I dearly hope that that is the case.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): Stuart McMillan will now join us remotely.

16:05

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): Thank you, Presiding Officer. Congratulations on your new role.

I am pleased to speak in the debate. It is clear that a few issues need to be considered, and I will focus my comments on three of them: first, on the present situation that educators face with the alternative certification model; secondly, on the first 100 days of the new Scottish Government; and, thirdly, on the longer-term future of education and what the SNP Scottish Government intends to do.

I listened to the cabinet secretary yesterday and today, in addition to MSPs across the chamber who raised legitimate questions about the situation that school students face and that of the exams replacement this year. As a constituency MSP, I know how challenging the situation was last summer, when the results were published and anger and frustration then developed. I know constituents who believe that the situation was not acceptable. I also know, however, that the exam replacement was brought together in a short space of time as a consequence of the pandemic.

One thing was abundantly clear: the use of an algorithm appeared to have a negative effect on

less well-off communities such as mine. The fact that a postcode is less salubrious should not mean that children in that area have another impediment in their way as they attempt to learn. Yesterday's confirmation from the cabinet secretary that

"Those grades will be based not on historical data or on use of an algorithm, but on what each individual learner has demonstrated that they know, understand and can do, through the work on which they have been assessed in school or college"—[*Official Report*, 2 June 2021; c 2.]

indicates to me that that vital lesson from last year has certainly been learned.

Clearly, the creation of the national qualifications 2021 group, which was established in October 2020 with representatives of teachers, learners and parents working alongside local authorities, the SQA and the Government, was the right thing to do. That partnership approach, which helped to design this year's arrangements, is hugely important and I fully support it. I am sure that, if there were no such approach, politicians from across the chamber would be challenging the Scottish Government on a lack of partnership—we hear that comment all the time. That challenge, however, would have been correct and supported in the chamber and across the country.

The second point that I want to touch on is that of the first 100 days of this parliamentary session. I want to ensure that barriers are removed to allow our young people the chance to learn, which is why I am delighted to support the SNP manifesto. The following key parts of our education ambitions are only some of the excellent initiatives in it. The first part is the funding of councils to increase teacher numbers by 1,000 and classroom assistants by 500 as part of our commitment to funding 3,500 additional teachers and classroom assistants over the parliamentary session.

The second key part is the roll-out of the £20 million summer programme to help children to "socialise, play and reconnect" and to enable children and their families to access activities that help them to recover from the pandemic. I was pleased that the Inverclyde Council announced its holiday hubs on 26 May, which the council is, once again, delivering in partnership with the Scottish Government and Children in Scotland.

The third part is the paying of the first instalment of the expanded £1 billion Scottish attainment fund.

The fourth part is the abolition of fees for music and arts education, including instrumental music tuition in schools and the renewed funding for Sistema Scotland. As somebody who learned an instrument as a child, I know how important the activity is. As well as the long-term benefits that playing an instrument affords the individual, abolishing the fees is an investment in the future.

The abolition of the core curriculum charges for all pupils will enable children to take the subjects that they want to take, without families having to struggle to meet the costs of resources and materials for practical lessons. That will be transformational for many young people. I know how important the planned provision of tablets and laptops for all school children will be for many communities in my constituency.

Following the agreement of the first allocation of funding to councils for the refurbishment of play parks, it is important that that investment is also used for equipment that is accessible to children with disabilities. Some such equipment has already been installed in Inverclyde—it is first class and I welcome it; however, I would like to see more of it, both in my constituency and across the country.

My next point relates to children with visual impairments. I was pleased to hear what the cabinet secretary said earlier regarding the Sight Scotland briefing. I am sure that a reconvened cross-party group on visual impairment—I have chaired the group for the past two sessions—would be delighted to invite her to a meeting in due course to discuss those young people's educational and employment challenges. In his previous role, Jamie Hepburn attended that cross-party group.

My final point concerns the review of the SQA and Education Scotland, which was touched on by the cabinet secretary. I was pleased to hear what the cabinet secretary said yesterday in reply to my question about the review, and I fully acknowledge the two OECD reports as well as the other work that is under way. A reform that is based on function and governance is crucial, and I hope that any public involvement in such a review is robust.

Every MSP wants to improve our education system. Quite rightly, we should always be looking at improvements. However, Oliver Mundell's comments about the past world-leading education system were a bit rich. Mr Mundell was a member of the cross-party group on dyslexia—as I was—so he has heard some of the horror stories about how that so-called world-leading education system, which he wants to bring back, failed many people over many years. I do not believe that a system that allowed children to be told that they would amount to nothing was world leading, and I do not believe that a system that allowed children with dyslexia to be told that they were stupid was world leading. I want an education system that nurtures, not stigmatises, and that encourages, not castigates.

Continual improvement in education, just as in every other aspect of life, is necessary if we are to help our young people on their journey, and it is a challenge that we must step up to. Over the

course of the next five years, I am quite sure that we will.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The last speaker in the open debate is Sue Webber. This will be Sue Webber's first speech to our Parliament.

16:12

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): Thank you, Presiding Officer. I congratulate you on your new role.

I am incredibly pleased to be speaking in this education debate. As a newly elected MSP for the Lothian region, I share and reaffirm my commitment to the area in which I grew up, attended school and went to university. I have lived and worked here for most of my life. I care deeply for the area and am very proud to call it my home.

I stood for election to be a strong voice for the local communities. People who know me know that I will keep that promise, so when I receive from constituents correspondence in which they raise serious concerns about the harrowing experiences that their families are going through, and legitimate concerns about their children's futures, I have to ensure that their voices are heard. Just as all our futures hung in the balance during the election campaign, so too do the futures of school children across Scotland, because of the alternative certification model. It seems to be shaping up to be yet another exams fiasco for the SNP Government.

One of my constituents contacted me to share his first-hand experience of the debacle of the process and, to be frank, it is alarming. Initially, students were told that they would not sit exams this year. The SQA then released exam-style papers and schools sent out exam timetables with only four weeks' warning. Parents had no guidance on how to prepare their children for that, either academically or emotionally, in such a short timeframe.

Teachers were also under immense pressure to organise the exams as quickly as possible, which led to knock-on effects for other pupils and impacted particularly on pupils' mental health. Being faced with exams under such conditions is unreasonable, especially with the added confusion of being told that the exams were not exams after all.

My constituent, who is a parent, told me that never in his children's school life had he been so stressed. He told me that

"it was absolutely beyond any sense and completely unthinking to subject young people to that amount of strain ... which is still occurring. ... As parents, we felt utterly

disorientated, not knowing how to support our children or understand the importance ... these tests had ... Information was patchy, conflicting, and very hard to come by. It has been and continues to be a very anxiety provoking experience for the whole family ... Things have felt very disempowering to us because we cannot understand how to support our children and the consequences ... these assessments will have."

There have also been worrying stories of the content of the exams being

"freely available to ... students due to exams being repeated on different days. This was by cheat sheets ... WhatsApp groups and other electronic platforms."

That put some children at a huge disadvantage if they were in the first cohort to sit the exams. My constituent feels

"at a loss to understand how schools and teachers will be able to mark papers fairly, and I feel the whole thing is a sham."

Those are his words. He carries on:

"I feel exceptionally angry that grades and futures could be decided on this."

He also told me that he had written to the SQA to raise his concerns, but

"the reply I was given was firmly projected back to the schools and when I asked the schools I sensed they felt gagged to say what they really felt."

I have also heard from a teacher in my region that it is the less well-off students who are suffering most. Many of them are not turning up for the so-called exams out of fear of how they will perform, after the shambolic past year of learning has put them at such a disadvantage.

It was only recently that the SQA stressed that the national qualifications 2021 group had published information on a new service that is aimed at young people who have suffered severe disruption of their learning. I have a genuine concern that that will be too little, and way too late, given what I have heard and continue to hear from professionals. I have therefore written this week to the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills to seek answers to all those questions. I look forward eagerly to her response.

The Scottish Secondary Teachers Association, which represents 6,500 high school teachers, has said that

"it's not too late' for Shirley-Anne Somerville to take action to stop 'the exams debacle'".

Unlike the EIS, the SSTA was refused a place on the Scottish Government's national qualifications 2021 group. It said that 92 per cent of its members had found that collection of evidence through assessments has created "substantial ... stress" and unnecessary pressure on the pupils.

That is what I am hearing from my constituents. Pupils should not be put under so much pressure

that they are unable to sleep, experience feelings of hopelessness and worry that their future is at an end before it has even begun. We should be ashamed.

The alternative certification model is not the only problem: we must not forget that the attainment gap remains wide open and that there are 1,700 fewer teachers in schools than there were when the SNP came to power. Results from the programme for international student assessment show that Scottish education has gone backwards and that subject choice is narrowing. The SNP has also failed to cut class sizes.

Time and again, the First Minister has stated that her number 1 priority is education, and that that is what she wants to be judged on. Although I am in no doubt that managing the education of the country during the pandemic has been an extremely difficult task, the pandemic must not be used as an excuse for the state of our education in Scotland. The health, wellbeing and education of our young people should have been priorities throughout the pandemic, but it is clear that young people have been failed by the Scottish Government—not only now, but in each of the 14 years for which the SNP has been in power.

I will change the tone now, to make a very personal comment. I am dedicating my speech to my most fabulous friend Kathleen. I need a deep breath for this bit. We met at university through a shared love of hockey, both on and off the pitch, although latterly it was more fun off the pitch because of injuries and the like. My very dear friend passed away in February. She was a force to be reckoned with and an immense legal talent who has been taken from us far too soon. This is for you, Kathleen. Like you, many people have put their faith in me to stand up and be a strong voice for the people of the Lothian region. I will not let you down. Thank you.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Webber. We now move to closing speeches. I call Ross Greer to wind up for the Greens. Six minutes, please, Mr Greer.

16:20

Ross Greer: Thank you, Deputy Presiding Officer. I welcome you to your new role.

I thank sincerely the education secretary for bringing the debate to Parliament. I am sure that she knew that it would not see an outbreak of consensus across the chamber. Such is the nature of education debates, although I am equally sure that we will see moments of consensus in the coming years. I sincerely welcome the commitments that she has made today on the review and reform process for the SQA and Education Scotland. The latter has been rarely

mentioned in the debate, but the 2017 Education and Skills Committee report that I mentioned in my opening speech was similarly critical of Education Scotland's performance.

I intend to end my speech on a more positive note, with my hopes for the coming reform process, but in the absence of an education committee, this is likely to be our final chance to explore in detail the issues with this year's SQA assessments. Therefore, before finishing, I wish to make a number of additional points in relation to that process and to the SQA more generally.

On transparency at the SQA, which was raised by Daniel Johnson, I want to raise the question of the SQA's international business activities. I have investigated those for some years, as has the journalist Gordon Blackstock. Where we could find available information, we consistently found that human rights checks were weak and were an afterthought or were functionally non-existent. Our work led the SQA to conduct a review, then—which I certainly welcome—to withdraw from a number of countries that have shocking human rights records.

However, there is a wider question that I ask the cabinet secretary to consider in the review. The question is about whether the exams authority's aspiration to be self-financing through that business activity is appropriate or diverts the efforts of senior staff, to the detriment of the SQA's core responsibilities. I genuinely do not have a fixed view on that and would welcome an opportunity to tease out those issues.

In his excellent speech, Martin Whitfield explained precisely the difference between tick-box performance of consultation with young people and genuinely listening to and empowering them. To do that right requires an understanding of power dynamics. As Cameron Garrett, a member of the Scottish Youth Parliament has explained, his simply being present on the national qualifications 2021 group and in its meetings did not mean that young people were being heard. What concerns me is that I think that the SQA and others consider Cameron's experience to be a successful example of youth participation, despite the fact that he has categorically told them that that was not the case. That demonstrates the need for the upcoming review to consider not just structural, remit and organisational changes, but cultural changes in our education system.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I thank Ross Greer for the chance to give my views on that matter. I listened carefully to what he said about Cameron Garrett's experiences on the NQ21 group, which is very different from what we have heard from the Scottish Youth Parliament representative on the Covid education recovery group. Although we have not, in Cameron's view, listened to him so

far, I am determined to ensure that we change that, do it better in the future and provide every opportunity for listening. I am determined to take that forward and I look forward to working with him on that and seeing what we can do.

Ross Greer: I thank the cabinet secretary for that intervention. I, too, have heard from Liam Fowley, the MSYP on CERG, that his experience has been much more participative. A look at those contrasting experiences is the right place to start.

We are left now, however, three weeks before the end of term, with a system that is based on demonstrated attainment in a year in which it has been more difficult than ever for young people to demonstrate attainment. That was infuriatingly foreseeable. Here is a quote on the SQA proposals from the review that was conducted in the autumn by Mark Priestley and Marina Shapira:

"The proposals appear to be premised on an assumption that the examinations in 2021 will proceed as planned ... This is by no means a given. There seems to be little consideration of the need to create a robust evidence base in the event that exams are not possible".

Months later, in January this year, I asked the SQA whether it had scenario planned for the impact that a period of school closures would have on its certification model. Based on the evidence that it provided and on what the Priestley review had already told us, the only conclusion that I could draw was that the SQA failed to take into account the impact that prolonged school closures would have on a system based on demonstrated attainment—that is, evidence that, largely, pupils could produce only in school and under moderated conditions.

That takes us to the point that Mr Whitfield and I discussed earlier. The certification model is based on pupils' ability to produce evidence in a school year in which teachers spent the first four months not knowing what evidence the SQA would require of their students in their subject, and the next three months with everyone at home, learning remotely and largely unable to produce that evidence.

I agree with the Government that schools' historical exam data should not be used to moderate pupils' grades. However, as the cabinet secretary reassured us yesterday that that would not be the case nationally, Education Scotland published a report that confirmed that most local authorities are already doing that, so I would appreciate it if the Government could indicate what it and the SQA will do to engage with local authorities that are using historical exam data for internal moderation purposes. Unlike last year, reversing any egregious moderation, once it takes place, will not be a simple case of swapping one data set for another at national level.

I will make two final points in relation to the appeals process. The first is another question that I would appreciate the Government addressing. Why are some students still waiting on decisions on their 2020 appeals? My understanding is that that was sitting on the previous education secretary's desk and required a decision from him, so I presume that it has been passed on to the new cabinet secretary unresolved. I would appreciate an update.

My final concern—you will be glad to hear, Presiding Officer—is about the SQA's capacity to process appeals in a timely manner. That was an issue of concern for the Education and Skills Committee last year, so I would appreciate it if the Government could confirm what capacity the SQA has put in place to process this year's appeals on a timescale that will not disrupt the admissions process for colleges and universities.

Presiding Officer, I said that I would turn to more positive things, but I am almost out of time, so I will have to be briefly positive—which, as a Presbyterian, probably suits me.

The OECD report—and the conclusions that I hope it comes out with—are a unique opportunity for reform in Scottish education, particularly in our exams and assessment system, which is the one piece of the puzzle that did not fundamentally change when curriculum for excellence was introduced. I am excited, and although I do not come with a fixed view, most members know what direction of travel I would prefer.

I will make one additional point about where we go next for young people with additional support needs. Kaukab Stewart's brilliant contribution made it clear that it simply does not have to be the case that, across Scotland, young people's additional support needs are not being met. I look forward to working with members across the chamber to take forward what has come out of the Morgan review and what will come out of the co-ordinated support plans review, and to making sure that every young person's voice is heard in the process.

With that comment, I am certainly out of time. Thank you.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Greer; time was given for the intervention.

Michael Marra will wind up the debate for Labour.

16:27

Michael Marra: Labour wishes to put on record our thanks to the full education workforce of teachers, support staff, lecturers and officials, who have performed a series of minor miracles in truly unprecedented circumstances. They have dealt

with policy missteps, a critical absence of national leadership and an incredibly difficult situation, and our grateful thanks go to all of them. In particular, the inept home schoolers, such as me, have a renewed admiration for their skills and dedication.

In his speech, one teacher, Martin Whitfield, gave a powerful invocation of the power of listening, and I will reflect a little on the power of listening as I close the debate for Labour.

Jackie Dunbar and Kaukab Stewart reflected powerfully on the service of teachers during the process that we have been through. I met a group of teachers this morning and it is clear that they are exhausted from what they have gone through over the past year and the support that they have given to all our children and young people. When we address what we do next, we need to make sure that the approach is focused on a comeback rather than a catch-up. We must also support teachers to build their own mental health and resilience, as they have done for our children.

Beatrice Wishart, who was speaking remotely, agreed on those points about the service of teachers and she raised a very important point about the transparency of meetings between ministers and the SQA. The new education secretary has said that she values transparency. It would be good if that were reflected in her meetings. I hope that we can expect that no unminuted meetings will take place in future. The minister has also pledged transparency in her commitment to reform the SQA and review its role.

I turn to the Green amendment. There are a hundred practical challenges arising from the Scottish Government's alternative assessment model for appeals this year. Unfortunately, that can be summed up in the deeply confused language that the First Minister used at First Minister's questions today. She said that no historical data will be used in the process, but it will, as it will inform the SQA's engagement with schools during moderation. Ross Greer touched on some of those issues. The First Minister said that there is already a process that allows for exceptional personal circumstances, but that is limited to the collection of evidence and does not include the impact that those circumstances have had on performance. She said that the Government has listened to and engaged with young people, but the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland and the Scottish Youth Parliament are pretty clear that they do not believe that to be the case. I agree with Martin Whitfield's reflections on that—someone saying that they are listening and them actually listening are two different things.

There is no doubt that there is a catalogue of concerns around the process. As the day has gone on, I have continued to receive emails on

issues such as teachers being asked to work to quotas for grades, different schools having different internal cut-off dates for evidence to be generated, schools conducting repeat assessments and extreme pressure on pupils to produce evidence that can be used. None of that is the fault of teachers, young people or schools. Let us be clear: it is the fault of the process and the Government that has put it in place.

We have now reached the position where we have more questions about the appeals process than those that are answered in the glossy booklet produced by the SQA. We need to see how it is going to work. What modelling has been done on the demand for appeals? A rise from 2 to 3 per cent up to 10 per cent would see an avalanche of work. It is not a case of marking standardised assessments across the country—there are a thousand different practices and the evidence has been collated and produced in many different ways. Those of us who have marked exam scripts know that it is not the same as doing such things by rote—it is an incredibly challenging issue. Those issues about capacity have been raised in the debate and they will have to be dealt with.

The appeals process will do nothing to address the inequity in the process, with papers being shared online, some children sitting multiple exams and there being nothing in place to deal with mental health issues. Sue Webber touched on those issues. I was struck by Jim Fairlie's discussion on taking a holistic view of the child and the education that is required in that respect. Consideration for mental health will play a key role in that. That is why we think that there is still some serious consideration to be given to that.

I turn quickly to the issue of exceptional circumstances. I want to talk about Ellie. Ellie lost her mother very suddenly in March 2021. She had initially been promised by the Government that no exams would be sat this year. No evidence on her performance prior to her bereavement in March was available, due to the lockdown. In the absence of any other available process, Ellie found herself forced to take examinations, having just lost her mother. Her lost education time has been exacerbated by grief and loss and her performance was not what it could have been. As it stands, the appeals process does nothing for her, and there are so many like her. The process makes no allowance for exceptional circumstances in a time when all our circumstances are exceptional, although I would say that Ellie's are more exceptional than most.

Ellie is watching today's debate and I ask that we listen to her. Policy folk like to speak about getting it right for every child, and we might want to consider whether that is happening. We should listen to some of the voices that have been

highlighted by the Children and Young People's Commissioner today. Verity says:

"Some friends are getting resit periods. We are not having resits at our school so it will be so much harder to get the percentage that we'll need."

Anja says:

"Young people in December unfortunately let their guard down due to the announcement of exam cancellations and were left panicking come March when they were informed they would need to sit formal assessments."

Liam says:

"Why are we here now? Why didn't anyone listen?"

Those are powerful words from the children who will be affected by the issue. I accept that the cabinet secretary has not caused the situation, but it is now up to her to deal with it. I believe that she has the will to do that and I hope that does. One way for her to do that would be to back the Green amendment today. I hope that the Government will vote accordingly.

I will quickly mention some other issues. We in Labour believe that we need a transitions bill as part of the forthcoming agenda for education. The bill should address disabled people's transitions between different points in school, and I would like to have the opportunity to engage with the cabinet secretary on those issues.

We need the route map on social distancing in higher education institutions. Many members have raised that issue.

Labour's amendment talks about a "National Tutoring scheme". Claire Baker spoke powerfully about inequality. Christine Grahame spoke about the need to track how spending is being allocated and invested in that area and the difference that the money is making, so that we can do more of the right things and stop doing things that are not working. That is critical as we deal with a crisis of such scale.

Labour is advocating a resit guarantee. I have already spoken to the cabinet secretary about that. We believe that such a guarantee would address many of the impacts that were so eloquently explored by Fulton MacGregor in his speech. A resit guarantee could give hope to the voices of the children and young people that we want to be listening to.

We need a no-detriment policy to be put in place for access to further and higher education. Gillian Mackay spoke about that issue in relation to further education. Again, I have raised such issues directly with the minister. We need to deal with the problem to ensure that we can provide access accordingly.

Ross Greer: Will the member take an intervention?

Michael Marra: Certainly.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You are coming up to your time limit. I am being generous.

Ross Greer: I need to make a brief apology to Mr Marra. The Greens will abstain on Labour's amendment not because we do not support it—but because I have made a personal commitment to young people who will need to use an exceptional circumstances provision, and there is a pre-emption issue with this afternoon's amendments. Mr Marra and I tried to resolve the issue earlier but, unfortunately, that was not allowed. I apologise to Labour members on behalf of the Greens. We support their amendment, but we will abstain on it.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I think that we get the gist, Mr Greer. Bring your remarks to a close, please, Mr Marra.

Michael Marra: I get the gist. Apology accepted.

I commend Labour's amendment and the many great speeches that we have heard in the debate. There is no limit to Labour's ambition for young people in this country. The specific crisis that is in front of us right now has to be dealt with, and our votes in the next hour can help young people to deal with it.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Meghan Gallacher to wind up for the Conservatives.

16:37

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): I welcome you to your role, Presiding Officer.

Before I summarise the debate on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives, I congratulate all members who made their first speech in the chamber today. I was in the hot seat last week and can relate to the nerves and excitement that they might have felt when entering the chamber this afternoon.

I will mention some of the excellent speeches. It is an honour to be able to call Pam Gosal, the first Indian woman to be elected to the Scottish Parliament, not only my colleague but my friend. Her speech not only gives our young people hope but inspires those who have been told that they cannot do something that they can. There is no wrong path.

Kaukab Stewart also made history by making her first speech today. Although our views on the constitution might differ, I look forward to debating and working with her over the next five years.

Martin Whitfield talked about the impact that Covid will have on our young people. The passionate delivery of his speech brought home

that there will be a looming lost Covid generation if we do not act now. I was one of those young people before I entered the world of politics, and it is a breath of fresh air to hear that politicians will listen to the views of our young people.

My friend Sue Webber has already made her mark on the Scottish Parliament through robust questioning and by holding the Government to account. I know that she will do her friend Kath proud, as she does those who she represents as a councillor and, now, as an MSP for Lothian.

I also congratulate Jackie Dunbar and Jim Fairlie on their excellent speeches.

We need action, not words, from the SNP-led Scottish Government. When Nicola Sturgeon stood in this chamber and made the promise that education would be her Government's number 1 priority, many people believed her. Today, the cabinet secretary reiterated the commitment that the Scottish Government made back in 2015 to ensure that our young people have the best start in life, which is something that we can all unite behind. However, we are now 14 years down the line, and Scotland's education standards and performance have either regressed or stayed stagnant.

I appreciate that the cabinet secretary has inherited more than a decade of failures. However, it is simply not good enough to state that the Scottish Government will seek to make improvements when it comes to education. Although I am a new MSP, my colleagues have heard those promises before, and this Government has never delivered.

We can all agree that our young people have been detrimentally impacted by the pandemic, and have had to adapt to learning outside of the classroom. We commend the extraordinary work done by university, college, school, nursery and childcare staff over the past year to maintain education and childcare. However, that is not enough. As we move into the recovery phase, we need to show our young people and those who work in the education sector that we know how to deliver on the promises that are made in this Parliament—and that they will be delivered.

Although the pandemic has come with its own unique set of education-related challenges, which the Scottish Government has had to navigate, there is no escaping the fact that our education system was in a shambolic state before lockdown began in March last year. Let us take a look at the Scottish Government's record over the past 14 years. There are now 1,700 fewer teachers than there were in 2007—the same year that the SNP formed its first Administration. We have yet to see smaller class sizes for primary 1 to 3, which was a 2007 manifesto promise by the SNP. It is yet to be

fully implemented—and, by the looks of things, the Government has stopped trying.

Our education standards have declined because of SNP mismanagement. As my colleague pointed out earlier, the international PISA study shows that Scotland's education system has gone backwards. We are no longer recognised as a world leader in education. What happened to the Government's ambition to make sure that our young people receive the best possible education?

Then there is the issue of subject choice for our young people. Under the SNP, subject choice has narrowed, which means that there are fewer opportunities when our young people leave school. Our young people cannot afford another five years of SNP mismanagement of education on top of the additional pressures that they already face because of the pandemic.

Although I welcome the expansion of the 1,140 hours announced in the cabinet secretary's statement, local authorities are still struggling to meet the initial 1,140 roll-out plan. Local councils need that support, and I urge the cabinet secretary, if she can, to make a further statement on that today. I declare an interest as a councillor.

I also ask the minister to address those issues in his closing speech, and, in particular, to outline how the Scottish Government intends to fix those historical education failures.

This week's ministerial statement on the 2021 exam process did not provide any reassurance that the Scottish Government will turn the whole debacle around. As we have witnessed over recent days, many young people, parents, guardians and teachers have expressed concerns over the number of assessments that school pupils have undertaken over the past few weeks—and that is despite the former cabinet secretary, John Swinney, announcing that there will be no exams this year, citing concerns around fairness.

Despite that announcement, over the past few weeks we have witnessed exam papers being leaked online, pupils sitting tests with little to no warning, and young people having to gamble on their grades and sit assessments in exam conditions, with the SQA guidance stating that the grades will be determined by assessment evidence.

Due to the SQA's and the Scottish Government's handling of the 2021 exams process, many young people fear for their mental health. A pupil in my region, who has spoken to her local newspaper, said:

"These exams are putting extreme pressure on us and pushing many to breaking point."

She also said:

"Some of us are getting four or five assessments per day, without any study leave so it's enormous pressure."

Those are real concerns from our young people and, by the sounds of it, they are sitting exams in all but name.

During their contributions, my colleagues Brian Whittle and Sue Webber mentioned the importance of dealing with mental health waiting times for young people. It is shocking that more than 2,000 children are now waiting more than a year before getting the help and support that they need. Teachers are rightly concerned about those waiting times, and I share the concerns that my colleagues mentioned today.

It is clear that the Scottish Government has not learned from the mistakes that it made in relation to the exam process last year. I agree with my colleague Oliver Mundell that the SQA should be scrapped and replaced by a new body that is fair and robust in order to ensure that pupils obtain the grades that they deserve.

There is a way forward. Opposition parties could come together to restore our education system. We all know that the Scottish Government has a 100-day recovery plan, but given the failures that have been mentioned by me and my colleagues, and others around the chamber, it will take longer to rectify many of the issues. As I said earlier, we need actions, not words.

My colleagues mentioned that the Scottish Conservatives have plans to restore Scotland's education standards. We would work alongside the Scottish Government to get those plans implemented to help to improve standards and to ensure that our young people receive the education that they deserve. For example, we would invest £120 million to catch up on schooling that has been lost as a result of the pandemic, to make sure that no young person is left behind; we would launch a national tutoring programme to coincide with that investment, to ensure that our young people realise their potential; and we would commit £1 billion to closing the attainment gap by creating a new system to identify deprivation in schools and provide extra support to those who need it. We cannot allow that gap to remain. It is to our shame that it still exists and that one in four children across Scotland are living in poverty.

Our young people deserve a collaborative approach from all corners, across the political divide, to ensure that we change the current system, but we will support the Government only if it focuses 100 per cent on the job. We do not want to see a repeat of last year, when the Government delayed the publication of the OECD report in favour of debating a bill on referenda. We do not want to see the Government, after only 100 days of the parliamentary session, start its new

campaign to separate Scotland from the rest of our United Kingdom. If the Government makes such a commitment on education today, it will have our support in dealing with issues pre and post pandemic.

It is now up to the SNP to prove that it will prioritise our young people. As I have said throughout my speech, actions speak louder than words. Only time will tell whether the SNP favours education over separation.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Jamie Hepburn to wind up for the Government. You have up to 12 minutes, minister.

16:47

The Minister for Higher Education and Further Education, Youth Employment and Training (Jamie Hepburn): Thank you, Presiding Officer. I congratulate you on your elevation to high status and wish you well in your new role. *[Interruption.]* It is always good to keep in with the Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: A bit of grovelling will work, but there is a limit, beyond which it may—

Jamie Hepburn: I think that you know me well enough to know the limit of my grovelling. That is it over and done with.

I also congratulate those members who made their first speeches today: Jackie Dunbar, Pam Gosal, Kaukab Stewart, Martin Whitfield, Jim Fairlie and Sue Webber. Jackie Dunbar asked how she will live up to Brian Adam's legacy. Her contribution to today's debate shows clearly that she will do Brian proud, just as Kaukab Stewart and Jim Fairlie will Sandra White and Roseanna Cunningham respectively.

Kaukab Stewart asked me to put on record my recognition of the professionalism and dedication of Scotland's teachers over the period of the pandemic, and I have no hesitation in doing so.

In his interesting contribution, Jim Fairlie set out his experience of engaging with the education system to help to provide awareness of the world of work and entrepreneurship. I entirely agree that that is a very positive example of curriculum for excellence in action. I assure him that such an approach is at the heart of our developing the young workforce programme.

In turning to some of the points that have been raised in the debate, I want to start with one that clearly relates to my area of portfolio interest. In intervening on the cabinet secretary, Oliver Mundell raised the issue of universities and colleges seeking clarity on the student experience in the coming year. Mr Marra raised that issue,

too, and requested that I meet him—I will, of course, be happy to do so.

I understand that the issue of clarity is of importance to our academic institutions. In my early engagement with university principals, which all members would expect me to have undertaken, they have sent a clear message about the need for clarity on the student experience in the coming year.

Ultimately, as I think everyone would expect, the safety of those who study and work on our campuses across the country has to be of paramount importance, and that is the way in which we will move forward. However, work is under way to look at how we can return to something akin to normal on our university and college campuses in the coming academic year. The cabinet secretary laid out the work that is in place and we will continue to be guided by the scientific advice, including through our new Covid-19 advisory sub-group on universities and colleges. That will help us to keep any restrictions that we have in place under regular review.

We also have our advanced learning Covid recovery group, which we have just established. It brings together all the relevant players in the sector—Colleges Scotland, Universities Scotland and the various unions including the University and College Union, Unite, the Educational Institute of Scotland, Unison and NUS Scotland. It brings together the voices of our academic institutions with students and the workforce to enable us to have a proper dialogue as to how we move forward.

Considering the extent of the vaccine roll-out and the expected impact on transmission rates, I am hopeful that the student experience in the autumn will look more normal, although of course there will still need to be some measures in place to help to prevent transmission.

Oliver Mundell: Can the minister confirm whether guidance will be issued before the Parliament breaks up for the summer recess so that the plans can be properly scrutinised and universities have the time that they need to plan for having students back on campus?

Jamie Hepburn: Of course, guidance is already in place. The work that we need to undertake is to make sure that it is under review and is consistent with the public health circumstances. I recognise the imperative—indeed, I laid it out—to try to make things clear to our academic institutions as quickly as possible, and that is my clear commitment.

I will pick up on some other comments that were made in the debate by Oliver Mundell and others. I want to take on the idea that we have falling standards in our school settings, which a number of members articulated. The latest figures that are

available show that 93 per cent of pupils are in a positive destination within three months of leaving school and that students leaving school with one pass or more at Scottish credit and qualifications framework level 5 or better constitute 85.7 per cent of school leavers, which is up from 77.1 per cent a decade ago. The figure for SCQF level 6 or better is 63.9 per cent, which is up from 50.4 per cent a decade ago. In addition, the attainment gap is narrowing.

Oliver Mundell: Will the minister take an intervention?

Jamie Hepburn: I will not just now, because I am going to respond to something that Mr Mundell's colleague Meghan Gallacher set out. She said—I think that I quote her precisely—that we are no longer seen as a world leader in education. I totally and utterly disagree with that. In the roles that I have had in the Government, I have had the great privilege to be able to visit schools the length and breadth of the country, to visit colleges and universities across the country and to engage with apprentices who are undertaking their training, and I see excellence day in, day out. We should completely disavow the idea that we are no longer a world leader in education.

Daniel Johnson: I admire the minister's confidence in Scottish education. Given that he is so confident, will he pledge that Scotland will be returned to the trends in international mathematics and science study and progress in international reading literacy study—TIMSS and PIRLS—world standards for education?

Jamie Hepburn: I have already set out the clear range of achievement of young people in this country and I think that it would behove all of us, Mr Johnson included, to reflect on the point that I have just made. I have responded clearly to the suggestion that we are no longer seen as a world leader in education, which I refute.

Similarly, I will pick up on some other terminology that Mr Mundell set out. He used some rhetoric that I think is damaging—I agree entirely with Fulton MacGregor on this point. He talks about a “lost generation”. I think that that does our young people an enormous disservice. *[Interruption.]* If he does not want to hear that from me, he should listen to Cathy McCulloch, who is the co-director of the Children's Parliament. She has asked that we

“stop talking about ‘the lost generation’.”

She said:

“This is so insulting to children and young people who have been AMAZING this past 14 months. They need our respect and support”.

I will certainly operate to the standard that she laid out, and I hope that other members will too.

Various members raised their concerns about the awarding of school qualifications and the appeals process. I will comment on that only briefly. I re-emphasise the point that the First Minister laid out earlier: we have to place where we are in the context of the pandemic. Jim Thewliss, the general secretary of School Leaders Scotland, said:

“The system that replaced the exams was never going to be perfect but all the way along no one”—

I think that that probably includes members who are criticising the system—

“has come up with a better way of doing it than the alternative certification model.”

I hear Mr Mundell saying that there have been some suggestions today, but the point was that

“no one has come up with a better way of doing it than the alternative certification model.”

I am afraid that I am running very short of time. I am sure that there will be plenty of opportunities to have other exchanges in the future.

I turn briefly to my portfolio interests. The debate has focused on the experience of our school students—and I spent some time focusing on that in my opening remarks—but we should be considering our wider education and skills system.

Our further and higher education institutions make an invaluable contribution to our society, to economic growth and, most important of all, to improving the life chances of students across the country. We have seen disruptions over the past year, but I want to pay credit to our academic institutions for the way that they pivoted to online learning, ensuring that staff and students were supported. I relay again my clear commitment to working with the sector to ensure that we can move forward.

We have seen disruptions to apprenticeships. My old sparring partner Michael Marra, with whom I look forward to reprising some verbal sparring, mentioned the reduced number of apprentices in the past year. He is correct to observe that there was a reduced number, but it is important that we place that in the context of a global pandemic. I can say—I am sure that it will reassure Michael Marra—that, although the number of apprenticeship starts in the first quarter of last year was 80 per cent down compared to the same point in the previous year, in the fourth quarter of last year we saw broadly the same number of starts as we had at the same point in the previous year. Of course, we will continue to focus on apprenticeships, given that they are such an important part of vocational learning.

However, we have to look further than apprenticeships, which brings me on to the young persons guarantee. We are working closely with employers and young people to deliver the young persons guarantee, implementing Sandy Begbie's recommendations. We are starting from strong foundations, with developing the young workforce, with our partnerships with local government, with the services of Skills Development Scotland and, of course, with our colleges and universities. We will take forward our commitment to invest £70 million in local partnerships to provide training and employer recruitment incentives for young people, to deliver around 5,000 more short industry-focused courses in colleges, to establish the new graduate internship scheme, and to ensure that we have developing the young workforce schools co-ordinators based in schools throughout Scotland.

I am up against the time. I could have said more about the national transition training fund, which is of fundamental importance, because we need to make sure that we support people to remain in employment.

I recognise that our students, pupils, apprentices and staff have faced a difficult 14 months but, in responding with the flexibility, ingenuity and resilience that we have all seen, they have shown the best of themselves and the best of the Scottish education and skills system. I thank them again for their efforts over the course of the pandemic, but I want to do more than just thank them. I want to lay out a series of commitments. Just as Michael Marra set out that he has no limit on ambition for Scotland's young people, neither do members on the SNP benches, and nor should any of us who have been elected to this place.

My primary commitment to all those in our education and skills system is that I will have high ambition. I am committed to working with them through the summer and into the next school and academic year to ensure that every school pupil and student gets the world-class education and life-changing opportunities that they deserve. I also commit to working with them to support 16 to 24-year-olds leaving education through our young persons guarantee and to implementing the next stage of our national transition training fund to support those who fall out of work so that they get back into employment as quickly as possible. My ministerial colleagues and I look forward to continuing those efforts.

Decision Time

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There are four questions to be put as a result of today's business.

I remind members that if the amendment in the name of Oliver Mundell is agreed, then the amendments in the names of Michael Marra and Ross Greer will fall. If the amendment in the name of Michael Marra is agreed, then the amendment in the name of Ross Greer will fall.

The first question is, that amendment S6M-00204.2, in the name of Oliver Mundell, which seeks to amend motion S6M-00204, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on education, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

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

17:01

Meeting suspended.

17:05

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We move to the vote. I remind members that if the amendment in the name of Oliver Mundell is agreed, the amendments in the name of Michael Marra and Ross Greer will fall. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is now closed.

Elena Whitham, I can confirm that you voted.

Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I was unable to vote and I would have voted no.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you. That is recorded.

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I was unable to vote. I would have voted to abstain.

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

The Minister for Business, Trade, Tourism and Enterprise (Ivan McKee): Hello? Presiding Officer, I was unable to vote and I would have voted no.

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

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con):

On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I could not hear anything so, assuming that we are talking about the Oliver Mundell amendment, I would have voted yes.

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

For

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lockhart, Dean (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (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, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Denham, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)

Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Abstentions

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-00204.2, in the name

of Oliver Mundell, on education, is: For 29, Against 64, Abstentions 28.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: I remind members that if the amendment in the name of Michael Marra is agreed, the amendment in the name of Ross Greer will fall.

The next question is, that amendment S6M-00204.3, in the name of Michael Marra, which seeks to amend motion S6M-00204, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on education, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lockhart, Dean (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)

Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, 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)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Denham, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Abstentions

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

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-00204.3, in the name of Michael Marra, on education, is: For 53, Against 61, Abstentions 7.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-00204.4, in the name of Ross Greer, which seeks to amend motion S6M-00204, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on education, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lockhart, Dean (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, 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)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Denham, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)

Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-00204.4, in the name of Ross Greer, on education, is: For 59, Against 60, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-00204, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on education, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is now closed.

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer, I had an issue with the previous vote on Ross Greer's amendment. I lost connection and was not able to vote. I would have voted no.

The Presiding Officer: I am afraid that you are too late with that point of order to record your vote, but we have your comment on the record; thank you.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (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)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Denham, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)

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

Against

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Dowe, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lockhart, Dean (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)

White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Abstentions

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-00204, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on education, is: For 68, Against 32, Abstentions 20.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament recognises the difficult circumstances that children, young people, students and parents have faced over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic; commends the extraordinary work done by university, college, school and childcare staff over the last year to maintain education and childcare; recognises that the pandemic has nevertheless had an impact on the health, wellbeing and education of many children and young people across Scotland, particularly the most disadvantaged; agrees that work to address these impacts, and remove the barriers to learning that too many still face, should be at the heart of Scotland's COVID-19 recovery efforts, and welcomes the Scottish Government's commitment to implement ambitious plans to support the education system during its first 100 days.

Meeting closed at 17:24.

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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