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Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 8 September 2021

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

Portfolio Question Time

Health and Social Care

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 members to take care to observe the measures, including when entering and exiting the chamber. Please use the aisles and walkways only to access your seat and when moving about the chamber.

The first item of business is portfolio question time, and today's portfolio is health and social care. I ask members who wish to ask a supplementary question to press their request-to-speak button or, if they are joining us remotely, to put an R in the chat function during the relevant question.

NHS Highland (Staff Bullying)

1. Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on NHS Highland's independent review into allegations of staff bullying in Argyll and Bute. (S6O-00099)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Humza Yousaf): Many improvement actions have already been delivered in response to the independent review of culture in Argyll and Bute, which was recommended by John Sturrock QC in his review into cultural issues in NHS Highland. NHS Highland has reported that there has been significant discussion by the board and within the health and social care partnership to explore how they might work together to support staff from across health and social care who have experienced bullying.

The leadership team has held a number of staff engagement events to tell staff about the actions that have been taken and to listen to staff feedback. The actions include establishing an independent helpline for staff to discuss concerns; setting up an independent review of disciplinary, grievance, bullying and harassment procedures; rolling out the courageous conversations programme more widely; and setting up a monthly assurance panel to review hiring decisions and to build trust.

The Scottish Government continues to support NHS Highland as it takes actions in response to this report, the report by John Sturrock QC and its recent independent listening and hearing survey.

Donald Cameron: I am very grateful for the cabinet secretary's update. He might be aware that, in the previous parliamentary session, there were calls to hold a debate on the findings of the Sturrock report. The First Minister said that she was broadly sympathetic to those calls. Will the cabinet secretary commit to holding a debate in Government time on that important issue, so that victims of bullying across the national health service, wherever they are in Scotland, feel that they are being listened to and not abandoned?

Humza Yousaf: First and foremost, I thank Donald Cameron for raising the issue. Emma Roddick and Edward Mountain have also raised such issues, which are incredibly important, and the Government takes them seriously. I suspect that, despite all our political differences, we are united in believing that a zero-tolerance approach should be taken to bullying or harassment anywhere in the workplace, let alone in our NHS and social care.

A debate has not been ruled out, but Donald Cameron knows that we are in the midst of a global pandemic. He will have heard about the priorities in the programme for government yesterday. Those will be our immediate focus for parliamentary debates, but I do not rule out such a debate taking place in the future.

I note that the Conservative Party will hold an Opposition debate next week, so it can bring forward such a debate if it chooses to do so. If it does, I will respond on behalf of the Government.

Mental Health

2. David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what importance it places on recognising and addressing the societal issues that contribute to poor mental health. (S6O-00100)

The Minister for Mental Wellbeing and Social Care (Kevin Stewart): Poverty is the single biggest driver of poor mental health, which is why we continue to urge the United Kingdom Government to reverse its decision to cut the uplift to universal credit.

We know that the pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing structural inequality in our society and that the adverse impacts on mental health are felt disproportionately by disadvantaged groups. In our mental health transition and recovery plan, we have committed to making the mental health of those groups a priority.

We also know that other social determinants, including employment and debt, can impact on mental health and wellbeing. We are working with employers, trade unions and other organisations, including the Money and Pensions Service and Citizens Advice Scotland, to better understand and tackle those issues.

David Torrance: The Medical and Dental Defence Union of Scotland recently carried out a survey that showed that 47 per cent of its Scottish general practitioner members and 58 per cent of its dentist members reported higher levels of stress because of the pandemic. What measures have been put in place to support the mental health of all national health service staff?

Kevin Stewart: Our health recovery plan, which we published on 25 August, outlines that the recovery of staff is intrinsic to our collective ambitions for renewing our NHS. The Government is providing £8 million this financial year to support the mental health and wellbeing of the health and social care workforce, which includes £2 million for targeted support for the primary care and social care workforces.

A range of national resources is available to support the mental health and wellbeing of those who work in health and social care. Those resources include the National Wellbeing Hub, which provides self-care and digital resources; the national wellbeing helpline, which provides a 24/7 service to those who require psychological support and can offer advice, signposting and onward referral to local services when required; coaching for wellbeing, which is a free-to-access digital coaching service; and the workforce specialist service. Additional capacity has also been put in place within boards to provide psychological therapies and interventions to support staff's mental health.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There are a number of supplementary questions and I want to take all of them, so I will need brief questions and answers.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): Yesterday, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care conceded that waiting times for child and adolescent mental health services are "unacceptable" and admitted that the targets were badly missed before the pandemic.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Make it a quick question, please, Mr Hoy.

Craig Hoy: We found out this week that CAMHS referral rates are now the highest on record, with one in every 100 children being referred for specialist care. Will the minister now outline what he intends to do to honour the Government's commitment to increase the CAMHS workforce by 320 new staff?

Kevin Stewart: Since the Government came to power, the CAMHS workforce has risen by some 80 per cent. We will continue to do our level best to reduce waiting times and to do what is required to improve services for those in need. It would be helpful, in all that matter, not to have the continued austerity agenda, so that we can employ more staff. I ask Mr Hoy and his Conservative colleagues to try to persuade the United Kingdom Government to reverse its austerity policies so that we can invest even more in our public services in Scotland.

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): The reality is that societal issues such as poverty have a major impact on children and adolescents. The waiting times for CAMHS in Fife are at an unacceptable level and are rising. Will the minister agree to meet me for a discussion of those issues and see what the Scottish Government can do to support NHS Fife to get those waiting times down?

Kevin Stewart: As always, I am more than happy to meet Mr Rowley to discuss that issue or any other constructively. I recognise that there are difficulties in Fife. As members will know, I have spoken to a number of health boards about the actions that they need to take to improve services. We have given £29 million of additional support to bring CAMHS waiting lists down.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): The minister listed many contributors to poor mental health, but I did not hear him mention the fact that we have enormously long lists or the contribution that that fact makes to the worsening of mental health in this country. It is no surprise that mental health does not improve if people have to wait up to two years to get treatment. Will the minister do something about that situation at last?

Kevin Stewart: We have laid out what we will do in our action plans. The Government is determined to ensure that the additional resources that we have put in play are used effectively to do the best for the people of this country, particularly the young folk who are waiting for treatment.

Cataract Surgery (Waiting Time)

3. **Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green):** To ask the Scottish Government what the average waiting time is for cataract surgery. (S6O-00101)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Humza Yousaf): Public Health Scotland published the most recent stage of treatment data on 31 August. It shows that the median wait during the quarter ending 30 June 2021 for ophthalmology treatment was 52 days. Over half—54 per cent—of those who were waiting for ophthalmology treatment had been waiting for nine weeks or less. The Scottish Government does not

hold sub-specialty information, which would cover cataract procedures.

We recognise that a backlog of care has emerged during the pandemic as a result of services being paused. However, cataract procedures have continued during this challenging time. To support that, the Scottish Government has made £1.75 million available to NHS Golden Jubilee to support additional cataract procedures this financial year.

Gillian Mackay: Obviously, this all has the pandemic as a backdrop. I have been contacted by a constituent who has been advised by NHS Lanarkshire that she will have to wait for at least 70 weeks for cataract surgery unless she pays for private healthcare. My constituent's eyesight is deteriorating rapidly and she is terrified that she will soon be unable to drive or perform her duties as a teacher. What support can the Government provide to NHS Lanarkshire to help it to reduce its waiting times for cataract surgery?

Humza Yousaf: I share Gillian Mackay's concerns. She has corresponded with me about them in general, but I ask her to provide specific details about her constituent—I will be more than happy for the case to be investigated. Like Gillian Mackay, I would also be nervous about somebody having to wait 70 weeks for a cataract operation.

We are giving additional funding to NHS Golden Jubilee, which is planning to deliver 12,000 cataract surgeries in core sessions during the current financial year. That is 4,000 more than the hospital delivered during the previous year. We know that there is a significant backlog across all hospital procedures, which is why we published our NHS recovery plan at the end of last month.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Annie Wells has a brief supplementary.

Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): Across my own health board, with our heroic front-line staff under unprecedented pressure, we are seeing cancellations of elective surgery appointments, leaving thousands to wait in pain before they can get the surgery that they need. That is having a brutal knock-on effect on accident and emergency departments, this being the fourth week in a row in which waiting times have hit the worst level on record. What reassurances can be given to staff? When will a winter preparedness plan be published?

Humza Yousaf: I am sorry; I did not catch the very end of the question. However, I say to Annie Wells that we are taking that significant challenge very seriously, as are the secretary of state in England and the health ministers in Wales and Northern Ireland. We are facing a collective challenge that has been significantly exacerbated by the effects of the pandemic.

Our recovery plan, which is backed by £1 billion of investment, goes into significant detail about how we will increase in-patient activity by 20 per cent and out-patient activity by 10 per cent during the current parliamentary session, and diagnostics significantly by more than 70,000 by 2022-23.

I am more than happy to meet Annie Wells to discuss those details, but health boards are making challenging decisions and we will continue to fund them and give them the investment that they need, while also taking care of the mental and physical wellbeing of our staff, because they are crucial in helping us to meet the targets in our recovery plan.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We have supplementaries to most of the rest of the questions. I want to get those supplementaries in, so I would appreciate brief questions—and brief answers, cabinet secretary.

National Autistic Society (Meetings)

4. Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government when it last met the National Autistic Society, in light of its reported concerns regarding support for families during the Covid-19 pandemic. (S6O-00102)

The Minister for Mental Wellbeing and Social Care (Kevin Stewart): I fully recognise the incredible pressure that the pandemic has put on autistic children, their families and carers.

The Scottish Government meets the National Autistic Society regularly. Officials last met with the NAS on 23 August and I will meet the director of the NAS shortly.

The Scottish Government has provided significant additional funding to help meet those pressures, including £170,000 to national autism charities, £28.5 million for local carer support and a further £1.1 million last year to the voluntary sector short breaks fund. We also published our plan, "Learning/Intellectual Disability and Autism: "Towards Transformation", in March.

Meghan Gallacher: The director of the National Autistic Society Scotland has warned that the pandemic has removed critical support for families, which has left carers and young people struggling. Home schooling was difficult for children with autism to adjust to, with statistics showing that 63 per cent of autistic young people missed attending school. In addition, figures from the Autism Centre for Education and Research revealed uncertainty around education, which caused high levels of stress and anxiety.

What progress has been made on the proposed learning disability, autism and neurodiversity bill? When will families and people with autism receive the help and support that they deserve?

Kevin Stewart: Families will continue to receive support, some of which I have already outlined. I am sure that that issue will form part of the discussion that I have with the director of the NAS when we meet shortly.

As far as the bill and the proposed learning disability and autism commissioner are concerned, the Scottish Government will carry out the scoping work for all of that, including the commissioner's remit and powers, very soon, and within the current parliamentary year. A commissioner will be appointed as soon as possible following the bill's successful passage.

I know that there are very diverse views on how we should progress our work in this area, and I aim to talk to as many stakeholders as possible to ensure that we get the scoping work, and the proposed commissioner's remit and powers, right.

Fiona Hyslop (Linlithgow) (SNP): Will the minister set out what action is being taken to support young children who are effective in masking or hiding their autism, which causes delays in their receiving a timely diagnosis in the early years of their education? Will he tell us specifically what action is being taken to support young girls, who are more likely to mask their symptoms? How will the Government adapt pre-pandemic plans to do more to work with the affected families to focus on identifying and supporting the children concerned?

Kevin Stewart: I will write to Ms Hyslop, because a lot of work is being done in that area. Very briefly, new guidance that was commissioned by the Scottish Government and published by the national autism implementation team in May this year supports areas to develop local children's neurodevelopmental pathways. We know that there are challenges in diagnosis, particularly with young females, who are able to mask the condition. We will do more to develop the guidance to get it absolutely right in that respect.

As I said, it is a complex area. I will write to Ms Hyslop, and any other member who requires that information, in some depth.

Dental Practices (Covid-19 Support)

5. Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what support is available to dental practices to alleviate pressures specifically related to Covid-19. (S6O-00103)

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The minister, Maree Todd, joins us remotely.

The Minister for Public Health, Women's Health and Sport (Maree Todd): The Scottish Government is fully committed to supporting the national health service dental sector. That is why, from the beginning of the pandemic, we have put

in place emergency support payments for national health service practices and dentists, including £33 million of additional funding per year.

We have also recently announced £7.5 million of funding for dentists to buy new equipment to help to reduce the impact of United Kingdom-wide Covid restrictions. That builds on the £5 million that we have already provided to the sector for ventilation improvements. NHS National Procurement continues to provide around £1.5 million of personal protective equipment per week free of charge to dental contractors who provide NHS care.

We expect those measures to increase the productivity of practices, thereby enabling them to see more patients within the current infection, prevention and control constraints.

Bill Kidd: Plean Street dental practice in my constituency has responsibility for 6,000 patients yet, because of the funding structures in place for Covid support, when one dentist left during the pandemic, the practice lost 25 per cent funding, despite patient numbers remaining the same. Balancing reduced staff and physical distancing while ensuring dental care for thousands of patients places increasing demand on practices.

Does the Scottish Government agree that that anomaly is unfair on practices in such situations? Will the Government commit to evaluating how the policy can be adapted to ensure that proportionate funding is maintained?

Maree Todd: We are certainly interested in working with dental practices to ensure that they are financially sustainable in future. Our commitment to provide free dental care in the programme for government shows the absolute priority that we give to dental care for the population.

We have provided significant funding for contractors who provide NHS dental services. Dentists have received a top-up payment of 80 per cent of their average monthly earnings from 2019 to 2020. We increased that to 85 per cent from November 2020, and that remains in place.

I am more than happy to hear more details about the situation in his constituency that Bill Kidd raised. If he writes to me, I will certainly look into the situation and give him a fuller, more individual response.

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): With dental practices across Scotland currently operating at restricted capacity in line with Covid restrictions, there have been worrying reports that although NHS patients are having to wait months to see a dentist, those who can afford to go private are being seen within days. Is the minister not concerned about risking the development of a two-

tier dental system in Scotland? What steps will be taken to ensure that NHS patients who cannot afford private dental care still receive the timely treatment that they need and to which they are entitled?

Maree Todd: We are absolutely committed to NHS dental care, and to supporting and protecting NHS dental care for all patients in Scotland. By the end of this session of Parliament, everyone in Scotland will be able to access free NHS dental care.

Covid has particular challenges for the dental sector, because the majority of procedures involve aerosol generating procedures. We have put in place funding to support enhanced ventilation in NHS practices and funding for different types of hand-held instruments, which do not generate aerosols.

We are doing what we can within the constraints of the pandemic to increase capacity in NHS dental care. Our commitment to NHS dental care is absolutely and fundamentally strong.

National Health Service (Operations Backlog)

6. Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to address the reported backlog of NHS operations. (S6O-00104)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Humza Yousaf): We published our NHS recovery plan on 25 August. It outlines our ambitions for increasing NHS capacity by at least 10 per cent as quickly as possible in order to address the backlog and meet the on-going healthcare needs of people throughout the country. It is, of course, backed by £1 billion of additional Scottish Government investment.

For this year alone, we have made more than £80 million available to specifically support health boards to target the backlog of treatment and care. However, we need to remember that the pandemic is not over and that Covid-19 and other pressures will impact on the NHS for some time to come. Health boards' elective activity is being monitored through daily and weekly returns to the Scottish Government, and support is being provided where it is required.

Pam Gosal: We have ambulances queuing out the door of accident and emergency departments and record waiting times, all of which is putting patients' lives at risk. In my region, when constituents have reported a stroke or a heart attack, in one example, an ambulance—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We need a question, Ms Gosal.

Pam Gosal: In one example, an ambulance was called at 2.30 pm and came at 4.45 am the

next morning. I contacted the cabinet secretary about that and I am still waiting for a response. It has been more than a month. I therefore ask the cabinet secretary how he will help patients like my constituents get the help and support they need from the paramedics who are desperate to deliver it.

Humza Yousaf: First, I thank the Scottish Ambulance Service for the incredible work that it is doing when it is facing such significant pressures. The pandemic pressures have built up the demand that Pam Gosal and all of us are seeing in the constituencies and regions that we represent.

We have given the ambulance service specifically an additional £20 million. That has already been invested and we are now starting to see recruitment. Last week, there was additional recruitment of 60-odd paramedics and ambulance staff into the north and north-east of the country, and we will back that with £1 billion of additional investment, which will help to increase our capacity.

However, when it comes to providing that additional £1 billion to aid our recovery—which is, by the way, £400 million more than the Conservatives were looking to spend—we will not hammer the lowest paid in order to pay for it. We will make sure that that recovery and the additional investment that we bring forward do not hit those who have already been hit hardest by the pandemic.

Rural Health Services (Support)

7. Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what plans it has to support rural health services following the end of the Covid-19 pandemic. (S6O-00105)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Humza Yousaf): Our NHS recovery plan sets out key ambitions and actions to be developed and delivered now and over the next five years, including in rural areas. As I said, the recovery plan is backed by £1 billion of targeted investment.

The Scottish Government remains committed to the recommendations that are set out in Sir Lewis Ritchie's "Shaping the Future Together: Report of the Remote and Rural General Practice Working Group". We aim to enhance primary care across remote, rural and island communities by ensuring stability for rural general practitioner incomes alongside other measures that support innovative approaches to the use of information technology and physical infrastructure, as well as supporting recruitment and retention practices in rural areas.

Following the 2021 Scottish Parliament elections, the recommendation to create a centre

for excellence for rural and remote medicine is now a Scottish Government manifesto commitment on which we will deliver in this parliamentary term.

Finlay Carson: Yesterday, it was revealed that more than 1,600 children have been waiting for over a year for mental health support. Alarming, in my constituency, nearly two thirds of young people seeking help have not been seen within the 18-week national health service target time. That is absolutely shameful—as, I am sure, the cabinet secretary will agree. They are a lost generation of vulnerable children and young people, particularly in the wake of the pandemic. Despite promises from the Scottish Government, services remain—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question, Mr Carson.

Finlay Carson: When will the Government finally act and provide adequate and timely support for my constituents?

Humza Yousaf: In answer to a previous question, my colleague Kevin Stewart outlined the 80 per cent increase in CAMHS staff under this Government; an increase in spending on mental health promised by this Government; £1 billion of additional spending in the recovery plan; and an increase of 320 in the number of CAMHS staff.

Where there are specific issues in rural areas, I am, of course, happy to work with the member to address those, but I give him an absolute and categorical assurance that mental health—particularly that of our children and young people—is a Government priority.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I earlier asked members to be brief in their questions and ministers to be equally brief in their responses. We have not seen any evidence of that, so I am going to have to consider how we go about trying to trim this back. We have three supplementaries on the next question alone, none of which I will be able to take.

Old Aberdeen Medical Practice (General Practitioner Services)

8. Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what steps it is taking to ensure that patients and staff at Old Aberdeen medical practice are consulted on the future provision of its GP services. (S6O-00106)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Humza Yousaf): Patient safety is absolutely paramount in any changes to service provision. Integration authorities are legally required to engage and consult staff and patients to ensure the best outcomes for local communities. Aberdeen City partnership has extensively engaged with staff on the proposed

changes and has communicated their plans to patients, assuring them that they will continue to receive medical care at the practice.

Mercedes Villalba: Until recently, Old Aberdeen medical practice was publicly run and it served the community well. I have met campaigners who are angry about the way that it has been put out to tender, and the previous minister ignored requests to intervene. Will the cabinet secretary agree to meet the campaigners to hear their concerns?

Humza Yousaf: I will, of course, consider that request. I would say that it is often members on the Labour benches who tell us that the Government interferes and intervenes too much when it comes to local decision making, and these are local decisions to be made by local integration authorities. Now the member is asking central Government to interfere in that decision making against the best judgment of the integration authority. However, if Ms Villalba writes to me, I will, of course, consider meeting her and campaigners about what I know is an important local issue.

Covid-19

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): 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 only to access your seat and when moving around the chamber.

The next item of business is a statement by Nicola Sturgeon on Covid-19. The First Minister will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:29

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I will give a detailed update today on the Scottish Government's most recent assessment of the state of the pandemic and on progress with vaccination. I will also outline the latest positions on three specific vaccination-related matters on which there have been significant developments in the past week, namely the on-going consideration of possible vaccination of all 12 to 15-year-olds, the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation recommendation of booster vaccination of people who are immunosuppressed, and our proposal—to be debated by Parliament tomorrow—for a limited and targeted system of vaccine certification.

First, I will summarise today's statistics, which were published in the past half hour or so: 5,810 positive cases were reported yesterday, which is 10.8 per cent of all the tests that were carried out; 883 people are currently in hospital with Covid, which is 78 more than yesterday; and 82 people are receiving intensive care, which is five more than yesterday. I am sad to have to report that a further 17 deaths were reported in the past 24 hours, which takes the total number of deaths registered under the daily definition to 8,198. As always, my sincerest condolences are with everyone who has lost a loved one.

The figures show clearly that we are still experiencing a surge in cases and a very high level of infection in the population. However, the latest data also gives us some early, albeit tentative at this stage, indication that the rate of increase might now be slowing down. That can be seen from an analysis of the past three weeks of case numbers. In the week to 22 August, based on the date when test samples were taken, an average of 3,374 new cases per day were recorded. In the week to 29 August, that had risen to an average of 5,763 cases a day—an increase of more than 70 per cent. However, figures for the most recent week, to 5 September, show a daily

average of 6,304 cases—an increase of 9 per cent. The seven-day average test positivity by specimen date has also fallen back slightly from a peak of 13.4 per cent on 29 August to 12.7 per cent as at 5 September.

It is worth providing a bit more detail about the age breakdown of the latest case figures. Over the past week, 75 per cent of all cases have been in people aged under 45. That is consistent with the broad picture that we have seen throughout this current wave of infection. However, further analysis of the under-45s shows variation between different age bands and gives scope for some very cautious optimism. For example, in the most recent week, the number of cases in the 0 to 14-year-old age band has risen by 44 per cent. Although that is a significant increase, it represents a significant slowing in the rate of increase from the previous week, when cases in that age group increased by more than 150 per cent.

Cases in the 25 to 44-year-old age band have also continued to rise but, again, the rate of increase has slowed quite considerably. It was 6 per cent in the most recent week compared with almost 70 per cent in the week before. Among 15 to 24-year-olds, cases have actually fallen in the most recent week by 18 per cent, from just under 11,000 to just under 9,000. That fall of 18 per cent compares with an increase of 29 per cent in that age group in the previous week.

We can take from all of that that it appears that the rate of increase has slowed. That might well suggest that the appeal to individuals and businesses over the past two weeks to improve compliance with basic mitigations and for all of us to be more cautious in our everyday behaviours is having some impact. The on-going work of test and protect is also vital and hugely appreciated.

I take the opportunity to say a heartfelt thank you to everyone for all the considerable efforts and sacrifices that continue to be made. I also issue a strong and equally heartfelt appeal to, please, keep it up. The data that I have just reported, which shows what seems to be a slowing in the rate of increase in new cases, gives us more cause for cautious optimism than we have had for a few weeks. However—I am afraid that this is always the hard part—cases are still rising week on week, and they are currently at their highest level since the start of the pandemic.

Of course, part of that reflects the significantly higher numbers of tests that are being conducted now compared with earlier stages of the pandemic, and indeed compared with other parts of the United Kingdom. Recently, testing rates per head of population in Scotland—for polymerase chain reaction tests and lateral flow device tests—have been significantly higher than those in

England and Wales. However, that reflects the fact that, since around the time of our schools returning, our levels of infection have also been higher.

That is the key and fundamental point. The levels of infection across the country—albeit that we may be seeing some potential and very welcome signs of stabilisation—remain far too high. That is why we must continue to monitor the situation very closely and be prepared, as any responsible Government must be, to take any targeted and proportionate action that we consider necessary to keep the country as safe as possible. That means doing everything that we can to protect against serious illness and death. However, it also means protecting the ability of our national health service and those who work so hard in it not just to care for Covid patients, which they do with such skill and compassion, but to catch up on backlogs and give care to everyone who needs it, for whatever reason.

As I have narrated many times before, vaccination has significantly reduced the link between cases of Covid and serious health harm from Covid, and that continues to be true. The proportion of people with the virus who end up in hospital is now much lower than it was before the vaccination programme started, and that fact continues to be hugely positive and reassuring.

However, our current case numbers reflect the fact that the delta variant is significantly more transmissible than previous strains of the virus. Just as vaccines have been a game changer in a very good way, delta has been one in a very bad way. Even a much lower percentage of a very high number of cases will—indeed, it already does—put intense pressure on the national health service. We can see the evidence of that clearly in the latest data on hospital and intensive care admissions and occupancy, although we must remember that there is a time lag between case numbers and hospital admissions: it always takes a week or so before any improvement in the number of cases feeds through into hospital data.

In the seven days up to last Friday, 785 people with Covid were admitted to hospital. That is an increase of almost 50 per cent from the week before, when 530 people were admitted. As a result, hospital occupancy has also risen sharply. On Friday 20 August, 312 people were in hospital with Covid; today, the figure is 883. The number of people in intensive care has also increased, albeit at a slower rate, from 34 on 20 August to 82 today. It is worth pointing out, as we always do, that those figures do not include other forms of serious illness such as people who do not require hospital treatment but suffer long Covid.

The inescapable fact remains that, if we do not see the rate of increase slow further and then fall,

many more people will become seriously ill and, sadly, some of them will die. The NHS will also come under even more severe pressure than it is already dealing with, and the pressure that it is already dealing with—this point simply cannot be overstated—is already very severe.

We cannot—we must not—let up in our efforts to stem the current wave of cases. We continue to hope—as I have outlined, recent data gives us more of a solid basis for this hope—that we can turn the corner through continued care and caution, through stringent compliance with existing mitigations, and without having to reintroduce tighter restrictions. However, to do that, as has been the case throughout this experience, we need the help of every business and individual across the country. We need everyone to continue to stick to the basic mitigations that we know are effective in helping to slow down transmission.

Last week, cabinet secretaries engaged intensively with a range of representatives from business, the public sector and wider civic society. They discussed how all of us—Government, employers and the wider public—must play our full part in observing and encouraging maximum compliance with the current mitigations. They include the wearing of face coverings, stringent hygiene, good ventilation and support for continued home working where possible.

Once again, I am very grateful to everyone, including businesses, for everything that is being done to follow and promote those measures. It is making a difference and, although we cannot rule out anything completely, it is also reducing the likelihood of restrictions having to be reintroduced.

The Government will also continue to do everything that we can to encourage compliance, for example through continued support for test and protect, on-going investment in ventilation and in carbon dioxide monitors in schools, and the provision of public information and advice. We are also continuing to do everything possible to maximise vaccine uptake, both in the groups that are already eligible and through readiness for quick implementation of any advice on the extension of vaccine eligibility. Getting vaccinated as soon as we are able remains the single most important thing that any of us can do to protect ourselves and others.

As of today, 4,130,841 people have received a first dose of the vaccine and 3,749,767 have had both doses. That includes 95 per cent of people over 40 who are now fully vaccinated, 72 per cent of 30 to 39-year-olds and 57 per cent of 18 to 29-year-olds. Three quarters of 18 to 29-year-olds have had their first dose, and the proportion in that age group who become fully vaccinated will continue to increase in light of the eight-week gap between doses.

In addition, 60 per cent of 16 and 17-year-olds have now had their first jab, which is 10 percentage points higher than I reported this time last week. We will continue to do everything that we can to encourage more and more people to get their jab—for example, in the last fortnight, we have written to all 16 and 17-year-olds who have not yet been vaccinated to offer them appointments, although, of course, they can also attend a drop-in clinic. And we are ensuring that mobile vaccination units are deployed during university and college freshers weeks.

In addition to that report on the progress of the current vaccination programme, I will briefly update the Parliament on recent advice from the JCVI on possible extensions of the programme. On Friday, the JCVI updated its analysis on offering vaccination to all 12 to 15-year-olds. It concluded that the health benefit of vaccination for 12 to 15-year-olds marginally outweighs any risks, but because it considers children to be at relatively lower risk of serious health harm from the virus, it has decided at this stage not to recommend that vaccination is offered to all 12 to 15-year-olds.

However, and significantly, the JCVI also acknowledged that it would be appropriate for Governments, in coming to a policy decision, to consider any wider benefits of vaccination—for example, whether vaccinating that age group could reduce any further disruption to education. Therefore, the four UK Governments have asked our chief medical officers to undertake a rapid assessment of the latest evidence and provide advice on wider benefits. We expect to receive that advice soon—I hope within days—and the Scottish Government stands ready to act in accordance with any recommendations that we receive.

Last week, the JCVI issued advice to the effect that people with certain health conditions that suppress their immune systems should now be offered a third dose of vaccine. That is because two doses may not be sufficient to enable those with compromised immune systems to mount a full immune response to Covid. We are now moving to implement that advice over the next few weeks and we will provide further information to those affected by it shortly. We still await—and hope to receive soon—the JCVI's final advice on a more general booster programme and stand ready to implement that as soon as the recommendation is available.

The third point that I want to touch on relates to vaccine certification. Parliament will debate and vote tomorrow on the principle of a limited, targeted and proportionate system of certification as an alternative to the risk of further periods of closure for higher-risk settings. Ahead of that debate, and to inform it, we will publish a paper

setting out in broad terms how the scheme will operate and detailing the work that we are doing in consultation with business to finalise the detail and produce sector-specific guidance.

As we debate that, though, it is important to bear in mind that Scotland is far from alone in considering such a scheme. Covid certification has already been introduced by several other Governments, of different political persuasions, in countries across Europe. Indeed, many countries have already gone much further than what the Scottish Government proposes. Covid certification is becoming an increasingly common response to the exceptional circumstances that we all face in this stage of the pandemic.

Neither we nor any other country has the luxury of doing nothing to keep Covid under control. The question, especially after 18 months of restrictions being in place to varying degrees, is how we do so in the most proportionate and least restrictive way possible. In the Scottish Government's view, Covid certification is a reasonable response to a very difficult situation, and a much more proportionate response than any of the likely alternatives.

Fundamentally, we believe that certification can help us reduce the overall harms caused by the pandemic. It will not eradicate transmission, but it will help to reduce it in some higher-risk settings, and will maximise protection against serious illness. We believe, as has been seen already in some other countries, perhaps most notably in France, that it will help to encourage take-up of the vaccine. It also represents a targeted way in which we can, we hope, enable certain events and venues to continue to operate at times when rates of Covid may be high and even rising.

The time that I have again devoted to vaccination today reflects the fact that it remains absolutely key to our progress out of the pandemic, not just in Scotland but across the world. For each of us as individuals, getting vaccinated remains the single most important step that we can take to keep ourselves safe, to keep others safe and to reduce the need for restrictions to be reintroduced.

However, although getting vaccinated is the most important step, it is not the only step that all of us need to take right now. I will therefore close by stressing the three key things that each of us can do as we all play our part in getting cases back under control. As I have stressed and as I will keep stressing, the first is to get vaccinated if you are eligible. If you have not been vaccinated yet or if you had your first dose eight or more weeks ago and have not yet had a second dose, please get your jab. It is straightforward to do—there are drop-in centres in every mainland health board area or you can book an appointment.

Secondly, please continue to test yourself regularly with lateral flow devices. You can order them for free through the NHS Inform website or collect them from a local test site or pharmacy. The point of regular testing—this really matters—is that, if you have the virus but are not aware of that because you are not displaying symptoms, taking a test gives you a chance of finding out that you have the virus before you inadvertently pass it on to others. Regular testing is a key and important way of interrupting chains of transmission. If you test positive through one of the lateral flow devices or if you are identified as a close contact or have symptoms of the virus, make sure that you self-isolate and book a PCR test.

Thirdly and finally, please continue to follow all of the remaining rules and guidelines that are still in place. For example, it is still a legal requirement to wear face coverings in indoor public places such as shops, on public transport and when entering and moving about hospitality settings. Face coverings are a simple but important and effective way in which we can help to protect one another.

More generally, continue to think carefully about the number of contacts that you are having and perhaps reduce any that are not really necessary. Meet outdoors as much as possible. If you are indoors, open the windows, because good ventilation makes a big difference. Even though it is not the law any more, try to keep a safe distance from people in other households if you can, especially when you are indoors. In addition, for the time being, try to minimise direct physical contact such as handshaking, and wash your hands and surfaces regularly and thoroughly. Having to take those steps is frustrating, but we know that they make a difference and help to limit the spread of Covid. Indeed, as I said, it may well be that, in our most recent data, we are seeing the evidence of the difference that those measures make.

I again thank everyone who is helping us to turn the corner in this latest wave of the virus. Please keep up those efforts so that we can continue to keep each other as safe as possible.

The Presiding Officer: The First Minister will now take questions on the issues raised in her statement. I intend to allow around 40 minutes for questions, after which we will move on to the next item of business.

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Covid cases remain high, and therefore it is vital that our test and protect system is operating at the top of its game. However, we know that the system continues to be overwhelmed. Provisional figures for this week show that just over half of cases are being traced, and that follows reports that contact tracers are being advised not to

repeatedly call positive Covid patients if they cannot get through to them.

Our NHS is struggling to cope as well. This week's accident and emergency waiting times are at the worst levels since current records began. We consistently hear of dire waits for people looking to get an ambulance and people who are unable to see their general practitioner. The Scottish National Party does not seem ready to support the NHS this autumn, let alone into the winter, when we know that the problems will get even more acute. We really need from the First Minister a proper plan to deal with those issues, not the flimsy public-relations pamphlet that the SNP Government produced earlier this year.

There are the same problems with vaccine passports. The First Minister has just promised a paper, but publishing it just hours before Parliament is expected to vote on vaccine passports is not good enough. So far, there are no details and no answers in the SNP's plans. We wanted to look at the content of the First Minister's proposals but, frankly, there is nothing to scrutinise. Even the paper promised in the First Minister's statement talks about how the SNP is going to finalise the proposal, rather than how the scheme will actually operate. To quote the First Minister's words, the paper will only set out

"in broad terms how the scheme will operate".

I say to the First Minister that setting that out in "broad terms" is not acceptable for an issue of such importance, which she wants MSPs to support in just 24 hours' time.

We need specifics, but we do not have them. We do not know how the scheme will be administered or enforced. We do not know if the data concerns have been fixed. We do not know if fraud risks have even been identified. We do not know what infrastructure will be needed. We do not know if the SNP will rule out extending vaccine passports indefinitely or rolling them out to further venues at short notice.

We have been asking those questions for a week now, and we have received no answers. This is clearly a last-minute rush job, and the more businesses hear about the proposals, the more they agree that they are an absolute shambles—*[Inaudible.]*—back her plans if they do not know what they are?

The Presiding Officer: First Minister, would you like Mr Ross to repeat the end of that question?

Members: No!

The First Minister: If he was here, we could hear it.

The Presiding Officer: Mr Ross, could I ask you to repeat the end of your question? Thank you.

Douglas Ross: Of course. I was asking: can the First Minister provide details of her scheme now? If not, how does she expect the public to back her plans if they do not know what they are?

The First Minister: Let me take test and protect, accident and emergency and vaccine certification in turn.

First, on test and protect, Douglas Ross has quoted figures today—as was done by others last week—in a way that does a real disservice to those working in test and protect. The publication that he has quoted, which cites provisional figures, actually tells us why it is not reliable to quote provisional figures, because the contact tracing is on-going. Therefore, it is the figures from the following week, when they are finalised, that matter.

To take the provisional figures—I think it was Jackie Baillie who quoted them last week—the provisional figure for completed cases was 43 per cent; it is up to 55 per cent this week, I think. The 43 per cent figure that was quoted last week to do down test and protect is, in the finalised figure this week, 82 per cent. Politicians who, perfectly legitimately, want to have a go at me and the Government, do a real disservice if, in doing so, they do down the efforts of those working in test and protect.

In this week's provisional figures for test and protect, which, again, I stress are provisional figures that will be updated and finalised next week, 89 per cent of cases closed within the 72-hour target—the World Health Organization's target of 80 per cent within 72 hours—which is up from 85.5 per cent in the provisional figures last week.

Yes, the organisation is under pressure. How could it be otherwise with the pandemic and the level of infection right now? However, it is an organisation that is working hard every single day, it is playing a valuable and vital part in helping to get this country through, and I think it is wrong for figures to be quoted in way that unfairly undermines the efforts that test and protect staff are making. This Government is supporting the NHS through the recovery plan and through the resources that have been identified to back it, in addition to the overall commitment to increase NHS funding.

This is interesting, and it will be relevant to the point that I am about to make on Covid certification. Regarding the plan that Douglas Ross derides, which is the Scottish Government plan to increase NHS capacity by 10 per cent, backed by investment, he says here that that is

insufficient, and yet yesterday the Conservative Government at Westminster announced its own plan, and guess what that plan was? I do not know whether Douglas Ross is at Westminster right now, but I suspect he will support it in that context, because that plan was to increase NHS capacity by—guess what?—10 per cent.

Again, we have Douglas Ross backing things that are done by the Conservative Government in Westminster while criticising exactly the same things when they are done here in Scotland.

That takes me on to vaccine certification. We will set out the work to which I have alluded today in advance of the debate tomorrow. Parliament has, rightly and properly, been asked to endorse the principle, and it is absolutely right and proper that—just like the UK Government for England—we continue to work with stakeholders to ensure that we take account of their views and concerns as we finalise the detail. In fact, we would be criticised if we were not to do that.

Of course, vaccine certification is already being used in many countries across Europe and around the world, and what we are proposing is also being proposed by the UK Government for England. I suspect that we are hearing from Douglas Ross a justification for the ridiculous position that he is going to end up in, where the scheme that he opposes in Scotland is exactly the same one that he supports when a Conservative Government introduces it in England.

By all means—[*Interruption.*] By all means, scrutinise this Government, but—for goodness' sake—try to have a single ounce of consistency as you do it.

The Presiding Officer: I ask that members cease commenting to one another across the aisles—thank you.

Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): I place on record my condolences to all those who have lost a loved one to the virus. The 17 deaths in the past 24 hours are a reminder that the virus has not gone away.

I also thank our front-line NHS and care workers. They were among the first to get the vaccine, and they safely got their second dose after four weeks. If there is some research that suggests that the efficacy of the vaccine declines over time, they should surely also be considered for inclusion in the early booster programme. Can the First Minister address that issue?

The First Minister covered three issues in her statement today: vaccine passports, the JCVI advice on 12 to 15-year-olds and the wider vaccination programme. We will have a wider debate on the substance of Covid passports tomorrow, but we should not allow that debate to

distract from the big issues and challenges that we currently face, although I must say that there is still limited engagement with businesses about the details of the programme and how passports will work in practice. I stress that, at key moments throughout the pandemic, we have supported the Government, so this is not opposition for opposition's sake or an ideological opposition—it is about what works and what will make a meaningful difference.

On the JCVI, I recognise what the First Minister says today, but I think that we should go by the principle that any 12 to 15-year-old who wants the vaccine should be entitled to get it.

Let us look at the current tools. Test and protect is still far from meeting its standard. That is clearly a criticism of those who are in charge of running the system, not those who work in the system. To be frank, it does a disservice to those staff—the very staff whom the Government underresources and undervalues—to hide behind them and use them as protection. If we look at the statistics for the spread of the virus among zero to 14-year-olds, we see the consequence of not using test and protect in our schools and the devastating impact that that has had.

Data published today shows that nearly 200,000 Scots have had their first vaccine and are now past the eight-week period for eligibility for their second vaccine but have still not yet had that vaccine. We should make no mistake about it—that is a colossal failure of the Government, and it is putting public health at risk daily. Rather than creating new systems, what urgent action will the Government take to fix the systems that we have, to finally resource and fix test and protect, and to find the missing 200,000 people?

The First Minister: Those who have not yet had the vaccine who are either eligible for a first dose or have passed the eight-week interval for the second dose have all been written to. We continue to make efforts to encourage and persuade those who have not been vaccinated to come forward, but the vaccination programme is not mandatory. Anas Sarwar appears, again, to be getting himself into a position—I will come back to this point shortly—in which he is setting his face against Covid certification without, as far as I can tell, looking at any of the detail or considering any of the evidence elsewhere in the world, while also suggesting that we should have mandatory vaccination. The programme is voluntary, and we continue to encourage people to come forward.

Uptake rates of the vaccine programme are incredibly high, but we continue to try to get to anybody who has not come forward for vaccination, so that we can encourage them to come forward, and we will continue to do so.

With regard to the JCVI, the issue of who is included in a booster programme and the issue of 12 to 15-year-olds, I am a politician, not a clinician or public health expert, so it is important that all our policy decisions on vaccination are rooted in evidence, either from the JCVI or, in the case of 12 to 15-year-olds, possibly from our chief medical officer. If I were to second-guess or ignore any evidential base and say that we were going to vaccinate people without that, Anas Sarwar and others—with much legitimacy, I hasten to add—would criticise us for doing that. We stand ready to implement recommendations but, for the sake of overall confidence in the programme, it is important that decisions on who we vaccinate are rooted in that clinical and expert evidence. Anas Sarwar previously suggested that the Scottish Government should act unilaterally to reduce the interval between doses in spite of the fact that we see evidence, for example from Israel, that that is not and would not have been the right thing to do, because it would have reduced the effectiveness of the protection from vaccination.

Secondly, the test and protect system is working extremely well under significant pressure. To repeat the point that I made to Douglas Ross, I think that it was Anas Sarwar's colleague Jackie Baillie who said last week that only 43 per cent of cases had been completed, knowing that she was citing provisional information. This week, the final figure for that week is 82 per cent. We can already see that, last week, Jackie Baillie was talking down the performance and achievements of test and protect. The provisional figures for this week will be finalised next week and we will see the comparison then. In terms of that WHO standard, last week the provisional figure was 85.5 per cent and this week it is 89 per cent. Again, test and protect is working exceptionally well and we have a duty to continue to support it.

For Anas Sarwar to say that test and protect is not working in our schools suggests a lack of understanding of what is going on in our schools. Contact tracing is being done appropriately and in a proportionate way in our schools, so that we do not have the situation that we had before the summer holidays, when lots of children were required to self-isolate when there was no need for them to do so. We now have a situation that helps to protect the population while minimising disruption to education.

Finally, on vaccine certification, I will not pre-empt tomorrow's debate, but Anas Sarwar says that he is not taking a position of opposition for opposition's sake. I am sorry, but anybody who, on the weekend four or five days before a debate in Parliament, decides—without considering the evidence or detail—that, come what may, they will vote against the motion is indulging in opposition for opposition's sake.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): Rising case numbers and the uptick in admissions to intensive care units are extremely worrying. The contact tracing system is broken and it is not doing down our contact tracers to point out how overstretched they are. All summer, Scottish Liberal Democrats have been warning about the system approaching meltdown. Our research found positive cases waiting up to a week to be interviewed. Ministers should be recruiting contact tracers, not reducing the reach of that programme. Alongside vaccines, it is the single most important tool that we have for stopping people catching Covid. Therefore, will the First Minister commit now to an emergency recruitment drive for new tracers?

The First Minister: Just in the past couple of weeks, we have recruited 100 more tracers. We do not do emergency recruitment drives; we recruit and support test and protect as we go along, depending on the need for the system. Alex Cole-Hamilton is right that it is not talking down test and protect staff to raise legitimate concerns or scrutinise the Government, but it is doing down the efforts of test and protect to cite misleading figures that suggest that it is performing at a level that is not reflective of the reality. The 43 per cent that was cited last week—which is, in reality, 82 per cent—is a case in point. Today's report shows that 84.4 per cent of positive cases are being interviewed within 48 hours of them being in the case management system and that, based on provisional figures, the WHO target this week is being met, although the figures will be finalised next week. Yes, the system is under pressure, but it is operating and performing well, and every one of us in the chamber owes every one of those staff members a deep debt of gratitude.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): For island communities, life can still be all too easily disrupted by the pandemic. Last month, over 11 days at the height of the summer season, 65 ferry sailings to and from Brodick were lost, primarily due to positive Covid-19 tests among CalMac Ferries crew members, which caused massive disruption. As we head into autumn and winter, what protocols are being put in place to minimise further disruption, not least in the light of reports today that mask wearing among passengers has declined significantly in recent days?

The First Minister: Ferry operators continue to reinforce the messages on complying with current legislation regarding face coverings. They also have in place enhanced cleaning measures and are promoting the guidance on travelling safely on public transport. Transport Scotland continues to engage with all lifeline ferry operators on the efforts that they are making in that regard and also on the wider resilience of the network.

The recent spate of Covid-related incidents on some ferry routes and vessels is concerning, but we need to remember that, even though most restrictions have been lifted, the virus is circulating, and we all need to continue to take care, as I have set out again today, and think about our own behaviours, whether at work, at home or while travelling. If we all comply with the measures, whether on public transport or elsewhere, we will continue to bear down on the number of cases that we are seeing.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): The tragic death of Sarah Harding has once again highlighted the devastating impact of breast cancer, and it has resulted in UK cancer charities seeing an increase of more than 800 per cent in contacts. Concerns have been expressed about breast cancer screening programmes here in Scotland potentially not returning to full service for years to come, and the limited options for women under 50 or over 70 to self-refer. When will breast cancer services across Scotland be fully restored? For women under 50 or over 70 who have a history of breast cancer in their family, what referral screening pathways will now be urgently developed?

The First Minister: The issue is important at any time but, given the tragic death of Sarah Harding earlier in the week, it is uppermost in the minds of many people, particularly many women.

I will ask the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care to write in detail about the different referral pathways and put the letter in the Scottish Parliament information centre. One of the things that we are in the process of doing, which is relevant to all cancers, is establishing early diagnosis cancer centres, and the first three are already operational. The centres are intended to be an alternative to the existing urgent referral pathway, and identify the less common symptoms of cancer, so that there is another route in. A lot of work is being done there.

As I know because I have recently entered the eligible age group, the breast screening programme is operational. It was paused for a period at the height of the first wave of Covid, but it has been up and running again for some time.

Urgent care, and in particular cancer care, continues to be prioritised during the pandemic, but there are efforts under way in cancer care across the whole health service to ensure that any backlogs are addressed as quickly as possible. However, given the importance of the issue, as I said, I will make sure that further information on various referral pathways is put in SPICe.

Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): I note that the JCVI made its recommendation on vaccinating 12 to 15-year-olds based on there

being what it called “marginal gain”. Many of my constituents have been in touch to ask me to put forward their concerns about their young adult children not being vaccinated, and their anxieties about their children potentially missing more school time and not being protected by the vaccine in school.

I appreciate that the First Minister advised that the chief medical officer will be reporting back with advice within days, but what criteria on societal impacts will be used in addition to the clinical criteria?

The First Minister: The issue is important and Gillian Martin’s question gets to the heart of it. To be fair to the JCVI, it is constituted with expertise to allow it to consider the health benefits and health risks of vaccination. That is what the JCVI has done, and such consideration is the basis for its recommendation.

It is worth reiterating that the JCVI concluded that the benefits of vaccinating 12 to 15-year-olds outweighed the risks, but, overall, it did not think that that was sufficient to recommend vaccination for all. However, crucially, the JCVI recognised that there are wider considerations—no considerations that it could properly take into account, but ones that Governments could appropriately and properly take into account. The four Governments have asked their chief medical officers to do exactly that and look at the wider benefits of possible vaccination. That will include the possible minimisation of disruption to education. It is important that the CMOs are allowed to do the work that they are undertaking independently, taking account of all the advice and wider factors that they think are relevant.

As I said earlier, we expect to receive the advice quickly—I am hoping that that will be in a matter of days. As soon as we do, Parliament will be informed.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): I am very grateful to NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde for correcting my online vaccination record. Can the First Minister say anything about how many people have their details wrongly recorded? What can people do about that? When will we catch up on that issue?

The First Minister: I do not have a figure for how many people might have their information incorrectly recorded—I would not expect there to be a significant proportion—and I will check to see whether the information can be made available. More important, if any data on anyone’s vaccination status record is incorrect, they can phone the Covid-19 status helpline and the matter will be investigated and rectified as quickly as possible. The helpline number is 0808 196 8565.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): Michael Kill, the chief executive officer of the Night Time Industries Association, has warned that nightlife businesses will lose more than one third of their trade overnight if Covid passports are made mandatory. He also said:

“Contrary to popular belief, much of our core market and workforce will not accept being coerced into taking the vaccine.”

Did the First Minister consider that viewpoint in coming to her decision? Given the night-time industry’s comments about the impact on the sector, what mitigation will the Scottish Government offer the sector, which has been closed for more than 18 months during the pandemic?

The First Minister: There is a pretty basic reality for all countries: we cannot wave a magic wand and make Covid go away. It continues to circulate, and we are about to enter the winter period, when it will pose significant challenges for us all. Therefore, the question for all of us is not whether we can get away with doing nothing, but how we can protect the country in a way that is as proportionate as possible and which is least restrictive.

On nightclubs and the night-time industry, I absolutely recognise that nobody wants a system of vaccine certification, and nobody wants it to be in place for any longer than is necessary. However, the alternative, particularly in higher-risk settings, is not to do anything, which might well lead to our facing the situation of having further periods of closure of some of the higher-risk settings.

That is, I am afraid, the hard reality that Governments simply cannot escape. This is about what is the most proportionate thing to do to keep people as safe as possible and keep the venues open, even during what is likely to be a very challenging winter period. We cannot escape that reality and those choices.

People who argue against vaccine certification—as I said, certification is working in many countries across Europe—have to then say how they think higher-risk settings should be kept open, given that cases might increase during winter, without facing further periods of closure. I am afraid that Governments have to face those hard realities—we cannot simply put our heads in the sand and ignore them.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): The First Minister has rightly, on the basis of clinical and medical advice, decided to continue the requirement to wear face coverings when in indoor public spaces. Will she reiterate the importance of the continued need for face coverings and their benefit in helping to stop the spread of Covid-19?

Will she comment on whether there is any clinical advice that suggests that, particularly as we approach winter, when people will be indoors more often, the use of FFP2 face masks and appropriately fitted face coverings is the best way for people to protect themselves and others?

The First Minister: Face coverings play an important part in stopping the spread of Covid, even as vaccination is rolled out. Scientific evidence shows that fabric face coverings of two or, preferably, three layers, help to reduce transmission.

Face coverings are, of course, most effective when they are fitted correctly over someone's mouth, nose and chin. The mandatory requirement to continue to wear face coverings is subject to regular review and will continue to take account of scientific, social and economic factors, as well as the latest clinical evidence.

Emma Harper mentioned FFP2 masks. In clinical settings, we continue to consider the most appropriate personal protective equipment to be used.

We will continue to keep all the requirements under review. We are legally required to ensure that any requirement is necessary and proportionate. Any changes to legal restrictions will, of course, always be scrutinised by the Parliament.

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): In June, I raised the subject of podiatry appointments with the First Minister, and the health secretary wrote to me, too. However, my constituents are still unable to access paused NHS services, including those in not only podiatry but dentistry. Although I understand the remobilise, recover and redesign principles, they might take time to implement. For many, that potentially means another six months of pain, isolation and the inability to stay active.

Will the First Minister provide an update on when paused NHS services will fully resume? Can she guarantee that sufficient staff and resources will be in place to ensure that there will be no shortfall in the services that are provided and that all patients will get the treatment that they require within 12 weeks of services resuming?

The First Minister: I will undertake to provide an update. Dental services, which the member referred to, continue to struggle, as many sectors do, with increased transmission, but they are operating much more normally. For podiatry services and a lot of other NHS services, the constraint on moving back to face-to-face appointments is the continued requirement for distancing, in order to reduce the risk of transmission. The health service is progressively getting more services back to normal, which

includes providing more face-to-face consultations. I will ask the health secretary to give an update on podiatry, in particular, and follow up his previous correspondence with the member in June.

More generally, we have set out our commitment to NHS resourcing, and we will continue to keep that under review. We have record numbers of staff in the national health service, and we have committed to increasing the NHS's staffing complement.

I must be frank: as is the case with many sectors of our economy, the health service and other public services are struggling with staff shortages, which are largely to do with Brexit impacts and the reduction in labour supplies. We need to grapple with such issues, which affect our health service as well as food supply and other parts of our economy.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): In recent weeks, a number of my constituents have inquired about the option to double up their winter flu vaccine with a Covid booster vaccine. While we await the JCVI's advice on whether Covid booster vaccines are required, will the First Minister confirm whether consideration is being given to administering the winter flu vaccine and, if applicable, a Covid booster vaccine at the same time?

The First Minister: In short, yes, we are considering all possible delivery options to make it as easy as possible for people who are being vaccinated and for the NHS in administering vaccination programmes. As I have indicated, the JCVI is still considering evidence on the benefits of booster vaccines for the wider population. We await its final advice.

The interim advice has allowed us to do some initial planning, and we are trying to ensure that that operates in as much synergy with the flu vaccination programme as possible. We are working with health boards to plan the seasonal flu vaccination programme and to ensure that we align the two programmes as much as possible. That will depend, in part, on the timing and detail of the JCVI's advice on Covid booster vaccinations. We will continue to update the Parliament as regularly as possible.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): I have been contacted by a constituent whose child's school is dealing with hundreds of pupil absences and a number of staff absences due to Covid. His daughter's close friends both tested positive, but despite identifying herself as a close contact, his daughter has heard nothing from test and protect. This is about a different school from the one whose similar absence rate I raised with the First

Minister last week. We know that that is happening across the country.

Does the First Minister believe that current guidance for schools is leading to a sufficient reduction in disruption and in the number of infections? How is the Scottish Government ensuring that funding that has been allocated for ventilation improvements is being used in a timely manner?

The First Minister: I am obviously unable to comment on that particular case. However, on Mr Greer's first point, about contact tracing in schools, test and protect is taking a much more proportionate approach to identify the circumstances in which a young person is considered to be a close contact. We know that, prior to the summer holidays, many young people had quite lengthy periods of isolation and therefore disruption to their education, and that, on reflection, those periods of isolation were possibly unnecessary with regard to risk reduction.

It is important that we keep the matter under review. In the past couple of weeks, I have asked for a review of that process and for an update of the advice. The advice that I have is that it continues to be appropriate to have the guidance that is currently in place, but we will keep all the guidance under review as the situation changes.

On the issue of ventilation and CO₂ monitors, work is on-going with local authorities to ensure that the funding that has been provided for CO₂ monitors is being used and that those monitors are used in all school and education settings. That work crucially supports the process of assessment that we have set out previously, which we have asked to be completed before the October break, to decide whether any longer-term changes to the ventilation systems in schools are required. The work is under way with local authorities to ensure that the assessment is done, and we will report on it as regularly as possible.

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): Constituents have told me that the online vaccination status system does not record doses that have been received elsewhere in the common travel area. Can the First Minister outline the steps that are being taken to resolve that issue?

The First Minister: A Scottish citizen who has received one or more of their vaccinations outside Scotland but in the common travel area can phone the status helpline that I mentioned a moment ago—0808 1968565. On-going collaboration is taking place between the Scottish Government and NHS Digital to establish appropriate data-sharing agreements in the common travel area. We are working to rectify the situation as soon as possible. Those who live in Scotland but have been vaccinated outside Scotland or England

should obtain proof of their vaccination from the country in which they have been vaccinated.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): Earlier today, I was able to download my record of vaccination certificate. Within a minute, I managed to create a copy of the certificate in which I was able to change every single detail. That is not a particularly robust system, is it?

The First Minister: It actually is, because the one thing that cannot be changed—the thing that matters—is the QR code. I do not pretend to be a technical expert on all of that, but we clearly set that point out last week. I advise the member not to seek to travel on the forged document that he just admitted to having, because the QR code and his identity documents will probably find him out.

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): With new Covid cases in Lanarkshire—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Colleagues, can we please hear the member?

Stephanie Callaghan: With new Covid cases in Lanarkshire still the highest in Europe, and with levels of A and E attendance and hospital admissions proportionally higher in Lanarkshire than in other Scottish NHS areas, what additional support can the Scottish Government provide to NHS Lanarkshire to enable it to respond locally to that immediate and worrying situation?

The First Minister: We obviously continue to work with local partners. The area that Evelyn Tweed represents is hard hit, and we continue to work with the health board and the local authority there and more broadly to ensure that the situation with Covid cases is addressed appropriately and that broader recovery is taken into account. Covid has impacted the Stirling and Clackmannanshire city region deal, but work is on-going with regional partners to ensure that the deal is delivered. I am happy to ask the relevant minister to write to Evelyn Tweed with a full update.

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): There was a slight mistake there—I think that the First Minister did not hear the appropriate question because of all the noise.

The Presiding Officer: I call Ms Tweed to ask her question.

Evelyn Tweed: As our minds turn to economic recovery, it is important that we act ambitiously to unlock Scotland's potential. What steps is the Scottish Government taking to ensure that the delivery of the Stirling and Clackmannanshire city region deal is accelerated as a result of the pandemic?

The First Minister: First, I apologise to Stephanie Callaghan and take full responsibility for

getting her mixed up with Evelyn Tweed and for getting the questions mixed up. It is my responsibility and I am not making excuses, but there is constant noise that sometimes makes it difficult for me to hear. However, it is my responsibility and I apologise to Stephanie Callaghan.

I will make sure that the answer that I gave about the work that is on-going around the city region deal, in particular, gets to Evelyn Tweed.

I apologise again to both members for that confusion, which was confusion on my part.

Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): The First Minister says that the work of test and protect is vital and hugely appreciated, but, two months since I first raised with her concerns about test and protect staff feeling stressed and overwhelmed, whistleblowers now describe staff as being burnt out. Test and protect is stretched to breaking point, with reports of contract tracers being told to make only two calls before closing a case, in order to get through the volume of calls. Staff have also reported not feeling listened to when scripts change.

In previous answers, the First Minister also referred to the overall number of cases being closed. However, the figures for the week ending 29 August show that only 60.5 per cent of contact tracing was completed within 72 hours. That is 13,330 contacts taking more than 72 hours to be traced from the time cases were recorded on the system. Will the First Minister clarify the position on that point and say what she is doing to fix test and protect and to support our hard-working staff?

The First Minister: We continue to take steps to support staff. The staff in test and protect are working under extreme pressure. They have my gratitude, but it is more important that they have our on-going support through the recruitment of more staff and by our making sure that they have the resources that they need.

It is important that we all understand the point about provisional versus finalised figures. I have been making the point today that it is important to wait for the finalised figures. The member has quoted the figures that assess performance within the World Health Organization target, and what usually happens there is that the provisional figure is higher than the finalised figure. Last week’s provisional figure, which was over 80 per cent, has now, in the finalised figure, come down to the level that the member has cited today. However, today’s provisional figure—*[Interruption.]* No it is not—I will come back to the second point in a minute. Today’s provisional figure is higher than last week’s provisional figure. We will see the finalised figure next week, but that suggests an improvement in performance.

The other figure—the one that Jackie Baillie cited last week and that Douglas Ross cited today—is the figure for the overall number of cases being closed, and we find that that figure is much lower in the provisional data than it is in the finalised data. It was 43 per cent last week but became 82 per cent today.

I know that that is complex, but it reflects a system in which, when a snapshot of a date is reported, many cases are still in process and it takes a few days after that for the figure to be finalised.

I encourage all members who have not done so already to look in detail at those figures and to understand that difference between provisional and finalised data. That would perhaps prevent our using provisional figures in a way that is misleading and in a way that—inadvertently, I am sure—downplays and understates the performance of those who are working so hard in test and protect.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): Will the First Minister confirm that Covid vaccine certificates will be available to people who have had their first or both vaccines in countries outside the common travel area, such as Canada and Australia?

The First Minister: As I said a moment ago, a Scottish citizen who has received one or more of their vaccines outside Scotland but within the common travel area should contact the helpline. That is taken account of. We are continuing to work with NHS Digital to establish data-sharing arrangements within the common travel area and internationally, and those arrangements will be in place as soon as possible. If someone lives in Scotland but has been vaccinated outside Scotland or England, where there is already a data-sharing agreement, they should obtain proof of their vaccination from the country in which they were vaccinated.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the First Minister’s statement on a Covid-19 update.

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. There is a strong point to be made about noise in the chamber during that session. Over the past couple of weeks, in particular, the noise level has prohibited me, as a member with a disability, from participating fully. I would be really appreciative if you could write to the business managers, setting out how we can continue to make the chamber a place where everybody can participate despite their disabilities. *[Applause.]*

The Presiding Officer: I thank Ms Mackay for that point of order. Several times since taking up the role of Presiding Officer, I have asked members for quiet when others have been

speaking. Although we do not want to have a sterile, wholly silent chamber, nor do we want it to become the norm that, when a member is making a contribution, others cannot hear the member properly and cannot hear interventions. Generally, that makes their full participation in business very challenging indeed.

I refer members, once again, to the code of conduct, which urges that members treat one another at all times with courtesy and respect. It is, indeed, a debating chamber, but it need not be a chamber where others are constantly speaking when members are doing their best to represent their constituents.

Programme for Government 2021-22

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): Before we proceed with the next item of business, 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 only the aisles and walkways to access your seat and when moving around the chamber.

The next item of business is a Scottish Government debate on the programme for government 2021-22 and the economy. I call Kate Forbes to open the debate for the Scottish Government. Under the rules on self-isolation, the cabinet secretary joins us remotely.

15:33

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Economy (Kate Forbes): Yesterday, the First Minister announced our programme for government, which sets out our ambitions for the next 12 months and the duration of this session of Parliament. I think that we would all agree that its publication comes at a hugely important time in the pandemic, when we remain focused on keeping the country safe with the recent surge in cases as we tentatively move towards recovery.

Despite the challenges, this year's programme for government marks a moment of renewed hope and opportunity. It sets out the actions that we will take to nurture economic prosperity for all of Scotland's people and places, whether they be urban or rural. It reinforces our commitment and support to the entrepreneurs, the business leaders and the workers who, day in and day out, produce, create and provide services that our economy and communities depend on. In so doing, they provide employment opportunities and drive investment and innovation in the economy. Our role is simple: it is to enable and support that entrepreneurial drive, and to ensure that Scotland remains a great place to start, to develop, to locate and to grow a business.

We want to create a pro-prosperity, pro-business and pro-jobs environment that fosters entrepreneurship and makes Scotland an even more attractive place for investors. We can stimulate business growth by investing in our people and expanding opportunities. We can also do it with well-paid and fair jobs while securing a just transition to net zero.

Our new 10-year national strategy for economic transformation will be key to delivering that vision. It is due to be published in late autumn alongside

a new national challenge competition, which will provide up to £50 million to projects with the greatest potential to transform Scotland's economy. It will be a crucial part of building the successful, thriving and prosperous Scotland that I hope all of us in the chamber want to see. It will deliver the long-term, transformational change that we need to build a sustainable, fairer and more inclusive economy, where everybody can flourish.

It is clear that the pandemic has taken its toll on Scottish businesses, putting livelihoods at risk. All of that has been exacerbated by the impact of the recent European Union exit. Since the start of the pandemic, all of us, including our businesses, have made sacrifices to protect public health. Helping those hard-hit businesses get back on their feet, and our economy back to growth, is crucial.

Over the past 18 months, we have invested strongly to support Scottish businesses, providing more than £3.7 billion in direct business support since March 2020. We extended 100 per cent non-domestic rates relief for all retail, hospitality, leisure and aviation premises for all of this financial year. Alongside other measures, such as a reduction to the poundage, that ensures that Scotland offers the most generous non-domestic rates regime anywhere in the United Kingdom. In addition to those policies, we have committed more than £1.7 billion to build a stronger and more sustainable economy.

Our support has gone further than that provided in the rest of the UK. In January, we provided more than £238 million through retail, hospitality and leisure top-up grants. As a result, those businesses in Scotland received significantly more than their counterparts south of the border. Our culture, heritage and events sector received £175 million, which is far more than we have received in consequential from the UK Government.

Of course, our work does not stop now. We will continue to work with those businesses that have seen the hardest impact as we move forward. That will include extending and refreshing the way that we work in partnership with businesses, large and small, in every part of Scotland.

The small business bonus scheme, fresh start relief and business growth accelerator will continue for the lifetime of this session of Parliament. We are also supporting the recommendations of the tourism recovery task force, considering the best approach to future years, as well as promoting a thriving rural economy through the new £20 million rural entrepreneur fund.

I am in no doubt that an innovative and entrepreneurial private sector is essential to supporting a wellbeing economy and to delivering

this programme for government. The programme for government clearly sets out our intentions to help create and support that entrepreneurial private sector.

Alongside our enterprise agencies and the Scottish National Investment Bank, we will support businesses at the forefront of developing the technologies of tomorrow by increasing funding for research and development to £100 million over this session of Parliament, which was a specific ask by some of the business organisations.

We recognise the vital role that international trade and investment plays in enhancing productivity, and we will work to deliver our international economy plans, underpinned by our values-led vision for trade.

We are also continuing our work to develop a digital economy, which is particularly close to my heart. We are implementing the recommendations of the Logan review and providing £100 million to improve digital capabilities across businesses.

In addition, CivTech will receive £46 million to create more opportunities for innovative businesses and up to 700 new high-value jobs. We will also deliver future-proofed mobile and broadband connectivity the length and breadth of Scotland through our Scottish 4G infill and reaching 100 per cent programmes, and we will begin delivery our five-year £35 million programme to digitally transform planning services.

Over the next five years, we want to invest to help businesses in promoting the good green jobs that will help to secure the just transition to net zero. Although we have a moral and legal obligation to meet our ambitious targets to end Scotland's contribution to climate change, I firmly believe that there is also an enormous economic opportunity to be grasped. We want to do that while ensuring that we deliver the just transition that will have a positive impact on every aspect of our lives, including through the delivery of job security and fairer work.

Our co-operation agreement with the Greens will only push us further forward in our plans to do that. The green jobs fund will provide £100 million over the next five years to help businesses to create employment through investment. Our commitment to infrastructure is steadfast: we will invest in the infrastructure that we know we need to boost our green recovery, with £33 billion invested over the course of this session in the national infrastructure mission to create new jobs and markets and provide benefits across Scottish supply chains.

In the coming year, we will start work to develop options for the creation of a new national infrastructure company, and we will announce the first pathfinder projects for the green growth

accelerator ahead of the 26th United Nations climate change conference of the parties—COP26. That will mark an important first step in unlocking up to £200 million of public sector investment and incentivising local authorities to deliver low-carbon infrastructure. The Scottish National Investment Bank will continue to build its portfolio, with £1 billion capital funding over this session.

Although good green jobs represent enormous economic and environmental opportunities for Scotland's recovery, we need to make sure that those opportunities are distributed fairly and meet the needs of our businesses. We are all acutely conscious of the current chronic labour shortages in sectors that are central to our recovery, including tourism, hospitality and logistics, which are clearly connected to the UK Government's damaging migration rules. We have written to the UK Government to ask for an urgent meeting and to push for changes that would increase Scotland's ability to import and distribute essential goods.

The Government, together with a number of business organisations, has pressed and will continue to press the UK Government to urgently revise its immigration policy before further damage is done. Going forward, we will continue to work with businesses to understand their skills needs, address long-standing recruitment and retention challenges and equip people with the skills that employers need now and in the future. We want to promote and maximise employability and skills interventions that will help workers enter or progress in sectors where there is demand. In that process, we will support into fair work those most impacted by the pandemic: young people, women, lone parents, disabled people, those from minority ethnic communities and those from lower income households.

In order to do that, over this session of Parliament, we will invest an additional £500 million to support the jobs of the future, including through the upskilling and reskilling of people to access those jobs and the addressing of skills gaps and shortages. Young people will also be supported into employment, with up to £70 million for the young persons guarantee this year, and we will invest up to £20 million through our no one left behind partnership.

There is no doubt—I think that we in the chamber all agree on this—that when we look back, we see that the pandemic has brought with it suffering and sacrifice in our business community and beyond. However, as we look forward, we see that recovery means that we can do things differently to deliver a just transition and push our economy forward, creating prosperity, business opportunities and jobs. The programme for

government that was announced yesterday gives us the basis to start the journey towards that economic transformation.

15:45

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): As we engage in this debate about the programme for government, it behoves us all, once again, to recognise and understand that the expectation from the public, as was shown clearly yesterday, is that the Parliament's primary focus will be on economic recovery from the pandemic. In the same context, I have no doubt whatever that business and industry want certainty, stability and a long-term strategy from Government that will protect jobs, people's real disposable incomes and incentives for investment and economic growth.

On that question of growth, given all the debate last week about the Green Party's approach, I say this: it is true that there are several important measures when it comes to assessing the progress of any economy, and it is true that gross domestic product and gross national product are incomplete measures, notably because they omit variables such as externalities, but that does not take away from the fact that GDP and GNP remain the most important internationally recognised economic measures, precisely because they measure the net output or value added of an economy in terms of the goods and services that are purchased with money. They will, therefore, always be an extremely good guide to the areas of the economy that are working well in terms of securing employment, improving productivity and creating new investment, all of which helps to determine real disposable income. If we do not have that strong economic growth, we all suffer. Common sense surely tells us that.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): Does the member accept that we can have growth but that, sometimes, not everyone benefits?

Liz Smith: Yes. I said that there are other measures that determine economic progress. However, growth is the primary concern in any economy because it provides the facility to do other things that are important and to enable measures that can reduce some of the inequalities in our society.

It does not matter which business—be it small, medium or large—we talk to, which economic forecaster or public policy unit we listen to or which financial services we speak to: they unanimously tell us that economic growth is the most important thing post-pandemic. When it comes to the Greens, I am afraid that it really is the Greens against the business world.

I wonder where the Scottish National Party is coming from on that, given that, not long ago, the

party agreed with the business world. At the SNP conference, Nicola Sturgeon said:

“Our government’s ... priority is economic growth ... we are doing everything we can to get the economy growing again.”

When John Swinney, as finance secretary and Deputy First Minister, gave evidence to the Scottish Affairs Committee, he explained why the Scottish Government’s priority was to maximise investment and support economic growth. Earlier this year, in reaction to concerns that Sir Tom Hunter raised about the SNP’s approach to business, Kate Forbes said:

“That is why the Government is absolutely committed to being pro-prosperity, pro-growth and pro-business”.— [Official Report, 2 June 2021; c 17.]

I do not disagree with any of those three senior SNP ministers when they make such comments, because they are right about the importance of growth. Why on earth would they go into coalition with a party that is fundamentally opposed to that as a priority? That tension will dominate the coalition for however long it lasts.

Kate Forbes said at committee on 31 August that she would like to build a 10-year economic strategy, and she repeated that today. She also said that that cannot happen in full because she does not have the necessary funds from the UK Government to address exogenous shocks to the economy, nor does she have sufficient information about the timescales that will underpin how Scotland will benefit from various UK Government projects such as the shared prosperity, levelling up and community renewal funds.

On that point, I think that there will be welcome news in the Chancellor of the Exchequer’s next budget and details of the funds will emerge. However, when Kate Forbes complains about the UK Government not providing the necessary funds to assist with the critical economic challenges that lie ahead, I really wonder how she thinks that the Scottish Government would have been in a position to fund the Covid recovery without the massive injection of UK cash, especially in terms of furlough and the huge assistance that is now to be provided via the health and social care plan.

The Minister for Business, Trade, Tourism and Enterprise (Ivan McKee): That is a bizarre question for Liz Smith to ask, because she knows the answer to it. The question that I put back to her is this: how does every other country in the world manage to do that? Does she think that Scotland would be unique among the almost 200 countries of the world in being unable to support our economy through the Covid pandemic?

Liz Smith: Is Mr McKee really saying that we would have had the same benefit without the UK

of—[*Interruption.*] Really? You are actually claiming—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I ask for less chat across the room. If Ms Smith wishes to ask Mr McKee to confirm or clarify or whatever, perhaps Mr McKee could stand up and not do this sotto voce, if that is possible.

Ivan McKee: Will the member take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: It is up to Ms Smith whether she takes the intervention.

Liz Smith: I am not going to take the intervention, Presiding Officer, because I really cannot believe that Mr McKee asked that question. It is abundantly clear—[*Interruption.*] No, I will not, Mr McKee.

Let us look to Professor Mark Blyth, who is, I believe, one of the Scottish Government’s top advisers and an independence supporter. He warns that the upheaval of independence would be “Brexit times 10”, and that view is shared by many in the Scottish business community and, indeed, among the public.

On the Conservatives’ side of the chamber, we are very clear in our minds that the economy brief must have as its primary focus policies that will support enterprise—especially by assisting small-scale business and new start-ups—and drive innovation and sustainable infrastructures. That is particularly true for the small business sector. We should remember that many of our small businesses are those that help our local communities most of all, and that small businesses provide 43 per cent of private sector jobs. Those firms have faced a disproportionate Brexit burden and disproportionate debt—a point that was made strongly to me and Murdo Fraser when we met the Federation of Small Businesses a few days ago.

We support the small business recovery plan, including the business rates relief aspects, because it is clear that the current system of taxing non-domestic property does not work for too many businesses. [*Interruption.*] I will not take an intervention, if the member does not mind.

Physical retailers find themselves paying higher taxes than their competitors despite the fact that they support more local jobs. At the Finance and Public Administration Committee yesterday, an interesting comment was made by Kevin Robertson of the Scottish Property Federation, who argued that legislative change might be needed to make the tax system more modern and efficient.

We then have all the skills issues. Sandy Begbie and Scottish Financial Enterprise have made it clear that we need better pathways for

apprenticeships that take advantage of the huge global fintech market, technology hubs and net zero objectives. They are also clear about the need for connectivity and collaboration among firms in Scotland, much better links between governments and the private sector, and the development of far more digital skills.

I will finish with the very important point that there is huge demand among businesses and the public for better value for money in public services. The Scottish Government has presided over disasters such as the ferries and Burntisland Fabrications, to name just two projects that have brought into serious question transparency and accountability when it comes to public money.

It is interesting, too, that the Auditor General is making some strong criticisms of the gap between Scottish Government commitments and its delivery, and parliamentary committees have in some cases concluded that there has been a catastrophic failure in the management of public money in procurement. Members have heard me speak about transparency several times in the chamber. I hope that the new parliamentary session will do a lot to improve transparency, accountability and the scrutiny of financial decision making.

I am absolutely clear, Presiding Officer, that there should be one focus and one focus alone, and that should be economic recovery.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Daniel Johnson to open for Labour.

15:53

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): The pandemic is not over—it is peaking. Recovery is not under way—it has barely begun. The project of recovery will demand our full attention for the duration of this parliamentary session and beyond. The success or failure of that project will shape a generation. That is the challenge that the programme for government needed to rise to. My fear is that it barely engages with the requirements of the recovery, let alone its challenges or how to address them.

The word “recovery” appears, but the announcements on it are either retreads or so inconsequential that they barely scratch the surface. A word that is mentioned, however, is “independence”. Independence would not be quick. There would be 20 years of economic uncertainty and cost and capital flight—“Brexit times 10”. That is not my analysis but that of Professor Mark Blyth, who is one of the First Minister’s leading economic advisers.

Recovery demands urgency and prolonged action—it will not be done by 2023 and it is clear

from the First Minister’s statement yesterday that she is more comfortable with a constitutional circus than the seriousness that is demanded by economic recovery.

Ministers should talk to businesses; they do not think that the recovery is done and they are worried. They have debts—even those that have never traded with debt. Small business owners have cashed in their pensions and remortgaged their houses to keep going. Customer volumes are down on what they should be. Businesses have no clarity on what measures may be coming next and they know that some habits have been changed for ever by lockdowns. It is not just small retailers or shops that have been affected. Online has risen by 50 per cent, with the majority of that going to the large online retailers. Footfall is 30 per cent down and chains are shutting 30 stores a week. Retail is 10 per cent of private sector employment, and we have to ask whether it will continue to be.

However, it is not just retail that has been affected. Right across consumer-facing sectors, the patterns and stories are the same. The recovery plan needs to deal with these things: debt, changed behaviours, resilience and, most important, jobs. Businesses whose balance sheets are loaded with debt need practical and financial help. Figures from the FSB show that small firms have taken on £4.1 billion-worth of debt over the past 18 months.

On changed behaviours, businesses need help to transition, because their customers are not coming back if they are working from home and shopping online. On resilience, we need clarity and advice so that businesses have systems in place to continue to trade as and when new measures are imposed to control the virus. The most important point is jobs; the jobs that we did before the pandemic may not be the ones that we do post-recovery. We must help people to reskill and retrain and businesses to adapt; if we do not, the consequences will be counted in those jobs being lost.

That analysis or something similar to it is completely absent from the programme for government. More important, a sense of urgency is absent. We have the promise of an ill-defined 10-year economic transformation plan to be delivered some months in the future, but economic recovery cannot wait 10 years; we need a 10-month plan to help reskill people and businesses to transition. We need a 10-week plan to ensure that businesses survive and people keep their jobs when furlough ends. We do not need more expert groups taking months to produce another report to be ignored by Government; we need ministers to get a grip, take responsibility and take action now.

I would be grateful if Mr McKee would enlighten me on that.

Ivan McKee: Daniel Johnson says that we should take action now: we have announced £500 million for upskilling and work learning, £20 million for the national transition training fund, £20 million for the no one left behind partnership, £70 million for the young persons guarantee and £20 million for the rural entrepreneur fund. I could go on and on—we are doing a lot.

Daniel Johnson: Every one of those numbers needs to be divided by five. In the coming year, only £150 million will be spent on reskilling or transition and training. Given that 150,000 people were still on furlough through the summer, that is a drop in the ocean and Mr McKee should recognise that.

Without bold action, Scotland faces an unemployment crisis that will become a national emergency. I will mention some more numbers. Between April and June this year, there were 119,000 people unemployed in Scotland, but the national training fund, which was just referenced by Mr McKee, targeted only 17 per cent of that population. That is shamefully inadequate.

We have to ensure that small businesses can access specialist digital support, but the funds that are being offered are not nearly enough and one is a reannouncement of a scheme that is already oversubscribed. Further to that, there are only two Covid-related business support schemes; both are reannouncements and will come to an end in this financial year.

I come to green jobs. The Scottish Government has been very keen to lace green words and credentials through the programme for government, but most if not all of the green measures are recycled. What impact have the Greens had on the programme for government? We got the answer today, because it was confirmed in the press that the Scottish Government has scrapped its plans for a publicly owned energy company. It is clear that any influence the Greens might have had has been sold out for ministerial job titles without any ministerial influence.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Does Mr Johnson agree that it is ironic that today, just a week after the Greens joined the Government, we have learned that the wind farm turbine factory in Machrihanish in Argyll is closing permanently? That does not demonstrate much of a commitment from the Government to supporting green jobs.

Daniel Johnson: It strikes me that the Government is more interested in green posture than in green delivery. The announcement regarding the wind turbines simply underlines that fact.

Not only has the Government brought forward little to address the economic recovery, there is no detail or explanation about how existing policies and Government machinery will be used to sustain the recovery. There is no mention of a role for Scottish Enterprise, South of Scotland Enterprise or Highlands and Islands Enterprise. The announcement on the Scottish National Investment Bank is not new, and it is a cut. There is no plan for how those agencies should work or co-ordinate to enable or deliver recovery.

The stark fact is that, despite enterprise support being needed now more than ever, the Scottish National Party Government is spending 40 per cent less in real terms than was spent in the final year of the Labour Administration. The figure now is £500 million, compared to £800 million in real terms in 2007. Despite the fact that we have one additional agency, a new investment bank and a new apparently integrated board, 40 per cent less is being spent during a global pandemic than was spent at a time of economic growth.

The lack of vision, strategy or clear plan from the Government should come as no surprise. The Government's economic record is marked by failure and calamity, from dodgy ferries to empty airports to empty and unused turbine yards. When it comes to the economy, the Government's position seems to be, "Pandemic? What pandemic?" The effects of the coronavirus will be with us long after the disease and illness subside. This is a time for serious politics and serious politicians. I am afraid that the PFG demonstrates that, on those measures, the Government and ministers are seriously deficient.

16:02

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): Liz Smith, who unfortunately is just leaving the chamber, made an interesting slip. She said that independence would be "Brexit times 10". That is from a member of the Conservative Party, which claimed that Brexit was going to be a good thing for our country. Liz Smith admitted that there is deep uncertainty in the Conservative Party about the reality of Brexit. The point is that Brexit and independence are as bad as each other. The mistakes of Brexit should not be repeated and should be remembered when we enter this next phase, as the SNP tries to move forward on independence. Of course independence would be Brexit times 10, which is why we should not repeat the mistake.

Murdo Fraser: I rise to defend my colleague Liz Smith, who disappeared to the back of the chamber momentarily. I simply want to clarify that, in saying that, she was quoting Professor Mark Blyth—she did not say that it was her view. She

was quoting the view of the Scottish Government's new starry-eyed economic adviser.

Willie Rennie: That is a wonderful contortion—I congratulate Murdo Fraser on that complicated explanation.

That extremes position, in which the Conservatives and the SNP are as bad as each other with their propositions on Brexit and independence, is repeated in the positions of the Greens and the Conservatives on economic growth. It was interesting to hear Liz Smith explore that important area. I rarely say this, but I think that John Mason was right that we should not have absolutist positions on the issue. It is not about having GDP or nothing; it is about having a balance and making sure that we take into account the social and economic impact as well as the environmental impact. Governments in the past—particularly Conservative Governments—have had an almost absolutist commitment to economic growth to the exclusion of all else. The absolutist positions of the Conservatives and the Greens are at the extremes and do not help us to move forward in the debate.

Liz Smith is now free to leave the chamber as she wishes, because I will not refer to her any more.

Coming out of the pandemic was always going to be much more difficult than going into it. We have seen that in the many business failures and the incredibly turbulent position that we are now in.

I happen to think that it is a good thing that workers are getting paid an awful lot more, especially those who were on low wages. Of course it is challenging for businesses, which are finding it difficult to get good workers to open their businesses. Many of them have been operating under restricted hours as a result, and they are not able to meet the pent-up customer demand that we have seen in recent weeks. Of course it is a good thing that workers are being paid more, but the challenge for business is considerable.

There has also been a shortage of materials, partly as a result of manufacturing disruption and, again, the pent-up demand that has come through. Of course, there is Brexit as well. We have not seen the worst of Brexit yet, because the pandemic has partly held the world in suspension. We may see the full consequences of Brexit that are yet to hit when the full release of the pandemic comes. Businesses are also facing pressure—good pressure—on climate change, with increasing demands from government and society to reform their operations.

All of those things are incredible pressures. For me, adding on top of that the challenge of independence would be reckless. I agreed with the First Minister when she said, in the election

campaign, that the recovery would come first. I think that the recovery is going to take a very long time to secure. We have seen the turbulence now, and it will take even longer to get on top of it. Even if we take into account the massive challenges that we face in our social care sector, in recruiting workers, through economic pressures and with issues around the NHS, it will take a long time to recover from the pandemic, and I think that it would be reckless to pursue independence in the process.

The Government is good at promises. I give it credit for that. It has endless promises; there are lists of commitments that it has made. However, its delivery is very poor. Just consider its industrial strategy. I reluctantly return, once again, to the subject of the Lochaber smelter. There is no sign at all of the 2,000 promised jobs for the Fort William area. We are barely keeping the company alive. Referring to Ferguson's, there is no sign of those ferries for the desperate islanders who want reliable ferry services. As for Burntisland Fabrications Ltd, there is just no sign of the company at all: it collapsed, despite significant Government investment. When it comes to delivery on its promises, the Government is not particularly good.

Liz Smith: I entirely agree with the points that Mr Rennie has just raised. Does he agree—I think he probably does, given what he said in the previous session—that there is a lot to be said for improving the scrutiny process in the Parliament for public procurement and how money is spent? We know far too little about who owes what and who owns what.

Willie Rennie: I agree with Liz Smith on that—that is a very sensible proposition.

I will quickly go through some of the key priorities for the coming period. We need to reform the skills and training agenda. We need to ensure that the apprenticeship levy works more effectively—it is a disincentive for training. We need a 12-month Covid recovery visa—that is a UK Government responsibility that it needs to deliver. We need to sort out the driver training programme—that is going to be a real priority. There is also the matter of universities. Some of our most international institutions are under incredible pressure just now. They are major economic drivers, and we need to support them so that they can do more of what they do well.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We now move to the open debate.

16:08

Fiona Hyslop (Linlithgow) (SNP): We are still living in and with a pandemic and its impacts. We should reflect, however, that the Scottish Fiscal

Commission has amended upwards its predictions for economic growth for Scotland, and downwards for unemployment. That is positive.

I wish to focus my remarks on the economic transformation and the just transition to the net zero future that members across the chamber want to see. The programme for government is ambitious and bold, and it is based on a full manifesto that was emphatically endorsed by a victory in the election in May. Do not underestimate the expectations of the people of Scotland for us to work together to tackle the most serious of challenges facing our economy, our society and our environment.

Oppositions oppose, but they must also rise to the occasion when the circumstances demand it, as a pandemic and a global emergency do. However, parliamentarians should not be uncritical. The challenge for the programme for government must be to move beyond strategy and policy and funding announcements, and focus on effective delivery and implementation.

The First Minister stated yesterday that the recommendations of the just transition commission are to be accepted. That was accompanied by the Scottish Government's very welcome response to the commission's report, with specific actions and commitments, backed by policy and funding, set out in the programme for government.

We face the twin pressures of Covid recovery and the drive to net zero but, unlike other countries, we do so in the context of an unmanaged and damaging Brexit. I know that the Government has a relentless focus on the mitigation of Covid impacts, but that cannot, and must not, constrain our drive to net zero.

In a world that has changed so much, the future direction of our country—our economic recovery, our net zero direction and the values of the country that we want to be—should be in the hands of the people of Scotland, through an independence referendum. Political choices matter, and we face a UK Government that wants to tax the youngest and the poorest to pay for much-needed health and care funding rather than introduce a windfall tax on those who have profited excessively from their Covid crony contracts.

I represent the constituency of Linlithgow, with towns and villages across West Lothian that have known their fair share of industrial transition. That transition has often been unfair and unjust, and we must learn the lessons of the past in shaping the future. The collective pardon for miners will be welcomed by my constituents, just as the UK Prime Minister's crude and clumsy mischaracterisation of the demise of the mining industry in Scotland was unwelcome.

Scotland needs a managed just transition to transform our energy production, distribution and use, and to tackle heat, housing and transport needs in particular. I welcome the fact that the Scottish energy strategy will have a just transition at its heart, and that the 10-year economic transformation plan will have it embedded, too. I welcome the fact that sector plans will be part of that, and that there will be a skills guarantee for transitioning energy workers.

We need to mobilise private funding, not just public funding, and Government can incentivise private investment through smart, bold policy and regulatory decisions in housing and transport.

The programme for government contains short-term immediate measures to help businesses to recover. For example, in the important area of tourism, it will provide continuing rates relief, which is very much welcomed by many in the tourism and hospitality sector. In addition, £100 million for digital and business capacity, which was one of the issues that Daniel Johnson raised, will be delivered as part of the programme for government.

The money for rural entrepreneurs—£20 million of investment—will help to revitalise various sectors, and the £10 million for tourism infrastructure projects will help to attract more tourists to visit those areas. It is important that we listen to business. The sector-led tourism recovery task force has put forward recommendations, and the programme for government is supporting those with £25 million.

The programme for government not only addresses the short-term pressures that members have talked about, but includes the long-term measures that we need in order to secure the green economic recovery. There is £1.8 billion to reduce the emissions from heating in homes and buildings and to tackle fuel poverty—that is bold and ambitious.

There is £500 million for a just transition in north-east Scotland. It is vital at this point that we recognise the needs and demands of that area, and the need to support the green jobs of the future by upskilling and re-skilling people. I look forward to the announcements regarding the green jobs fund, which will come forward shortly.

There is £5 billion to maintain and improve, and—importantly—to decarbonise, rail services—*[Interruption.]*

I am just about to close.

There is £240 million for an energy transition programme, and £1 billion for the Scottish National Investment Bank. Only yesterday, SNIB announced an investment of £6.4 million in the world-class tidal energy company Nova

Innovation. All that is in a programme for government that matches the reality of coping with immediate issues with policies, funding and the drive to deliver a just transition to a net zero future. I commend it to Parliament.

16:14

Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands)

(Con): The First Minister describes her Government's new partnership with the Scottish Greens as "genuinely ground-breaking" and a new and better "way of doing politics", and she argues that it provides a "strong foundation" for strong and decisive action. However, yesterday's programme for government is the opposite of strong and decisive action—it is clear that we are in for another five years of tired and rehashed policy and another five years of constitutional navel gazing.

I have listened to debates on six programmes for government in this chamber and I am always amused by the fact that SNP back benchers are clearly told to use the words "bold and ambitious" to describe the new policy programme. Fiona Hyslop did just that a few minutes ago, and it happens every time. Sometimes we get a bit of variety—instead of "bold and ambitious", we are treated to "ambitious and bold". However, calling a programme for government "bold and ambitious" does not make it so, and this year, as ever, the same is true. The programme for government is not bold and ambitious; it is cautious and timid—it is thin, thin gruel.

Despite warm words from the First Minister on focusing on recovery from the pandemic, we only have to read a handful of paragraphs in the foreword—*[Interruption.]* I am sorry—I would like to make a bit of progress.

We only have to read a handful of paragraphs in the foreword, or to have listened to the First Minister in the chamber yesterday, to learn of the SNP's plans to foist another referendum on Scotland at some point before 2023. Where we have we heard that before?

We are now in a new session of the Scottish Parliament, and the programme for government was a real opportunity to focus on the pressing need to create new jobs, rebuild our economy, sort out the long-standing problems in our national health service and close the attainment gap. However, the SNP-Green coalition has opted to park those urgent priorities and put them to the side, rather than deliver for communities across Scotland.

Willie Rennie was absolutely right to focus on delivery. Fiona Hyslop also talked about delivery, and delivery is the problem. The words of Stephen Boyle, the Auditor General for Scotland—a neutral

in this debate, with no axe to grind—are worth paying attention to. He said that there is

"a major implementation gap between policy ambitions and delivery on the ground"

and that

"there's a mismatch between the Scottish Government's vision of a more successful Scotland—where poverty is reduced, and economic growth is sustainable—and how we assess public sector performance."

That is the real issue and it goes beyond Brexit, indyref 2 and Covid, because the shiniest policies in the world, if they are not delivered, mean nothing.

In the short time that is left to me, I want to look at how the programme for government will impact the region that I represent and where it is missing the mark. I had hoped to see concrete and deliverable policies that would help rural and remote parts of the Highlands and Islands recover from the pandemic. In the past five years, when it comes to delivery, my region has witnessed a catalogue of failures from this Government, such as the failure to deliver 100 per cent superfast broadband to every home and business by the end of the last parliamentary session or the failure to deliver on key infrastructure problems and help to reverse the worrying trend of rural and island depopulation.

However, the greatest failure is the Government's inability to sort out the crisis with our ferry service, which is causing misery and mayhem for residents and businesses across the Highlands and Islands. The programme for government makes several minor commitments to maintain existing policies, such as road equivalent tariff where it is applicable on current routes, or a pledge to establish further transport integration at ferry terminals. The glaring omission is a commitment to build any new ferries during this parliamentary session. The ferry network has seen breakdowns on an unprecedented scale in recent months. Given that more than half the active ferry fleet is operating beyond its life expectancy, there has been ample opportunity to commit to new vessels in addition to the two delayed vessels that we await.

On rural depopulation, I noted that the programme for government commits to creating a rural entrepreneur fund and an islands infrastructure fund. Those are welcome measures, but I am concerned about whether the Government will be able to deliver on its pledges. As I discovered recently by asking a parliamentary question, over the past five years, the SNP Government passed on less than half its rural housing fund to local authorities and just over half its islands housing fund. In addition, the Shetland Islands have received nothing from the islands

housing fund in the past five years. On that basis, how can we be confident in this Government to deliver on its new commitments?

The programme for government falls desperately short on infrastructure commitments. It expects that the R100 programme will not be fully delivered to homes and businesses across the north lot area until 2027—six years away. That is a damning indictment. Just five years ago, the SNP made a cast-iron commitment that it would be delivered by this year, 2021, before this session of Parliament had begun.

I know that the programme for government makes minor commitments here and there, but it is clear to members on the Conservative benches that it could have said, and committed to, a lot more.

Despite the Government forming a coalition with the Scottish Green Party, its lack of ambition for Scotland remains static. The Scottish Conservatives have a bold commitment to deliver a number of bills in this session of Parliament, which we hope will receive support from others. As we recover from the—*[Interruption.]* I am waiting.

As we recover from the Covid pandemic, now is the time for fresh ideas that will stimulate our economy and create new, high-quality jobs; it is not the time for another divisive independence referendum that turns focus away from what really matters to the people of Scotland.

16:21

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): I am pleased to have the opportunity to explore some of the content of the Scottish Government's programme for government. There is much there to commend, but I promise Mr Cameron that I will studiously avoid using the words "ambitious" and "bold", given that they offend him so much.

In my short speech, I can highlight only a few of the many important initiatives that are detailed in the document, but given that the economy is very much my priority as we come through the pandemic and face the disastrous consequences of a reckless Brexit, I will focus on that aspect of the programme.

I welcome the emphasis on a green, sustainable and prosperous recovery for all. Managing the economy at any time is a challenge, given that Scotland has only some of the levers with which to do so. Managing the economy is too often tenuous, and relying on the Tory Government in London to do the right thing by our economy, over which they have far too much negligent control, is an exercise in futility.

The programme seeks to tackle those areas of the economy that we can influence, and to strengthen and nurture our businesses. Many businesses in our economy are struggling—the double hit of the pandemic followed by Brexit has left us with a fragile and uncertain economic future. Everything that we can do to support our economic accelerators, and mitigate those that tend to deflate our progress, must be done.

I cannot deny that it would all be easier if we had control of our own future and were able to direct our resources to the best effect. However, we do not have that control, so we must do all that we can with what we have.

I will focus on the solid facts of the programme for government. Developing a wellbeing economy is a hugely ambitious task, particularly in the situation that we are now in. However, that situation is also an opportunity to do things differently. Economic prosperity is essential for all our futures, and, within that, the economy is an integral part of our society. Pooling together economic development, the environment and social wellbeing makes simple sense.

I welcome the first £200 million tranche of capital for the Scottish National Investment Bank—the total is £1 billion over the next five years. The provision of patient capital to help technologies and innovative businesses is vital. Many of the technologies on which we are relying to drive net zero are not yet developed to a point at which they can deliver the benefit that is hoped for, and they need capital to do so.

Putting in place regional economic partnerships makes absolute sense. Regional strategies and recovery plans will attract new public and private investment. New ways of working and closer co-operation between local businesses and local and national Government are incredibly important. The investment of an additional £500 million across this parliamentary session in delivering a fair, just and sustainable recovery, and putting people at the forefront of economic delivery, is good news. It will support new sustainable green jobs and help to equip people to take on the new jobs of the future.

I note that £200 million will be spent on adult upskilling and retraining, which will be essential as our economy settles into a new reality and shape. In its first 100 days, the Scottish Government established a green jobs workforce academy, which will provide support for, among others, oil and gas workers to transition into low-carbon sectors. Overall, the college creates the opportunity to provide a single solution for those who are seeking transition into green jobs. To further support that, the green jobs fund will provide £100 million in capital over five years to help businesses create green employment through

investment, with opportunities to retrain and upskill in new and high-growth areas. I think that members will note a heavy emphasis on retraining and upskilling throughout the entire approach to the economy, and to pulling it through the pandemic and Brexit.

The young person's guarantee has been an important and well-used scheme. The initiative allocated £70 million, which, combined with past investment, will provide 24,000 new and enhanced opportunities for young people. Given the impact of the current economic situation, young people tend to be affected more than other demographics, so the scheme is hugely important.

Fair work has been a long-term ambition for the SNP Government. It is indeed time for all employees of companies that receive public funds to be paid the living wage. I would also welcome the abolition of zero-hours contracts and similar conditions.

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): I agree with the member about wellbeing and job creation, including green job creation, but will he comment on the closure and mothballing of the only offshore and onshore wind turbine manufacturer?

Colin Beattie: That is a little bit outwith the scope of the speech that I am delivering—I am sure that others will touch on that.

I note the commitment to exploring the possibility of a four-day week. As a long-term private sector employer in my past life, I have some doubts about the practicality of that, but I am certainly willing to see the evidence. I suppose that one concern is that the productivity rate in relation to gross domestic product across the UK is poor compared with that of our competitors in Europe. How do we lift productivity levels to meet the competition, while reducing working hours and accommodating additional productivity gains to compensate for those reduced hours? As I said, I will wait for the evidence on that.

Delivering a just transition will not be easy, but it is necessary. The national infrastructure mission will increase investment in infrastructure by £1.6 billion by 2025-26. That should be a game changer, and the supply chains that will enable the use of the funds will be a key part of making the investment deliver for our economy.

Local and international supply chains are under intense scrutiny. Brexit has led to severe disruption of existing supply chains at all levels. For the investment to work, supply chain issues must be addressed. Of course, the best and quickest way to address them would be for an independent Scotland to rejoin the EU—that makes absolute economic sense.

Scotland is a trading nation and the ambition to increase exports by 25 per cent of GDP by 2030 is laudable. Our trade balance is immeasurably better than that of the struggling UK. However, all that has been placed under threat by Brexit.

There are so many other initiatives in the programme for government, but there is no time to touch on more than a small number of them. I am pleased with the overall tenor of the programme, and it moves Scotland in the right direction. My biggest concern is that technology must move quickly, supported by the investments that we have shown. The whole Parliament should be able to get behind and support the programme. I commend it accordingly.

16:27

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): When I delivered my first speech in the chamber, I was clear that I came to Parliament to fight for workers in my region and across Scotland. That fight is necessary because the lives of too many workers are constrained by the reality of our economic system, which enables a few to accumulate ever-greater wealth at the expense of the many. Workers are increasingly undervalued and faced with low pay, insecure work and poverty. After 14 years, the SNP has failed to offer a transformative vision for our economy.

Our economy is built on declining public services, rising levels of inequality, an ever-shrinking manufacturing base and increasingly insecure work. The programme for government represented an opportunity for the SNP to transform our economy to address those issues, but we have instead been presented with proposals that just tinker around the edges.

The Government has confirmed that it intends to publish a national strategy for economic transformation—a strategy that has been sorely lacking for 14 years. There was no strategy to save jobs and vital manufacturing assets when the Government stood by and allowed BiFab and the Caley rail works to be closed, and there was no strategy to promote democratic ownership of essential utilities, which are still run for private profit, not public good.

Given that the climate emergency is the greatest threat that we face, I am disappointed by the Scottish Government's on-going lack of ambition in that area. It promised to deliver 130,000 green jobs by this year but, in reality, it has fallen far short, delivering just over 23,000. The First Minister has announced that a biodiversity strategy will be published by next autumn, but the programme for government appears to contradict that.

I represent the north-east, so I am keen to ensure that we deliver a just transition for the region, given its dependence on the oil and gas sector for jobs and the wider local economy. However, we do not have a green industrial base, so we are forced to rely on turbine imports from Denmark, Spain and Germany to drive our shift to renewable energy. The programme for government refers to the creation of

“a £500 million Just Transition Fund for the North East and Moray”,

but it provides absolutely no detail on how the fund will be invested.

In 2017, the Scottish Government pledged to create a publicly owned energy company, which Scottish Labour has been calling for, but, years later, we have heard nothing about its development. There are now reports that ministers are set to abandon the pledge altogether.

Despite the scale of the climate emergency, the Scottish Government is seeking private finance and investment to deliver the green energy and technologies that we need. That is an abdication of responsibility. The Scottish Government should not be outsourcing tackling the climate emergency. It should be taking a central role in co-ordinating Scotland's response.

When it comes to tackling the fundamental issues in our economy, the Scottish Government is failing. More than 300,000 workers across Scotland are on less than the real living wage, striking ScotRail workers are being denied pay equality and cuts to local government are hollowing out public services.

The programme for government was an opportunity to announce the real changes that are needed so that we can tackle the climate emergency, end inequality and bring economic power into the heart of our communities. The Scottish Government has failed to grasp that opportunity.

16:32

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): I welcome the programme for government outlined by the First Minister and, in particular, the actions to ensure that Scotland has the opportunity to become a modern, normal, independent nation as soon as conditions allow. Fundamentally, it is about having the freedom to make policy choices based on the needs of the Scottish people. There are huge opportunities to be grasped. I will focus on how best to support the Government's ambitions in two areas: investment in transitioning to a green economy and the need to overcome barriers to progress.

The commitment to transitioning to a net zero economy is very welcome and hugely ambitious, but the Government cannot do that alone. Businesses must change what they do and massively increase investment. According to October 2019 data from the World Bank, significant investment in infrastructure for the next 15 years alone will be required, costing about \$90 trillion by 2030.

We cannot move away from our reliance on fossil fuels by simply stopping the use of fossil fuels. We need to invest heavily in new businesses, such as those that are built around hydrogen technologies. Bringing to reality the power-to-X concept, which I recently discussed with lead researchers at the University of St Andrews, is a case in point, and it is particularly important for my Falkirk East constituency, which includes Grangemouth.

The United Nations has claimed that, if our investment patterns do not change, we are on course for a 3.5°C rise in global temperatures, which will be devastating for our planet. It points to, for example, the need for pension funds and investors to move quickly and at scale to decarbonise their portfolios. For us, that must include consideration of how we leverage pension investments in support of the Government's ambitions.

Where better to start than at home? Back in April, I was disappointed to read in *Business Insider* that our parliamentary pension fund had not, at that time, fully divested itself of fossil investments. Having looked at the 32 Scottish local authority pension funds, I note that almost £50 billion in total is currently being invested by 11 regional funds. Strathclyde Pension Fund and Lothian Pension Fund are the largest and most developed in terms of climate investment practice.

All funds acknowledge the need to address net zero ambitions to some degree. There is, however, some distance to travel, so I was pleased to note in the Scottish Government's response to the just transition commission that it plans to develop guidelines for voluntary disclosure. My personal view is that that should be required as soon as possible, given the issues with comply or explain reporting, which is more often explained in terms of corporate governance.

There is however two-fold good news. First, internationally, the World Bank among others has identified that transitioning to a green economy can unlock new economic opportunities and jobs. The bank claims that an investment of £1 is likely on average to yield £4 in benefits. Secondly, because of Scotland's existing progress with renewable energy and our other natural advantages, we are ideally placed to exploit the

new opportunities that will create many more jobs in the future.

Economically, however, all is not sweetness and light, thanks to the current UK Government. As we look towards the future, we find that a toxic combination of Brexit and the Internal Market Act 2020 creates barriers to progress. As recent research by the Fraser of Allander Institute and others has pointed out in relation to the 2020 act,

“The effect is to circumvent not only the Barnett Formula but the devolved governments themselves.”

Part of the UK Government’s response to Brexit has been to set up funds that are aimed at addressing lost EU structural funds, but whereas our Scottish Government was in the past able to assess needs and set appropriate priorities, the UK Government’s replacement funds currently bypass the Scottish Government and set up a competitive bidding process for local authorities. What is interesting is that the lead department managing that competition will be England’s Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

I wonder whether what Liz Smith meant by her earlier comment about good news was that it will not be an English minister bypassing our elected Scottish Parliament?

Liz Smith declines to intervene. That speaks volumes.

I am not aware that such a ministry has any expertise to assess Scottish needs. The lesson here must be that until we achieve Scottish independence, we will always be at the mercy of the whims of a Tory Government in Westminster that fundamentally does not have Scotland’s interests at heart.

16:37

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): Yesterday’s programme for government announcement was incredibly disappointing, especially for rural Scotland. The programme jeopardises rural jobs, rehashes old announcements and fails to tackle the urgent need for action in rural communities as we emerge from the Covid-19 pandemic. What it does prioritise, however—it takes the reader only until page 4 to work it out—is the SNP-Green obsession with independence and breaking up Britain at a time of crisis. The programme puts their campaign for separation front and centre, above recovery from the pandemic, which is nothing short of reckless.

Today, in the chamber, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care took questions from MSPs who are worried about constituents not being able to see a general practitioner. In my constituency this week, the Coldingham practice

closed. That is another rural practice shut—another one on the list—because the Government has failed to attract GPs to rural areas. In the First Minister’s statement, we heard concerns about rising Covid cases, yet the nationalist coalition will pursue a white paper on independence, diverting time and resources away from the things that matter to the people of Scotland.

Although the programme for government outlines policies that will benefit rural areas—I welcome the increased funding for more women in agriculture, for example—it falls at the first hurdle when tackling the deep-rooted problems that rural communities face. There are questions to ask about how the policies will encourage diversity and how the legislation that the Scottish Government proposes to introduce on succession planning will lower the average age of farmers, which currently sits at 59. The agritourism growth strategy group is a fantastic idea, but it is one that is taken straight from a Scottish Conservative policy.

One may debate whether a soufflé should be reheated, but these are old ideas rehashed. The rural entrepreneur fund is simply a rebadged, reworked SNP 2021 manifesto commitment. The manifesto said the SNP will

“Create a new, £20 million Rural Entrepreneur Fund”.

Now, the nationalist coalition’s programme for government says:

“in the coming financial year we will launch a £20 million Rural Entrepreneur Fund.”

I think that that is the same thing.

Ivan McKee: The member seems to misunderstand the purpose of a manifesto and a programme for government. The manifesto says what we are going to do and the programme for government brings those things into the chamber for debate. Does she expect us to put things in the manifesto and then not deliver them?

Rachael Hamilton: I thank Ivan McKee for that intervention, but I will go on with my list of the rehashed and reworked commitments that have been promised and not delivered by his Government.

The fundamental fact remains that this central-belt focused SNP-Green Government has simply missed the point when it comes to the rural recovery, leaving Scotland’s farmers on the scrap heap. For example, they are calling for the doubling of land for organic farming, but, under this Government, between 2012 and 2019, the amount of organic land decreased by 40 per cent and now stands at just 1.6 per cent of total Scottish land.

The Scottish Government is not listening to rural Scotland. Why has the SNP not acted on its own

commissioned research, which highlights the widespread abuse of Scottish gamekeepers? Why is there no reference to the scourge of fly-tipping, which injures wildlife and farm animals and which my colleague Murdo Fraser will introduce a bill to tackle within this parliamentary session?

Let us take the SNP's obsession with bringing Scotland back into line with deeply unpopular EU regulation. Farmers across the country whooped with delight at the prospect of leaving the cumbersome and bureaucratic red-tape-ridden common agricultural policy regime, with its three-crop rule and land-based payments rather than meaningful interventions to drive productivity and efficiency. Because of the desire to align with the CAP, Scotland is put at a disadvantage compared to the rest of the UK, because our internal market is worth three times that of the EU.

Where is the draft farming and food production future policy group report? It is still in draft form and has not been published, but it highlights the group's dismay with the CAP and its failure to deliver environmental objectives, with payment levels not always correlating clearly with public benefits.

Further to that, the SNP's proposed realignment with the EU's controversial regime for pesticide regulation is a massive worry for farmers. We saw the debacle over glyphosate. In our fight against climate change and food sustainability, we cannot afford to leave decision making to Brussels. We know that gene editing reduces the need for the application of pesticides, which, in turn, would help the Scottish Government's poor biodiversity record and help the agricultural sector to meet climate change targets. As the country moves towards net zero in the coming decades, the agricultural sector has been identified as a sector that can lead the way in tackling climate change.

With the newly announced Minister for Zero Carbon Buildings, Active Travel and Tenants' Rights and the Minister for Green Skills, Circular Economy and Biodiversity taking up their positions, I have been left to wonder when the Government will unveil the next minister for compost, country bumpkins and the winter solstice, adding to the burgeoning number of special advisers and civil servants paid for by the taxpayer.

Fundamentally, the programme for government is designed to meet Green demands and prop up numbers to push an agenda to break up Britain. In effect, it is a one-trick disaster duo. To build on Donald Cameron's points on delivery, one might ponder that, if the Greens' U-turn on vaccine passports sets a precedent for future dealings, will they be happy to sit back when their new partners fail to deliver on rural housing targets, island depopulation, ferries, job creation and the

economy? There is no mention of infrastructure or the things that matter to people in the rural economy.

I know that my time is up, so I shall leave it there, but the Scottish Conservatives are the only ones who can deliver for rural Scotland.

16:44

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): What is our economy for? What are the values that underpin it? What do we need to do to support the kind of economy that we want?

Those are three of the fundamental questions that any Government must ask when considering how to govern and what legislation, policies and strategies should make up its programme for government. I have spoken here before about how the Scottish Greens seek to address those questions. We want our economy to serve society—to create the context within which all members of society can reach their potential. Such an economy must be based on care, creativity and co-operation, not driven by the profit motive.

The fallout of the 2008 financial crisis and the current economic shock of the pandemic have demonstrated the failings of the conventional economics that Liz Smith talked about and of the pursuit of endless economic growth. We understand that, mathematically never mind ethically, it is not possible to have infinite growth in a finite system without that system collapsing. Therefore, as we rebuild our economy, we must grasp the opportunity to do things differently and to reorient our economy so that it can support everyone to have what they need to live a good life, while supporting society to respect our planetary boundaries.

We have already begun that journey, and the programme for government is Scotland's next step. However, it is not perfect—it does not do everything that we might wish it to. For instance, it does not go as far as I would like it to in challenging assumptions of industrial strategy. The advice that has been provided on Ferguson's shipyard and BiFab has not been good enough. We need to look for advice from other sources.

The programme for government also does not—indeed, it cannot—go as far as many of us would like it to, because we do not have all the economic levers at our disposal. Given the powers of independence, we could see a plan—a Scottish Meidner plan, as it were—to give workers progressively more ownership of the economy. We would also be able to maximise the enormous potential in a Scottish green industrial revolution. We know that we have the expertise and the history to lead the way in heavy industry, manufacturing and engineering.

Nevertheless, there are key shifts in thinking in the programme for government that give me hope. We know that the same things that we need to tackle the climate emergency are what we need to support economic recovery from Covid: investment in public transport, job creation in upgrading Scotland's homes, and building up our renewables industry. Our recovery must be investment led. That the UK Government wants to cut spending by at least 5 per cent across all departments is terrifying. We cannot cut our way to success, resilience or prosperity. The Scottish Government must invest, and it is committed to investing and playing an active role in developing and growing green industries and ensuring that workers and wealth redistribution are at the heart of our recovery plans.

At the heart of the programme for government is a commitment to a green economic recovery that is based on the policies and expenditure plans that were agreed in the co-operation deal between the Greens and the Scottish Government. That deal will mean billions of pounds of public money being invested in green industries, as well as determined action to ensure that public funds do everything that they can to support positive outcomes for workers and the environment.

Investing in energy efficiency is the cheapest and most effective way of creating green jobs and reducing emissions. The Green co-operation deal will result in at least £1.8 billion being invested in making Scotland's homes and buildings more efficient, tackling fuel poverty and creating new jobs and opportunities for builders, roofers, plumbers, heating engineers, joiners, window fitters and many more. This is tried and tested: from Germany to South Korea, energy efficiency investment was central to countries' recovery from the 2008 financial crash.

We will also see the start of the investment of £5 billion in improving, expanding and decarbonising our railways to deliver a modern, reliable and zero-carbon train service, as well as major economic benefits. For every £1 billion that is invested in the rail sector, £1.6 billion is generated and 14,000 jobs are created.

Rachael Hamilton: Will the member take an intervention?

Maggie Chapman: I must make progress.

Regional rail links, including rural rail links—such as the one that is to be developed in my region, as a result of the co-operation agreement, to link Peterhead and Fraserburgh to Aberdeen—will play a vital role in supporting local economic development. We need only look at the Borders railway, which has carried millions of passengers—

Rachael Hamilton: Will the member take an intervention?

Maggie Chapman: Yes.

Rachael Hamilton: To create rural jobs, extending the railway down to Carlisle from Tweedbank would be a game changer. Does Maggie Chapman support that?

Maggie Chapman: We need to look at rail infrastructure in all regions across Scotland, because it is the future of both transport and community connectivity. We know from the Borders railway—which has carried millions of passengers since opening and has attracted investment and tourism to the area—that it is a real way to generate economic sustainability. *[Interruption.]* I will make progress, if the member does not mind.

The deal will also see billions more being invested in the onshore wind industry, in addition to the rapidly growing offshore sector, and the Greens will seek to ensure that that investment also creates jobs and opportunities in the supply chain. We cannot continue to see our domestic manufacturing fail while turbines are imported.

The Green deal will also see conditionality applied to all Scottish Government support, so that public money is always forwarding the just transition and promoting fair work. That includes requirements to pay the real living wage, recognise trade unions and ensure that recipients of public grants are not engaging in tax avoidance. That is what investment-led recovery looks like, and it is the economic recovery that people and the planet need.

Although I am proud of the difference that the Greens are making, we need to do more. Trades Union Congress analysis of public spending on the green recovery and job creation in the G7 countries shows that the UK is lagging far behind, with Germany investing three times more per person and France four times more. Although we are doing what we can in Scotland, we need the UK Government to do its bit—to reject austerity and to commit to a long-term programme of green stimulus spend.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Could you wind up, please?

Maggie Chapman: Failure to invest in a green economic recovery would be a disaster for our planet and for our economy. We have our work to do, but the prize will be a prosperous, successful and resilient economy that supports a fair and green Scotland.

16:52

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): I welcome the programme for government and, in particular, the commitment to an independence referendum, which, as is always worth repeating, the people of Scotland voted for. It is also worth repeating that Scotland has been dragged out of the EU against the wishes of its people by a party that has not won an election here since 1955.

The Scottish Government is to be praised for stopping work on the independence referendum last year to focus on the pandemic, while the UK Government pressed ahead with a disastrous Brexit. It is absolutely clear that becoming an independent country is essential to building the Scotland that we know is possible, and to allow us to rejoin the EU. *[Interruption.]* I will not take an intervention, as I need to make progress.

Scotland simply cannot afford to be part of a UK that is intent on destroying its economic base. We see shortages of labour and increased complexity in European trade. Let us take, for example, a small business in the heart of Stirling, the Scottish Gantry. It has spoken about its customs nightmares, saying that it has had great difficulty securing wine imports and exporting whisky products. It is drowning in paperwork and red tape. That is a damning indictment of the Westminster Government, which has betrayed Scotland's many world-class businesses with its Brexit obsession. It is good to see Kate Forbes press the UK Government on those issues.

There is so much in the programme for government to be commended, but I particularly want to highlight three areas. Having spent a career in housing, building housing for people in need, I welcome the continuing expansion of the affordable supply programme, with a further £3.5 billion of investment and the building of additional 110,000 new homes.

Since 2007, more than 1,700 social and affordable homes have been built in the Stirling constituency, and over the next five years, a further £53 million will be invested. The SNP Government continues to transform areas such as the Raploch, which were abandoned under Labour, into attractive and vibrant communities. It is thanks to the SNP Government and its abolition of the right-to-buy policy that councils are now able to build new homes, supporting the investment and excellent work of 150 housing associations that work right across Scotland. Building new homes is vital for our economy, as it creates high-quality jobs and apprenticeships while improving the health, wellbeing and life chances of our communities.

That brings me to the next aspect of the programme that is to be welcomed. There are

numerous references in the programme to support for jobs, businesses, the high street and our tourism sector. One would not know this from the comments of the Opposition parties, but Scotland under the SNP Government has an excellent record in increasing and supporting employment. Unemployment in Scotland currently stands at 4.3 per cent, which is below the UK average of 4.7 per cent and well below the London figure of 6.2 per cent.

Like Fiona Hyslop, I welcome the pardon of miners across Scotland, including those in my constituency, in Bannockburn and the eastern villages. The vicious and vindictive actions of the Thatcher Government obliterated an entire industry almost overnight. Many experts believe that there is a particular link between problem drug use, poverty and inequality caused by the UK's rapid deindustrialisation. The loss of industries and the complete lack of any strategy to replace them destroyed communities. The Scottish Government is still having to deal with the legacy of that industrial vandalism.

Listening to the contributions in the chamber, it is clear to me that many Opposition members want to ignore the problems that their parties have created for Scotland. The Scottish Government already spends far too much time and resources mitigating the impact of UK Government policies. It now also has to try to mitigate all the negative consequences of Brexit. Now, at the worst possible time, the UK Government is introducing a tax on jobs, with the increase in national insurance to pay for social care reforms in England.

The Liberal Democrats want us to forget their enthusiastic role in imposing austerity in Scotland, which was really just an excuse to cut public spending and tax the poor, and we cannot forget that the Labour Party had the power to transform the whole of the UK from 1997 to 2010. *[Interruption.]* No, I am about to finish, but thank you. Instead of, for example, tackling inequality, poverty and homelessness, the Labour Government kept the House of Lords, spent billions of pounds on the Iraq war, which cost millions of lives, and bailed out the bankers with billions of pounds of public money. Of course, Labour recently voted for Johnson's supposedly "oven-ready" Brexit. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Members, I cannot hear Ms Tweed. I would like to do so, so I would be grateful for your co-operation.

Evelyn Tweed: Thanks, Presiding Officer.

I welcome this ambitious programme for government, in particular its commitment to giving our people the right to choose their future and the opportunity to build a fairer, greener and more

sustainable economy for everyone in Scotland and those who come after us.

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

16:59

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): The pandemic is, first and foremost, a health crisis, but it has also fast become an economic one. Too many lives and livelihoods have been lost, and still today families fear for the health of their loved ones, their jobs and their incomes.

Never has it been more important for this Parliament and this Government to step up to the mark, but the programme for government fails to do that. It lacks urgency. The First Minister's statement yesterday was littered with references to the lifetime of this parliamentary session, except when it came to the coalition's priority, another independence referendum, which the Government wants within months.

At a time when this Government and this Parliament should have a laser-like focus on delivering a national recovery plan from Covid, on health, schools, the environment and the economy, nothing should distract us from that focus. As Willie Rennie rightly said, it will take a long time to deliver the recovery that we need.

The programme for government is long on rhetoric about recovery but short on detail and a plan for how to deliver it. There are many worthwhile initiatives in the programme but, as Daniel Johnson said, the announcements are either retreads or so inconsequential that they barely scratch the surface. There is no overarching thread, there are no clear aims and there is no immediate strategy. The individual initiatives, taken together, do not go far enough.

We cannot wait for the publication of a 10-year economic strategy when 32,000 young people in Scotland are out of work right now. That figure has risen sharply in the past year as young people have faced the challenge of entering the labour market in the midst of a pandemic—and they have often been trying to enter sectors that have been hit hardest and in which Government support has failed to match what has been needed, such as retail, hospitality and tourism.

Ivan McKee: Does the member recognise that the work on the young person's guarantee addresses the very point that he made about youth unemployment?

Colin Smyth: Ivan McKee's problem is that the young persons guarantee does not do what it says on the tin. It does not guarantee real opportunities for all those 32,000 young people—[*Interruption.*] The minister's programme for government talks

about opportunities for 24,000 people, but there are 32,000 unemployed young people at the moment.

The SNP-Green Government still thinks that a zero-hours contract is a positive destination.

Ivan McKee: It was Labour, in the Smith Commission, that prevented the devolution of employment law—otherwise, we would have fixed that some time ago.

Colin Smyth: I appreciate that Mr McKee fails to take responsibility, ever, for the powers that he has. The minister and his Government constantly refer to zero-hours contracts as positive destinations. Why do they continue to do that? It shows a lack of support for getting rid of zero-hours contracts.

We need an ambitious jobs scheme that delivers a guarantee of a job, training or education for every one of Scotland's young and long-term unemployed people. Given that furlough, which currently supports 141,000 jobs in Scotland, often in sectors that have a high proportion of young workers, is coming to an end, the youth unemployment figure might rise further. At the very least, it will not fall sharply as a result of this Government's programme for government.

We need to ensure that the skills and talents of our young people match the opportunities and vacancies that will arise in the future. The number of vacancies fell sharply in recent years, compared with the position prior to the pandemic. According to the Scottish Government's Scottish employer skills survey, last year there were half the number of vacancies that there were in 2017. Despite that, employers said that a quarter of vacancies were hard to fill because of the skills shortage.

As the number of vacancies increases, not just through new demand as we reopen the economy but as a result of an increase in automation, there are reports of labour shortages across the board—from farm workers to heavy goods vehicle drivers. That is partly because of Brexit and the barriers to overseas labour; it is also due to a multitude of structural factors, which go beyond our exit from the EU.

There is a difference between a labour shortage and a skills shortage, but we will not tackle the former, in the long term, if we do not tackle the latter. There is much in the Government's future skills action plan with which it is hard to disagree, but there is—again—little that is new in the programme for government that will ensure that the scale of the response matches the scale of the labour and skills-gap challenges that we face.

No wonder that in its response to the programme, CBI Scotland said:

“employers will be frustrated not to hear more about plans for upskilling and retraining.”

A lack of urgency and scale is reflected, too, in the SNP-Green Government’s response to the report of the just transition commission. Fiona Hyslop described the report as welcome, but the Scottish Trades Union Congress said that the response

“leaves much to be desired on future job creation and ensuring the burden of climate change is not carried by workers and the less well off.”

As Mercedes Villalba said, that shows that little has changed since the SNP Government promised 130,000 green jobs by 2020 but instead cut the number of people directly employed in such jobs to just over 23,000. The cabinet secretary referred to the Scottish Government’s £100 million green jobs fund, but that was announced almost a year ago and it has yet to create a single job.

As Daniel Johnson and Mercedes Villalba asked, what has happened to the plans to establish a publicly owned energy company? In June, the leader of the Scottish Greens attacked the SNP for not moving quickly enough on that plan, yet today the Greens are part of a Government that appears to have ditched it altogether.

The programme for government could have put climate and not the constitution first, with a real plan for a just transition that focused on developing the skills that are needed in the green recovery and on protecting jobs and communities that are impacted by the transition to net zero. It has not done so.

I want to highlight one other area where we need to go further than the programme of government does, and that is the future of our town centres. If you walk down any high street at the moment, you will see that the fastest-growing market is for providers of “To let” signs. Shop closures have accelerated in the past year, but our high streets have been in decline for a lot longer. We cannot wait until the proposed retail strategy comes out some time in the future.

We need an immediate fiscal stimulus package to encourage people back into our shops safely and to prevent lockdown behaviours from embedding permanently. The lifting of restrictions and the Government’s Scotland loves local fund and loyalty card—welcome and laudable as they are—do not scratch the surface of the plummeting footfall that our town centres have faced. We can and should go further by providing a meaningful high street voucher scheme and creating a level playing field for bricks-and-mortar shops and online retailers through proper reform of business rates. We need to think outside the box when it

comes to our high streets, and come up with ideas such as investing in getting more people to live in our town centres again.

As we face up to the uncertainty of what the current, third Covid wave might mean, lives and livelihoods are still on the line and businesses are still on the brink. We can genuinely build back better if we make the right choices by supporting businesses more now to get through the crisis and by investing to create a stronger, more inclusive, more resilient and greener economy.

However, we need a Parliament and a Government that are relentlessly focused on the issues that will matter over the next few years. That means a Parliament and a Government that will always put the recovery first, and not another independence referendum.

The Presiding Officer: I call Murdo Fraser, to speak for up to eight minutes.

17:06

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): In presenting the programme for government yesterday, the First Minister and her team had a simple choice to make. They could bring forward a set of proposals that would unite Parliament and the wider country and focus on what is important, or they could decide to focus on measures that would divide us. It must be a matter of great regret that they chose the second option.

It was entirely clear in advance of the debate what the priorities for Scotland are, at this point. We must focus on economic recovery, as Liz Smith set out earlier, in order to help to replace jobs that have been lost and to support businesses that have suffered so much over the past 18 months. We must also focus on rebuilding our public services, on helping our NHS—which we know is creaking at the seams—and on repairing the damage that has been done to the lives of our young people due to their having missed education.

Michelle Thomson: The member who opened for the Tories declined my opportunity to deny that the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government for England would lead the overruling of the democratic Scottish Parliament in assigning structural funds. Perhaps Mr Fraser might want to deny that, instead.

Murdo Fraser: Scotland has two Governments. It has a Government here and a Government in Westminster, and those Governments should be working together for the good of people in Scotland. I say to Michelle Thomson that I hope that, if the UK Government decides to start spending money in her constituency, she will not turn it away and say, “We don’t want that money”.

I hope that she would welcome it on behalf of her constituents, because that would be the sensible thing to do.

I have set out some of the issues that should have been addressed in the programme for government yesterday. Sadly, however, it did too little to address those issues.

The voices of Scotland's businesses are very clear about where priority should have been given. The chief executive of Scottish Chambers of Commerce, Liz Cameron, said that supporting business recovery must be at the front and centre of the Government's priorities. We agree with that. A bold plan for jobs recovery was needed, with a target from the Government for the number of new jobs that would be created.

Earlier in the debate, Daniel Johnson made a very fair point about the need for action now. We have heard a lot about long-term plans over five years, but now we cannot afford to wait. Action needs to start now, because we want to see the Scottish economy growing faster than the economy anywhere else in the United Kingdom, instead of it lagging behind.

Instead, the new SNP-Green coalition—

Ivan McKee: Does the member know that Scotland's economy has rebounded faster than that of the rest of the UK, back to pre-pandemic levels?

Murdo Fraser: That might have been the case over the past month or two, but the long-term trend is very clear; we have been lagging behind the United Kingdom, as the minister would have known, had he done his homework.

We have a First Minister who has appointed—*[Interruption.]* No. I have taken two interventions already; I will make some progress and give way later, if I have time.

The First Minister has appointed to her Government people to hold ministerial office who are actively hostile to the principle of economic growth. It is little wonder, therefore, that business voices who were once enthusiastic supporters of the SNP are so dismissive of the approach that is now being taken. At the weekend, Jim McColl, who was once the yes campaign's biggest cheerleader, said how badly he had been let down by the Government and how he felt used by it. Sir George Matheson, the former chairman of the Scottish Government's Council of Economic Advisers and another enthusiastic SNP and yes-campaign supporter, expressed his concern about the power-sharing deal, and stated:

"this raises concerns about whether the contribution of business is still valued."

That is the business reaction; it is not the reaction from pro-union business people but from people who had pinned their colours to the SNP mast. That is their reaction to what the Government is doing, and there is nothing in the programme that will reassure them.

Instead of proposals that will take Scotland forward and unite us, we see a set of proposals that will divide us. We see a proposed bill to reform the Gender Recognition Act 2004, which is so contentious that last week there was one of the largest-ever demonstrations outside the Scottish Parliament, with hundreds of women from—*[Inaudible.]*

The First Minister is saying that she dismisses the concerns of hundreds of women from across Scotland who came to the Parliament to express their concerns. She is saying, "Shame on them." What a disgrace. The First Minister is not listening to the concerns of those women. We await the detail of the bill, but the Scottish Conservatives are absolutely clear that women's rights must be protected in the context of GRA reform; I know that those concerns are shared by many SNP MSPs.

There are also proposals to establish a national care agency, which amount to what has already been described as a "blatant power grab" from local authorities. The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities has already complained that it was given just a few hours' notice of the huge scope of the overhaul of public services that is proposed; not just adult social care, but children's services, community justice, alcohol and drugs services, social work and elements of mental health services are all to be centralised and brought under Edinburgh control, rather than decisions on them being taken at local level.

The Scottish Government continually demands that powers be passed down to it from Westminster, but it is a Government that likes to hoard power here at Holyrood. It wants to strip powers away from local authorities and to build empires for Scottish ministers. That is not something that we can support. It is dividing Scotland when we should be uniting it.

By far the worst and most divisive proposal is the one on preparations for another independence referendum. It is hard to imagine anything more damaging, more out of touch with the public mood and more disdainful of the concerns of business than pursuit of another divisive referendum at this particular point in our history, when the country faces so many other challenges. It is a misuse of public resources to divert the time of civil servants away from vital work to focus on that.

We know that the public does not want another referendum; we know there is not support for it,

just as there is not support for independence. It is an obsession of the party of Government and of the First Minister to pursue the breaking up of the United Kingdom, when there are so many other priorities.—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Will members please desist from making sedentary comments? I would like to hear Mr Fraser.

Murdo Fraser: What is worse is that the plans to introduce a referendum bill at some point in the future are utterly pointless, because holding a constitutional referendum, as we all agreed in 2014, is outwith the powers of the Scottish Parliament. We would waste parliamentary time on a bill that would go nowhere and which would be all about stirring up division and allowing the First Minister to grandstand to her party faithful when she knows—and we know and they know—that she has absolutely no ability to deliver that objective. It is, put in the simplest of terms, a total and utter waste of parliamentary and Scottish Government time.

However, there is one thing that I agree with the First Minister on, which is that a new case for independence is needed, because the one that was presented in 2014 is now exposed as a work of fiction—whether on oil, Scotland's finances or currency. The person who led that campaign—the former First Minister and a man whose name can no longer be mentioned—has been airbrushed out of SNP history.

Now we have the SNP's shiny new signing and its latest economic guru, Professor Mark Blyth, setting out the hard realities of independence, which in his words, as quoted by Liz Smith earlier, would be "Brexit times 10". That is not a unionist politician saying that; it is not even a non-aligned academic. It is the Government's newly appointed chief economic adviser, who is a cheerleader for and supporter of a separate Scotland. He says that, in his view, independence would be 10 times more damaging than Brexit. Therefore, every time we hear someone on the SNP benches mumping and moaning about Brexit or blaming supply chain issues exclusively on Brexit, let us remind them that their expert says that it would be 10 times more damaging to go down the route of independence.

It is shameful that independence is the Government's priority at this time, but it is all too typical of an Administration that is out of ideas and which would divide us, rather than unite us. It has nothing new to offer the people of Scotland, and the programme for government should be rejected.

17:16

The Minister for Business, Trade, Tourism and Enterprise (Ivan McKee): As is customary, I will take a few minutes to comment on some of the points that have been made, although I will not be able to get round everything in the time available to me.

Just to close off a point that Liz Smith made, I point out that every other country in the world borrowed to get through Covid, and Scotland would have been no different were we an independent country. Let us get that nailed, because it is hugely important.

Murdo Fraser cannot resist talking down Scotland's economy at every opportunity. If he had done his homework, he would know that, over the period from before the pandemic in February 2020 until now, Scotland's economy is down 2.1 per cent, whereas the UK economy is down 2.2 per cent. On unemployment, which some of my colleagues have mentioned, the figure for Scotland is 4.2 per cent, whereas for the rest of the UK it is 4.7 per cent. There is still work to do but, if we want to make comparisons between Scotland and the rest of the UK, at the moment, we are doing better.

Daniel Johnson talked about business engagement. I can tell him that I talk to businesses every single day of the week. I had two meetings with businesses this morning before I came to the chamber to deliver this speech. Those businesses talk about labour market shortages and the issues that are affecting them. We recognise and understand that. We have businesses engaged in the work that we are doing on the national economic strategy. They recognise the value of that and, as Daniel Johnson did, they recognise the importance of having a long-term strategy to address the issues. That is exactly what we are doing.

Daniel Johnson: I hear what the minister says, and I do not doubt that he has those meetings, but is he listening? The reality is that, in a few short weeks, 150,000 people who have been on furlough will find themselves having to go back into employment. Surely, there needs to be at least a contingency in case those people's jobs are no longer there for them. Where is that contingency in the programme for government?

Ivan McKee: There is the £500 million skills investment and the range of other interventions that I talked about through which we are supporting people to get back into work. At the moment, we face a labour market shortage in every single sector across the economy, and we have people whom we need to work with so that they can take up those opportunities. If the member talked to businesses the way that I do, he

would understand that the labour market shortage is their biggest issue.

Willie Rennie talked about that issue and mentioned the high wages that the shortage has driven. We welcome that, too, and, as I go through my remarks, I want to say more about our proactive efforts to embed that in our economic strategy. Willie Rennie also talked about material shortages and shortages of HGV drivers in logistics, which are largely driven by Brexit. We are working hard to influence the UK Government where we can on many aspects, including visas for drivers to support our industries. We are working hard with the construction sector and others at a detailed level to address the material shortages that are affecting businesses right across Scotland.

Fiona Hyslop made valid points that reinforce my point about our strong engagement with business. She talked about the tourism recovery task force, which worked in conjunction with Government to identify £25 million of support, which has now been invested to support the sector. We are now moving on to look at the phase 2 proposals from the group.

Willie Rennie: I know that the minister engages with business, and he has assisted me with many businesses in my constituency. However, given all the disruption that he has talked about that has in part been caused by Brexit, does that not make him pause to think about the disruption that would inevitably come with independence?

Ivan McKee: Independence will create opportunities—and I will come on to talk about that in my later comments.

I do not have much to say about Donald Cameron's speech: it was bold but, I am afraid, not ambitious.

Other members spoke about the importance of the real living wage. I remind Labour members that, if they had not taken their ridiculous position on the Smith commission, we would already have dealt with the issue through devolution of employment law. Colin Beattie and others raised the point. The programme for government has a very strong commitment on conditionality—something that I am delighted to pursue regarding the real living wage and other aspects of the fair work first agenda. Our green ports agenda that we are taking forward is one of the first areas where we will embed that conditionality to lift wages across the country.

On Mercedes Villalba's speech, apparently Labour does not support private sector investment in the economy now. Who knew? That is a very interesting policy shift.

The £3 billion green investment portfolio is intended precisely to attract international investment and to invest in our green transition to net zero, along with the public sector investment. We need both of those in order to deliver. One point that Michelle Thomson made very well was about the £3 billion green investment portfolio and locking in that investment, as part of our global capital investment plan, alongside the work of the global ethical finance initiative, setting up Scotland as a centre for environmental, social and governance—ESG—investment, which is something that we are very proud to take forward.

Maggie Chapman talked about conditionality, which I have covered. On investing in infrastructure, she made the very strong point that we need the powers to do that, as did my colleague Evelyn Tweed.

I will now move to a conclusion. How many minutes do I have left, Presiding Officer? Three or four? Okay.

The debate has been about our programme for government, a programme that recognises the essential importance of Scotland's economy to our recovery and transformation and that recognises the Government's commitment to supporting and working with businesses the length and breadth of the country. This Government is unashamedly pro-business. We understand the need to grow Scotland's economy, to create prosperity, to fund our public services and to create opportunities for all of Scotland's people to realise their potential. We understand the need for that growth to be completely aligned with our overriding twin imperatives of delivering net zero and delivering on our fair work agenda. We understand that productivity is key to a successful economy. We recognise that the wellbeing economy—providing opportunities and prosperity for all of Scotland's people—is built on a strong, productive economy.

The range of measures detailed in our programme make that clear: our initiatives to strengthen the skills pipeline that our growth businesses need to support workers transitioning to low-carbon sectors or those entering the labour market for the first time; our initiatives to support investment in the economy, including public sector investment in our public services and infrastructure, and to intelligently stimulate private sector investment in our growth businesses and in the wider economy; our initiatives to support entrepreneurship across all sectors of our population, specifically targeted at key groups including women and rural entrepreneurs; and our initiatives to further internationalise our economy and to drive up exports, despite the vandalism inflicted on the economy by the UK Government's misguided Brexit policies.

Our programme delivers on our wider ambitions for Scotland, with the just transition to net zero contributing to the global efforts to address the climate emergency and to create a fair-work nation, a country where everyone is paid at least the real living wage. We are working with businesses, sector groups and regional economic partnerships across the country to deliver on those ambitions, to create the high-productivity, high-innovation, high-technology, high-wage economy that we all want to see—an economy that works for everyone.

The programme also recognises the limitations of our current powers on investment, employment law and international trade, and elsewhere. Rightly, it calls for the people of Scotland to have a say on whether all those powers should come to this Parliament as an independent country. That is the opportunity that it will create for those businesses.

Our national strategy for economic transformation will be published later this year. As the cabinet secretary has made clear, that will be a national endeavour, co-produced with stakeholders across the country and implemented alongside businesses. It will build on top of the initiatives in the programme for government, and it will be an ambitious 10-year agenda to transform Scotland's economy. I look forward to working with businesses and others across the country to deliver that bold and ambitious agenda.

Business Motions

17:24

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-01143, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a change to this week's business.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees to the following revision to the programme of business for Thursday 9 September 2021—

after

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:
Social Justice,
Housing and Local Government;
Constitution, External Affairs and Culture

insert

followed by Ministerial Statement: The Deaths of John Yuill and Lamara Bell

delete

5.00 pm Decision Time

and insert

5.30 pm Decision Time—[George Adam]

Motion agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-01111, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

Tuesday 14 September 2021

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by First Minister's Statement: COVID-19 Update

followed by Scottish Government Debate: A Caring Nation – Recovering, Remobilising and

Renewing Health and Social Care in Scotland

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 15 September 2021

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:
Justice and Veterans;
Finance and the Economy

followed by Ministerial Statement: Update on
Cervical Screening

followed by Scottish Conservative and Unionist
Party Business

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.40 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 16 September 2021

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

followed by Members' Business

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:
Education and Skills

followed by Scottish Government Debate: A Land of
Opportunity - Supporting a Fairer and
More Equal Society

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

Tuesday 21 September 2021

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by First Minister's Statement: COVID-19
Update

followed by Scottish Government Business

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 22 September 2021

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:
Covid Recovery and Parliamentary
Business;
Net Zero, Energy and Transport

followed by Scottish Labour Party Business

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.10 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 23 September 2021

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

followed by Members' Business

2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.30 pm Portfolio Questions:
Rural Affairs and Islands

followed by Stage 1 Debate: Carers Allowance
Supplement (Scotland) Bill

followed by Financial Resolution: Carers Allowance
Supplement (Scotland) Bill

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

(b) that, for the purposes of Portfolio Questions in the week beginning 20 September 2021, in rule 13.7.3, after the word "except" the words "to the extent to which the Presiding Officer considers that the questions are on the same or similar subject matter or" are inserted.—[George Adam]

Motion agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-01112, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on the stage 1 timetable for a bill.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that consideration of the Transvaginal Mesh Removal (Cost Reimbursement) (Scotland) Bill at stage 1 be completed by 26 November 2021.—[George Adam]

Motion agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of nine Parliamentary Bureau motions. I ask George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move motions S6M-01113, S6M-01114, S6M-01115 and S6M-01117 to S6M-01120, on approval of Scottish statutory instruments; motion S6M-01121, on committee membership; and motion S6M-01122, on committee substitutions.

17:26

The Minister for Parliamentary Business (George Adam): I am happy to go into detail on the SSIs if you wish, Presiding Officer.

The Presiding Officer: If you wish to do so, minister.

George Adam: It is not that I would prefer to wish to; I was just giving you the option. *[Laughter.]*

The Presiding Officer: Given that you have offered members that option, you should continue.

George Adam: Once again, it is everyone's favourite time of the evening.

The Health Protection (Coronavirus) (International Travel) (Scotland) Amendment (No 13) Regulations 2021 (SSI 2021/237) came into force on 14 June and extended the definitions for elite sport to include all events at which specified persons compete to qualify for the Birmingham Commonwealth games.

The Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Restrictions and Requirements) (Local Levels) (Scotland) Amendment (No 27) Regulations 2021 (SSI 2021/238) came into force on 11 June and included providing a person designated by a local authority with a power of entry to enforce restrictions relating to stadia and events.

The Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Restrictions and Requirements) (Local Levels) (Scotland) Amendment (No 28) Regulations 2021 (SSI 2021/242) came into force on 18 June and included removing Ireland and Bedford Borough Council from the list of areas to which common travel area restrictions apply.

The Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Restrictions and Requirements) (Local Levels) (Scotland) Amendment (No 29) Regulations 2021 (SSI 2021/252) came into force on 26 June and included adjusting physical distance requirements in various settings, including funerals.

The Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Restrictions and Requirements) (Local Levels) (Scotland) Amendment (No 30) Regulations 2021

(SSI 2021/255) came into force on 30 June and included removing the area of Bolton Metropolitan Borough Council from the list of areas to which common travel area restrictions apply.

The Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Restrictions and Requirements) (Local Levels) (Scotland) Amendment (No 31) Regulations 2021 (SSI 2021/262) came into force on 8 July and included reducing required physical distances to maintain between persons within the premises of the Renaissance Club in North Berwick for the period of the Scottish open in July.

The Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Restrictions and Requirements) (Local Levels) (Scotland) Amendment (No 32) Regulations 2021 (SSI 2021/263) came into force on 19 July and included reducing physical distancing to 1m indoors and outdoors.

The Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Requirements) (Scotland) Regulations 2021 (SSI 2021/277) came into force on 9 August and included a requirement for relevant hospitality and entertainment premises to obtain a record of visitor information.

That is that, Presiding Officer.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees that the Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Restrictions and Requirements) (Local Levels) (Scotland) Amendment (No. 29) Regulations 2021 (SSI 2021/252) be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Restrictions and Requirements) (Local Levels) (Scotland) Amendment (No. 30) Regulations 2021 (SSI 2021/255) be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Restrictions and Requirements) (Local Levels) (Scotland) Amendment (No. 31) Regulations 2021 (SSI 2021/262) be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Restrictions and Requirements) (Local Levels) (Scotland) Amendment (No. 32) Regulations 2021 (SSI 2021/263) be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Requirements) (Scotland) Regulations 2021 (SSI 2021/277) be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Restrictions and Requirements) (Local Levels) (Scotland) Amendment (No. 27) Regulations 2021 (SSI 2021/238) be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Restrictions and Requirements) (Local Levels) (Scotland) Amendment (No. 28) Regulations 2021 (SSI 2021/242) be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that—

Maggie Chapman be appointed to replace Lorna Slater as a member of the Economy and Fair Work Committee;

Ross Greer be appointed to replace Patrick Harvie as a member of the Finance and Public Administration Committee;

Mark Ruskell be appointed to replace Patrick Harvie as a member of the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee.

That the Parliament agrees that—

Jenni Minto be appointed as the Scottish National Party substitute on the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee;

Kaukab Stewart be appointed as the Scottish National Party substitute on the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee;

Alasdair Allan be appointed as the Scottish National Party substitute on the Finance and Public Administration Committee;

Marie McNair be appointed as the Scottish National Party substitute on the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee;

Emma Roddick be appointed as the Scottish National Party substitute on the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee;

Marie McNair be appointed as the Scottish National Party substitute on the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee;

Jackie Dunbar be appointed as the Scottish National Party substitute on the Criminal Justice Committee;

John Mason be appointed as the Scottish National Party substitute on the Economy and Fair Work Committee;

Natalie Don be appointed as the Scottish National Party substitute on the Education, Children and Young People Committee;

Emma Harper be appointed as the Scottish National Party substitute on the Rural Affairs, Islands and Natural Environment Committee;

Fergus Ewing be appointed as the Scottish National Party substitute on the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee;

James Dornan be appointed as the Scottish National Party substitute on the COVID-19 Recovery Committee;

Bill Kidd be appointed as the Scottish National Party substitute on the Public Audit Committee;

Rona Mackay be appointed as the Scottish National Party substitute on the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee;

Tess White be appointed as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on the Finance and Public Administration Committee;

Jeremy Balfour be appointed as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee;

Maurice Golden be appointed as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee;

Murdo Fraser be appointed as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee;

Sue Webber be appointed as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee;

Brian Whittle be appointed as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee;

Sharon Dowe be appointed as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee;

Meghan Gallacher be appointed as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on the Education, Children and Young People Committee;

Donald Cameron be appointed as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on the Criminal Justice Committee;

Edward Mountain be appointed as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on the Rural Affairs, Islands and Natural Environment Committee;

Liz Smith be appointed as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on the Economy and Fair Work Committee;

Maurice Golden be appointed as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee;

Alexander Burnett be appointed as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on the Public Audit Committee;

Graham Simpson be appointed as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee;

Rachael Hamilton be appointed as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on the Social Justice and Social Security Committee;

Dr Sandesh Gulhane be appointed as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on the COVID-19 Recovery Committee.—[George Adam.]

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, minister. The question on the motions will be put at decision time.

Point of Order

17:30

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. This afternoon, the First Minister accused a number of members of this Parliament of using data on test and protect in a misleading manner. She accused members of talking down the performance of test and protect and proceeded to share her wisdom with the chamber on the accuracy of provisional figures. The First Minister, using provisional figures, then appeared to suggest that performance was within the World Health Organization standards. It is a case of “Do as I say and not as I do”, and it gives a misleading impression of test and protect performance by the test that the First Minister set for others. The First Minister was given the opportunity to clarify her remarks by my colleague Paul O’Kane, but she did not take it. She encouraged members to look in detail at the figures, and I have done so. This afternoon, Public Health Scotland published data that makes it clear that only 60.5 per cent of contact tracing was completed within the target of 72 hours, which is well below the WHO standard; those are finalised figures.

The First Minister stressed the importance of accuracy. Presiding Officer, I know that you want colleagues to treat each other with respect, but that applies to the First Minister, too. Out of respect for colleagues, should the First Minister apologise to the chamber for suggesting that figures were used in a misleading way by members of this Parliament? Will the First Minister be asked to clarify the record at the earliest opportunity?

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I thank Neil Bibby for advance notice of his point of order. The content of members’ contributions is not a matter for me, but the member’s point is now on the record. If any member realises that he or she has given incorrect information in a contribution in the chamber, there is a procedure for addressing that via the *Official Report*.

Decision Time

17:32

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There are three questions to be put as a result of today’s business. I propose to ask a single question on seven Parliamentary Bureau motions. If any member objects to a single question being put, please say so now.

Members: Yes.

The Presiding Officer: To which motion do the members object?

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): Motion S6M-01120, Presiding Officer.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I agree about motion S6M-01120.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you. In that case, I will put the other questions en bloc and take the question on S6M-01120 separately.

The first question is, that motions S6M-01113 to S6M-01115 and S6M-01117 to S6M-01119, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on approval of Scottish statutory instruments, be agreed to.

Motions agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Restrictions and Requirements) (Local Levels) (Scotland) Amendment (No. 29) Regulations 2021 (SSI 2021/252) be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Restrictions and Requirements) (Local Levels) (Scotland) Amendment (No. 30) Regulations 2021 (SSI 2021/255) be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Restrictions and Requirements) (Local Levels) (Scotland) Am-endment (No. 31) Regulations 2021 (SSI 2021/262) be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Restrictions and Requirements) (Local Levels) (Scotland) Amendment (No. 32) Regulations 2021 (SSI 2021/263) be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Requirements) (Scotland) Regulations 2021 (SSI 2021/277) be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Restrictions and Requirements) (Local Levels) (Scotland) Amendment (No. 27) Regulations 2021 (SSI 2021/238) be approved.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-11120, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on approval of an SSI, 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.

17:33

Meeting suspended.

17:38

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: Members may cast their votes now.

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)
 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)
 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)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)

Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (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)
 Golden, Maurice (North East 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)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lockhart, Dean (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (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)

Abstentions

Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (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)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (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)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-11120, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on approval of an SSI, is: For 67, Against 25, Abstentions 24.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Restrictions and Requirements) (Local Levels) (Scotland) Amendment (No. 28) Regulations 2021 (SSI 2021/242) be approved.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-01121, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on committee membership, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that—

Maggie Chapman be appointed to replace Lorna Slater as a member of the Economy and Fair Work Committee;

Ross Greer be appointed to replace Patrick Harvie as a member of the Finance and Public Administration Committee;

Mark Ruskell be appointed to replace Patrick Harvie as a member of the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-01122, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on substitution on committees, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that—

Jenni Minto be appointed as the Scottish National Party substitute on the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee;

Kaukab Stewart be appointed as the Scottish National Party substitute on the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee;

Alasdair Allan be appointed as the Scottish National Party substitute on the Finance and Public Administration Committee;

Marie McNair be appointed as the Scottish National Party substitute on the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee;

Emma Roddick be appointed as the Scottish National Party substitute on the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee;

Marie McNair be appointed as the Scottish National Party substitute on the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee;

Jackie Dunbar be appointed as the Scottish National Party substitute on the Criminal Justice Committee;

John Mason be appointed as the Scottish National Party substitute on the Economy and Fair Work Committee;

Natalie Don be appointed as the Scottish National Party substitute on the Education, Children and Young People Committee;

Emma Harper be appointed as the Scottish National Party substitute on the Rural Affairs, Islands and Natural Environment Committee;

Fergus Ewing be appointed as the Scottish National Party substitute on the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee;

James Dornan be appointed as the Scottish National Party substitute on the COVID-19 Recovery Committee;

Bill Kidd be appointed as the Scottish National Party substitute on the Public Audit Committee;

Rona Mackay be appointed as the Scottish National Party substitute on the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee;

Tess White be appointed as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on the Finance and Public Administration Committee;

Jeremy Balfour be appointed as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee;

Maurice Golden be appointed as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee;

Murdo Fraser be appointed as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee;

Sue Webber be appointed as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee;

Brian Whittle be appointed as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee;

Sharon Dowe be appointed as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee;

Meghan Gallacher be appointed as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on the Education, Children and Young People Committee;

Donald Cameron be appointed as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on the Criminal Justice Committee;

Edward Mountain be appointed as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on the Rural Affairs, Islands and Natural Environment Committee;

Liz Smith be appointed as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on the Economy and Fair Work Committee;

Maurice Golden be appointed as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee;

Alexander Burnett be appointed as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on the Public Audit Committee;

Graham Simpson be appointed as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee;

Rachael Hamilton be appointed as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on the Social Justice and Social Security Committee;

Dr Sandesh Gulhane be appointed as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on the COVID-19 Recovery Committee.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time. We move to members' business. I would be grateful if members leaving the chamber could do so quietly.

Tokyo Olympic Games (Team GB Success)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The final item of business is a member's business debate on motion S6M-00838, in the name of Brian Whittle, on team GB success. The debate will be concluded without any questions being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament recognises what it considers the incredible achievements of Team GB at the Tokyo Olympic Games in winning a total of 65 medals, the same number that Team GB won in the home Olympics at London 2012; recognises the Team GB administration and coaching staff who help to make the athletes' experience the best it can be; considers that, behind every performance, there is the hard work of personal coaches, medical support, administrators and other support staff, many of whom are volunteers; believes that these performances would not be possible without the support of the National Lottery, UK Sport, sportscotland, national governing bodies, local authority facilities and many local clubs and volunteers, including in the South Scotland region, and notes the calls on the Scottish Government to work towards greater opportunity for all to participate in sport, irrespective of background or personal circumstance, with a recognition that sport can be such a force for good.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Brian Whittle to open the debate. You have seven minutes, Mr Whittle. [*Applause.*]

17:44

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): Easy, easy. I must ask members to save their applause—I have a weak finish. [*Laughter.*]

I am delighted to bring this debate to the chamber. Indeed, I am hardly able to contain my excitement at the prospect of talking about all things sport for the next hour or so.

The Paralympic games have now concluded just after the Olympic games in Tokyo, and what a veritable feast it has been of all things sporty. We got to witness the prowess of the very best physical specimens that the human race has to offer. What can we say about the Great Britain and Northern Ireland team? It won 65 medals in the Olympics, finishing fourth in the medal table and, in the Paralympics, it won 124 medals and finished in an incredible second place. [*Applause.*]

Scotland was well represented and, in fact, made up more of the team than our comparative populations would suggest. Scots won medals in athletics, cycling, hockey, rowing, sailing and swimming. Moreover, for the first time, there were more women than men in the British Olympic team—well and truly smashing that glass ceiling.

While we are discussing Scottish women, I want to highlight Katie Archibald's gold in the Madison

in the velodrome. Other golds came in the pool, from Kathleen Dawson in the mixed 4x100m medley relay and Duncan Scott in the 4x200m freestyle relay. Duncan also became the first Briton to win four medals at a single games. Owen Miller won the men's T20 1500m and Neil Fachie took gold in the men's 1000m cycling time trial. I also give a shout-out to the indomitable Sam Kinghorn, who added two medals to her Paralympic haul on the track, while Gordon Reid added a further two medals to his collection in the wheelchair tennis.

At this point, I have to declare a bias when I tell the chamber that the medal that I celebrated most was Laura Muir's silver in the 1500m. The field was absolutely stacked with the highest quality athletes, but she fought her way on to the podium in a global final at last, after so many attempts that came so close. Presiding Officer, you know me as a cool, calm and collected individual who is not given to outbursts of emotion, but when Laura came off that final bend, I was out of my seat and screaming at the television. In fact, I think that I might have hurt myself.

Laura Muir's silver was well deserved in an event that is of the highest calibre globally. If members saw the work that she puts in day in, day out, they would perhaps understand what these athletes are prepared to put their bodies through to achieve their dreams. Her coach, Andy Young, also coached Jemma Reekie, who narrowly missed a medal when she came fourth in the 800m. That highlights the importance of athletes having a support network and training partners as they strive to achieve in the arena. I will come on to that topic shortly.

I must also mention Josh Kerr's bronze medal in the 1500m, with a time that ranks him second in the UK all-time list. We should ponder that for a second—that is quicker than those track legends Steve Ovett, Sebastian Coe and Steve Cram. Only Mo Farah has run quicker. It is just astounding, and I should say that Josh was coached in the United States by an old friend of mine, Mark Rowland, himself a bronze medallist in the 1988 steeplechase.

However, the performance of the championships, by a country mile, was Norway's Karsten Warholm and his astonishing obliteration of the world record in the 400m hurdles, in a time that would have won the UK 400m Olympic trial. A couple of weeks ago, I was chatting about this to the current British record holder, a certain Kriss Akabusi, and his take on it was that Warholm had shown him that, back in his day, they were only playing at the event—that is a bit harsh on Kriss, but I get his meaning.

The journey to the Olympic podium is a long one. It takes relentless dedication from athletes as

they search for those fractions of fractions of seconds that are the difference between greatness and being back in the pack. We must not forget the coaches and volunteers in all the clubs across the country who give their time for free, the families who traipse across the country to ensure that athletes get to training and competitions, and the national governing bodies and local authorities that play a huge part in developing and maintaining facilities. Also important are sportsScotland and its institute of sport, Scottish Disability Sport and the funding from the National Lottery, which was a game changer when it was introduced in 1997 after the GB and NI team's disastrous 1996 Olympics.

We must also remember UK Sport, which is chaired by our own Kath Grainger, which funds the elite podium programme that all our elite sportsmen and sportswomen benefit from. The last time I looked, they had put £13 million directly into the programme in Scotland to allow those athletes to train full time. It takes all that and more. UK Sport's investment in the development of bike technology, for example, helped Chris Hoy to win his six Olympic gold medals, and the same goes for boat technology in Kath Grainger's case. It is all about seeking those incredibly small margins. The training camps around the world that our athletes have access to are all part of the jigsaw, too, and we also have to remember the input of doctors and physiotherapists, nutritionists, sports psychologists, sports physiologists and so on.

Getting selected for the GB and NI team is the very pinnacle of a sportsman or sportswoman's career and it takes a long-term significant investment in terms of effort from the athlete and their backroom team—the people whom we do not see.

Scottish sport receives support from many sources, from local clubs all the way through to the lottery and UK Sport. We benefit enormously from the economy of scale of being part of the GB and Northern Ireland team.

Speaking of background support, I want to mention the sudden passing of one of Scotland's true coaching heroes, Iain Robertson. Former director of coaching Frank Dick called me three Fridays ago to say that Iain had been diagnosed with cancer that day. We were utterly shocked to hear of his passing the following Thursday. Not only did Iain coach women to reach the Olympic, world, European and Commonwealth teams, he was instrumental in developing the modern coaching philosophy. He was an educator to many coaches in Scotland and the UK and changed women's athletics when he had the vision to turn Maryhill Harriers into Glasgow City Athletics Club, which has been so successful in the UK women's league. Iain was a true innovator and a lovely

man. He taught me how to lift weights, which shows that he was a patient man. He will be desperately missed by his family and friends and the whole athletics community.

Sport is a force for good. We are waking up to the huge physical and mental benefits of being active and are starting to understand the positive contribution that physical activity can make towards educational attainment—including up to 40 per cent higher test scores for students—and the reduction in business staff turnover that sport can bring about. Those are just some of many positive statistics.

What matters is not training our children for sport, but educating them through sport, because sport is a vehicle for learning many skills, for social interaction, resilience, confidence and for tackling isolation and loneliness. Sport teaches young people to take the knocks, to fall short of expectation and to come back for more with greater determination. Those are skills that can seep into every aspect of their lives.

Very few will go on to take sport more seriously. It is not a level playing field. The Olympics and Paralympics are a shop window and marketing tool for sports participation, but children must be able to see it to do it. Too many community assets have been ripped out; opportunities to participate are becoming more remote. To see proof of that, look at the make-up of the GB and NI team. A disproportionate number were privately educated. That is not a slight on those educational establishments, but we should be looking at the opportunities that are afforded in those schools and seeing how we can replicate those across all of education.

Sport also has a significant part to play in preventing the lure of addiction. Covid has taught us how health impacts the economy. If we want to grow our economy, we have to tackle our poor health record. Sport has a significant part to play there and has a role in tackling the attainment gap.

Given the money that we spend on health and education, sport in Scotland is chronically underfunded. There is a better way. We should be utilising all the community facilities that are available to us—especially the school estate—and ensuring that our national governing bodies and councils are funded to deliver sports locally.

It will take a real paradigm shift if we are finally to use sport to make the difference that it can make. We talk all the time about opportunity for all, irrespective of background or personal circumstances, but not enough is being done on the ground. It is time to get serious about sport and its benefits. I do not see that as being in any way party political: we should all want to be part of that conversation.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I thank Mr Whittle for the timely reminder that we gentlemen of a certain age should take care when getting in and out of chairs too quickly.

17:53

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate and congratulate Brian Whittle on securing it. He has outlined the number of medals won by our Olympians and has name-checked many of our outstanding team members.

I congratulate team GB on their outstanding achievements at Tokyo 2020. Olympic captain Dina Asher-Smith and Paralympic captain Jim Roberts led their teams to great success. Their achievements in a range of sports cannot be understated and every athlete can take pride in the inspiration that they provide to people across Scotland.

The idea behind the modern Olympics, as expressed by the International Olympics Committee, is

“the elevation of the mind and soul, overcoming differences between nationalities and cultures, embracing friendship, a sense of solidarity, and fair play; ultimately leading to the contribution towards world peace”.

Brian Whittle has clearly outlined the positives for health and education that sport brings, but as well as supporting positive health and wellbeing, we need to support the international forum focusing on sport, which rightly strives to build relationships between nations of the world and takes a progressive stand on humanitarian issues. For example, to highlight the fact that more than 65.3 million people across the world have been displaced from their homes and are classed as refugees under the United Nations definition, the International Olympic Committee supported the creation of the IOC refugee team, which featured 29 talented athletes across 12 sports in this year’s games. Such steps should be acknowledged and welcomed.

Dumfries and Galloway, in my region of South Scotland, is home to one member of team GB, modern pentathlete, 26-year-old Jo Muir from the Haugh of Urr, near Castle Douglas. She competed in the modern pentathlon alongside fellow team member, Kate French. Jo’s take-home message from the games is that, regardless of their ability, everyone should try a sport, whether it is sprints in the local park, planks in the living room or even a walk around the neighbourhood. Residents of the Haugh could not be prouder of their Olympian. They produced a wee video showing their support for her during the Olympics, which can be viewed online.

The Tokyo Olympics inspired many people across Scotland to try a new sport, from traditional sports such as running, cycling or swimming to new sports such as speed climbing, skateboarding and mountain biking. I welcome the fact that, to aid access to those sports, the Scottish Government has funded, and plans to double investment in, access to sporting facilities for younger people, particularly those in the most deprived areas of Scotland.

Across the South Scotland region, we have fantastic mountain biking, BMX and skating facilities. Mountain bikers can go to the 7stanes and there are various skate parks and pump tracks in the region. There is a brand-new pump track at Glentroll park in Lochside in Dumfries, a skate park in Kirkcudbright, a BMX arena in Berwickshire and a BMX track in Newton Stewart. The 7stanes mountain biking trails at the forests of Mabie and Ae, Kirroughtree, Dalbeattie, Glentress, Glentroll, Innerleithen and Newcastleton are all world renowned and are all in the South Scotland region. They offer a perfect training ground for all those who are interested in taking up mountain biking, and who could be our future Olympians.

However, I have been contacted by constituents who think that we are missing an opportunity to market those facilities better. I have written to Forestry and Land Scotland and VisitScotland in the past, but I also ask the minister whether the Government would consider a national marketing campaign based on Scotland's 7stanes, which would enhance access to and promotion of those fantastic assets.

Finally, I want to mention Raiders Gravel Galloway, which is an international gravel cycle festival. The event seeks to attract people from across the globe and has various opportunities for local people to try gravel cycling. It also proposes to have accessible cycling at the event, which takes place from 7-10 October. The event could be a fantastic way to inspire our future Olympians.

I welcome the fact that we have had the debate. I congratulate all athletes on both teams in team GB for all that they do.

17:58

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): I congratulate my colleague Brian Whittle on securing the debate. I join the other speakers in congratulating everyone who took part in the Tokyo games on their success, whether they won medals or simply turned up. As a nation, we are deeply proud of what they have done. I am pleased that, next week, we will debate the Paralympic games and its success. All being well, I look forward to taking part in that debate, too.

As we heard from Mr Whittle, the Olympic games is a showcase of what sport is and can be like. For me, the real success of the Olympics is not just about those who turn up to compete or those who win medals; it is about how that affects the grass roots of our society with regard to sporting achievements. I saw the excitement that my daughters got from watching the Olympics on telly over the past few weeks. They learned about sports that they did not know about and were motivated to go back to doing the activities that they were already involved in.

We are all aware from the communities that we represent across Scotland that many activities have been closed down because of the pandemic. Before the pandemic, 313,000 people were attracted by access to sport and other such activities. However, because of the pandemic, a lot of those activities have closed down in our schools and communities. Across parties and across Government, we need to ensure that grass-roots events and sporting activities start again. We need to re-encourage people to volunteer on Saturday mornings and Wednesday evenings, and we need to consider why fewer people are coming forward to volunteer for grass-roots sport.

We need to ensure that our young folk see the physical and mental benefits of taking part in grass-roots sport. As Brian Whittle said, very few of them will become Olympians, but that is not necessarily the benchmark of success in Scotland. The benchmark is our having fitter, healthier and better children coming through the system who can achieve what they can within their limitations. I hope that that happens.

We have to ensure that we do not have a missed generation. For example, up until a few weeks ago, my daughters had not been able to swim for nearly 18 months. There will be children who have not been able to go to swimming pools, who have not gone through basic swimming lessons, and who have not been able to progress to the next level because of that. I hope that, when we are looking at our figures and the system, we will leave nobody behind and that extra time and resources will be provided for those who have missed running, football, swimming or other activities.

I congratulate everyone who took part in the Tokyo games. As I said, they made us proud as a nation, and they have given us hope that we can come through the pandemic. We look forward to Paris in three years' time.

18:02

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I congratulate Brian Whittle on securing the debate.

His enthusiasm for sport can be seen, and I enjoyed that.

Like my colleagues and people throughout the country, I watched as our Olympians delivered major success for team GB in Tokyo during the summer and no doubt inspired a generation of young athletes to dream of reaching the very top of their sport. The commitment of our athletes, their coaches and their local clubs throughout the UK is admirable, and the time, skill and effort that are put into developing first-class athletes have undoubtedly paid off this summer. It is worth saying again that our athletes won an impressive 65 medals, which equals the London 2012 total.

Although indoor events took place behind closed doors, the return of the Olympics was much needed for all those who had been looking forward to a summer of sport. The Olympics brought a sense of normality, albeit in the most abnormal of times.

In the excitement of a global Olympic games, I sometimes think that we forget where it all begins for many. It begins at the grass-roots levels in towns and villages throughout Scotland and the whole of the UK, where future Olympians and Paralympians are first introduced to sport, enhance their skills and prepare for a future of success. It is in local communities that future champions develop what will become a lifelong love of sport, and it is local sports teams, such as Nithsdale Wanderers Football Club in Sanquhar, which I visited recently, that allow local accessibility and the opportunity for people to dream of playing for team GB at an Olympics some time in the future. A small games hall in the village of Catrine has championed badminton over many years and given young people the pride of performing in tournaments across the country.

It is a shame that those opportunities simply do not exist for many young people today and that accessing outdoor green spaces or using football pitches or multi-use game areas comes at a significant cost that is too much for many families. Others have spoken about the power that sport has to unite communities, spark friendships, showcase talent and improve mental health. Given that power, it is beyond belief that we do not give sport the recognition that it deserves or prioritise it in the way that we should. Austerity has hit sport hard and has taken it from the communities that need it most. When Governments have a target to reduce public spending, what is hit first? It is community spaces, sports halls and kids clubs, and we know that that disproportionately affects poorer communities.

Brian Whittle: Does the member agree that, when councils decide to shut down community assets, that is actually a false economy? We take that money from one side of the ledger, but it goes

on to the other side of the ledger through the cost to health and education services.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am happy to give you back the time for that, Ms Mochan.

Carol Mochan: Thank you.

I see the thread that Mr Whittle is going with. I believe that austerity causes great detriment to the communities that need it most and that we need to look at the way in which services are funded. Of course, I agree that, if money is not used because there are no sporting facilities, it will be spent through the national health service.

We can, of course, highlight the national lottery funding and sportscotland grants that are available to local sports clubs to enhance their services. Through the national lottery's awards for all project, sportscotland awarded more than £375,000 to 96 groups across Scotland. That is good but, if we believe that sports should and must be available to all, the truth is that we must argue against austerity and for the valued place of sport and sports facilities in every community. Every community deserves decent sports facilities and they should be available to be used by all.

The Tokyo games took place in the most difficult of circumstances. It is widely believed that it is the fans who make sport what it is. Their presence would undoubtedly have taken the success of the games to another level. It is right that we are debating the motion and I thank Brian Whittle for bringing it to the chamber. I applaud again the success of the Olympians, the hard work of their coaches and the influence of local sports clubs. We have a lot of work to do to make Scotland a fairer and more equal place. We know that we can do it and provide the opportunity for children not to be defined by their postcode but to become Olympians themselves. I hope that we can move forward towards a fairer strategy that helps all to progress towards being hopeful Olympians tomorrow.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Christine Grahame is the last speaker in the open debate.

18:07

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I congratulate Brian Whittle on securing the debate and I congratulate all the UK athletes who took part in the Olympics, especially given the delay of a year when they had to keep training during Covid and lockdown, and be inventive in their training methods.

Pre-empting next week's debate, of which I was unaware, I will focus my comments on the Paralympics. I acknowledge Brian Whittle's commitment to increasing sport for all, although I

would, as he knows, distinguish between sport and “activity”—a term that I prefer, being one of the many people who has no sport in my DNA.

I do not believe that the Olympics brings about any substantial cultural change, apart from for some people who may be inspired by Olympians to progress in their chosen sport. Rather like what we see with Wimbledon, when children are briefly seen out with tennis rackets, the change soon disappears. Activity is a different matter and for another debate.

It is, however, my view that the Paralympics does change, and has changed, society. For me, the London Olympics was the time when that sea change took place. The sight of people with disabilities—to use that broadest term—participating in all manner of sports, displaying not only their skills but in many cases their physical disabilities, has, I think, had a profound impact on the way that disability is viewed.

However, the Paralympics is not equal with the Olympics, as an event or for its participants, in many respects, a fundamental one of which is funding. In support of that point, I refer to a campaign by Paralympians David Weir, Jonnie Peacock and Hannah Cockroft. Those three top track stars have repeatedly raised issues of unequal pay, poor promotion and a lack of technical investment in the Tokyo games for Paralympians.

David Weir has said that he is

“sick of being second best”

and has challenged Sebastian Coe to a “fight” for the future of para-athletics. After finishing fifth in the Paralympic marathon, the Weirwolf, as he is called, let rip on the parlous state of his sport and now wants World Athletics, of which Coe is president, to intervene. Along with swimming, para-athletics is reluctantly governed by the International Paralympic Committee. I say that the committee is reluctant because, in July, it openly invited interest in taking the responsibility off its hands.

David Weir said, “we deserve more”, and went on:

“That is what I’m going to fight for now, I am going to keep pushing and knocking on the door.”

On a positive note, I, too, congratulate Samantha Kinghorn from Melrose on her success in winning a bronze medal in Tokyo in the T53 100m, finishing just a quarter of a second behind the winner—such are the narrow margins, as Mr Whittle knows. She has come a long way since her first competition in 2012 in the London mini-marathon. She has come an even longer way since her injuries in 2010, when she was crushed by snow and ice and broke her back. She had

emergency surgery and spent five months in hospital, with the injury to her spine leaving her paralysed from the waist down. She has said:

“I thought I’d be in a bed forever. So, to then get into a wheelchair was amazing. I know it sounds strange, but I was so happy. Then to find I could actually compete in sport in my wheelchair has just been incredible. Sport has helped me hugely, helped me to accept it really.”

That story, along with the cultural change in the public perception of disabilities that has resulted from the Paralympics, is inspirational. For that reason, although I congratulate those involved in the Olympics, I certainly value the Paralympics more.

18:12

The Minister for Public Health, Women’s Health and Sport (Maree Todd): I am delighted to close the debate for the Scottish Government. I thank Brian Whittle for bringing the motion to the Scottish Parliament, and I thank the members who have contributed to the debate. As Mr Whittle knows, I share his passion for sport, although not his skill.

The Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic games will forever be known for having taken place in 2021 rather than 2020. They will also be remembered as the best games in history for team GB, in terms of performances and medals. On behalf of the Scottish Government, I thank everyone in team GB, including those involved in preparing the athletes and putting in place all the arrangements to keep them safe during the pandemic. It is not simply about athletes turning up on the day. There is an entire programme, with a network of coaches, managers, physiotherapists, nutritionists and more behind the scenes working tirelessly to ensure that everything is in place.

I also put on record our congratulations to the organising committee of the International Olympic Committee, and of course the Japanese Government, for putting on such wonderful games across 33 venues, despite the challenges of the pandemic. Scottish athletes certainly played their part by contributing to 14 medals in the Olympics and 21 in the Paralympics. As Mr Whittle said, the Scots on team GB certainly punched above their weight, and all of Scotland is proud of them.

I want to give a special mention to the family and friends who were not able to travel to Japan to watch their loved ones perform at the very highest level—I hope that their sleeping patterns are back to normal now. Others who watched the performances at the games must have been inspired by our athletes and their accomplishments, which are not just about the medals and the records galore that were

smashed, from British and Scottish records to new personal bests.

To do so during a pandemic, when training has been difficult, and in front of empty stands without the extra lift from spectators, demonstrates their dedication and desire to do their best for their team, themselves, their coaches and their loved ones.

I personally congratulate all our competitors and medal winners, and make special mention of swimmer Duncan Scott, who became the first British athlete to win four medals at one games. I also take the opportunity to thank our sports governing bodies—sportscotland, including the institute of sport, UK Sport and the National Lottery—for their continued work to support our athletes.

I have mentioned the work that goes on behind the scenes in order to get our athletes to the start line, and in the best possible condition. I am also aware of the thousands of people across Scotland who volunteer, and give people of all ages and abilities the opportunity to participate in sport and physical exercise. That contribution has been recognised by several members during the debate. Clubs, groups and classes can only be held thanks to an army of volunteers who cut the grass, paint the lines, open the buildings, clean facilities, maintain equipment and, of course, coach the participants. As a rugby player, I know at first hand how many hours a week people put in to provide such an opportunity for others.

As many other members have said, sport is a powerful tool in improving our physical and mental health. At this moment in time, it is also vital in bringing communities together. That is why our programme for government commits to doubling the investment in sport and active living to £100 million a year by the end of this parliamentary session. That investment will enable us to rebuild capacity and resilience in the sector following the pandemic, and ensure that we address the inequalities in access to physical activity and sport, which many members have mentioned.

A priority will be to support participation across all groups, and to tackle inequalities. We will work with sportscotland, as well as with organisations and individuals across Scotland, to break down the barriers, financial or otherwise, that keep too many people from leading active lives. Physical activity and sport can be central to Scotland's recovery from the pandemic, by providing the boost that we all need to our physical and mental health and bringing us together in our communities. That approach has been central to our changing lives work, as the sector is pivoted to the changing needs of its communities, which has resulted in the sector playing an important role during various phases of the Covid lockdowns.

The sport and physical activity sector is in a good position to support communities in rebuilding, through learning and engaging in programmes that will achieve locally focused outcomes, as well as sporting outcomes.

The Covid-19 pandemic has certainly brought its challenges to the Scottish sporting sector, but it has also brought opportunities through strengthened relationships and greater partnership working. Sports clubs are often in a unique position in communities, and since becoming minister, I have been impressed in the conversations that I have had with the sector around its commitment to breaking down the barriers to activity.

Once again, I thank everyone involved in team GB, our inspiring athletes, our sporting sector, and, in particular, the thousands of volunteers. At the 2022 Commonwealth games in Birmingham, our athletes will look to build on successes from the Gold Coast and Glasgow. In only three years' time, we will again be supporting team GB at the Paris Olympics, where many of our athletes will be targeting further success, and the next generation of athletes will be looking to stamp their mark on the sporting global stage. During that period, we will be working with our partners right across the sporting sector to address inequalities in access to physical activities and sport, and to aspire to be a more active nation.

Thank you to everyone who has made a contribution tonight, and to Brian Whittle for lodging the motion.

Meeting closed at 18:19.

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