



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Meeting of the Parliament (Hybrid)

Thursday 2 December 2021

Session 6



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

© Parliamentary copyright. Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body

Information on the Scottish Parliament's copyright policy can be found on the website - www.parliament.scot or by contacting Public Information on 0131 348 5000

Thursday 2 December 2021

CONTENTS

| | Col. |
|--|-------------|
| GENERAL QUESTION TIME | 1 |
| Older People (Financial Support) | 1 |
| 2030 Emissions Target (Update)..... | 2 |
| Modal Shift (Rail Journeys) | 4 |
| Infrastructure (Meetings) | 5 |
| Stillbirth (Support for Parents) | 6 |
| Delayed Discharge and Winter Pressures (NHS Fife) | 8 |
| FIRST MINISTER'S QUESTION TIME | 9 |
| Vaccination Booster Programme..... | 9 |
| Queen Elizabeth University Hospital | 14 |
| Ardrossan to Brodick Ferry Services | 21 |
| Storm Arwen (Impact on Scottish Borders) | 21 |
| Anne's Law | 22 |
| Cabinet (Meetings) | 23 |
| British Sign Language (National Plan) | 24 |
| Antidepressants (Use in Children)..... | 25 |
| National Outcome on Care | 27 |
| Union Connectivity Review..... | 28 |
| Office for National Statistics Report..... | 30 |
| Scottish Hospitals Inquiry (Evidence)..... | 30 |
| City of Glasgow College (Union Facility Time)..... | 31 |
| INTERNATIONAL DAY OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES | 33 |
| <i>Motion debated—[Pam Duncan—Glancy].</i> | |
| Pam Duncan—Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab)..... | 33 |
| Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP) | 36 |
| Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con) | 38 |
| Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)..... | 39 |
| Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)..... | 40 |
| Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con) | 42 |
| Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab) | 43 |
| Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green) | 45 |
| Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP) | 47 |
| Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab) | 49 |
| The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government (Shona Robison) | 50 |
| POINT OF ORDER | 54 |
| PORTFOLIO QUESTION TIME | 55 |
| EDUCATION AND SKILLS | 55 |
| Violence Prevention Programmes (Dating and Relationships) | 55 |
| Dyslexia (Support) | 56 |
| Climate Issues (Engagement) | 57 |
| Scottish Attainment Challenge (Equality Impact Assessment) | 58 |
| Scottish Attainment Challenge (Local Authority Funding Allocations) | 59 |
| SpeakGaelic | 61 |
| School Curriculum (Business Needs Alignment)..... | 63 |
| COVID-19: PREPARING FOR WINTER AND PRIORITIES FOR RECOVERY | 65 |
| Siobhian Brown (Ayr) (SNP)..... | 65 |
| Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)..... | 68 |
| Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con) | 70 |
| Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab) | 73 |
| Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP) | 75 |
| Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green)..... | 77 |
| Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP) | 78 |
| Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab) | 80 |
| The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery (John Swinney)..... | 82 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con) | 85 |
| Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab) | 86 |
| Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD) | 88 |
| John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP) | 90 |
| Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con) | 91 |
| Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP) | 93 |
| Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab)..... | 95 |
| Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)..... | 97 |
| Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green)..... | 98 |
| Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con)..... | 100 |
| Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab)..... | 102 |
| Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con) | 103 |
| The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery (John Swinney)..... | 105 |
| Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)..... | 108 |
| PARLIAMENTARY BUREAU MOTION | 114 |
| <i>Motion moved—[George Adam].</i> | |
| DECISION TIME | 114 |

Scottish Parliament

Thursday 2 December 2021

[The Presiding Officer opened the meeting at 11:40]

General Question Time

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Good morning. I remind members of the Covid-related measures that are in place. Face coverings should be worn when moving around the chamber and across the Holyrood campus.

The first item of business is general questions. I would be grateful for short and succinct questions, with answers to match, in order to get in as many people as possible.

Older People (Financial Support)

1. **Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what support it can provide to older people who may face financial hardship over the winter months due to the rising cost of living. (S6O-00480)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government (Shona Robison): We are taking action to support all people on low incomes. I recently announced our £41 million winter support fund, which will help people in need to heat their homes and to meet rising food costs. We are also investing £114 million to tackle fuel poverty and to improve energy efficiency in people's homes. Additionally, by the end of October we had delivered a £130 pandemic support payment to around 500,000 low-income households, including those on pension credit. This week, we introduced the Money Support Scotland website and marketing campaign to raise awareness of the services that are available to people with financial worries.

Karen Adam: I recently met representatives of the charity Age Scotland, who stressed that the elderly are heading into a crisis, with pensions in the United Kingdom being significantly lower than those of our European neighbours. Our older people are often on fixed incomes, and they cannot afford sky-rocketing food and energy bills. Some are facing the unthinkable choice between either turning on the heating or feeding themselves. Does the cabinet secretary agree that pensioners have been betrayed by the UK Tory Government scrapping the triple lock?

Shona Robison: I absolutely agree with Karen Adam. The triple lock is crucial to ensuring that the support that is offered by the basic state pension

continues to rise to reflect the increasing cost of living and to support pensioners into their third age. We are disappointed and concerned that the UK Government decided to push ahead with breaking the triple lock before publishing information on how that will affect pensioners, and despite a cost-of-living crisis that is set to hit everyone on low incomes, including pensioners. I therefore call on the UK Government to play its part by sticking to the commitments that it made to pensioners and by actively encouraging older people to take up pension credit.

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): On Tuesday, the Scottish Government released the outline business case for a publicly owned energy company, two years after it was written. The business case highlights that a publicly owned energy company would produce annual savings for customers. Age Scotland recently revealed that eight in 10 older people were greatly concerned about paying their energy bills. With nearly 30 per cent of pensioner households in Scotland living in fuel poverty, does the cabinet secretary not think that it is time for the Scottish Government to fulfil its promise to deliver a publicly owned energy company?

Shona Robison: I am happy to ensure that the minister responsible for taking forward that policy writes to the member on that point.

As I said in my initial answer, the Government is investing £114 million to tackle fuel poverty and improve energy efficiency in people's homes. Is it not a shame that the member does not support our calls to have full control over all those issues here in Scotland? That would allow us to tackle fuel poverty in an even more efficient manner and to support people into their older age and during the winter months more effectively than we can with our fixed budget.

2030 Emissions Target (Update)

2. **Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on progress towards cutting emissions by 75 per cent by 2030. (S6O-00481)

The Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport (Michael Matheson): Scotland continues to lead the United Kingdom in delivering long-term emissions reductions. The most recently published data, which are for 2019, show that Scotland has reduced our emissions by 51.5 per cent from the 1990 baseline. However, we recognise that much more must be done to achieve our world-leading 75 per cent target for 2030 and to meet our net zero target for 2045.

The Scottish Government's updated climate change plan, which was finalised in March, includes more than 200 policies and proposals

and puts us on a clear and credible pathway to meeting our target up to 2032. Our focus is on delivering those measures.

Liam Kerr: I thank the cabinet secretary for that answer. The Committee on Climate Change suggests that the 75 per cent target might be “overcooked” and urges

“deep co-operation with the UK”

if the target is ever to be achieved. The chief executive, Chris Stark, noted that he has not seen the types of policies that the nationalist coalition needs in order to turn that target into reality. Will the cabinet secretary reassess his Government’s policies against those criticisms? If so, when will his conclusions be made public?

Michael Matheson: I suspect that that chief executive was the same chief executive of the Committee on Climate Change when it stated that the Scottish economy is decarbonising quicker

“than the rest of the UK, and faster than any G20 economy since 2008. Emissions have fallen rapidly, while the economy has grown.”

The very same Committee on Climate Change, to which Liam Kerr referred, recognised the significant process that we are making.

Liam Kerr made reference to the need to work closely with the UK Government, so perhaps he will call on his colleagues at Westminster to reverse the ludicrous decision not to support the Scottish Cluster in helping to deliver carbon capture, utilisation and storage, which will have an impact on the north-east of Scotland in particular. The UK Government decided not to go ahead with that project despite the fact that the Committee on Climate Change stated that it was a key project to support Scotland in delivering on its climate change ambitions.

Fiona Hyslop (Linlithgow) (SNP): To what extent are Scottish and UK targets dependent on a well-developed carbon capture, utilisation and storage project? Today the UK Climate Change Committee published a report that challenges the UK on its ability to deliver on its targets. Is the Scottish Government continuing to press the UK Government to get on with funding the Acorn project, rather than keeping it on the reserve list?

Michael Matheson: Fiona Hyslop makes an important point, because the Committee on Climate Change was very clear that carbon capture, utilisation and storage is critical to Scotland and the UK in relation to delivering on our climate change targets. That is why the UK Government’s decision not to support the Scottish Cluster makes no sense and I believe is a very serious mistake, not just in terms of delivering on our climate change targets but for the north-east of Scotland. The UK Government has been happy to

lean on that area and the oil and gas sector for many decades when it suited, but when it comes to paying back, through investing in areas such as carbon capture, the Government has let the north-east down.

It is clear that the issue needs to be progressed and I assure Fiona Hyslop that we will continue to do everything that we can to support the Scottish Cluster and to press the UK Government to reverse that ridiculous decision.

Modal Shift (Rail Journeys)

3. Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): I remind members of my entry in the register of members’ interests.

To ask the Scottish Government what steps it is taking to encourage a modal shift to increase train passenger numbers and journeys. (S6O-00482)

The Minister for Transport (Graeme Dey): Our national transport strategy is clear about the investment priority that we attach to public transport and modal shift. The substantial financial support that we have provided throughout the pandemic has ensured the availability of rail, along with bus, as a mode of choice.

We remain committed to growing the rail market. Accordingly, we have charged ScotRail Trains Ltd with producing a market growth strategy from April 2022 that develops and implements appropriate products and services to address post-Covid markets, in order to deliver increased revenue and passenger growth against a backdrop of net zero carbon and modal shift.

Richard Leonard: I thank the minister for that response.

As a low-carbon transport link between Scotland’s two largest cities and London, the Caledonian sleeper route has a central role to play in getting people on to public transport, yet Serco, which is responsible for running the franchise, has managed to cause not one but two disputes with its workers and their union—the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers—over both pay and, now, clear evidence of bullying and harassment. That is a shocking way to treat key workers.

As the Scottish Government fully funds the franchise, I say to it today, “Bring it back—bring it back into public ownership.” Will the minister commit now to doing that when the emergency measures agreement expires in March 2022?

Graeme Dey: Presiding Officer, that question was at a bit of a tangent to the original question, but let me deal with it.

We have encouraged both sides to resolve the initial dispute between the Caledonian sleeper

operators and the RMT. As I understand it, the trade union concerned approached the operators with a proposal to resolve the dispute. The operators came back matching that proposal, the trade union did not recommend it to its members and it was rejected. I think that that is matter of deep regret.

On the member's other point, bullying and harassment—alleged or otherwise—is a serious matter. I would encourage Serco to look into that dispute in great detail.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): We do not get people back on to trains by cutting services. The consultation on the controversial proposed new timetable closed on 2 October. When will we be told the results?

Graeme Dey: That is going through a process of review and the results will be conveyed to the public in due course.

Infrastructure (Meetings)

4. Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government when it last met the United Kingdom Government to discuss infrastructure projects of importance to Scotland. (S6O-00483)

The Minister for Transport (Graeme Dey): Scottish ministers meet with their UK Government counterparts to discuss matters of importance to Scotland, including key infrastructure projects, as required. We have stressed, through engagement with the UK Government, the importance of Scotland's capital budget being sufficient to deliver our infrastructure investment plan and of any UK Government spending in Scotland supporting its delivery. It was therefore disappointing that the UK Government's October spending review did not provide significant scope for an infrastructure stimulus and that the levelling-up fund was disbursed directly across the UK, despite previous commitments otherwise, which in turn reduced capital funding for Scotland.

Finlay Carson: The Scottish Government has repeatedly promised upgrades to the A75 and A77, even before the ferries moved to Cairnryan. The UK Government has committed £40 million to preparatory work being done between our two Governments. Why the Scottish Government is refusing to get involved in the union connectivity review is baffling to my constituents, especially given that 12 Scottish local authorities, the Welsh and the Northern Ireland Governments and, for that matter, the Republic of Ireland Minister for Transport have contributed to the review.

The Scottish Government claims that the A75 will feature in its strategic policy review, but the people of the south of Scotland are growing tired of waiting and of this Government failing to deliver.

Will the minister commit today to working with the UK Government to bring much-needed upgrades for the benefit of the people of Scotland and of every nation across the UK?

Graeme Dey: We are always willing to work with the UK Government in work that respects the devolution settlement, which has not been the case in this and many other instances. The union connectivity review talks of offering funding to support the upgrade of the A75. We are quite prepared to discuss that with the UK Government, with two specific lines of questioning to be explored. The first is on whether the funding would be additional funding and not top-sliced and repackaged existing monies. The second is on how upgrading would fit with the proposals for the route that are being considered as part of the strategic transport review process?

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): Specifically in relation to the issue that has just been raised, the union connectivity review recommended that the UK Government make funding available for A75 upgrades. The minister is aware that I, too, have lobbied for that since my election in May 2016. Can the minister outline specifically what the UK Government has promised in terms of the amount of money that it proposes to give, and the timescales for the money being delivered?

Graeme Dey: To date, no dialogue on that has taken place. However, there is an offer of a meeting, which I hope will take place in the not-too-distant future. We will engage in that meeting on the basis that I outlined earlier.

Stillbirth (Support for Parents)

5. Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what support is in place for parents who experience stillbirth. (S6O-00484)

The Minister for Public Health, Women's Health and Sport (Maree Todd): All national health service boards should, within best practice guidance, provide tailored care and support to parents who experience stillbirth. That should, where appropriate, include further investigation and counselling.

We are committed to supporting families who have experienced stillbirth and other types of baby loss. That is why we have invested £578,000 over the past four years in a range of initiatives to improve care for families who experience baby loss. In addition, we have provided approximately £150,000 a year to support improvement activity, research and audit, in order to drive further improvements in clinical care to reduce the incidence of stillbirth.

Fulton MacGregor: I have been working with a group in my constituency called Baby Loss Retreat, which supports patients who experience baby loss at all stages. They have told me that aftercare for parents is often inconsistent and, in some cases, is inadvertently retraumatising—for example, when people are treated close to newborn babies, who might be heard crying. Is the Government considering reviewing the protocols that are in place to allow people who experience stillbirth to receive the more tailored and specialist support service that they require?

Maree Todd: Absolutely. I am aware of the work of Baby Loss Retreat and of Fulton MacGregor's efforts to highlight it.

The Scottish Government is committed to supporting families who have experienced baby loss through high-quality and sensitive bereavement care. We have provided £178,000 of funding over four years to the Stillbirth and Neonatal Death Society—known as Sands—to develop the national bereavement care pathway for pregnancy and baby loss in Scotland. Sands will work with bereaved parents, baby-loss charities and royal colleges to develop the pathway, and it will put the voices of bereaved parents at the heart of the vision. The pathway will allow health professionals to provide evidence-based care and will describe best practice for bereavement care following miscarriage, termination of pregnancy for foetal anomaly, stillbirth, neonatal death or the sudden unexpected death of an infant.

The bereavement care pathway is currently being piloted in four early-adopter health boards in Scotland. Unfortunately, full roll-out had to be paused while health board resources were focused on dealing with the Covid pandemic, but we expect work to recommence early next year.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): We would not send someone who has cancer or another illness home without support in the community, but across much of Scotland there is no long-term specialist baby-loss counselling. Will the Government carry out an audit of where the gaps are so that we at least have a picture of where services need to be provided? Will the minister commit to working with the third sector in particular to provide such services where they are not provided at present?

Maree Todd: Absolutely. We are committed to improvements. The work with Sands to develop the national bereavement care pathway focuses on that. We have also provided £400,000 to baby-loss charities in Scotland to provide front-line support to parents. Those charities include: the Simpson's Memory Box Appeal—SiMBA—Sands, Baby Loss Retreat, Bliss Scotland, Held in Our Hearts, Edinburgh Children's Hospital Charity, the

Miscarriage Association and Scottish Care & Information on Miscarriage.

We are determined to improve that area of care, and we have a lot of work going on. I am more than happy to hear more details from Mr Balfour if there are areas that we can work on together.

Delayed Discharge and Winter Pressures (NHS Fife)

6. Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its discussions with NHS Fife and Fife Council about delayed discharges and winter pressures. (S6O-00485)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Humza Yousaf): I met NHS Fife, Fife Council and the Fife health and social care partnership on 23 November and again on 1 December to discuss delayed discharge performance. At those meetings, the partnership outlined its plans to reduce delays, with a trajectory to do so by at least 30 per cent by the end of the year. It has already achieved a 15 per cent reduction, which is promising. I expect that improvement to continue well into 2022 and beyond, and we have a follow up meeting scheduled for 15 December.

Annabelle Ewing: It is clear to me that front-line health and social care workers in Fife are pulling out all the stops to tackle delayed discharges and to put in place and implement timely social care packages. Will the cabinet secretary provide reassurance to my Cowdenbeath constituents that he is satisfied that the senior management teams at Fife Council and NHS Fife are straining every sinew and using all the resources at their disposal to deal with winter pressures? Will he confirm that additional help will be made available if necessary?

Humza Yousaf: Yes, I give Ms Ewing's constituents that reassurance. I have already met Fife Council on a number of occasions and will, as I mentioned, meet it again on 15 December.

We are providing £300 million as part of our winter package. I have said to Fife Council, NHS Fife and the health and social care partnership that, if they require further resource, I will consider that with an open mind. I am reassured that they are working collaboratively, but I will continue to push them to go even further, because Ms Ewing is right: we already face significant winter pressures that might become even more significant in the weeks and months ahead.

I will continue to keep Ms Ewing updated on those discussions.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes general questions.

First Minister's Question Time

12:00

Vaccination Booster Programme

1. Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands)

(Con): A year ago today, the United Kingdom became one of the first countries anywhere in the world to approve a Covid vaccine. Since then, 10 million jags have been delivered to people across Scotland. I thank all the front-line staff, the armed forces and the volunteers who have made that happen. *[Applause.]*

At this critical moment, we need to continue the success of the vaccine programme to tackle the new variant. Earlier this week, the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation updated its guidance, which means that people can get their booster jag three months, rather than six months, after their second jag.

However, last night, it emerged that people who are now eligible for the vaccine were being turned away. How is that situation allowed to happen? Has the issue now been resolved, so that no one else is refused a vaccine to which they are entitled?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I take the opportunity again to thank vaccinators and vaccination teams across the country. Scotland currently has the fastest vaccination programme anywhere in the UK on the first, second and third doses and, crucially, on booster doses. That is a credit not to the Government but to those who work so hard in every corner of the country every single day.

The Government has a heavy responsibility in ensuring that the pace of the programme does not just continue, but accelerates. As I said on Tuesday, we are focused on that happening.

Let me explain yesterday's issue. I apologise to anyone who was turned away from a vaccine clinic yesterday. When advice changes, as the JCVI's advice did on Monday, there is a process of updating protocols and materials to ensure that everything is done in line with clinical protocol, because vaccination is a clinical procedure.

In the normal course of events, that process would take around a week. However, the process has now happened already. We have taken steps to ensure that the information has been cascaded down to vaccination clinics everywhere across Scotland. It is important that people who had that experience yesterday—I stress that it was a small number of people—go to the website and re-book their appointment now, if they are over that three-month period.

The vaccination programme continues to go well. As I said candidly many times, there might be glitches in the system, such as that which we saw yesterday, particularly when advice changes quickly. We try to avoid that happening, but we take steps to rectify matters as quickly as possible when those glitches happen.

I saw on social media this morning that a prominent journalist was narrating exactly the same experience at a vaccine clinic in England. We are all dealing with those issues now, but we are ensuring that we are working hard to continue the excellent progress of the vaccination programme.

I remind people that Scotland currently has the fastest vaccination programme anywhere in the UK.

Douglas Ross: The First Minister had time to check Twitter to see what was happening in England instead of trying to solve the problem in Scotland. Although her apology is welcome, her back benchers are shouting that the problem is solved, and she and the Deputy First Minister are going along the same lines and saying that that was only an issue yesterday. However, this Thursday morning, we are still hearing of people turning up to get the vaccine that they had booked and being turned away despite having an appointment.

We have looked at the latest available updates from all health boards, because the First Minister confirmed that the advice had been cascaded to all clinics. The situation was evolving as I came into the chamber. Five health boards seem to be implementing the guidance as of now, five say that they plan to implement the new guidance soon, and four health boards have yet to provide an update.

The First Minister has just said that the issue has been resolved. As of this moment, it does not look that way, does it?

The First Minister: With regard to the comment about the issue being resolved, the chief medical officer for Scotland issued the guidance yesterday. All health boards have that guidance and are expected to implement it. My advice is that people who are eligible for a booster vaccination under the new JCVI advice should book it, and health boards will implement the new guidance.

I repeat, not to make an excuse but as an important point of context, that vaccination—the most vital thing that we are doing right now—is a clinical process and procedure. It has to be backed up by protocols. When advice changes, those protocols have to change, which is a process that normally takes a lot longer than this. Rightly and properly, it is being done more quickly because of the urgency of the vaccination

programme. That is a process that health boards are now implementing to ensure that they are giving effect to the changed guidance.

I absolutely accept that, for anybody who finds themselves in this position—again, it is a small number of people—the situation is really frustrating. I am sorry that they are having this experience. I ask them to go ahead and re-book. They will be vaccinated in line with the new advice.

This is the biggest vaccination programme that has ever been undertaken—that is true of not only Scotland but every country that is administering these vaccines. It is being administered alongside the flu vaccination programme, and it is an enormous logistical exercise. I have never stood here and said that every single aspect of the programme will go absolutely smoothly all the time. When problems arise, we rectify them quickly.

I make no apology for, yet again, taking a step back—and asking other people to step back—from all this to recognise the enormous achievement that the vaccination programme represents. I do not say that to get credit for the Government; the credit belongs 100 per cent to the people who have designed the programme and those who are delivering it, as we speak, in every part of Scotland. It is the fastest vaccination programme in the UK, with 27,000 lives already saved in Scotland, according to a World Health Organization study. It is a success story, and I take very seriously my responsibility to ensure that it continues to be a success story so that we get as many people vaccinated with boosters as far and as fast as possible. That is an obligation and a duty that this Government takes seriously every day.

Douglas Ross: Let us look at how seriously the Government has taken the issue. How it has unfolded is because communication from the First Minister's Government has been a mess.

Members: Oh!

Douglas Ross: Well, Scottish National Party members do not like it, but let us go through it.

On Monday, the chief medical officer told everyone who is eligible to

“book an appointment and get vaccinated as soon as possible.”

On Tuesday, in response to people on Twitter who were asking what would happen if they turned up for a booster, the national clinical director said, “You’ll get it.”

Also on Tuesday, the First Minister came to the Parliament, stood at her podium and called on the public to schedule booster appointments based on

the new three-month timescale. She now speaks about clinical processes and procedures, but her words at the time were:

“I say to everyone who is in a similar position to me: try now to bring forward your booster appointment.”—[*Official Report*, 30 November 2021; c 24.]

That was on Tuesday, yet we know that the proper procedures had not been put in place, so people ended up being turned away. It should surely all have been sorted before the First Minister told people to make their appointments.

The First Minister: The advice that we gave is the advice, and it is the advice that I give again today. I understand that that is no comfort to each and every one of the small number of people who were affected, which is why I am saying that I am sorry that they had that experience. A small number—a minority—of people, in the time when the protocols and guidance were being updated, were wrongly turned away from clinics. However, many people—I know some of those people personally—got their vaccinations over the past couple of days, within the updated guidance.

This is one of those situations, in a massive programme, in which the advice changed very quickly and substantially and in which—yes, I concede—a small number of people had an experience that they should not have had. We are rectifying that—it is being rectified—and the advice remains that, if people are eligible for their vaccination within the new guidance, they should go online and book their appointment. The guidance has been updated and people will be vaccinated. That is the position.

It is also the position that the success of the programme cannot be denied. We have vaccinated with booster vaccinations—this is yesterday's figure—more than 35 per cent of the over-12 population, which is ahead of England, Wales and Northern Ireland. We are not complacent about that and we are not resting on our laurels. The vaccination programme is a success because of the people who, right now, around the country, are working so hard.

Douglas Ross and any other member is right to raise issues when things go wrong or do not go as right as we want them to. However, some of the language that I have heard applied to the vaccination programme over the past 24 hours does a disservice to the people who are working hard every day to get jags into people's arms. Let us not lose sight of the success that those people are delivering for us all right now in the fight against Covid.

Douglas Ross: I can tell that the First Minister is struggling with her answers when she accepts that the question is correct. I am delighted that my questions seem appropriate to the First Minister.

What we have heard in every single one of her answers is that she stood here on Tuesday and told people to book a vaccination booster appointment now, but it is clear that at that point the First Minister and her Government had not done the groundwork with health boards prior to her announcement. That led to confusion when the public needed clarity so that we could accelerate the booster roll-out.

Yesterday, a spokesperson for the Scottish Government insisted that

“we will confirm our approach to deployment very soon.”

We should have a detailed plan right now. That could have stopped this mess from happening.

The Scottish National Party Government needs to show the same urgency in rolling out the booster vaccinations as was the case in delivering the first and second doses. There is a backlog of close to 2 million people across Scotland who are waiting for their jags.

The Minister for Mental Wellbeing and Social Care (Kevin Stewart): Away!

Douglas Ross: I do not know why SNP members do not want to hear that—it is happening in all our constituencies. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Excuse me, Mr Ross. Can we afford members the courtesy of listening to their questions and responses carefully?

Douglas Ross: The sight of SNP MSPs laughing and shouting down comments from all our constituents is very telling, because there is a backlog of close to 2 million people in Scotland who are waiting to get their jag. We have been calling for the reopening of mass vaccination centres, if not at the scale of the P&J Live or the Hydro, at least of major clinics in town halls and buildings across Scotland. It is surely about time for the First Minister and her Government to back our calls so that we can roll out booster vaccinations as quickly as possible and guarantee that no one else gets turned away from having those vital jags.

The First Minister: I have set out the reasons why a small number of people got turned away, and the action to update the guidance that has been taken was in the process of being taken, not just in Scotland but in other parts of the United Kingdom. The fact is—Douglas Ross can check this in the public record—that the vast majority of people who got their booster vaccination over the past three days got it within that updated guidance.

I readily accept how important it is that we keep and pick up the pace of the vaccination programme. That is why the health secretary speaks to health boards on a daily basis right now;

many of them are putting on extra clinics already and there are large-scale vaccination clinics in many parts of the country.

Douglas Ross seems to think that we are getting this somehow terribly and uniquely wrong. Let me share this with people: we are all trying to work through the numbers of people who are eligible for vaccination as quickly as possible and as soon as possible after the JCVI gives us its advice. Many people were already eligible by the time that the JCVI gave us its original advice. Let me set this out for the public—this is publicly available information. In relation to first doses, 90.9 per cent of the over-12 population in Scotland are vaccinated. In England, 88.5 per cent of that group are vaccinated. In relation to second doses, 82.6 per cent of that group in Scotland are vaccinated and in England, 80.4 per cent are vaccinated. In relation to boosters, 36 per cent of the over-12 population in Scotland are vaccinated and in England 32.2 per cent are vaccinated.

Are we going as fast as we need to go? We need to pick up the pace further, but is the approach that we are taking in Scotland the most successful anywhere in the UK? Yes. Therefore, is it not about time that Douglas Ross, if he will not give the Government credit—I am not asking him to—gave the vaccinators who are working so hard right across the country the credit that they deserve, not just in rhetoric but in reality?

Queen Elizabeth University Hospital

2. **Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab):** Yesterday, Kimberly Darroch, who lost her daughter Milly four years ago, and Louise Slorance, who lost her husband Andrew a year ago, said that “enough is enough” and that the Government needs to decide whose side it is on—the side of patients, families and staff or the side of a failed health board leadership. Shamefully, the Government chose the wrong side.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): It is not a game.

Anas Sarwar: Exactly—it is not a game, Mr Gray.

Whenever there is a serious infection, an urgent alert is sent to the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care. It is called a HIIAT red warning. In the closing seconds of his speech in yesterday’s debate, the health secretary said that he had received three HIIAT red notices from the Queen Elizabeth university hospital since becoming health secretary. After weeks of such questions being asked, can the First Minister tell us what infections those three red warnings were for, what date they were received and what action the Government took?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I will come back to that; I can certainly provide information on that. First, however, I want to address a number of issues. I apologise if I take a bit of time with this answer, because those issues are really important to patients and their families across the country. I absolutely understand the questions that Kimberly Darroch and Louise Slorance have and their determination to get answers. I want to get them the answers to their questions. If I was in their position, I would be doing the same, as the family member of somebody who had lost their life.

Anas Sarwar has raised a number of concerns about the Queen Elizabeth university hospital. I want to briefly go through those and, in the process of doing that, I will answer the question that he has asked.

First, on the suggestion that the hospital is somehow unsafe and that there is a higher risk of infection there than anywhere else, evidence does not bear that out. Whether that evidence is hospital standardised mortality ratios or published reporting of hospital-acquired infection, the Queen Elizabeth performs better than the national average and better than many other hospitals. In addition—this is an important point—Scotland as a whole has a lower prevalence of HAI than the European average.

Secondly, the suggestion that there is a systemic problem at the Queen Elizabeth that is causing infections has always been taken seriously. That is why the independent review was commissioned; it is why the case note review was commissioned; it is why the oversight board was established; and it is why there is now a public inquiry and, of course, criminal investigations into some of the cases in question. Anas Sarwar derides all that as process, but much of it is process that he demanded. More important, all that process has led to improvements on the ground.

We take all this seriously, but the very difficult fact is that, despite best efforts to minimise the risk, no hospital anywhere in the world can eradicate completely the risk of infection in very sick patients.

I cannot go into the detail of individual cases, but after last week's First Minister's question time, I asked NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde to do an internal review. It has advised me that, based on the work that it has done so far, there is no child who had Aspergillus noted on their death certificate as a direct or contributory cause of death. We are not resting on that. Healthcare Improvement Scotland has been asked to carry out a wider review.

On the issue of the HIIAT assessments, it is important to recognise what those signify. I think that, last week, Anas Sarwar gave the impression that, when one of those notices comes to Government, that signifies a death in a hospital. In fact, it signifies two or more cases of infection that are linked in some way. Red and amber ones come to Government. From 25 November last year to 1 December this year, two red and one amber one came to the Government from the adult Queen Elizabeth hospital. The dates of those were 12 January this year, 7 May this year and 23 June this year. I do not have the information on what infections were involved, but I can get that and provide it.

The point that I want to end on goes to my first point about the suggestion that the Queen Elizabeth is somehow an unsafe hospital. In the same timeframe as those three alerts were made in relation to the Queen Elizabeth, 45 were notified across Scotland as a whole. I will give some context around that. The Queen Elizabeth represents more than 11 per cent of all adult acute beds in Scotland, but less than 7 per cent of the HIIAT notifications.

We take all these concerns very seriously, but it is also important that politicians do not come to the chamber and try to erode confidence in the quality of care that is provided by dedicated clinicians in the Queen Elizabeth hospital every single day.

Anas Sarwar: It is worth noting that, yesterday, we had a debate in the Parliament in which the health secretary had the opportunity to bring those facts to the Parliament but did not. The First Minister did not bother turning up for the debate and did not even bother voting on the motion for the debate.

It is also important to note that, although we are talking about processes, we are looking for the accountability and responsibility that come with those processes. To this day, not a single person has been held accountable.

I am pleased that the First Minister referred to the need for the HIIAT warning not to be about deaths but, crucially, to be about infections.

The First Minister: It always has been.

Anas Sarwar: I agree with the First Minister, but she needs to understand what is happening in that health board. The First Minister is either not being told the truth, or she is hiding the truth. I prefer to believe the first. I think that the health board is not telling the First Minister the truth. That is really serious. Jeane Freeman recognised that during the previous parliamentary session. We are talking about infections, not deaths. When those infections happen, they should be notified so that the Government can take the necessary action.

Let me give an example. While the First Minister hides behind process, and behind a public inquiry that could take three more years, patients are still getting infections and lives are still being lost. In the Parliament, I have talked about cases of *Aspergillus* and *Stenotrophomonas*. Those cases should trigger HIIAT red warnings.

Yesterday, I spoke to a mother who recently and tragically lost her six-month-old baby. The child was in the intensive care unit at the children's hospital on the Queen Elizabeth university hospital campus. The mother showed me the death certificate. Listed as a cause of death was *Serratia*, another deadly bacterium linked to water and to the hospital environment. What the First Minister has said indicates that that death did not trigger a HIIAT warning. *Serratia* is a deadly bacterium linked to water and the hospital environment. That mother asked me to raise her case today. In her words:

"I have no confidence in this health board. I have no confidence that action will be taken. It is inevitable it will happen again and other patients will be affected."

Another child has died and another family is grieving. What will it take before action is taken?

The First Minister: I will make three points and will make them very genuinely because they are such important issues. My deepest condolences are with the mother whom Anas Sarwar referred to.

Let me be clear. The HIIAT system is about the Government being alerted to cases of infection. When the system is not triggered, that does not mean that no action is taken on individual cases of infection. The reason why the HIIAT system triggers an alert to Government on the basis of two or more linked infections is because that is indicative not of individual and isolated cases of infection but of a potential infection outbreak that should trigger a higher level of response.

I come back to isolated cases of infection. I find this difficult to say because it is such a hard fact, particularly for the parent or relative of someone who has died of an infection, or of someone who has got an infection in hospital, even if that did not contribute to the person's death. I know what that feels like. Many years ago, my grandmother got an infection in hospital before her death. The reality for every hospital across the world is that, despite the best efforts and the highest quality of care, it is not possible to prevent every case of infection in very sick patients with compromised immune systems. That is why the HIIAT system is in place. Of course, we review such systems all the time.

Secondly, I will talk about process. I am not hiding behind anything and I am certainly not hiding behind process. The processes that are in place are important. I repeat the point that I made

earlier. Anas Sarwar called for many of those processes, including the public inquiry. We are not waiting for that to conclude before we do anything. Look at the recommendations of the independent review of the fabric and maintenance of the hospital, which was commissioned by the Government, or at the recommendations from the oversight board. In the first case, 98 per cent of those recommendations have been implemented, in the second 88 per cent. There has been significant investment in specialist ventilation and water systems in the affected wards. Action is being taken all the time.

I come back to the point that I made earlier. Every case of infection is serious. When we look at all the evidence, the Queen Elizabeth has a lower incidence of infection than many other hospitals, although it is a big hospital providing specialist care.

I know that I am taking time on this, but it is so important. Lastly, there has been a suggestion of a cover-up. That issue was raised and addressed in the letter that 23 senior clinicians wrote yesterday.

I know from my experience as health secretary, from my experience as First Minister and from my experience as a citizen and, at times, a user of the health service how seriously clinicians take their duty of candour and honesty to patients. The Government takes that so seriously that we changed the law to make the duty of candour a legal obligation. I have confidence in clinicians.

If the allegation is, as it appears to be, that health boards, or in this case the Greater Glasgow and Clyde health board is pressurising, bullying or telling clinicians not to be honest with patients, then my message—not to Anas Sarwar, but directly to every clinician across greater Glasgow and Clyde and across the country—is that, if they feel that they are in that position, they should raise that in any way that they see fit and they should come to me directly, because that is not and would not be acceptable.

These are serious issues. Let us treat them seriously, as this Government does, but let us not erode confidence in a hospital that is providing a high quality of care. Sending out photographs of mould without saying that they are from four and two years ago, that it has been rectified or that the report that included those photographs in the first instance made it clear that patient care was not affected—that is what Anas Sarwar did yesterday. I think that that crosses the line from raising legitimate issues to trying to undermine confidence in a hospital and in hard-working clinicians.

Anas Sarwar: I listened to what the First Minister said and I will address a couple of those points, but first I say that she should listen to the words of Dr Christine Peters, who was one of the

whistleblowers at the start of this crisis. What did Dr Christine Peters say? “Do not gaslight” the entire staff base of the Queen Elizabeth university hospital in order to protect the jobs of a few at the top. No one is questioning the confidence in the front-line staff. What we are questioning is the confidence in the leadership of the board. This fight is as much about the staff as it is about the families and the patients.

I accept that we cannot stop every single hospital-acquired infection, but what we know has happened at the Queen Elizabeth university hospital shows that a grip needs to be taken on the situation. If it were me, I would be saying to the health board, “Every single time there is a serious infection, I want to know about it so that we can make sure that we are taking the necessary action and we do not make the same mistakes again.” I would not be trying to hide behind some process, which is exactly what is happening in this case. Why is the First Minister not getting a grip on the health board, so that we know every single time there is a serious infection related to the water and the hospital environment and action can be taken? The problem here is not those who are asking the difficult questions, but those who are making the wrong decisions.

The First Minister says that moving the health board into stage 5 would be a step too far, but in 2018 she escalated NHS Tayside into emergency measures. She sacked the chief executive and the chair, and that was for financial mismanagement. In greater Glasgow and Clyde, children have died and are still dying, yet not a single person has been held accountable.

No more hiding behind process. No more blaming of staff. No more waiting for the findings of a public inquiry in the distant future. Families cannot wait that long. The First Minister made the wrong choice yesterday, and we have heard today that there are still patients dying in the hospital after contracting infections. I shared a new case today.

For the sake of the staff working tirelessly to save lives, for the sake of the families who have lost loved ones, for the sake of patients in Glasgow and across Scotland and for the sake of all those who have had to share their heartbreaking stories, will the First Minister please listen, act and do the right thing?

The First Minister: I will try to cover all the points that were raised there under three broad headings, as briefly as possible. I am probably betraying my age here, but I am never entirely sure what gaslighting exactly means in practice. However, I am not blaming staff. Nobody is blaming staff. The letter that was written to me and the health secretary yesterday was from clinicians and clinical voices—the head of medicine, medical

directors and people who are part of the clinical community.

The point is this—and this is not blaming staff; this is recognising a reality. When individual patients or their families are communicated with, it is not a health board that communicates with them; it is clinicians. I have the utmost confidence in the way in which clinicians do that and the seriousness with which they take the duty of candour and honesty to patients. The point that I am making, though, is that if any clinician considers that they are being pressurised into doing something different, bullied into doing something different or told to do something different, they should not hesitate to bring that directly to me or to the health secretary. We will not tolerate that.

The second point is about hiding behind process. Anas Sarwar called for the public inquiry and it is right and proper that that happened. There is a criminal investigation on-going into certain cases. The independent review and the oversight board were important pieces of process that led to many recommendations that have been implemented and to real investment in the water and ventilation systems at the hospital.

I come back to this point, which will lead me into my last point. In saying this, I am not minimising the seriousness of every infection, but the Queen Elizabeth hospital, in published statistics on infection and standardised mortality data, actually performs better than the national average. That shows that some of the actions that are being taken are working. Clinicians in that hospital deliver a high quality of care across a very complex range of treatments.

That takes me to my final point, which is on the “sack the board” cry. This is really serious—

Anas Sarwar: There is a criminal investigation.

The First Minister: There is a criminal investigation under way. [*Interruption.*]

Presiding Officer, Anas Sarwar is, from a sedentary position, asking me who has behaved criminally. That is what a criminal investigation is intended to find out: whether anybody has behaved criminally and, if so, who and in what way. That is a really irresponsible thing to shout across the chamber.

The final point is this. If I thought for a minute that simply removing the health board would change anything on the ground in the Queen Elizabeth, or that the health board was the problem and that improvements were not being made because they were being blocked by the health board, I would remove it without hesitation. However, removing a health board, given everything that I have said about the work that is

being done, in the middle of a pandemic and a vaccination programme, would not be the responsible thing to do. The responsible thing for Government to do is to work with the health board to continue to make the improvements and continue to ensure that in the Queen Elizabeth hospital, and in every hospital across the country, high-quality care is provided. That is what we do every day.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Before we move on to supplementary questions, I wish to make members aware that First Minister's question time will continue until 12:55 approximately.

Ardrossan to Brodick Ferry Services

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): The Ardrossan to Brodick ferry regularly has to berth overnight at Brodick due to the poor state of the Ardrossan harbour fenders, which leads to the cancellation of the 7 am service to Arran—a sailing that carries goods, workers and contractors to the islands. The next sailing arrives in Brodick at 10.40 am, which has an impact on the working day. Basic maintenance has been neglected by Peel Ports Group—a company that was privatised by a previous Tory Government and which has raked in millions of pounds in passenger fees over the years. Does the First Minister agree that some of those fees should be retained by CalMac Ferries until such time as the fenders are repaired or replaced?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Payment of berthing dues is a matter between the ferry operator, CalMac Ferries, and the statutory harbour authority. It is the responsibility of the harbour authority to ensure that harbours are well maintained and fit for purpose.

We are investing heavily in ports and vessels to support and improve ferry services, as part of the wider infrastructure investment plan that we have outlined. I will ask the Minister for Transport to write to Kenny Gibson with more detail about those investments and the work that we and Transport Scotland are doing with stakeholders, including Peel Ports Group, North Ayrshire Council and the Arran ferry group, to improve services and infrastructure specifically on the Arran route.

Storm Arwen (Impact on Scottish Borders)

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): Nicola Sturgeon is the First Minister for Scotland, which includes responsibility for the Scottish Borders, not just the central belt. Outrageously, it took until Tuesday this week for the First Minister to acknowledge on Twitter the devastation that had been caused by storm Arwen. The First Minister must not think it acceptable that a frail and vulnerable 87-year-old

constituent of mine has had to sleep in front the fire—a coal fire—in a chair, without power or heat this week.

We all know that energy companies have serious questions to answer, but surely the First Minister must agree that the Scottish Government has a responsibility to act quickly in such life-threatening situations.

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Yes, I do. The Scottish Government has been heavily engaged in the matter all week. The Scottish Government resilience committee has met on several occasions; I chaired the most recent of those meetings just yesterday. There have been extensive discussions daily—several times a day—with the power companies.

I take this opportunity to express my sympathies to everybody who has been impacted by storm Arwen. The storm was almost unprecedented—it is certainly unprecedented in recent memory—in its severity. Its impact has been extreme. Many thousands of people have suffered very difficult experiences as a result, and some are still suffering.

I turn to power connection issues. At the start, more than 200,000 customers were off supply. As of this morning—it is a moving picture, obviously—around 3,300 are still not reconnected. The power companies are working intensively on that, and the estimate is that it might take until the end of this week to get absolutely everybody back on the power supply. A lot of welfare support is being provided and, again, the Government is working with resilience partnerships to ensure that that is happening as it should.

This has been a really difficult time. There are lessons for all of us to learn. The Scottish Government will lead, through our resilience arrangements, a lessons-learned exercise, once the impact has been addressed. One of the lessons is around communication.

I know that the power companies have been working extensively and intensively to get people reconnected. The damage has been extreme, but there are lessons that everybody can learn, and we will certainly ensure that that happens—once, of course, everybody is back on power and the immediate impacts have been addressed.

Anne's Law

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): For all of us who have lost a loved one in a care home during the pandemic, Anne's law will come too late. It will also come too late for my constituent, Anne Duke, who was the inspiration behind the campaign. Loneliness and isolation continue to impact on the quality of life of many care home

residents, despite the open with care policy on visiting. Can the First Minister reassure people that the Anne's law consultation report is still on track to be published this month? When will the Government deliver its promise on Anne's law?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): We are absolutely committed to introducing Anne's law. The public consultation closed on 5 November. Officials are currently working through the responses to consider the impact that they might have on how we go about implementing Anne's law. It is important that we consider properly the views of the public, but we intend to publish the responses in the coming weeks and to take forward our plans for implementation as soon as possible.

Loneliness and isolation have been particular issues for many people over the course of the pandemic—in particular, for those in care homes. We continue to support a range of initiatives to help to address loneliness and isolation but, of course, we can all help to reduce the impact of Covid by following all the protections that are in place so that we can continue to keep the pandemic under control and therefore support the increasing return to normal life that, in itself, will go a long way towards addressing the root causes of the loneliness and isolation that people have suffered.

Cabinet (Meetings)

3. Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): To ask the First Minister when the Cabinet will next meet. (S6F-00528)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): On Tuesday.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: This morning, the Office for National Statistics published figures to show that 99,000 Scots now suffer from long Covid. I asked the First Minister about that topic at the start of October. Eight weeks and 20,000 new patients later, we are still nowhere.

Where are the long Covid clinics? Where are the community nurses for delivering support in the homes of sufferers? Where is the financial guidance and certainty for employees—including some in the Scottish Government—who just do not know what they are going to be paid at the end of each month?

Long Covid sufferers need new hope. I said as much to the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Economy yesterday, in negotiations on the budget.

Does the First Minister recognise the plight of long Covid sufferers? Does she recognise that her Government's response has so far been unequal to the challenge, and will she meet that challenge

with a significant and substantial response in next week's budget?

The First Minister: I absolutely recognise the plight of those who are suffering from long Covid. It is a dreadful and often complex condition, and clinicians and scientists are still working to understand exactly how it impacts on people.

I do not accept that our response has not been equal to the scale of the challenge. However, I absolutely accept that our response and the response of all Governments will have to scale up and adapt considerably as we learn more about long Covid. We have already published an approach paper, which set out 16 commitments to improving care and support for people with long Covid in Scotland. That is important. Those commitments are already backed by a £10 million long Covid support fund, so the financial commitment already exists.

I fully expect that there will be a requirement for additional financial support not just in this budget but perhaps for years to come, as we continue to understand and respond to long Covid. I cannot, and I am not going to, pre-empt the budget next week, but it will include a significant increase in funding for the national health service. As one of the many obligations on the shoulders of the national health service, responding to the needs of people with long Covid is important.

British Sign Language (National Plan)

4. Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): To ask the First Minister whether she will provide an update on the advances that the Scottish Government has made in relation to the British Sign Language national plan. (S6F-00525)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): On 27 October, the Scottish Government published its "British Sign Language (BSL): Progress Report 2021", which outlines the progress that is being made towards implementing the BSL national plan. It outlines progress on a range of fronts including education, BSL English interpreting and public life.

The report outlines how the Scottish Government has funded BSL partnership organisations to engage with and support public bodies with their plans and notes important developments, including the decision that our next census will, for the first time, ask, "Can you use BSL?"

Significant progress has been made towards making the country more inclusive and supportive of BSL users. The language enjoys a higher profile than ever before in our public life, and it is ever more visible in media and communications. That is a really important development.

Karen Adam: Tomorrow is the international day of persons with disabilities. There have been tremendous strides taken in improving deaf and BSL visibility since the British Sign Language (Scotland) Act was passed in 2015. I have even had feedback from the British Deaf Association saying that many people across the United Kingdom were tuning into the Scottish Government's Covid briefings because the UK Government did not provide an interpreter service.

I am sure that we were all moved by the recent powerful performance on "Strictly Come Dancing", when Rose Ayling-Ellis was dancing and the music stopped. It was an incredibly poignant moment, but we still have more to do to open the doors to the deaf community. Can the First Minister give an indication of what work is being done on the BSL national plan to ensure that the very welcome increase in demand for BSL training and education is met?

The First Minister: I recognise that tomorrow is the international day for persons with disabilities. It is an important reminder of our obligations to people who are living with disabilities to ensure that we make our countries and our societies as inclusive as possible.

It is fair to say, and I take the opportunity to say it today, that Karen Adam herself is a shining example of somebody who uses her public platform to raise the profile of BSL. I pay tribute to her for doing that. *[Applause.]*

These things matter, and the really moving moment on "Strictly Come Dancing" a couple of weeks ago, when Rose Ayling-Ellis took the opportunity to use that platform to raise awareness, will live in people's memories for a long time.

I also take the opportunity to thank publicly the BSL interpreters who have helped me to communicate with the country during the Covid pandemic. We owe them a huge debt of gratitude for ensuring that our public messages have reached as many people as possible.

On the specific question, I note that we are working to expand opportunities around education and are updating guidance on the appropriate qualifications, including the BSL qualification, for teachers of children and young people who have sensory impairments. Through the inclusion of BSL in the one-plus-two languages policy, there are now more opportunities to learn BSL. The Government, through the Scottish Funding Council, is continuing to invest in BSL education and training in higher education.

Antidepressants (Use in Children)

5. Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish

Government's response is to reports that the use of antidepressant medication among children has increased by more than 80 per cent over the last 10 years. (S6F-00538)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): We are committed to ensuring that all children and young people can access the right support for their mental health without stigma, including medication when that is clinically considered to be the most appropriate intervention. The numbers of children and young people who are being prescribed antidepressant medication are low. Public Health Scotland data show that, in the zero-to-19 age category, 1.8 per cent of children and young people were prescribed medication.

Medication will be one aspect of treatment, alongside psychological therapy or other therapeutic interventions, but it is not the only treatment option for children and young people who require support. We continue to improve access and invest in other services, including by providing funding to ensure that every secondary school in Scotland has access to counselling and funding for community-based mental health and wellbeing services as part of our focus on early intervention and prevention.

Tess White: Infants under the age of four are being prescribed antidepressants, and the number of 5 to 14-year-olds on antidepressant medication has risen massively in recent years. Those are alarming statistics. It is a hidden mental health pandemic. We know that early intervention and prevention are key. What action is the Scottish Government taking to extend community-based mental health services for children and young people, to support youth work services and to ensure that there is an adequate pipeline of qualified counsellors for schools?

The First Minister: Those are really important issues and we should all treat them really seriously—as I know the member does. I am sure that the member will agree with this important point: prescribing—in this or in any instance—is a clinical decision. It is important that prescribing decisions are taken by clinicians on the basis of their judgment of what is in the interests of the patient. When it comes to the prescribing of antidepressants, whether for children or adults, it is really important that we do not talk about it in a way that stigmatises the use of antidepressants. *[Applause.]*

For some people, that will be the correct intervention, even if only for a period of time. We must remember that when we have these discussions.

Behind Tess White's question lies an important and legitimate concern: we must not have a situation in which people are being prescribed

antidepressants because there is a lack of more appropriate alternatives. That is a very serious responsibility on the Government. That is why, in the work that I referred to in my earlier answer, we are trying to shift the focus on child and adolescent mental health much more to an early intervention space. That is why we are investing in counsellors in schools and in early intervention in mental health and wellbeing services in communities, so that there are alternatives and so that, when someone is prescribed antidepressants, it is genuinely because that is the right intervention for them at that time.

National Outcome on Care

6. Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government’s response is to the report, *Towards a Scotland that cares: a new National Outcome on care for the National Performance Framework*, by the University of the West of Scotland, which is supported by Oxfam Scotland, Carers Scotland, Scottish Care, the Scottish Women’s Budget Group and One Parent Families Scotland. (S6F-00531)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): It is a timely report and we will consider it fully. The views of carers will be heard as part of the next review of the national performance framework, which is due to start next year. We are committed to creating a national care service to increase the quality of care and to improve fair work in social care. We are currently improving pay and terms and conditions for social care workers.

Carers make a highly significant and valuable contribution to our society and the wellbeing of the country. That is why, for example, we introduced the carers allowance supplement, which provides more than £230 twice a year to each carer on top of carers allowance, to support around 91,000 unpaid carers. We provided an additional payment last year and we will do so again this month. We are also providing an additional £28.5 million for local carers support in this financial year.

I take the opportunity to put on record my thanks to carers all over the country. I recognise that this pandemic period has made what they already do and have to deal with even more difficult.

Paul O’Kane: The past 20 months of the pandemic have highlighted the vital importance of all forms of care, whether paid or unpaid. However, those who look after someone—overwhelmingly, carers are women—remain undervalued and unrewarded, and many are living in poverty as a result. Does the First Minister agree that we must now make a long-lasting and deep commitment to change by locking in a new national outcome that is focused on better valuing and investing in all forms of care and monitoring

progress? That would give a real focus to showing how much we value care and carers across Scotland.

The First Minister: Before I address the national performance framework, I should say that I agree that the pandemic has taught us lots of things—in particular, the importance of care and the need to value all those who provide care across the country, whether on a paid or an unpaid basis.

Paul O’Kane makes a very reasonable point in relation to the national performance framework. The framework will be reviewed next year, and we will have the opportunity to consider a specific national outcome on care within the context of that wider review. I add only that the national performance framework is intended to be a cross-cutting framework and it is important not to see anything that we capture in isolation—all the different things within that will impact on care.

It is also really important that we value those who provide care. The national care service and the work to establish it will be very important. We need to pay those who work in our social care service more and, even though we do more to support unpaid carers than probably any other Government in the UK, we still have more to do, not just financially but in terms of ensuring respite and wider support for unpaid carers, who do so much for their loved ones and for the health and wellbeing of the country, too.

Union Connectivity Review

7. Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government’s response is to the union connectivity review. (S6F-00526)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): We saw the “Union Connectivity Review: Final Report” only on Friday, when it was published, and we will, understandably, take some time to consider our response. To be perfectly honest, I do not think that there is much in the review for Scotland. Although we are very happy to discuss and consider what benefits there might be, there is an attempted power grab in it, to take decisions around priorities away from the Scottish ministers, with a suggestion of funding improvements on one route being dangled in front of us. If United Kingdom ministers really want to be helpful, why do they not just deliver the funding that is needed for infrastructure investment in line with the established budgetary mechanisms for Scotland, so that the democratically elected Scottish Parliament can determine our own spending priorities in line with the devolution settlement?

Graham Simpson: It is perfectly obvious from that answer that the First Minister has not read a

word of the review, because it does nothing that she has suggested that it does.

I was pleased to hear earlier from the Minister for Transport, who, unlike the First Minister, is prepared to have talks with the UK Government on the funding for the A75. That would be a good thing.

If the First Minister bothers to read the review, she will see that a theme throughout it is that both Governments should work together. On that note, it says:

“Both the UK and Scottish Governments have previously agreed to develop options which could support a rail journey time between London and Scotland of three hours.”

Both Governments were working on that, but we know that Transport Scotland officials were told to stop working on it. They were ordered to stop. Will the First Minister now allow them to restart that vital piece of work?

The First Minister: The latter allegation is just not the case, so I will not engage further on that.

I, too, heard the Minister for Transport, and I agree entirely with him. I said in my original answer that, of course, we will discuss with the UK Government how we can get benefit from the connectivity review. However, let us not forget that it is not that long ago that we were being told that the connectivity review was going to deliver a bridge from Scotland to Northern Ireland. That was the big, headline-grabbing commitment, but it seems to have simply gone by the wayside.

There is no specific commitment to funding on the A75, for example. We will discuss that, but a really important thing that we have to determine is that those so-called promises are delivered in practice, because we often find that the promises do not materialise. On another issue, it was, I think, put to the Deputy First Minister in the chamber earlier this week that the Prime Minister tweeted that the UK Government was ready to help the Scottish Government in our response to the storm damage. Yesterday, the Treasury confirmed to us that that did not actually involve any financial support. We often have to scratch below the surface.

The other thing that we need to check is that the funding is additional—that what the UK Government is giving us with one hand is not being taken away from us with the other hand. That very often turns out to be the case.

We will discuss those things, and I hope that we can come to a position in which there is mutual benefit to be had. However, I do not think that it should be controversial, in principle, to ask why we do not just do these things in line with the devolution settlement and the established funding mechanisms instead of having a UK Government

try to go over the head of the democratically elected Scottish Parliament for political reasons.

The Presiding Officer: We will return to supplementary questions.

Office for National Statistics Report

Siobhian Brown (Ayr) (SNP): A new report from the Office for National Statistics has shown that the Scottish economy has suffered a 6 per cent hit as a result of Brexit while Northern Ireland has prospered in the European Union single market. Does the First Minister agree that that report lays bare the fact that Scotland is paying an outrageous price for being ignored by the Tory United Kingdom Government as it imposes Brexit against our will and that Westminster control is a disaster for Scotland?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Yes, I do agree with that. I am not sure whether the Tories were laughing or groaning in despair while Siobhian Brown was asking that really important question, but they certainly made lots of noise, because they do not like the reality of that being pointed out to them.

Brexit has been a democratic insult and an offence to Scotland, because it has been imposed upon us against our will. We are now finding out—including through the study that Siobhian Brown has cited—that the economic impact of Brexit in Scotland is severe and is likely to become more severe. Actually, we are one of the worst-hit parts of the UK. Conversely, Northern Ireland, which is managing to stay within the European single market, is not suffering that damage. That tells us that having those things done to us is not just undemocratic but does us real damage. The sooner that we get all powers into the hands of this Parliament, through independence, the better, because we will no longer have to put up with things like Brexit.

Scottish Hospitals Inquiry (Evidence)

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): Evidence that has been given by bereaved parents to the Scottish hospitals public inquiry is now to be kept secret, following legal applications by the Scottish Government and Greater Glasgow and Clyde NHS Board. That is a hugely concerning development, and it risks undermining the confidence of the public inquiry.

The First Minister has already said that she will not tolerate cover-ups or secrecy from health boards. In this case, however, her own officials have acted to ensure that the evidence is heard in secret. Beyond the public inquiry, what steps will now be taken so that those allegations made by bereaved parents are fully investigated by Police Scotland?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Miles Briggs is just wrong in his characterisation of the matter. I suggest that anybody who wants to understand the reality here should read the decision of Lord Brodie in this case. The family have given their full evidence to the inquiry, so that information is all available to the inquiry. It is entirely for the police and the Crown Office to determine what information they need to access, in line with any criminal investigation.

The decision here, as has been made clear in the published legal note from Lord Brodie, was all about ensuring fairness for all those with an interest in the inquiry and ensuring that individuals who had no opportunity to challenge allegations were not put in the position of having those allegations made publicly.

Interestingly, the family's own counsel conceded that the applications were well merited, and they did not oppose those applications. Of course, Lord Brodie can decide at any point to overturn or reconsider that decision—that is entirely a matter for the judge—but the reasons for the restriction order are fully set out in his published legal note, and anybody who reads it will see clearly the reasons for it.

City of Glasgow College (Union Facility Time)

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): I have been contacted by constituents employed at the City of Glasgow College who are concerned about the college management's proposals to cut facility time for their union representatives by more than a third. That is despite a significant increase in the demand for the support that is provided by staff unions due to the pandemic.

I believe that the further education minister wrote to the college management about the issue a number of weeks ago, but they are still refusing to engage seriously with staff unions to discuss their proposal. Does the First Minister agree that it is essential that staff union representatives are given the time that they need to provide adequate support for their members?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Yes, I do—absolutely. My apologies, but I do not know all the detail relating to the City of Glasgow College case. However, if the further education minister has written to the college management, it is clearly something that he has already had involvement in. The management of colleges is for them—they are the employers of staff—but let me say unequivocally, as I have said many times before, that facility time for trade union officials is an important part of ensuring that trade unions can do their job of representing and standing up for their members. That is important for any employers, and it is a responsibility that the Scottish Government takes seriously as an

employer itself, ensuring that the facility time is there to enable union officials to do their jobs. I very much hope that the college will meet the trade unions and that the matter can be resolved satisfactorily.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes First Minister's question time.

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. We heard from the First Minister earlier that people will not be turned away from having vaccinations, but I have been contacted just now to be told that patients in Stirling are, indeed, being turned away. Will the First Minister please get a grip on the situation?

The Presiding Officer: Mr Gulhane, that is not a point of order, but your comment is on the record.

International Day of Persons with Disabilities

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-02225, in the name of Pam Duncan-Glancy, on international day of persons with disabilities. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament recognises that 3 December 2021 is the UN international day of disabled people, notes that this has taken place annually since 1992 to promote the rights and wellbeing of disabled people in all spheres of society and development and to increase awareness of the situation of disabled people in every aspect of political, social, economic and cultural life; acknowledges that not all disabilities are visible; notes the view that there is a need to highlight unseen impairments, such as mental ill health, chronic pain and fatigue and to promote inclusion in life and in the workplace; understands that one in five people in Scotland are disabled; acknowledges the view that disabled people's rights are human rights and that everyone must work together to promote, protect and fulfil these to support disabled people to realise their human rights, and celebrates the work of the disability movement and its allies in the campaigns that they have won, and are yet to win.

13:01

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): There are moments in all our lives when we feel the need to pinch ourselves, and today is one of those moments for me. Not only do I feel honoured and proud, as I always do, to be a disabled person and to celebrate disabled people and our organisations the world over, but I am incredibly proud and grateful to celebrate our collective fight from this chamber, having secured a members' business debate on international day of persons with disabilities, which is tomorrow.

It is an absolute privilege to open the debate. In my first speech to the Parliament, I paid tribute to the disability movement. Today, I will do so again and expand on that. The theme for this year's day is leadership and participation in a post-Covid world. I will dedicate my time today to the fights that the incredible disability movement, of which I am proud to be part, has led and won, and the fights that we are yet to win. It is because of the endless struggle—and, yes, the fight for representation—throughout the history of the movement that such days exist and that we are able to celebrate them and harness them to promote and improve the human rights of disabled people across the country and the world. However, as I am sure we all agree, disabled people's rights are human rights every day of the year. In this chamber, we owe it to those who have fought for their right to exist—not even to live—to fight for them, too, every day.

The past year has been tough for all of us, but for disabled people—who have had their rights and freedoms stifled and taken away by a system that fought against them, rather than one that enabled them to realise their rights—things were hard before Covid. They have lived in lockdown for years. Long before the pandemic, disabled people across Scotland had been living below the poverty line. They had their care packages—in effect, their lifeline—cut, and they were forced to drag themselves upstairs because there are not enough accessible homes. Covid has deepened that inequality and exacerbated those problems, as is clear to all of us across the chamber.

I have said this before from the Labour benches, but it is a point that must be reinforced. We cannot go back to that normal; we must go forward to a better Scotland for everyone who lives here. That must mean ensuring that disabled people are included on the journey to recovery. We cannot, and should not want to, get there without them, so we must have them at the heart of all that we do.

It has been said that, if you are not around the table, you are probably on the menu. When the going gets tough, we have only to look at what is first to go, and who loses out on the most, to see how true that is.

In the initial months of the pandemic, almost six in 10 Covid-related deaths were of disabled people. No statistic could highlight the deep inequality that disabled people face more than that one. However, sadly, there are more figures that highlight that inequality. In the midst of the toughest years of our lives, disabled people have had their care and support withdrawn overnight and their lifeline denied. Their families and loved ones have been left to pick up the pieces, and that has broken unpaid carers. Forty per cent of children who live in households where someone is disabled are living in poverty. In many cases, disability benefits do not scratch the surface of the additional costs that are associated with being a disabled person.

There remains a disability employment gap of 32.6 per cent, and progress to reduce that has been slow. Recent analysis by the Scottish Government has shown that the employment rate for disabled people fell by 5.7 per cent throughout 2020.

Further analysis by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that disabled people had reported a loss of earnings by the middle of 2020. As we begin to recover from the pandemic, one in four disabled people are worried about their health and safety at work, especially as workers begin to return to offices and public-facing roles.

We have to change—we all deserve better than that. That change starts by making sure that

disabled people are at the centre of our recovery. Disabled people are innovative by design; we have to be, just to get by. Let us make sure that disabled people are around the table, not just because it is the right thing to do but because—you never know—we might learn something.

Decisions about us must never be made without us, and I urge the Government to ensure that they never are. To do that, it has to actively involve disabled people. It has to go the extra mile to make sure that they are around the table, and that means resourcing disabled people's organisations.

Such organisations are way more than service providers—in fact, that is usually not the main thing that they do. They advocate and speak truth to power for a better world. They develop policy, build capacity, support, lead, listen, deliver and fight. They have given me and thousands of other disabled people so much. It is not an overestimation to say that they changed my life.

It was because of disabled people and the collective action and solidarity of our organisations, the Labour Party and the labour movement that I realised that the inequality that I experienced was not my fault. I was not broken or wrong—society was. The inequality that I and other disabled people have experienced is the consequence of structural, systemic oppression. It was because of disabled people and our organisations that we have risen up and demanded our rights and our emancipation. Disabled people's organisations are life changing for disabled people—they are a lifeline for our families and are pure gold for Governments that want to improve the lives of disabled people, because—I promise—they can tell us how to do so.

None of us knows what the future holds, but we know that inequality cannot be an option and that we can conquer it only by working together with disabled people and their organisations. They have told us for a long time what that future should look like for them: a Scotland where social care meets our human rights and our workers rights, where charges for such care are gone, and where social care workers get £15 an hour; a Scotland where equality and human rights are enshrined in law and delivered in practice, including through the full incorporation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; and a Scotland with a social security system that is there for people in and out of work, that guarantees a minimum income and, crucially, that does so while properly taking account of the varying conditions that disabled people live with and the costs that they incur.

Colleagues, if we do those things, we will begin to scratch the surface of tackling the systemic, sustained and ingrained inequalities that disabled

people face. That is the new normal that we, in this chamber, must seek and deliver.

This week, in the run-up to the international day of people with disabilities, I want to end with a message to disabled people across Scotland: I promise that, for as long as I am in this place, your fight will be my fight, and there will be nothing about us without us.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, and well done, Ms Duncan-Glancy.

13:08

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): I thank Pam for bringing the debate to the chamber. I will touch on many of the same points that she did, because they are very important points to make.

Although the international day of people with disabilities should be a time to celebrate and embrace the many and varied achievements of our disabled brothers and sisters, I am afraid that, this year, as we remain in the midst of a pandemic, most people with a disability will struggle to celebrate it.

As we have already heard, the theme of tomorrow's international day is fighting for rights in the post-Covid era. It is a sad indictment that, in 2021, disabled people are still fighting for their rights. Although the challenges that people with disabilities face are not new, the pandemic has crystallised many of them and has created new ones, too.

Health inequalities between disabled and non-disabled people are stark, and they make for grim reading. Six in 10 people who die of Covid-19 will have a disability, whether visible or hidden, and people with disabilities continue to be more likely to contract Covid than the general population.

On top of disabled people being at greater health risk, the underlying societal conditions that they face require an urgent and sustained response. The latest figures on the disability employment gap in Scotland reveal that the employment rate for disabled people remains 35.5 per cent lower than that for non-disabled people.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): Will Stephanie Callaghan give way?

Stephanie Callaghan: Not just now, sorry. I have a lot to fit in, Stephen.

Although disabled Scots make up about 20 per cent of our nation's population, too often, they remain excluded from much of society, be it decision making, policy setting, employment, culture or sport. As Scotland continues its journey of recovery, people with disabilities—including

disabilities that might not be seen—need to be included in all areas of recovery policy.

An ingredient for creating sustainable societies that embrace people with disabilities is to have communities that are based on the law of equity rather than just the law of equality. There is an important difference between the two: equality means that everyone is treated exactly the same regardless of need or any other individual difference, whereas equity means that everyone is provided with what they need to succeed. Equity is about levelling the playing field.

As a South Lanarkshire councillor, I have had the joy and privilege of working with councillor Grant Ferguson, who is the first British Sign Language-using councillor in Scotland. Conducting virtual meetings created great challenges for Grant, and our councillors' well-meant suggestions were, to be frank, unhelpful and, to be honest, a wee bit rubbish. It took Grant defining his own needs to find real solutions. That clearly demonstrates why the full and direct participation of disabled people is important—hence the popular slogan, “Nothing about us without us”.

However, change cannot be one dimensional. We must challenge attitudes. The pandemic has presented an opportunity to make workplaces more inclusive and allow employers to tap into the benefits of a diverse workforce. For example, a person with autism has a neurodiverse mind—a way of seeing the world differently to others. As my autistic child once said to me, “Mum, the world needs autistic brains to solve the problems normal brains can't solve.”

There is a vast pool of untapped talent in society—people who can help businesses to become stronger and more competitive. However, they can do that only if those businesses are willing to stop seeing someone's disability as a problem and to start viewing it as an asset.

Let us show people the strengths and abilities of the persons who are currently being excluded. Let us change attitudes, remove barriers and treat people of all abilities with dignity and respect. Let us learn from disabled people themselves. In the post-Covid world, we must not forget that the idea of returning to how things were before the pandemic is not on. We do not want to go back; we want to go forward towards a more inclusive future and a more inclusive Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I recognise that this is a consensual debate, but I gently remind colleagues to refer to one another by their full names.

13:12

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I congratulate Pam Duncan-Glancy on securing the debate and giving us the opportunity once again to discuss what I have always described in the Parliament as a misnomer. I have never liked the term “disability”. My view is that everybody has an ability and it is our job as a Parliament to ensure that the route to achieving those abilities is realised.

Without question, we have come a long way in relation to disability. I make no apology for the fact that I will talk about sport at some point during this speech, but I will talk about employment rates first.

I was asked to go to an event with employers in, I think, south Ayrshire, to discuss with them the importance of ensuring that their workforce is representative of the community and to highlight the support that is available to them to ensure that the workplace is adapted for people with any disability.

The first thing that I did was turn to my colleague Jeremy Balfour and ask whether he would go with me. What better way to demonstrate achievement through disability than to go with him? A double act was born—it is not so much Morecambe and Wise, although he is the funny one. We were asked to several events after that, and now we have Pam Duncan-Glancy—

Stephen Kerr: Will the member give way?

Brian Whittle: I will give way to Mr Kerr.

Stephen Kerr: I thank my friend for giving way, and I congratulate Pam Duncan-Glancy on her motion and excellent speech.

Is not one of the ways in which MSPs can practically show our commitment to tomorrow's celebration to commit ourselves to become disability-confident employers and sign up to the five commitments?

Brian Whittle: Stephen Kerr is absolutely right. In the previous session of Parliament, many of us did exactly that to ensure that we not only talked the talk but walked the walk. It is incredibly important that we as MSPs demonstrate leadership.

I will—obviously—talk about sport for the next minute. We have come an awfully long way, if we consider how the Paralympic games have developed over the past decade. London 2012 was a big turning point, since when the games have been much more at the forefront of public knowledge.

I have said previously in the chamber that I have been, and I still am, extremely fortunate in coaching athletes who have so-called disabilities—cerebral palsy, foetal alcohol

spectrum disorders and autism—some of which are visible and some not. I know that the inclusion of those athletes and its positive impact on their ability to participate are life changing for them. In the FASD debate, I spoke of the young man with whom I was working then. The framework of sport has helped him develop as a person; he went to college, and now lives and works on his own.

It is crucial that all people, irrespective of background or personal circumstances, should have the opportunity to participate in sport. The big issue for me is not so much what those with disabilities do once they get into a sport as their access to it. I always talk about the members of the Ayrshire Tigers Powerchair Football Club, who have given us many lessons on how to play that game. The problem for them is being able to get to training and competitions.

I thank Pam Duncan-Glancy again for bringing the debate to the chamber. Whatever we decide to do in this area, we need to remember that access to opportunity is crucial.

13:17

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab):

I say thank you—not just the customary thank you, as I am incredibly grateful—to Pam Duncan-Glancy for securing the debate and to one other member in the chamber: Jeremy Balfour. I am a disabled person; I have attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder. I would not have been comfortable saying that if it had not been for the support of Pam—my apologies, Presiding Officer; I mean Pam Duncan-Glancy—and Jeremy Balfour.

I will never forget the conversation that I had with Jeremy in the garden lobby after I stated that I had ADHD. He said that I had to tell Parliament that I have a disability. I was not sure that I was “disabled enough”, but Jeremy told me, “It’s important that you tell Parliament, because everyone who has a disability has to be matter-of-fact and confident in discussing it. Unless you do, you will make it harder for all of us.” That was an important contribution. Likewise, Pam was encouraging and reassuring, and she embraced the fact that I had a disability.

Importantly, that has given me ownership of my own identity: you cannot understand me if you do not understand my ADHD. It is a vital part of how I think, behave and see the world. Sometimes, that is not terribly easy, but it is easier if I explain what I have and who I am. That is perhaps particularly the case when I am blurting something out in the chamber when I should perhaps be sitting and staying quiet—I thank you for your patience, Presiding Officer.

It is critical that we talk about the disabilities that are not immediately obvious—disabilities that are

invisible. Beyond that need to have confidence, we must acknowledge that, although we have made huge progress in talking about disability and breaking down prejudices, there is still huge prejudice against those with disabilities, especially when those disabilities are invisible.

It is still acceptable to make jokes about poor spelling in which dyslexia is used as the punchline. Social awkwardness is still dismissed as someone being “a bit on the spectrum”, and an inability to concentrate is still described as someone being “a bit ADHD”. We are one of the groups in society that it is still acceptable to make the butt of a joke or to be casually dismissive of or prejudiced against. That must stop.

We need better understanding. Just today, we heard about people being stigmatised for taking medication. I took my medication this morning, and I will not apologise for that. We need understanding that some people need medication to overcome and help them with their disability. I am thankful that I have that possibility, because my brothers and sisters with autism do not have a prescription for medication that they can take to help them with their invisible disability.

To give members an understanding of the stark reality of such disabilities, I note that every one of the groups that are considered to have a neurodevelopmental disorder is overrepresented in prison. People with ADHD are five times more likely than the general population to be in prison, people with autism are twice as likely to be in prison and people with dyslexia are three times as likely to be in prison. There is no greater sign of the injustice that is happening to people with neurodevelopmental disorders than those statistics.

We cannot go back to the old normal. Pam Duncan-Glancy is absolutely right about that. We need better understanding, we need to break down barriers and we need to break down the prejudices that still exist.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you very much, Mr Johnson. I will just clarify that an explanation of an intervention from a sedentary position will not be considered as justification for it. I also note that I have my work cut out in getting members to refer to one another by their full names. I take that in the spirit of the debate.

13:21

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): I am pleased to speak in this important members’ business debate to mark the international day of persons with disabilities. I congratulate Pam Duncan-Glancy on securing the debate. As one of her colleagues on the Social Justice and Social Security Committee, I see at

first hand her determination to ensure that the needs of disabled people are listened to.

The debate allows us to show our cross-party support for this annual event. The theme this year is fighting for rights in the post-Covid era, which I welcome. As a member of the Parliament's Social Justice and Social Security Committee, the theme reminds me of the evidence that we recently received from the Glasgow Disability Alliance, which is clear that the pandemic has supercharged the inequalities that disabled people face and created new inequalities. Glasgow Disability Alliance correctly points out that listening to the voices of disabled people will be vital to ensuring that the recovery leaves no one behind. Therefore, the debate gives us all the opportunity to say that we hear that message and that we will listen to disabled people as we make our decisions. I am supportive of that approach, and it is my long-standing view that disabled people massively enhance our country and should be involved in shaping its future.

My view has been positively enhanced by my volunteer work with adults with additional support needs, which began in my teenage years, and by my employment as a support worker in the heart of my constituency. I draw members' attention to my entry in the members' register of interests on my previous employment.

As MSPs, we owe a big thank you to Inclusion Scotland for the excellent briefing that it produced for the debate. The briefing is clear that disabled people have been the hardest hit by Covid-19. It stresses that disabled people want to move forward and not back, that they want to do so as leaders and full participants, and that they want to help to create a more inclusive future. This Parliament must unite in agreement with that approach.

We have made good progress on the dignity, fairness and respect agenda as we redesign social security. The redesign has, rightly, involved disabled people, whose experiences are vital if we are to avoid, in the future, the failures of the past. For example, we have vehemently rejected the use of private sector assessments and the harsh conditionality regime that has been at the heart of the Westminster disability benefit system for many years. Once we have had the safe transfer of cases from the Department for Work and Pensions to Social Security Scotland, we will continue with the much-needed redesign.

Unfortunately, the harsh assessment regime remains for universal credit and legacy benefits. Benefit sanction levels have crept up again since sanctions were suspended during the pandemic. We must continue to call that out and not let disabled people in Scotland be subjected to a two-tier system of social security.

However, it is not just in social security that we must listen to disabled people; we must take the same approach in making decisions across the whole range of services that we provide in Scotland. In health and social care, education, housing, transport and our green recovery, we must listen to the voices of those who can help us shape a way out of the pandemic that is fair and just and leaves no one behind.

I take this opportunity to thank all the groups in my constituency that support and are led by disabled people. There is a really strong community spirit across Clydebank, Bearsden and Milngavie, and I promise that I will continue to be on their side in this Parliament.

13:25

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): As other members have, I want first of all to thank Pam Duncan-Glancy for securing the debate, which provides a valuable platform not only for commending the work of those who have gone before us, but for looking forward to the progress that is yet to be made.

I also thank my colleagues from across the chamber for giving up their lunch hour to come and engage with issues surrounding disability. Even though disabled people make up 20 per cent of the Scottish population, it can often feel as though they are a secondary concern, compared with other issues, so I am grateful to and encouraged by members who have come to participate in the debate.

I am also happy that I am no longer able to say that I am the only person in the Scottish Parliament who openly identifies as having a physical disability, as I was in the previous parliamentary session. It is unarguable that we have benefited greatly from the election of a more inclusive Parliament, and I look forward to further progress in elections to come. However, even though such great strides have been made, we have still not reached our destination of being a truly inclusive Parliament. There are still barriers that must be broken down, both in a material sense and in the context of our attitude to disability issues.

That brings me to a point that I want to make clearly: we do a great disservice to disabled people if we lower the bar too far and do too much for them. Viewing a person's specific disability as being indicative of their wider ability is very common and very destructive. We should not lower the achievement bar beyond what is reasonably simple in order to bestow good feelings on people with disability—or, as is often the case, on ourselves.

Often, we are at best encouraging, and we are at worst forcing, disabled people to settle for a life in which they do not fulfil their potential or pursue their dreams. Far too often, we assume that the fact that someone cannot do something means that they cannot do anything at all. That is clearly not the case in reality, given the fact that disabled people have succeeded in a wide range of sectors. We should be encouraging everyone, regardless of disability, to strive to be the best that they can be, and we should be supporting them in their efforts.

Of course, we should be pragmatic in such endeavours. It would be dishonest not to acknowledge that there are limitations experienced by disabled people that inform the extent to which they can progress in certain fields. For example, it is very unlikely that I would make a good brain surgeon—it is probably not the area that I should be working in. However, that does not mean that I cannot look at other areas into which I can put my energies. When limitations are identified, they should serve only as guidance for each individual. They should never stop people realising their dreams and excelling in their chosen field.

I once again applaud the progress that we have made and commend my colleagues across the chamber for seeing the potential in disabled people, helping them to realise their dreams and facilitating all of that as we come out of the worst 18 months that many of us have ever faced and look forward to a brighter and better future.

13:29

Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): I am pleased to contribute to the debate as convener of the cross-party group on learning disability. I thank my colleague and friend Pam Duncan-Glancy for securing the debate as we mark the international day of persons with disabilities. I also pay a wider tribute to Ms Duncan-Glancy for all the work that she has done over many years and for what she has already done in the short time that we have both served in this Parliament.

On 2021’s international day of persons with disabilities, it is important to acknowledge that the chamber looks different to how it looked when the previous international day was marked in 2020. Parliament has changed to become more diverse, with an increased number of MSPs identifying as having a disability.

I praise Daniel Johnson, my colleague and friend, for his powerful and personal speech. As someone who knows something of speaking your own truth every day, whether that is in Parliament or anywhere else, I say that it is a brave and important thing to do, not only for oneself but for

other people. Jeremy Balfour’s advice on that to him was very solid: speak the truth, even if your voice shakes.

Jeremy Balfour also made a characteristically powerful speech. He was a great help to me in a former role in the secretariat of the cross-party group on learning disability in the previous session of Parliament.

This session, Parliament includes our first permanent wheelchair user in Pam Duncan-Glancy. I will quote from her maiden speech. She said:

“for too long this Parliament—and others like it—has not looked like the people that it is here to represent, but this year is different. The people of Scotland broke glass ceilings and glass staircases, and this room got a bit closer to looking a bit more like the people of Scotland. It is now our chance to turn a little hope into lasting change. This is the room where it happens.”—[*Official Report*, 27 May 2021; c 50-51.]

Those are powerful words that are worth recalling, because we know that we have much more to do to make our Parliament look like our country and to ensure that the voices of disabled people are heard and listened to.

Jeremy Balfour: Does Paul O’Kane agree that it is not just the Parliament that has to change? Our political parties—all six parties in the Parliament—need to change.

Paul O’Kane: I certainly agree with Jeremy Balfour on that. All of us in political life have a duty to find ways, within our political parties, to encourage more people from diverse backgrounds to join our political life. Politics is often off-putting for people because there are barriers in respect of how we deal with and respond to one another. Political parties have a bigger role to play. I hope that we all take cognisance of that.

Decisions that we make in Parliament impact on the lives of disabled people every day and on their families and communities. I will focus my remaining time on this year’s theme, which is disabled people’s leadership and participation in fighting for rights in the post-Covid era. For too many disabled people, the past 20 months have been a battle to have their rights upheld, protected and advanced. Too many people have seen care and support being removed with little or no consultation. Too many have been cut off from family, friends and their social lives. Many have been pushed further into poverty. Tragically, six in 10 deaths from Covid-19 have been of people who were disabled.

We know that people have not felt consulted, engaged or involved when Covid-19 regulations have changed. I reflect on my experience of working to support people with learning disabilities and their families in the first lockdown. Regulations

did not always fit the many complex and different challenges that those people experience every day. For example, autistic children could not visit the beach that they went to every week, which for them was a haven because it was in a different local authority area, just down the road.

Many people did not feel able to engage with and understand what was being asked of us all because of the lack of accessible formats such as easy read. Far too many people's lives were viewed as being worth less than those of others, through blanket approaches being taken to "do not resuscitate" orders. I commend my colleague Jackie Baillie, who is a former convener of the cross-party group, and the former vice-convenor, Joan McAlpine, for bringing that matter to the fore in the previous session of Parliament. Serious questions remain unanswered.

I conclude by looking forward. A single day of awareness raising and celebration will not solve the problems that are faced by disabled people. We must learn the lessons of the past 20 months and we must do more. We must always ensure that the voices of disabled people ring loud and clear in all our considerations, in Parliament and beyond.

13:34

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I thank Pam Duncan-Glancy for securing the debate and giving us time to discuss what more we can do—there is much more that we should do—to ensure that Scotland achieves equality for every one of the 20 per cent of Scots who are disabled. I also thank all the individuals and organisations who provide support, advocacy and so much more to disabled people across Scotland.

Households with a disabled person experience a relative poverty rate that is 6 per cent higher than that for the general population. Disabled Scots are just less than half as likely as non-disabled people are to be employed. In 2020-21, disability hate crime, not including crimes that go unreported, rose by 14 per cent, and the figure has risen by more than 600 per cent since 2010-11.

The Scottish household survey tells us that disabled people are more than twice as likely as non-disabled people are to experience loneliness. Those facts say a lot about the depth and breadth of disability inequality in Scotland. In almost every way that it is possible to think of, disabled people can be—and are—discriminated against, overlooked and disadvantaged.

For too long, disabled people have borne the brunt of cuts to our social security system. Just a few weeks ago, tens of thousands of unemployed

disabled Scots living on low incomes had £20 a week cut from their universal credit payments. However, with about one in 10 Scots claiming one of the devolved disability benefits, we have a truly golden opportunity to advance equality for disabled people.

Our social security system in Scotland is built on the idea that social security is an investment. Indeed, the Scottish Fiscal Commission projects that spending on the new adult disability payment will eventually be more than £0.5 billion. The commission also predicts an extra £40 million of consequential payments to carers of disabled people. It is absolutely right that that will happen, and I am proud that the Greens were central to it.

Getting to this point, however, has taken years of campaigning by disabled people, and organisations that represent them, to highlight the damage that has been done by the personal independence payment and by welfare cuts. There have been countless protests outside jobcentres and hundreds of thousands of appeals, and hundreds of thousands of lives have been affected. Therefore, disabled people, their voices and their experiences should be at the heart of our new system. In particular, the forthcoming review of disability benefits must be led by disability benefit recipients and must leave nothing off the table that might increase support and access to support.

I would like to touch on the impact of climate change on disabled people. Last year, the United Nations published a landmark study into the impact of climate change on disabled people, which presented evidence that disabled people are more likely to be left behind during evacuations and that emergency information is not always accessible. Earlier this year, extreme heat in Canada saw huge numbers of people with mental health conditions being treated for heatstroke—sadly, some died of it—because drugs that are used to treat certain mental health conditions can cause reduced heat tolerance.

Worldwide, disabled people experience poverty at more than twice the rate of non-disabled people, and we know that it is the world's poorest people who experience the most severe impacts of climate change. However, the Glasgow climate pact contains just a single passing reference to disabled people. Inclusion Scotland, which organised the first ever disability-focused event at a climate change conference of the parties, said that the agreement is

"very disappointing in relation to active involvement and participation of disabled people in climate action".

Without proper involvement of disabled people, well-intentioned measures to tackle climate change, plans to build a new society and attempts

to support vulnerable people properly will further marginalise them.

We must ensure that all that we do has disabled people front and centre, and that their voices are heard. That applies not just in debates such as this, or on the international day of disabled people tomorrow, but every day.

13:38

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I congratulate Pam Duncan-Glancy on securing this timeous debate—she is a force to be reckoned with, and thank goodness.

We have come a long way since we used the definition

“a person who is unable to walk or move properly through disability or because of injury to their back or legs.”

According to the “Oxford English Dictionary”, that definition was first used as long ago as 950AD. Today, under the Equality Act 2010, someone is disabled if they have

“a physical or mental impairment”

that has

“a substantial and long-term adverse effect”

on their ability

“to carry out normal day-to-day activities.”

That recognises, as does the motion, that many disabilities are invisible. Many decades ago, when I was a secondary teacher, we were not aware of issues such as autism. We might have had autistic children in the class behaving strangely, but we had no idea.

I confess that the term “disabled” sits uncomfortably with me, as it can be construed as having pejorative undertones. I do not know how we move away from that.

In my lifetime, there have been improvements in the perception of and provision for those with impairments. That is not simply in providing equipment to assist people—although that is important—but in recognising the obligation to ensure a level playing field for work and life at large. I am talking not just about having access and hearing loops but about seeing beyond the disability to the person.

Not many decades ago, our society hid some people with disabilities—they were even locked up—and it certainly did not go out of its way to make accommodations. In too many parts of the world, the situation is still a struggle or even Dickensian.

I will start with the Parliament building. It was ensured that those with impairments were involved

at the beginning of construction. We have Braille signs and disabled access, although some lift locations are simply daft, as I am sure Pam Duncan-Glancy has found. Ramp access in the chamber had to be adapted. We have a hearing loop system, although I recall that alterations had to be made to that after the Parliament was built.

In the selection of Scottish National Party candidates for this place, endeavours are made not to disadvantage those with disabilities and to encourage them to go forward. In our regional list system, anybody with a disability who is on a list automatically goes to the top of it. I am not talking about patronising people; I absolutely agree with everything that Jeremy Balfour said about not patronising people. We must have a system that allows people to fulfil their potential, whatever it is.

I remind members that, when Dennis Robertson was a member, he had his wonderful dog, Mr Q, in here. Staff fought for the right to walk Mr Q, who even had his own pass. Woe betide anyone whose speech was boring, because Mr Q had a very loud snore—that was bigger than any critique from other members.

I will talk briefly about changing perceptions. In an episode of the detective series “A Touch of Frost”, two young actors with Down’s syndrome portrayed a couple with Down’s syndrome who fell in love and wanted to get married. That exposed prejudices among parents and society at large, and the episode had a big impact.

Brian Whittle mentioned the Paralympics, which I have spoken about before. That has made a difference to perceptions of disabilities. Some folk used to turn away from looking at an amputee, but that is ordinary now. The Paralympics have had a lasting impact on children who share such disabilities.

“Strictly Come Dancing” was mentioned at First Minister’s question time. I confess that I watch the programme with a whisky and the cat—that is the sad story of my Saturday nights. When I saw Rose Ayling-Ellis dancing so beautifully, I clean forgot that she is deaf. The result of her participation has been a huge increase in the number of people who wish to learn to sign. She is an inspiration to others who have a similar impairment.

My conclusion is that, yes, politicians can change life for those with disabilities through policies and legislation, which are important, but, in my book, it is popular programmes and events that give the extra push to equality and change societal perceptions.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I confirm that, although Mr Q’s sedentary interventions were perhaps explicable, they were not encouraged.

I call Monica Lennon, who is the final speaker in the open debate.

13:43

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): I, too, congratulate Pam Duncan-Glancy on securing the debate. I am pleased that the Parliament has the opportunity to recognise the UN international day of persons with disabilities 2021, which falls tomorrow.

As I am the last to speak in the open debate, I can say that all the speeches have been genuinely excellent. A range of issues have been covered and I have scored out things that I was going to say because they have been said, but I will add a few things. After today, the cabinet secretary will be busy speaking to lots of colleagues, because cross-cutting issues have been raised and we need a joined-up approach not just for the Government but for all employers, agencies and others across Scotland.

I declare an interest as the patron of Disability Equality Scotland. I am honoured to hold that voluntary role. I will talk about a couple of things that have not been fully covered.

I want to mention toilets. Every week, Disability Equality Scotland polls its membership, which has increased during the pandemic. Ninety-five per cent of disabled people who responded to the recent survey said that they have changed plans because no suitable toilets are available. If that does not spell out exclusion, I do not know what does.

I pay tribute to former MSP colleague Mary Fee and to Jeremy Balfour for the great work that they did in the previous session to champion changing places toilets. In the previous term, the Government announced more funding, which is welcome. However, from looking at my inbox, I know that people want to see the roll-out of more changing places toilets. That important work must be borne in mind.

I will talk about transport but in a way that is linked to toilets. One of the respondents to the recent Disability Equality Scotland poll said that the lack of suitable accessible toilets on long-distance bus journeys is a real issue in Scotland. They said:

"The worst offenders are long-distance bus operators—toilets on those buses are useless."

Others said that, in rural areas, a journey to a hospital appointment can take several hours, and not having access to a suitable toilet is a real problem. In some restaurants and pubs, accessible toilets are being used for storage. Cleaning products are kept there, taken out when a disabled person wants to use the toilet, then put

back in. That is really offensive. Today's debate is about dignity and human rights, so we need to do better than that.

Transport and town planning is another issue that is close to my heart, including access to the built and natural environments more widely, and Disability Equality Scotland does important work on access panels. For those who do not know, access panels are groups of disabled volunteers who work together to improve physical access and wider social inclusion in their local communities. During the scrutiny of the Planning (Scotland) Bill in the previous session, some of us tried to secure statutory recognition of access panels in the planning process. That issue still needs to be considered by the Government. It is about access to inclusive communication and ensuring that discussions with planners and transport providers are fully accessible.

I do not have much time left, but the other "T" that I want to mention is treatment, as well as access to healthcare, particularly for chronic pain patients, who feel that their care has been further deprioritised during the pandemic. We also need to improve treatment for hidden disabilities such as migraines.

In its briefing to members, Inclusion Scotland said:

"Policy and decision makers and service providers already have the best resource possible to get things right—Scotland's disabled people."

That comment is from disabled people. Today, we have heard that disabled people know what is needed, what works and what does not. It is the responsibility of us all to listen and break down barriers. I hope that both the Government and the Parliament will be ambitious and bold enough to deliver the system change that disabled people require.

13:48

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government (Shona Robison): I join others in thanking Pam Duncan-Glancy for securing the debate. I also thank all the members who have taken part in such a good debate for sharing their views and their aims and suggestions for the future. Those are all important ahead of this year's international day of persons with disabilities.

As mentioned, this year's international day focuses on the importance of the leadership and participation of disabled people for an inclusive, fair, accessible and sustainable post-Covid world. As others have said, it is encouraging to see that the Parliament itself is more diverse than it was in previous sessions. Jeremy Balfour noted that point, as did Paul O'Kane, who also reminded us

that there is more to do to ensure that the Parliament truly looks like Scotland.

It is a key moment to recognise Scotland's champions for disabled people's rights, equality and inclusion. There are members here who have done a tremendous job in breaking down barriers and showing what can be done. Disabled people's organisations play a vital role in representing the diverse views and experiences of disabled people across the country, in urban, rural, Highland and island communities.

That role has been particularly crucial during the pandemic, which has had considerable impacts on disabled people, and I offer my thanks to all those working in disabled people's organisations and the wider third sector for their invaluable contribution to supporting people at this very difficult time.

The Scottish Government is listening to disabled people's lived experiences and is trying to ensure that, collectively, we build resilience in our communities, so that disabled people can realise their rights and get on with living their lives. Pam Duncan-Glancy was right to say that people with disability should be around the table. We do not always get that right and it is important that we do so.

One of the foundation stones of our approach will of course be our new human rights bill, which will bring the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities into Scots law as far as is possible within devolved competence. It will provide greater impetus to public bodies to remove barriers and to support disabled people to participate fully in society, and it will also empower disabled people by enabling them to claim and, just as important, enforce their rights.

That follows our work in the previous parliamentary session on taking the UN convention as the blueprint for our "A Fairer Scotland for Disabled People" delivery plan. Our next plan for action, which we will publish by the end of 2022, will build on that, reflecting on what has and has not worked so far as we progress towards a Scotland where the convention is meaningful in communities, services and opportunities. Through our equality and human rights fund, we will invest £21 million over three years to advance human rights, promote equality and tackle discrimination, with over £5 million of that funding going to disability-focused projects and organisations

An important issue that has been highlighted is the disability employment gap, which we are committed to reducing by at least half before 2038. Real progress had been made on that before the pandemic, but the disruption of Covid-19 slowed the pace of change, and we are now working with disabled people's organisations and, importantly,

employers to reinvigorate the programme of work. We will also establish a scheme to tackle the barriers faced by disabled people who wish to take on leadership positions, empowering more people to fulfil their potential.

As members have mentioned, our social security system plays an important role in this matter, and it must treat people with dignity and respect. The involvement of disabled people in the redesign that Marie McNair mentioned was therefore critical. Early next year, we will pilot our new adult disability payment as the replacement for the personal independence payment. The new initiative will be trialled as part of our transformation of disability assistance, during which we will transfer the entitlements of nearly 700,000 existing disability and carer benefits clients from the UK Government's systems to Social Security Scotland in what will be a massive undertaking. As a first step, we launched in July our new child disability payment in three pilot areas, providing vital support to 38,000 children and their families in the next financial year alone. Of course, we will also double the Scottish child payment next April.

As well as building people's economic resilience, we must ensure that, as a number of members have said, disabled people have access to the right support and care. We know that there is a lot more to do to ensure that everyone can rely on having access to the right care in the right place at the right time, and we will continue to engage with disabled people's organisations as we start to build our groundbreaking new national care service, which has the potential to revolutionise the delivery of support to people when they need it most.

Monica Lennon mentioned the issue of accessible toilets and, as she pointed out, we are investing £10 million in increasing the number of changing places toilets across the country, including mobile facilities at events and outdoor venues. Facilities that meet our needs are something that most of us take for granted, and fully accessible toilets are important for dignity, confidence and peace of mind. There is more to do in that area.

I want briefly to mention young people, particularly the young persons guarantee. We want to ensure that disabled young people can access the guarantee and we want to help connect more than 1,000 disabled young people to fair work, education and other activities. We have also made a commitment to introducing in this parliamentary session Scotland's first national transitions to adulthood strategy to ensure a joined-up approach. In that respect, I note Pam Duncan-Glancy's proposed bill on disabled children and young people's transitions to

adulthood. We share the same ambition for improved outcomes and are supportive of the bill's intentions. As a result, we are engaging with Pam Duncan-Glancy on the bill; indeed, we met just yesterday as part of that work.

I want to end with a couple of reflections. In his very powerful speech, Daniel Johnson recognised that there are many people in Scotland who are living with unseen or hidden disabilities, including autistic people and people with a range of other disabilities. They face particularly stark inequalities, which is why we have committed to a dedicated programme of work as detailed in our "Towards Transformation" learning and intellectual disabilities and autism plan. Part of that commitment includes our work over this parliamentary session to introduce a dedicated learning disability, autism and neurodiversity bill.

I will close by taking a moment to appreciate the crucial role of our allies in the journey to disability equality, including all those who have shared their lived experience and colleagues in the Parliament, in creating for all disabled people the much-needed societal change that Christine Grahame talked about and in acting as real role models and inspirational leaders. We thank them for their work.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate.

13:56

Meeting suspended.

14:30

On resuming—

Point of Order

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): Good afternoon. I remind members that Covid-related measures are in place and that face coverings should be worn when moving around the chamber and across the Holyrood campus.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Today, at First Minister's question time, I asked the First Minister about the union connectivity review. I referred to a project between the United Kingdom and Scottish Governments that aims to develop options to cut rail journey times and said that Transport Scotland officials have been told to stop working on it. In her answer, the First Minister said that I was completely wrong. However, I was not wrong, because I was at the public meeting at which a Transport Scotland official said that that had happened, as was the transport editor of *The Scotsman*, who duly reported it. Could the First Minister be invited to correct the record so that Parliament has not been unduly misinformed?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): I thank the member for his point of order. That is not a matter for the Presiding Officer. The member will be aware that there is a mechanism to correct the *Official Report* that members can proceed with should they consider that there is a need to do so. Mr Simpson could pursue that, should he wish to do so.

Portfolio Question Time

Education and Skills

14:32

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is portfolio question time on education and skills. I remind members that questions 4 and 5 are grouped together, so I will take any supplementary questions on those questions after both have been answered. If a member wishes to raise a supplementary question, they should press their request-to-speak button or indicate so in the chat function by entering the letter R during the relevant question.

Violence Prevention Programmes (Dating and Relationships)

1. **Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on whether there should be more programmes in the school curriculum that aim to prevent violence in dating and intimate partner relationships. (S6O-00472)

The Minister for Children and Young People (Clare Haughey): The Scottish Government is clear that harassment or abuse of any form whether in the workplace, schools, the home or society is completely reprehensible and must stop.

We are taking forward a range of actions such as teaching our children and young people about safe and healthy relationships through relationships, sexual health and parenthood education, and we are funding programmes such as mentors in violence prevention, which is aimed at reducing and preventing sexual harassment and violence in schools.

We are committed to publishing national guidance for schools on addressing gender-based violence. That work is being advanced by the gender-based violence in schools working group, which will review existing resources and develop new resources where needed. That work is expected to be completed by 2022.

Pauline McNeill: Evidence from Canada and the US shows that school-based programmes that seek to prevent violence in dating and intimate partner relationships are effective, so I welcome that answer. A recent report by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills said that in the 32 schools in England that were inspected, nine out of 10 girls said that unsolicited explicit pictures or videos were sent to them or their friends, and the chief inspector of schools in England, Amanda Spielman, stated that it is

"alarming that many children and young people, particularly girls, feel that they have to accept sexual harassment as part of growing up."

Can the minister tell me whether that is happening to any extent in Scottish schools? It would be deeply concerning if it was. Can she investigate the matter if she does not know? Will she keep me informed of the development of the programme that she referred to?

Clare Haughey: Pauline McNeill raises an important point, which would concern anyone. We all want children and young people to be able to develop mutually respectful, responsible and confident relationships.

We will continue to fund a range of school-based programmes, which I heard that the member welcomes, and organisations including Rape Crisis Scotland, whose national sexual violence prevention programme in local authority secondary schools across the country has reached 48,000 pupils.

We all realise that the conduct and behaviour of perpetrators need to change if we are to end harassment and abuse across society, including among our young people. We must tackle the underlying attitudes and inequalities that perpetuate that behaviour, and I welcome Pauline McNeill's support in that endeavour.

Dyslexia (Support)

2. **Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to support people in education or training in rural areas who have dyslexia. (S6O-00473)

The Minister for Children and Young People (Clare Haughey): We work with Dyslexia Scotland to provide support across the country to people with dyslexia. In January 2020, we published a final report marking the delivery of the recommendations in the 2014 review "Making Sense: Education for Children and Young People with Dyslexia in Scotland" to improve outcomes for learners with dyslexia.

Learners can access support under the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004, and financial assistance is available in colleges and universities to tailor support to the individual needs of students.

Skills development and training opportunities are available to people with dyslexia through Skills Development Scotland's modern apprenticeship programme and its careers, information, advice and guidance service.

Rachael Hamilton: Adult dyslexia assessment is crucial in supporting people who have not been identified in further education or training, but the

Scottish National Party Government still does not offer free dyslexia assessment to adults. Over the past 18 months, I have repeatedly pushed the Government to provide such a service.

Young people and adults with unidentified dyslexia need access to free assessment and support because, without it, their life chances are potentially being hindered. Will the minister back the campaign to provide free dyslexia assessments for all adults in education and training? Will she also commit to undertake an assessment of unidentified dyslexia in colleges, universities and workplaces?

Clare Haughey: I believe that Rachael Hamilton wrote to my colleague Richard Lochhead on the matter last month, given his portfolio responsibilities, and received a response from him. I will not add to that here.

However, we are assured of the fact that there is support available to people with dyslexia in all parts of the country, including rural communities such as the one that Rachael Hamilton represents. That includes access to Dyslexia Scotland's services and support at every stage of a person's education and during apprenticeships, as well as access to Skills Development Scotland's careers support services.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): Over the past decade, there has been an erosion in the number of additional support needs teachers, which declined by 578 between 2010 and 2020, the date of the report to which the minister referred. The number of ASN teachers reduced from 56 to 35 in East Lothian, from 136 to 100 in Dumfries and Galloway, from 191 to 161 in the Highlands, and from 103 to 83 in Moray. That is despite a 90 per cent increase over the same period in the number of pupils who were identified as having ASN. Should we be proud of that record in Scotland?

Clare Haughey: It is important to understand that, under the Additional Support for Learning (Scotland) Act 2004, local authorities are responsible for identifying and meeting the additional support needs of their pupils and that local authorities and schools should prioritise personalised support to meet the individual physical and emotional needs of all children and young people, especially in the light of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Climate Issues (Engagement)

3. **Fiona Hyslop (Linlithgow) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what teaching and resources schools are providing to encourage pupils to engage in climate issues and ensure their experiences and ideas are acted on, including through the Climate Assembly. (S6O-00474)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Education Scotland's national improvement hub provides a range of resources that schools can use to support and facilitate pupil engagement with climate education. Initiatives such as eco-schools and climate-ready classrooms also support schools with that work.

The Scottish Government and Education Scotland have reflected on the recommendations and commentary from the Climate Assembly report, and continue to engage with young climate activists through the Teach the Future campaign and others, as a key part of ensuring that our curriculum and resources reflect the latest science and are as engaging as they can be for children and young people.

Fiona Hyslop: The cabinet secretary will be aware of the Scottish Youth Film Foundation's work at the 26th United Nations climate change conference of the parties—COP26—where it created documentary films on climate change, interviewed guests and edited and presented programmes through the COP TV initiative. She will also be aware that Education Scotland agreed to show COP TV in schools, following my request earlier last month.

Building on the recently announced funding that will go towards the Children's Parliament's climate changemakers programme, what engagement will take place with young people in schools so that discussions about climate change can continue and the views of our young people can be heard?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I commend the work that was undertaken by the Scottish Youth Film Foundation at COP26. It was great to see that initiative come to fruition.

We are absolutely committed to ensuring that the views of children and young people form the bedrock of our policy development in all areas of policy. It is important to me that that is done properly. The specialist support provided by the Children's Parliament and the climate changemakers programme will mean that the ideas and comments of younger children will be directly available to officials and to me and other ministers, which is particularly important at present, while we are refreshing the learning for sustainability action plan, as that will allow us to build their ideas in from the beginning of that project.

Scottish Attainment Challenge (Equality Impact Assessment)

4. **Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it has carried out an equality impact assessment following reports that it plans to cease funding for the

schools programme as part of the Scottish attainment challenge. (S6O-00475)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Shirley-Anne Somerville): The Scottish Government has fully considered the impact of all changes to the refreshed Scottish attainment challenge and will publish its EQIA ahead of implementation next year.

Paul O’Kane: The impact on the 73 schools is significant. Of those affected, 34 are set to lose around or more than £100,000 in direct funding, and 13 schools will lose more than £150,000. Yesterday, the Education, Children and Young People Committee heard what the Scottish attainment challenge funds in schools. It pays for staffing, support for pupils with additional support needs and a vast range of important interventions such as speech and language therapy. What would the cabinet secretary advise headteachers in those schools to cut?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As we refreshed the Scottish attainment challenge, we looked carefully at how to ensure that we are providing a fair assessment of needs across the country. No less funding will be provided to schools and local authorities, but it will now be distributed more equitably across the country.

For example, 97 per cent of Scottish schools will receive pupil equity funding from a total of £420 million over four years. Where work has been going on through the schools programme, local authorities and Education Scotland are there to assist with any transition process.

Scottish Attainment Challenge (Local Authority Funding Allocations)

5. Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what the local authority funding allocations are for the Scottish attainment challenge, following the review of the programme. (S6O-00476)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Funding allocations for all 32 local authorities for the refreshed Scottish attainment challenge were sent to directors of education for each local authority and were published on Thursday 25 November.

As part of the refreshed £1 billion Scottish attainment challenge programme from 2022-23, and on top of annual pupil equity fund investment of up to £130 million and additional support for care-experienced children and young people, that totals £172 million in the next four years. Allocations have been confirmed on a multiyear basis for the first time, covering the period from 2022-23 to 2025-26 and enabling better longer-term and strategic planning across the education system.

Michael Marra: The cabinet secretary may wish to examine the figures in her answers to me and to my colleague Paul O’Kane. As I understand it, there is a reduction in funding from last year to this year and funding has been top sliced.

The nine previous challenge authorities—those assessed to have the deepest and most condensed multiple deprivation—are facing cuts of 60 per cent to their attainment challenge funding by 2026. In my home city of Dundee, there will be a cut from £6.2 million to £1.3 million. Hundreds of jobs, and many transformative projects, are at risk, which will undoubtedly have an impact on attainment.

Has the cabinet secretary abandoned any analysis of the role of concentrated, multiple deprivation on educational performance?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: In this session of Parliament, £1 billion will go into the Scottish attainment challenge. That is significantly more than the £750 million that went into the challenge during the previous session of Parliament.

The Scottish Government has taken a decision, backed by local authorities and leaders from the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, to ensure that we provide a way to recognise that poverty exists in all parts of Scotland—rural, urban and remote—and that the impact of the pandemic is being felt in all parts of Scotland. It is important that we recognise that fact and that we have acted on it.

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): The cabinet secretary mentioned that a small but not insignificant number of schools still do not benefit from that funding. Many of them are small, rural schools and, even on a measure of low-income families, there may be hidden poverty and deprivation. What more will be done to give headteachers in those schools flexibility to support their young people?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The implementation of the pupil equity fund has been an important part of the work. That is based on free school meals. Through the agreement with COSLA, we have ensured that every local authority is now receiving funding. That is based on the number of children in low-income families—a direct and, I think, better way of making those decisions—rather than on the Scottish index of multiple deprivation, which has been used in the past. We were, rightly, asked by Audit Scotland to look at the use of SIMD. The agreement will ensure that money goes to all 32 local authorities, which will then work with any school that does not get the PEF directly to ensure that it is being supported. As I say, the money is available right across the country.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before I call question 6, which is from Alasdair Allan, I draw

members' attention to the fact that those who wish to use the headphones should plug them into the side of the console. They should press "menu", then "audio" and then "channel 1". I hope that is clear. I feel that I should be doing some air stewardess emergency exit signals. I hope that everybody is online with that.

SpeakGaelic

6. Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): A dh'fhaighneachd de Riaghaltas na h-Alba ciamar a tha e a' smaointinn a bhios iomairt ùr SpeakGaelic a' toirt àrdachadh air an àireamh de dhaoine a bhios a' bruidhinn Gàidhlig agus ga dhèanamh nas fhasa do dhaoine an cànan ionnsachadh.

Following is the translation:

To ask the Scottish Government how it anticipates the new SpeakGaelic language learning initiative will help increase the number of people speaking Gaelic and make learning the language more accessible. (S6O-00477)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Shirley-Anne Somerville): I am afraid that the interpretation did not come through my audio, so I am going to presume that the question is as per the *Business Bulletin* and go along with that for the moment. Perhaps we can seek some guidance for the supplementary question.

The Scottish Government is proud to have provided financial support to MG Alba for the development of the new SpeakGaelic initiative. That free, multiplatform approach to language learning will allow anyone who is interested in learning Gaelic to access a high-quality course at any time that suits them. I commend everyone involved in bringing SpeakGaelic to this stage and look forward to the continued development of further phases.

There are other Gaelic learning resources that have proved to be very popular, such as Duolingo and LearnGaelic, with high numbers signing up to learn. We expect that SpeakGaelic will also benefit from the increase in interest.

Dr Allan: I do not know whether other members heard the interpretation, but, as someone who wants to use Gaelic in Parliament, as is my right, I am beginning to weary of waiting for an occasion when I will get simultaneous translation either at a cross-party group or when I begin my contribution in the chamber. My question is—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Dr Allan, please resume your seat for a second. I appreciate the point that you raise. My understanding is that the prior arrangement was, rightly or wrongly, that the question in the *Business Bulletin* would be read out in English and then the supplementary would

be translated into Gaelic. That may be an issue to look at, but it might explain the problem that some members experienced. I hope that that answer is helpful.

Dr Allan: I thank the Presiding Officer and take that point. I suppose that I was referring to the fact that there have been numerous occasions—in cross-party groups, in the chamber, and in many other places—when it has been impossible to obtain the simultaneous interpretation. I thank you for your time.

I ask, as a supplementary to that question, what difference the cabinet secretary thinks the new SpeakGaelic facility will make across Scotland and the world.

Dr Allan continued in Gaelic:

Tha mi a' cur fàilte air an iomairt seo, a bhios a' dèanamh diofair mòr do luchd-ionnsachaidh na Gàidhlig anns an sgìre agam fhèin, air feadh Alba agus air feadh an t-saoghail. An toir am Ministear beachd seachad air ruigsinneachd nan goireasan seo, gu nàiseanta agus gu h-eadar-nàiseanta?

Following is the simultaneous interpretation:

I welcome the development of this initiative, which will make a big difference to Gaelic learners in my own constituency, as well as throughout Scotland and, indeed, around the globe. Will the minister give an indication of the international, as well as the national, scope of these resources?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Dr Allan. Cabinet secretary, I think that you got the gist of the subject matter in Dr Allan's first posing of the question.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Thank you, Presiding Officer. On the point that Dr Allan raises, I really hope that this is something that we can see develop and come to fruition. These resources are freely available on a variety of platforms, which makes them available to learners right across the world. I hope that they will attract people to pick up the language not just here, at home, but more widely. We can point to the pupils in the new Gaelic school in Nova Scotia, for example, who may use it as part of their language learning.

I was certainly pleased to see that, in the first two weeks of the project, the website alone had 11,000 unique visitors, 77 per cent of whom were from the United Kingdom, which means, of course, that others came from further afield.

Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Teaching Gaelic is intrinsic to increasing the number of Gaelic speakers. Since 2016-17, only 25 new Gaelic teachers have been recruited from postgraduate diploma in secondary education courses, which falls short of the Scottish Funding Council's target of 31 in the period. Given the

need to fill vacancies in Gaelic education, what action is the Scottish Government taking to ensure that the 2021-22 target is not only met but exceeded?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I thank Donald Cameron for that important question. I absolutely agree that we need to do more to encourage people into teaching, particularly in Gaelic-medium education. That has been discussed regularly with me and officials, and I know that there has been work, for example, with which the General Teaching Council for Scotland has been assisting. I would be happy to provide much more detail in writing to Mr Cameron, to ensure that we see further progress on the matter. Of course, once he has received that letter, if there is more work that he thinks we should be doing, I would be more than happy to hear whether there are some practical examples of how we can take that up.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: For the record, and as a matter of clarification, the interpretation of Dr Allan's supplementary question did, in fact, come through the headphones.

School Curriculum (Business Needs Alignment)

8. Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to ensure that the school curriculum and courses delivered by higher and further education establishments are aligned with the needs of businesses as they transition to a net zero economy. (S6O-00479)

The Minister for Higher Education and Further Education, Youth Employment and Training (Jamie Hepburn): We recognise the importance of preparing our learners so that they have the skills required to meet our ambitions on transitioning to net zero. In schools, our learning for sustainability action plan sets out how we are working to enable pupils and teachers to build a socially just, sustainable and equitable society.

In further and higher education, Skills Development Scotland and the Scottish Funding Council, through their joint skills alignment team, will ensure that our annual investment in skills through work-based learning, upskilling and reskilling is fully aligned behind our aims for a net zero transition.

Brian Whittle: As the minister said, delivering the future skill set that is required to deliver a net zero economy will take the upskilling of existing teachers and lecturers. What is the Scottish Government doing practically to ensure that all our educators have access to such training and upskilling?

Jamie Hepburn: I recognise that point. Of course, just as we seek to upskill the workforce

who will be practically applying the skill set, we also need to make sure that educators have that skill set too, as Brian Whittle is correct to say. Set out in our climate emergency skills action plan is a commitment to taking forward the green jobs workforce academy, which will play an important role in the upskilling and retraining of people to meet the challenge. That is just as important for those who will provide those skills. When we talk about upskilling people, that includes our educators, and that will be a priority area for us as we take the work forward.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio question time. I will allow a very short pause to enable the relevant spokespeople to move to their seats safely.

Covid-19: Preparing for Winter and Priorities for Recovery

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): I remind members of the Covid-related measures that are in place and that face coverings should be worn when moving around the chamber and across the Holyrood campus.

The next item of business is a debate without motion on Covid-19: preparing for winter and priorities for recovery. I call Siobhian Brown to open the debate on behalf of the COVID-19 Recovery Committee.

14:54

Siobhian Brown (Ayr) (SNP): It is my pleasure to open the debate and to speak as the convener of the COVID-19 Recovery Committee about our work on preparing for winter and priorities for recovery.

In March 2020, the world was caught off guard. We were not prepared. With the emergence of the omicron variant last week, it is evident that the pandemic continues and that the virus remains very much with us. Although we continue to live in that fluid situation, we expect this winter to be difficult. In particular, we are preparing for a more challenging flu season.

Through the pandemic, we have learned that effective, early interventions—often a lot earlier than might seem obvious at first sight—are needed to prevent harm and to reduce the need for stronger intervention later on. We need to learn from the pandemic and ensure that we are never again in the position that we were in in March 2020, when schools and businesses shut and we were all told to stay at home.

Shortly, I will talk about the committee's work on baseline health protection measures in the run-up to winter. First, however, it is important to stress that many of the issues that are raised with the COVID-19 Recovery Committee overlap with the work of other committees, such as—to name just a few—the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, the Education, Children and Young People Committee, and the Finance and Public Administration Committee. The COVID-19 Recovery committee has made a great effort not to duplicate the important work that is done by other committees. Instead, we have focused on the on-going public health measures that are being used to respond to Covid-19.

At committee, we routinely consider regulations that put in place the on-going changes to health protection and travel restriction measures. However, our inquiry has allowed us to get under the surface of the issues. In the new year, we

intend to prioritise scrutiny of Covid-19 recovery, with a specific focus on health inequalities.

This is an important debate—the first of its kind—with the opportunity for all conveners to speak about their committee's Covid-19 recovery-related scrutiny work. I am looking forward to contributions from other committees on their work, and to the Deputy First Minister's response.

The COVID-19 Recovery Committee decided to undertake work on what role baseline health protection measures—in particular, ventilation—could play in lessening the impact of Covid-19, especially over winter and as we move forward. We also looked at the measures that are needed to support long-term recovery. During our inquiry, we heard first from ventilation experts and then from those working in health and social care services, the hospitality industry, the business and leisure sectors, and schools. We looked at ventilation and at the relative success of other health protection measures in helping to slow down the spread of the virus.

We all know that one of the main ways in which the virus spreads is through the inhalation of droplets in the air and that ventilation is one of the key measures that is used in reducing spread through inhalation. Although I am aware of yesterday's debate, not much of the focus prior to that had been on ventilation, so we looked at how improvements in ventilation could be an effective response to a potentially worsening situation. With a difficult winter upon us, we want to do everything that we can to prevent any closures of schools and businesses. No one wants that to happen.

We asked witnesses what could be done to keep businesses in the hospitality and leisure sectors open, and how best to keep health and social care services open—services such as general practitioner surgeries, dentists and social care centres. We also considered health protection measures in schools and their impact on young people.

We were told of the challenges that are faced by the retail and hospitality sectors. We heard of the importance of carbon dioxide monitors in assessing ventilation in buildings. We discussed the support that is available to businesses to improve ventilation and install CO₂ monitors to reduce transmission, and the challenges that are faced by the leisure industry, which often uses buildings that are not always suited to the ventilation adaptations that are required.

We heard of the impact that the baseline measures have had on health and social care capacity and how services are delivered. We were told that doctors were continuing to provide a mixture of remote and in-person consultations in order to meet demand, and that the wearing of a

mask can sometimes be a challenge when it comes to non-verbal communication during in-person consultations. I was delighted to learn yesterday that new transparent face masks that are made in Scotland have been approved for use in health and social care settings and that they will be in use in NHS Scotland from this month.

We were told that more than four million dental appointments have been lost since the beginning of the pandemic, with baseline measures limiting capacity to between 40 and 50 per cent. We also heard that the workforce in social care services has been affected and that the economic stability of the sector is at risk.

The vaccine certification scheme, and possible extensions to it, were issues of concern to the business and hospitality sectors, although there was no consensus among the witnesses on whether the scheme should be extended. We will continue to pay close attention to that debate and scrutinise any proposed changes to the scheme through the appropriate regulations.

I turn to schools. In general, witnesses were supportive of mask wearing in schools as a necessary measure to stop the spread of Covid-19 and to help keep our schools open. However, there was no consensus among parents about the wearing of face masks in schools. Some had concerns over pupils' learning in relation to hearing and understanding, and thought that masks should be removed in classrooms. We heard about the challenges of achieving an appropriate balance between heating and ventilation in schools. Concerns were raised about the increasing costs associated with providing additional heating and ventilation systems, and whether heating systems would be able to cope with the worsening weather over the winter.

We also took written evidence from members of the Scottish Youth Parliament about their general thoughts on Covid restrictions—for example, how hard it was for them not to see friends and family during lockdown, and their mixed feelings about current restrictions. One MSYP said:

"I've got mixed feelings. I agree we need to be unlocked but I don't like the idea of clubs being open because cases are going up again ... I'm a bit unsure ... I'm not going to go to a club, not going to chance it. But with Uni being back, I think that should be more prioritised than clubs ... I think some restrictions, seminars being in person is good, but some people want lectures to be in person instead of online. Having 100 people in a lecture hall wearing masks doesn't feel great".

What did the committee learn from its inquiry? It showed me how much can be achieved through relatively simple modifications and forward thinking regarding the proper ventilation of our buildings. Although it does not exactly set the heather alight, we learned about the simple things

that can help, such as the use, wherever possible, of high-level rather than low-level windows. That prevents cold draughts while still providing good ventilation—it is simple, but effective.

I urge the Scottish Government to review the evidence that we heard and consider any new ways to promote the use of good ventilation to help prevent the spread of Covid-19.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): Will the member take an intervention?

Siobhian Brown: Yes.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Very briefly.

Michael Marra: Would the member recognise that, with a case rate for under-15s of 400 per 100,000, the current rate of Covid in schools is incredibly high? That is with the Government's current interventions on ventilation, so do we not need to do more?

Siobhian Brown: I believe that the Scottish Government is doing everything that it can that has been advised by the experts at this time but, as we move forward, we might have to investigate other options.

We all have full mailboxes regarding the challenge of non-compliance and current health protection measures, be it the wearing of face masks in shops or people who are, for a variety of reasons, reluctant to get vaccinated. It is clear that more work must be done in those areas to change the public attitude.

We also need to think about how we build for the future and ensure that our buildings are fit for purpose and able to cope with any future pandemics.

The Presiding Officer: I ask you to close now, Ms Brown.

Siobhian Brown: I finish by putting on record the committee's appreciation for the constructive engagement that all committees have had with us. I also thank the clerks who help and support the committee's work.

15:03

Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): On behalf of the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate.

On 9 November, the committee took evidence from a range of stakeholders on seasonal planning and preparedness in health and social care. As we look towards recovery from Covid-19, that evidence highlights the scale of the challenge that we face in the recruitment and retention of health and social care staff across all disciplines.

Many stakeholders told us how extremely tired staff feel, given everything that they have faced over the pandemic. Staff across nursing, general practice and many other health and care professions have experienced non-stop and persistent levels of stress and pressure. Where they see no prospect of that improving, an increasing number are leaving the profession for the sake of their own health and wellbeing. We heard that more flexible working patterns are needed to address that, alongside sustainable and long-term workforce planning.

Covid-19 has impacted on employment opportunities, specifically for younger people. What more can be done to encourage more young people to consider a career in health and social care? With that in mind, I have written to colleagues on the Education, Children and Young People Committee, to see whether there is a way that they can explore the issue further, under the committee's skills remit.

We also heard about the substantial numbers of vacancies across all allied health professions, which has a knock-on impact on the provision of preventative health measures, which in turn puts additional pressure on hospitals and primary care further down the line. Several of our health and social care colleagues pointed to the more sensational media reporting on general practitioners and hospitals, which they said are putting people off either coming back to work in healthcare, or pursuing a career in health in the first place.

Stakeholders highlighted other key contributing factors. First, there is the lack of a sustainable education model to support workforce development for allied professionals. Again, we need to focus on encouraging more young people to pursue a career in these professions, and we must work with partners in secondary, further and higher education to facilitate that.

The second factor is a short-term approach to funding and late provision of funds to NHS boards, creating an additional barrier to recruitment and workforce planning. We also heard that return-to-work schemes could bring back allied health professionals who are on a career break.

In social care, we heard that staff recruitment and retention issues are

"now acute and are worsening"—[*Official Report, Health, Social Care and Sport Committee*, 9 November 2021; c 38.]

and that they are impacting on the sector's capacity. In a recent survey, 63 per cent of providers who responded said that they have had to reduce capacity for service delivery due to recruitment shortages.

Training can take years for the majority of health professions. We heard that, by contrast, social care workers can learn on the job. They could start tomorrow, yet there are still significant challenges. The main challenge is that working in social care is not an attractive enough option. Social care cannot compete with sectors such as retail and hospitality, which offer similar or even better rates of pay and comparatively less pressured and stressful working conditions. That is a particular problem in more remote areas.

There is a pressing need to look at improving pay, and terms and conditions, as well as promoting the value of the social care profession. Social care is there to support people to live well, live independently and live the lives that they want to lead. Perhaps that is not portrayed clearly enough in the rhetoric out there.

Some stakeholders suggested that a golden hello for those joining the sector could help to boost recruitment and that a loyalty payment could support retention. However, they also said that, if such measures are to work, a consistent sector-wide approach would be required; otherwise, if only some providers offered incentives while others did not, we could simply see increased staffing churn between organisations.

The stakeholders we spoke to acknowledged and welcomed the additional resources that have been made available to them to support their wellbeing at work through this difficult winter period. However, they said that they are hearing reports that the key challenge for staff is being able to carve out the time to make use of those resources, given that staff shortages mean that they are being asked to take on additional responsibilities and work extra shifts.

To prepare for this most challenging of winter periods, we need immediate action to look after the health and wellbeing of our health and care workforce. As we look towards recovery from the pandemic, a key priority must be to create a sustainable, long-term plan to ensure that we are building the health and care workforce that we will need in the future.

The Presiding Officer: I call Finlay Carson to speak on behalf of the Rural Affairs, Islands and Natural Environment Committee.

15:09

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): The impact of the health crisis is being felt everywhere, but the way in which recovery policies and priorities are delivered in rural areas, in particular, could have long-term impacts, leading either to more sustainable communities or to further devastating depopulation with impacts across every part of the country.

Rural and remote communities and islands in particular have paid a heavy price during the pandemic. One example is the many residents who were already experiencing loneliness because of their location suddenly being further cut off from society as village and rural life was shut down for months on end. That had a disproportionately high impact because of the ageing profile of our rural areas. Those already suffering from ill health were forced to close their doors on the outside world in order to self-isolate for even longer periods.

We know that there continues to be a digital divide, which is growing as more and more aspects of everyday life require the internet. The impact of the lack of a reliable broadband service was felt even more strongly in lockdown, as many people could not keep in regular contact with their family members and friends. It is important that, while we start the planning for our recovery from Covid-19, those issues are recognised and tackled head on as a matter of priority.

Public transport—more accurately, the current lack of public transport—will play a major part in rural recovery. Although passenger numbers on buses and trains have fallen dramatically, it is vital that the provision of services returns to pre-Covid levels. Now is not the time to cut train and bus timetables, because we desperately need rural workers to be able to get to work—otherwise, the work will disappear.

There is a strong argument that ideas such as the 20-minute community model can be looked at through a rural lens and as possible starting points to address the scenario that we see all too often in rural areas of “Which comes first?” Is it job creation, the availability of the workforce, housing or public transport? The answer is difficult, as we need them all at the same time.

As the convener of the Rural Affairs, Islands and Natural Environment Committee, I, with my colleagues, have asked that recovery policies be rural proofed. That will ultimately slow and start to reverse the trend of rural and remote communities being depopulated, with young people, families and, potentially, elderly residents now being forced to move into towns and cities to access services. We have a fantastic opportunity with more people working from home in rural areas right now, but we must ensure that that trend is not reversed. The important message is that the post-Covid recovery plans need to be rural proofed and should not result in centralised services in health, for instance. We need greater support for rural GPs so that residents can be treated locally and not forced to travel greater distances to larger towns.

The issues of how precious, fragile and precarious our food system is and the requirement for urgent transformation of our food supply chain

were among the many issues that the Rural Affairs, Islands and Natural Environment Committee examined. Scotland Food & Drink admits that it has been on a crisis footing as a result of the pandemic. It has revealed that many people who were heavily reliant on exports found that they disappeared overnight with Covid.

In the committee, James Withers from Scotland Food & Drink said in response to a question from Ariane Burgess:

“Over the past 18 months, one of the silver linings to the very dark cloud of Covid has been the huge amount of support from the Scottish public and consumers for businesses in their areas. The local food movement has taken a step forward, but that has emphasised some of the challenges in local supply chains.”

He said:

“Although the food supply chain did a remarkable job in a pandemic ... we have a very centralised system of food distribution, and the most resilient supply chains are often the shorter ones within communities.”

The chair of the Scottish Food Coalition, Professor Brennan, added that Argyll and Bute

“has shown huge innovation in how it has responded to Covid, supporting and working creatively with local suppliers in what is a geographically complicated area. That shows agility in contracts, in bringing in, encouraging, mentoring and supporting new suppliers, and in reducing bureaucracy.”—[*Official Report, Rural Affairs, Islands and Natural Environment Committee*, 1 September 2021; c 14-15.]

It is encouraging that local convenience stores have come into their own during the pandemic. They have become more flexible, they make decisions more quickly, and they respond to changes in customer demands. Indeed, their connection with local suppliers will grow in importance over the next few years. Local shops are, and will remain, absolutely central to rural communities throughout Scotland. Throughout the pandemic, they have shown fleetness of foot by changing where they have got their deliveries from, getting more local produce, and working with people and suppliers who are different from those with whom they would normally work.

That diversification of the supply chain is to be welcomed, and it has to be a big plus for the sector. That needs to be at the heart of Covid recovery now, and it must continue to be. The food supply chain in Scotland should develop and flourish in the months and years ahead through creating relationships with local suppliers, especially in horticulture and the agriculture sector.

The Presiding Officer: I call Claire Baker to speak on behalf of the Economy and Fair Work Committee.

15:14

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I am pleased to contribute to the debate on behalf of the Economy and Fair Work Committee. I will speak about our work on the on-going impact of the pandemic, the position of the Scottish economy and the support and policies that are needed to encourage investment and employment as part of the recovery effort.

The committee wants to see support to encourage investment, growth, prosperity and employment opportunities, while resilience and protection against any future economic shocks are built. We have heard evidence from stakeholders in business, employment and skills, including the economic development agencies and VisitScotland, and we have identified a number of specific spending priorities for the Scottish Government's forthcoming budget to support and drive economic and business recovery for a post-pandemic society.

We recognise that there is now a considerable opportunity to challenge and reset what we do and how we do it. Of particular interest to the economy is the fair work agenda. The pandemic has disrupted our economy, creating further insecurity for many sectors. There is now a choice between trying to rebuild an economy that returns us to our old ways of working and building one that is driven by increased fairness and equality in employment. Many of the witnesses we have heard from over recent weeks have emphasised the importance of skills, and we will look to work with the Education, Children and Young People Committee on that agenda.

There were practical calls from businesses. They are asking for more of a one-stop approach to business support, with improved joint working between agencies and support that is more tailored to local needs. The Economy and Fair Work Committee recognises the creation of the Find Business Support portal, but, as the cabinet secretary acknowledged to the committee, there is more to be done to simplify the landscape. With a view to the imminent 10-year economic strategy, our approach must match the scale of effort and ambition that is needed if the economy is to fully recover.

The effects of the pandemic on small and medium-sized enterprises have been uneven. Although most businesses have returned to trading, many smaller businesses accumulated significant debt during the pandemic. The Federation of Small Businesses in Scotland made a number of suggestions on how to help small firms, such as extending the terms of loan repayments, repayments only starting when a certain level of profitability is reached, and controlling costs such as non-domestic rates. The

committee has asked the Scottish Government to consider those suggestions in the context of next year's budget.

We had an evidence session to explore support for SMEs in the move to net zero. Although we heard about some good work that is taking place, we also noted concerns that many businesses are still in survival mode, and they may not feel able to look any further ahead at this point. Businesses recognise the importance of the transition to net zero, but there is understandably little appetite to take on further debt to invest in the measures that are needed. The committee is calling for a clear road map for businesses to drive the necessary and sustained efforts that they need in order to decarbonise.

We recognise that the pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on women's employment. Women were in the sectors of the economy that were the most exposed and that were more vulnerable to the virus. The committee recognises the vital role that women play as part of the workforce—as employees, entrepreneurs and business owners—and we welcome the commitment in the programme for government to progress with a women's business centre. We would like that to be prioritised in the forthcoming budget to ensure that women's contribution to economic recovery can be realised.

As we consider winter pressures in this afternoon's debate, our inquiry into supply chains illustrates the pressures in our economy. We have identified the pressures of labour and skills shortages, the impact of Brexit and our changed trading relationships, and the pandemic, which has created global supply-chain challenges. Supply chains are all under even greater pressure as winter approaches, and that brings a new set of challenges in dealing with Covid. The committee's work on that is on-going and, at its conclusion, we hope to propose practical solutions, including short-term and longer-term actions that can be taken to support Scotland's supply chain as we continue through the pandemic.

We received evidence from VisitScotland. At the moment, the tourism and hospitality sectors will be concerned about the emergence of the new variant of the virus. The committee intends to consider the Government's budget proposals seriously to ensure that those sectors have sufficient support.

It is clear from the committee's work so far that there are no easy answers to the challenges that we face, but there are choices that we can make about what sort of society we want to be and what our economy should look like and do for us.

If the pursuit of net zero and the wellbeing agenda is to be core to our recovery, we must be

realistic about where we are as we identify and respond to the challenges that arise. The forthcoming budget and the 10-year economic plan must respond to the significant challenges that we face as we all strive for a recovery that is fair for everyone.

The Presiding Officer: I call Kenneth Gibson to speak on behalf of the Finance and Public Administration Committee.

15:19

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I am pleased to speak on behalf of the Finance and Public Administration Committee about the priorities for pandemic recovery.

Others have spoken about the devastating impact that Covid-19 has had and the work that the committees are doing to shine a light on the needs of the public sector and the economy as we look ahead to recovery. Whatever the impact on our lives, health, jobs, businesses and the way that we work, it has required an unprecedented level of public investment. That is why our committee was keen to look at the overall impact of the pandemic on Scotland's public finances, as part of our pre-budget scrutiny. We found that, in total, £13.6 billion has been spent on Scotland's Covid response to date, with a further £500 million expected as a consequence of the United Kingdom autumn budget.

Although it is perhaps understandable in an ever-developing situation, we heard in evidence that it has not always been easy to identify and track the flow of Covid spend. That could become even more challenging as we continue our recovery. Therefore, the committee asked the Government to commit to providing transparent and timely information on all Covid allocations. That will not only allow proper scrutiny of where and how effectively money is being spent but enable us to learn lessons for the future.

In the early months of the pandemic, HM Treasury provided a funding guarantee of in-year resource to devolved Governments, which gave more certainty to budget planning. With no such guarantee this year, the Scottish Government was in the difficult and uncertain position of having to allocate spend without knowing whether all the resources that the UK Government announced would actually flow to Scotland. There is no doubt that that has made budget management more challenging in Scotland.

In the short term, we have asked the UK Government to commit to a funding guarantee if the fiscal situation develops rapidly. Looking to the longer term, we have called on both Governments to examine whether funding guarantees could be a better way of managing devolved finances.

Based on the pandemic experience, we also made recommendations regarding the upcoming review of the fiscal framework that governs the budget process in Scotland. Although the framework has broadly worked as intended, that has been more by accident than design. The economic impacts have largely been the same across the UK, with additional in-year Barnett consequential. The committee would like the review to look at how the fiscal framework can be strengthened so that it can withstand a situation in which future health or economic shocks disproportionately affect one part of the UK.

Some sectors, including hospitality, retail, leisure and travel, have been particularly affected by Covid. Some businesses have built up significant debt in the process, and Claire Baker talked eloquently about their concerns just a few moments ago. Therefore, we asked the Scottish Government to consider how it might best support those sectors to recover, rejuvenate the high street and grow the economy. It might not be possible within next year's spending envelope to provide a similar level of relief from non-domestic rates to businesses that struggled the most, but we welcome the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Economy's commitment to

"ensure that ... taxation enables businesses to fully recover and ... trade."—[*Official Report, Finance and Public Administration Committee*, 5 October 2021; c 12.]

We also understand the continuing pressures on local government finance: income was lost during the pandemic, and additional reliance on reserves is expected in 2022-23. The Scottish Government was asked to explore whether greater flexibility can be afforded to councils to enable them to better respond to local priorities in the next budget round.

The economic outlook for the UK is better than was forecast at the start of the year, the omicron variant notwithstanding. Forecasters have recently revised up their expectations for growth over the next five years, following stronger than predicted growth in the first half of 2021, which was supported by the vaccine roll-out. The Office for Budget Responsibility now expects the UK to reach pre-pandemic levels at the turn of the year and to surpass February 2020 levels by January next year.

Although unemployment and economic scarring are predicted to be lower than was anticipated last January, inflation has risen sharply, which has prompted fears of a cost of living crisis. That is evident in the cost of fuel at the pumps, heating bills and our weekly shopping baskets.

We will look to the Scottish economic and fiscal outlook in the Scottish budget on 9 December to find out the latest on how the Scottish economy is faring and how the Scottish Government plans to

invest in recovery. Members will also have an ongoing interest in the framework for the upcoming resource and spending review and the medium-term financial strategy, which is published on the same day, to see how the Scottish Government proposes to address some of the longer-term impacts of Covid-19.

I look forward to exploring in more detail other aspects of the committee's report, including the pre-existing challenges to Scotland's public finances, in our new year pre-budget debate.

The Presiding Officer: I call Ariane Burgess to speak on behalf of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee

15:23

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): As convener of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee, I will focus my contribution on the vital role that local government will play in driving recovery from the pandemic. That was the focus of the committee's pre-budget scrutiny.

The experience of the pandemic emphasised how critical local authorities are to the communities that they serve. Through the dedication and hard work of council staff and collaboration with community and third sector workers, local authorities ensured that communities were able to access vital services throughout the pandemic, and they continue to do so as the pandemic endures.

If there is to be meaningful and transformative recovery from the pandemic, local government needs to take a leading role in that process, because simply returning to the status quo is not good enough. Any recovery from the pandemic must involve tackling inequalities, which have only been exacerbated by the pandemic. Doing that can be achieved only with the full involvement of local government. However, local government needs to have the finances, certainty, workforce and tools to deliver that transformative recovery.

In the rest of my speech, I will talk about what needs to be in place for local government to be able to play a full role in recovery from the pandemic.

First, local government needs sufficient resources and funding. The intention of any local government funding settlement is to enable local government to deliver core services. In the current circumstances, leading the economic recovery from the pandemic is a crucial part of the work of local government, so it is an important aspect of local government funding arrangements.

Differing views were presented to the LGHP Committee about whether local government

funding has gone down in real terms. Irrespective of anyone's view on that, funding is not keeping pace with the ever-increasing demands on local government, and that needs to be recognised.

For local government to play a leading role in recovery, not only does it need to be sufficiently resourced, it needs more long-term certainty about resources. The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities stressed how important multi-year funding settlements from the Scottish Government are to local authorities. Not only has the absence of multi-year funding frustrated the ambitions of local authorities by preventing them from developing long-term plans, it has also impacted on their partners. Without certainty about their own funding, local authorities are unable to make long-term commitments to their partners. We recognise that, to date, the Scottish Government has not been in a position to offer multi-year funding, but with the UK Government now setting out a three-year spending plan, the opportunity is there. Long-term certainty would enable local authorities to work with their partners to make the kind of long-term plans that could help tackle inequalities and make transformative societal changes. I would welcome any update on progress towards a multiyear settlement.

Witnesses also raised concerns with us about the extent of ring-fencing and the constraints that it places on local authorities to act flexibly to meet local needs. Funding that was provided to local authorities during the pandemic was, to a large extent, not ring-fenced, and that enabled local authorities to act flexibly to meet the greatest need in their areas. I think that we would all accept that there will always be some funds that it is appropriate to ring fence. However, local authorities were able to act effectively and responsibly during the pandemic because of the flexibility that was afforded to them. The positive lessons of the pandemic must not be lost.

The need for a fiscal framework for local government was also repeatedly highlighted to us, and we will pursue that issue in the context of our considerations of the local governance review over the coming years. The consistent message to the committee so far has been that local authorities must be able to act flexibly to deliver locally.

The Presiding Officer: I call Audrey Nicoll to speak on behalf of the Criminal Justice Committee.

15:28

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): It is a privilege to speak in today's important debate as the convener of the Criminal Justice Committee. I thank the convener and members of the COVID-19 Recovery

Committee for securing the debate. It is especially valuable that we will have an opportunity to hear so many contributions from a range of committees—it reminds us all that Covid is not just a health issue, but one that has impacted on almost every part of our lives. To echo the words of the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Veterans when he last spoke to us about Covid, it has certainly not gone away; the pandemic is far from over.

Like many other sectors, the criminal justice sector has been significantly impacted by the virus. As a committee, we have tried to ensure that the sector has been able to cope and continue to function to the greatest extent possible during the lockdowns.

As we slowly start to recover, we have tried to ensure that we retain some of the incredibly innovative changes to practice that the pandemic has brought about, while carefully studying Government plans to make some of them permanent. As the committee said recently in its pre-budget report, any proposals

“must enjoy the support of the sector and any fundamental changes to the ways we currently conduct business must be carefully studied and the impact on rights considered. The balance of justice must also not be undermined by any changes.”

I thank everyone who works and volunteers in the sector for their incredible efforts to keep the criminal justice system functioning. Their professionalism and commitment have been second to none. However, I also acknowledge that the pandemic has left the sector with massive challenges. One of the largest of those challenges is the backlog of cases in our courts—in particular, our sheriff courts and High Courts.

As we heard recently, before the pandemic there were approximately 1,330 trials outstanding in our sheriff and jury courts and there are now in excess of 3,500. Every one of those cases represents not only a victim who is awaiting justice, but an accused who is waiting to come to trial. With those figures, it is not surprising that the Cabinet Secretary for Justice recently told the Parliament that remand numbers have jumped to nearly 30 per cent of the prison population.

A growth of nearly 2,000 extra trials is challenging enough, but we also know that a significant proportion of those are for serious offences such as rape and crimes of sexual violence. That means that many of the 3,500 trials will result in a conviction and imprisonment, which will put yet more pressure on the prison system, healthcare sector and voluntary groups that work in prisons supporting education and training and responding to drug misuse and mental health issues.

We also know that it is likely to take years to tackle that backlog. Can members imagine the strain on a survivor of rape of having to wait another three or four years for their case even to come to court? We were privileged recently to hear from a group of such survivors. I can honestly tell members that their stories and journeys were some of the most powerful evidence that I have ever heard. We simply must take action to address the situation.

The committee will publish further reports, including on Covid recovery, in the coming weeks to set out our suggestions for improvement. We look forward to helping in any scrutiny of a Covid recovery bill and will play our part, working with the Scottish Government and others, to do all that we can to recover from this brutal pandemic.

The Presiding Officer: I call Richard Leonard to speak on behalf of the Public Audit Committee.

15:33

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): It is a privilege to be the convener of the Public Audit Committee because it lies at the heart of parliamentary scrutiny and democratic accountability. It is the guardian of not only the public purse, but the public interest, too, promoting openness, good governance and strong leadership. It does that in the cause of public trust and confidence in not just public spending but public outcomes. At no time have those principles been as important as they are today.

The Auditor General for Scotland reported that, last year alone, Scottish Government spending on Covid-19 was at least £8.8 billion. A further £4.9 billion is expected to be spent in 2021-22. That spending has been aimed at saving lives and jobs and at keeping our children in school and our national health service going.

In the midst of human suffering and the awful loss of life—almost 10,000 of our fellow citizens have died from Covid-19 in Scotland alone—a new spirit of social solidarity has also been rekindled. Only last week, the committee heard at first hand about a new dawn of community empowerment in neighbourhoods across Scotland in response to the pandemic, but we have to ensure that that new dawn is not a false dawn. That means providing longer-term funding for the voluntary sector so that vital services are sustained. It also means that all public bodies, not just local government, must understand that they have an obligation to support and empower the communities that they serve.

The pandemic has taken a disproportionate toll on the lives of young people and children, disrupting their learning, harming their wellbeing and plunging too many of them into even deeper

poverty. That is set out starkly in the joint Auditor General for Scotland and Accounts Commission report, published earlier this year, on “Improving outcomes for young people through school education”.

To put it bluntly, pupils who live in the most challenging circumstances have been most affected by school closures. They are the ones who are less likely to have access to devices, broadband and suitable study space and more likely to have caring responsibilities. That is why the committee agrees with the Auditor General that improvement needs to happen faster, that we need to address inconsistency across the country and that we must start to measure properly our young people’s outcomes—not just by exam results, but by their health, wellbeing and confidence—to make sure that they are going forwards and not backwards.

Audit Scotland has also reported that the number of children and young people who have been

“waiting more than a year for treatment has trebled in the last 12 months”.

The Scottish Association for Mental Health warns us that, as we recover from the pandemic, an even greater wave of mental health problems across our communities is likely and that Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service referrals will continue to rise. However, we know that one in four referrals to CAMHS was rejected last year and that no national data is collected to establish whether alternative services were accessed or, critically, what difference they made. Cabinet secretary, it must be a priority for the Scottish Government to work with Public Health Scotland to improve the quality and scope of data on the provision of CAMHS as a matter of urgency and to improve the quality and scope of services as well.

I now turn to the vaccination programme. During our scrutiny of the “Covid-19: Vaccination programme” report, which Audit Scotland published, we heard that 90 per cent of people who are aged 18 and over have received at least one dose of a Covid-19 vaccine. That point is critical, because, as the report highlighted, people who are not vaccinated at all are twice as likely to contract the virus, three times more likely to be hospitalised as a result, and five times more likely to die from Covid than somebody who is doubly vaccinated. The truth is that people who live in economically deprived communities, our younger people and some minority ethnic groups are more likely to be in that unvaccinated category. While this is a matter of public health, it is also a matter of social justice and economic inequality.

The road to recovery will be a prominent feature of the Auditor General for Scotland’s work

programme in the months ahead, as it will be for the Public Audit Committee. We look forward to scrutinising further Audit Scotland reports. We will challenge Government directorates, take to task public agencies and take evidence from people on the ground. We will follow the pandemic pound, be guided by the facts and so hold Government to account. That it is our job and it is one that the entire committee, on behalf of the Parliament and the people, is determined to get done.

15:38

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery (John Swinney):

I am grateful to Parliament for the opportunity to respond to the important scrutiny work that the COVID-19 Recovery Committee has undertaken and to the contributions from other committees so far. We thank each of the committees for their work and the scrutiny that is a vital part of the process of parliamentary accountability, which will strengthen our approach to recovery.

As we look towards an uncertain winter period, it is clear that the pandemic is far from over and that we must all continue to take the appropriate steps to keep ourselves, our loved ones and our communities safe.

Because of the measures that we have all taken to control the virus and the outstanding efforts of those who have developed and deployed the vaccine, we find ourselves in a stronger position than that in which we were this past year. However, the risk that we could see a dramatic rise in cases in the coming months remains significant, especially with the identification of the omicron variant and the fact that we are moving into winter, when people are less able to spend more time out of doors.

Public Health Scotland is working rigorously to assess how many cases of omicron there are likely to be in Scotland. Together with local test and protect teams, it will work to identify how the virus might have been transmitted and to break further chains of transmission. However, we should not await the outcome of that work before taking necessary action. We must act now to reduce the virus’s opportunities to spread.

As I explained to the COVID-19 Recovery Committee this morning, the Scottish Government considers the state of the pandemic each week on the basis of assessing the case for proportionate action in the context of the evidence that is available to us. We always work on the precautionary principle, given the necessity of acting as swiftly as we can to interrupt the spread of the virus.

As was set out to Parliament on Tuesday, the Government has so far taken the stance of asking

people to significantly step up and increase compliance with existing procedures rather than introduce new protections. Existing procedures include getting vaccinated; taking tests more regularly, particularly in relation to levels of socialisation in our society in the run-up to Christmas; maintaining hygiene measures; working from home wherever that is possible—the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Economy has been encouraging the business community so that more organisations enable more of their staff to work from home—and showing Covid certification, where needed.

I take this opportunity to thank everyone who continues to play their part to protect Scotland. During the past few months, the committee has necessarily focused on baseline measures and our approach to trying to live with the virus. For that reason, I will focus my remarks on some of the issues that have arisen from the committee's scrutiny and on the importance of ensuring that the emphasis on baseline measures is a message that is clearly understood by members of the public and applied to how we all live our lives.

The vaccination programme has fundamentally changed the balance of harms that are associated with the pandemic, with the relationship between infections and serious health harms weakening significantly. The fact that we have a significant level of protection in the population has meant a strategic change in how we are able to handle the pandemic. As of 2 December, 88 per cent of the adult population in Scotland have been vaccinated and 39 per cent have received a booster or third dose.

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): Figures that were published yesterday by Public Health Scotland show that, in parts of Glasgow such as Finnieston and Kelvinhall and east of the city centre, less than 30 per cent of people have had a second dose. How can we get on top of that?

John Swinney: We have to take steps to ensure that the vaccination programme is available to individuals. I am certainly satisfied that we have comprehensive availability of vaccination venues in accessible locations.

One of the questions that has been raised with us is on the possibility of creating mass vaccination centres—Dr Gulhane has raised that point in the chamber previously. There is an argument to be had about whether we should have a wider range of locally accessible facilities that maximise convenience, reduce travel costs and provide a more reliable way of securing access to vaccination for some of the people in the communities to which Dr Gulhane refers or whether we should have facilities in larger, more centrally located venues, which is what the Conservatives have been arguing for, although I

noticed that Mr Carson was rather arguing against a centralised approach during his speech this afternoon.

We have to ensure that we have available facilities that are accessible to members of the public and, crucially, the communication to encourage and motivate individuals. The best messaging around that is the significant protection that the vaccine offers people to reduce the risk of serious health harm.

The vaccination programme has a crucial role to play in protecting the public and reducing the pressure that the national health service faces, which will be significant as we go through the winter.

The Scottish Government set out a significant NHS recovery plan on 25 August. We have also set out measures to invest in the national health service, to ensure that we have sufficient staff capacity and sufficient investment in facilities, such as the new national treatment centres, which will enable us to make progress on addressing the delivery of care that has been interrupted for some individuals by the pandemic in the past 18 months or so. The recovery plan focuses on ensuring that we have the necessary resilience in place over the winter, and it complements the work that is being undertaken to ensure that we have population-wide protection as a consequence of the vaccination programme.

I turn to the Covid recovery strategy, which was set out to Parliament in early October. It is focused unreservedly on tackling the inequality in our society that existed before Covid and has been exacerbated by Covid, a point that was raised by Ariane Burgess and Richard Leonard. The strategy is unapologetic about focusing on the necessity of tackling child poverty by focusing on increasing financial security for low-income households, enhancing the wellbeing of children and young people by undertaking early intervention activity rather than waiting for CAMHS support, and creating good green jobs and fair work to enable families to access higher-quality employment.

We have developed the strategy very much in collaboration with the local government community in Scotland. I will chair a joint board with the president of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to monitor the implementation of the Covid recovery strategy, because we accept that there has to be alignment between the activities of the Government and local government and those of the voluntary and private sectors, to ensure that we make as much progress as possible on the work of Covid recovery.

Covid recovery has to be about ensuring that we protect the population from the risks of the virus at

this stage and that we create a fairer and more equal Scotland in which every individual has the option to prosper and thrive. That is the focus of the Government's work on Covid recovery.

15:47

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests. I am a practising NHS doctor.

Many of us learned a new Greek word this week: omicron. Is omicron more dangerous than the delta strain? We do not know yet. For now, we are on heightened alert; we wash our hands and wait for the data. Artificial intelligence and data have been at the heart of the international Covid-19 response.

Data is key to our amazing vaccine development programme and the trialling of new treatments. Without data, there would be no contact tracing apps that ping in the night. Data-driven innovations are transforming how we do healthcare in general. For example, drones are delivering medical supplies to remote regions and new optometry technology will soon be trialled to support clinical decisions in primary care.

I seek to make a case for data-driven innovation and for how we can build back better if we harness for healthcare the world-class skills we already have in Scotland. The data-driven innovation and AI landscape in Scotland is thriving. Through UK and Scottish Government programmes and funding from major donors, more than £1 billion pounds is being pumped into innovation and skills development in Scotland.

In healthcare, Scotland has greatness at its fingertips—literally. Scotland has the potential to be a world leader in developing, testing and proving medical technology. We just need to want it more and embrace home-grown and home-funded start-ups and university spin-outs. I would argue that we do not have a choice.

We have the spectre of 100,000 Scots struggling with long Covid. Many months ago, I had a productive meeting with the Cabinet Secretary for Health, Social Care and Sport, Humza Yousaf, but it seems that all momentum has stalled. Although the announcement of money is welcome, actually providing help via long Covid clinics is what we need.

Our NHS and social care services face huge workforce crises and challenges. Yes, we can increase our medical school numbers by funding more places, and I support that. Yes, we can incentivise experienced consultants to put off retirement—that is possible—and, yes, we can ethically recruit excellent qualified staff from overseas, which I also support. However, we will

not be able to increase our staff numbers enough to meet patient demand. We need to be innovative, and the solution lies in data-driven innovation.

Things are also difficult for our home-grown talent. Many get seed funding from us initially, but it is hard to get a foothold in our NHS, where bureaucracy so often slams the door on innovation. People are asked, "Where are your accounts for the past three years? Do you employ more than 50 staff?" When businesses are lean and mean, they do not qualify. That is why we have lost some great ones to the US, where they have secured venture capital and built up their companies.

Surely we should be adopting medical technology solutions at scale here, in Scotland, to manage patient care, shorten hospital stays, reduce hospital readmission rates, improve patient satisfaction and bring about better patient outcomes. As one tech entrepreneur said to me yesterday, our smart start-ups do not want yet another Government grant; they want their first order.

Here, in Scotland, we need a new strategic innovation model so that our NHS regions can pilot home-grown cutting-edge solutions that will improve healthcare delivery and efficiency. I spoke to another tech start-up company, which has developed a remarkable antibody test that uses high-performance assays to detect new strains of the virus at five to six times less cost than we are paying at the moment. That technology has been heralded as a game changer. We need it.

If we can crack that nut, we will not only improve services and cut costs, we will help our smart young medtech companies to grow and capture markets overseas. Public support for data-driven innovation depends on trust in good governance, but we need to have in place the right rules and regulations that support our model of publicly funded healthcare rather than holding it back.

Innovation has been at the heart of our fantastic response to the pandemic. Let us pull together and harness innovation to see us through the crisis and into recovery—from omicron to beyond.

15:51

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): The impact of Covid-19 across Scotland has been devastating, and our thoughts are with those who have lost loved ones. More than 12,000 deaths have been recorded in Scotland as a result of Covid-19. That is a heartbreaking milestone, but we are not through this yet.

With the arrival of the omicron variant in Scotland, the immediate focus must be on

resourcing the test and protect system so that it has the necessary surge capacity, and urgently speeding up the roll-out of the booster jab to eligible people. I know that the cabinet secretary will agree that that means greater use of mobile and walk-in vaccination centres and the provision of many more local opportunities for clinics.

Members have raised complaints about vaccination centres turning people away, even though the eligibility criteria have been changed, with people having to wait only three months, rather than six months, to get the booster. The Government has apologised for the confusion, but it would be helpful to know when people can attend without being turned away.

Vaccinators will undoubtedly face an enormous task, given that more than 2 million people who are eligible for a booster jab are yet to receive one, and around 280,000 people have yet to receive their second vaccination. I thank the vaccinators in advance for their work.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): At this morning's meeting of the COVID-19 Recovery Committee, the issue of waiting at drop-in clinics was raised. Does Jackie Baillie accept that, if we have drop-in clinics, we will face the challenge that more people may turn up than can be coped with?

Jackie Baillie: My experience in my local area is that some of the drop-in clinics have not had enough people and that letters—certainly in the Helensburgh end of my constituency—have not arrived with constituents. Therefore, they have taken the novel approach of just going to the vaccination clinics to get their booster jabs, and the vaccinators have welcomed that. Whatever arrangements are put in place, it is a case of working at pace, and I think that the Government recognises that.

Many people remain uncertain about what will happen at Christmas, whether they will be able to visit family and whether they will be able to travel abroad. We support a four-nations approach, but the Scottish Government has powers in that area. If it decides that a quarantine needs to be put in place, I ask it to make sure that that is accompanied by a package of support for the travel industry. I would welcome any assurance that the cabinet secretary can offer on that point.

I want to focus my remaining comments on health and social care. Even before Covid-19, health services were struggling to keep up with demand and there was a growing backlog of care requirements. The pandemic has exacerbated long waits. More than 650,000 patients are waiting to be seen, and, unless urgent action is taken, lives will be lost.

Ambulance delays are still too long, waiting times at accident and emergency departments are

the longest ever recorded, and there is no capacity in our hospitals because the SNP has stripped out more than 1,000 beds. Social care is in crisis.

Although the number of Covid patients in hospital remains relatively low, any increase, as has been seen with the new variant in South Africa, would be a catastrophe. Staff are already working flat out and are under enormous strain. So, too, are staff in social care, where vacancies are increasing as people leave for other jobs in hospitality and retail because the pay in social care is so poor. Care packages are being cancelled because of those workforce shortages and families are being left to cope without support.

Family carers have been the unsung heroes of the pandemic. Without their efforts, we would have struggled to cope. Where is their recovery plan or respite? In many local authorities, respite has not restarted and family members are now being told that they must step into the breach yet again because care packages can no longer be provided.

The Scottish Government must act urgently or the strain will become too much. It could start by spending the £165 million in Barnett consequential that languish, as yet unallocated, in the health budget. The Government cannot sit on the money; the NHS needs it now. Winter pressures have been with us for a few months and could become even worse because we do not yet know what the impact of the new variant will be. We need adequate workforce planning because there is insufficient staffing. We need increased bed capacity to make up for the current lack.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Please conclude, Ms Baillie.

Jackie Baillie: A sticking-plaster approach will not get us through this. I again thank all the staff for their hard work and dedication. Their goodwill might well be tested this winter.

15:56

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): I thank today's other speakers. It is important that we hear about the work of all the committees and about how the Covid recovery is being addressed by each.

I will reiterate the importance of vaccines and of messaging by Governments and public bodies, talk about long Covid and finish by saying something about the resilience of young people living through this period.

I, too, pay tribute to our healthcare professionals, who are exhausted. This has been a relentless time for them and for everyone in front-line services. We know that the public are grateful. We used to hear that gratitude in the

streets every Thursday evening. I hope for a time when those workers can step down from the top tier of unremitting struggle.

Scottish Liberal Democrats have proposed a burnout prevention strategy. That would include a commitment that new staff will be trained and recruited until safe staffing levels, as recommended by the royal colleges, are met, and new guarantees about time off in lieu and annual leave, backed by joint Government and health board guidance, to guard against overwork and to ensure that planning places greater emphasis on guaranteeing staff leave and provides new protection for precious time off.

The new omicron variant that has been discovered in southern Africa is a stark reminder of the existential threat posed to our own recovery by the collective failure to help vaccinate the whole world. It is only when we are all vaccinated that we will truly destabilise the Covid pandemic. The fastest way to end it is to ensure that vaccines are available to everyone globally. We are all interconnected and interdependent.

Our Governments and public bodies must be clear with their messaging. They have been clear about the need for vaccinations, and I urge everyone who is eligible to go and have their first, second or booster jab. The situation is complex and fast moving. Our Governments and public bodies must strive to make things clear and simple. There has been some confusion when messages for the islands have been different to those found in national media outlets.

Since the summer, I have been asking constituents to get in touch with me and with NHS Shetland about long Covid, so that we are able to determine the needs in the isles. Scottish Liberal Democrats led the first debate here about long Covid. I am grateful to other members of the cross-party group on long Covid, many of whom joined Alex Cole-Hamilton and me in the recent debate. As my party leader reminded the First Minister today, 99,000 people in Scotland are now living with long Covid.

Before I conclude, I want to reflect on the importance of our young people in the recovery from Covid. We know how resilient they have been during it and how much they are needed in the recovery. The Deputy First Minister will recall that I have raised with him concerns about the on-going student experience. Young people are our investment in the future and we want them to be learning for all our sakes. We cannot afford to have a brain drain. We need their talents, skills and knowledge.

However, people are telling me that they cannot understand why university learning is still mostly online, with students being in university for in-

person lectures less than a day a week, while pupils and staff can attend schools daily. A constituent told me that their young person would be better off flying from Shetland to their mainland university for a day each week, rather than spending most of their time isolated, away from home, struggling and learning online in small and expensive student accommodation.

We do not want to have high drop-out rates in education as another consequence of the crisis. We need to have everyone contributing to the recovery from the pandemic.

The Presiding Officer: The first speaker in the open debate will be John Mason.

16:00

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): As a member of the Covid committees in both the previous and present sessions of Parliament, it has been interesting for me to see how things have changed. The present committee was keen to use today's debate to strengthen the links with other committees and to try to ensure that we are not overlapping with one another or leaving gaps that someone should be covering. Covid's impact has been so wide ranging that, as well as the committees that focus on the economy and education, many other committees—in fact, all of them, probably—will have some kind of angle on it. I am keen to see Parliament functioning well and having a joined-up approach as much as we can.

One of the challenges for the COVID-19 Recovery Committee has been to decide exactly what its role is and what its focus should be. It was clearer for the previous Covid committee, which was ably led by Donald Cameron—I do not know who wrote that part of my speech notes—because things were changing so dramatically from week to week that it was almost the case that all that we had to do was react to that. Now that things have settled a bit and seem to be gradually improving, it is all a bit less clear.

I think that we need to accept that, in some sectors at least, full recovery is going to take quite some time. Older people who might have travelled overseas as tourists both to and from Scotland may well be wary for some time about making such trips, and that will impact on the tourism sector. Most obviously, the NHS cannot possibly get waiting times back to normal any time soon—and I note what we have heard about the waiting times in the justice system. I accept that that is hard to hear for people who are waiting for hip replacements or similar non-emergency procedures, but I do not think that there is any quick way round it.

I will move on to some more specific issues. We face a number of challenges as we go into the winter, but one that concerns me is the number of people who are still not getting their vaccinations and those who are arguing against either the existence of Covid or the vaccines as the main way of tackling it. I accept that our overall vaccination rates are very good and stand comparison with those of most other countries, and I certainly do not want to see vaccination being made mandatory. However, we see a hesitancy or a reluctance to get vaccinated in certain quarters, especially among some ethnic minorities and in poorer areas. Health services have always found it harder to reach younger men in constituencies such as mine, and I do not have an easy answer to that. The committee will focus on some of those issues next Thursday.

More serious is the fact that some people, for whatever reason, spread misinformation or downright false statements about Covid and the vaccines. That is perhaps seen most clearly on social media, but I do not entirely blame social media for it. Twitter, Facebook et cetera have been extremely useful for all of us and for the health services in communicating with the public.

However, let us remember that we all have a role to play as MSPs in supporting and building trust in our health services. Of course we need to be asking questions of Government and others about how the pandemic is being handled. Mistakes will inevitably be made and it is right that they are explored and learned from, but we all need to be careful not to undermine the tremendous work that our doctors, nurses and other health staff are doing.

Looking further ahead, there is still a lot that we do not know. Will most office workers return to their offices over time? If they do, will they return full time or just for some of the time? We are not yet sure about the answers to those questions, but they will have a huge impact on our town and city centres and on our public transport, especially if there are no longer the peak time rushes that there used to be.

Finally, I thank those who have supported the previous and current Covid committees. In particular, being able to regularly question people such as Gregor Smith, Jason Leitch, Linda Bauld and Helen Stagg, to name but four, has been both a great opportunity and a great privilege.

16:05

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I will focus my remarks on the most recent comments that have been made by the business community, which build on exactly what it told us five or six weeks ago, when we had our previous Covid

debate in this chamber. Business is still very much of the view that, although minimising the Covid threat absolutely has to be the priority, especially with the dangerous new omicron variant, the second priority must be developing our ability to secure a strong economic recovery that is sustainable in not just in the short term but the years ahead. That economic growth is absolutely critical not just for jobs, investment and tax revenues, but to encourage the greater economic optimism that we all so desperately need.

What is the business community—whether that is the Scottish Chambers of Commerce, the Confederation of British Industry, the Scottish Retail Consortium or the Federation of Small Businesses—asking for as it faces up to the on-going pandemic, supply chain issues, the increased cost of living and national insurance increases? First and foremost, those organisations are very much talking about making their businesses secure for the future.

The FSB—of course, it is small business Saturday this weekend—is very clear that to complement the existing measures that have been agreed by this Parliament, we need a package of discrete measures to assist with the small business recovery. I have a great deal of sympathy with that, because small businesses are very much the bedrock of our economy and they have been at the heart of our local communities during the pandemic—I know that the Deputy First Minister recognises that in his constituency, and Richard Leonard referred to it in his remarks this afternoon. That is why the Scottish Chambers of Commerce has been so strong about the need to revitalise our towns and cities not just with short-term measures such as extending the business rates relief and the small business bonus scheme, but with longer-term measures, too.

The Scottish Government should be credited with showing some generosity in its approach over the past financial year, in that it permitted some business rates relief. I hope that that will be true in next week's budget as well.

Business is keen to remind us that, although the short-term measures are helpful, they will not be nearly enough. The Chambers of Commerce and the CBI want to see reform of the non-domestic rates system and the planning system, and the FRC wants reform of the commercial property market. Of course, it is absolutely essential that Scotland is not at any competitive tax disadvantage with anywhere else, including England.

It is noticeable how much business is focusing on upskilling, training and building an effective digital infrastructure. We know that unemployment has not risen quite in the way that we were once expecting, and we also know that job vacancies

are higher than expected, which clearly tells us that there are some mismatches on skills in the economy and perhaps a lack of flexibility in the labour force. It would be helpful if the Scottish Government could spell out exactly what it will do to address some of those labour issues as quickly as possible.

The critical issue is the provision of greater certainty and stability—I think that those are the words that Kate Forbes used—when it comes to economic policy making. We need a much more coherent and holistic approach to policy making, to ensure that Scotland remains fully competitive with other economies. People in business want a Scottish Government that fully engages with them, not one that just gives them a quick phone call to tell them that some new regulations will be coming out in a few days' time. They want a Scottish Government that brings a clarity of purpose to business support and planning ahead, and a Government that provides clear supporting evidence to underpin the decisions that it is making, because those decisions are absolutely crucial if we are going to have public trust in the way forward from Covid. We know that there has been a great deal of confusion and contradiction in that regard at times, so clarity of purpose is vital.

Next week's budget, of course, presents us with an opportunity. I look forward to responding to the budget statement and to the engagement process between stages 1 and 3 after Christmas.

16:09

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): We face our second winter and second Christmas having to deal with Covid. Everyone is tired of the personal impact and the impact that it is having on our local and national services. The discovery of the omicron variant is, of course, worrying and it will be a few weeks before we discover the full impact.

We all have to play our part in keeping the virus under control. As the First Minister indicated on Tuesday, the vaccination programme is our best line of defence. We all need to play our part in our constituencies to ensure that as many people as possible get vaccinated. We heard this morning that our booster programme is the best performing in the UK. Lateral flow testing needs to be a regular occurrence for us all, not only when we go to events and socialise but outwith such activity.

Only yesterday, a poll by Ipsos MORI showed that 84 per cent of the people who were asked held a favourable opinion of the Scottish Government's handling of the pandemic. Clearly, the messaging on the vaccine booster programme and on adherence to rules and regulations is working.

Prior to vaccination, Covid had a very telling impact in a number of ways and across all sectors of life in Scotland, including in my constituency of East Lothian. In retail, many of our high streets were closed for months on end. That impacted not only on those businesses but on the supply chain. Our highly successful tourism trade struggled as the visitor tap was turned off overnight. This week, I have met representatives of the aviation sector and Marc Crothall from the Scottish Tourism Alliance. Both sectors are recovering, but they need their pipeline of visitors in order to build up for summer 2022.

In caring for our most vulnerable, our community resilience teams have worked amazingly over the months during the pandemic. I know that, in my constituency, they are ready to step up again. I thank Volunteer Centre East Lothian and the area partnerships.

A few months ago, I brought forward a members' business debate on mental health. Covid has exacerbated that issue and has highlighted other inequalities in our society. My office manager, Lyn Jardine, made a very good point in recent meetings with anti-poverty groups. We have often heard in discussions that some groups in society are difficult to reach; she pointed out that we should talk about them as being easy to ignore. We must continue to reach out to all our communities and ensure that no one is left behind.

Of course, the most important issue that we face is in relieving the pressures on our care and health services. The care sector has been impacted by Brexit, as have our hospitality, farming and logistics industries. The pool of available people has been reduced, due to Brexit, and that has placed pressures on our care services.

The recent announcement by the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation on boosters for all age groups will, of course, require resources in staff and buildings across East Lothian, Scotland and the UK. The vaccine programme in Scotland has saved an amazing estimated 27,000 lives. East Lothian's share of that is more than 500 people whose lives have been saved. We just have to look at the large increases in cases across Europe to see what happens if vaccinations fall behind. The balancing act between staffing hospitals and vaccination booster centres is a very difficult one. The quicker we can reduce pressures on the NHS nationally and recruit additional staff, the quicker we will return to a more sustainable delivery of services.

In conclusion, all of us in this building and everyone in Scotland must adhere to the guidelines more than ever. We must get the vaccine, wear masks, wash our hands and test regularly. We owe that to our retailers, our tourism

sector, our voluntary sector and, most importantly, our care and NHS workers.

16:12

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): On Monday, the First Minister addressed the country and offered new advice on Covid-19. Once again, we are at a significant moment in the pandemic. In that update, the First Minister announced that the first cases of the new omicron variant had been detected here in Scotland, including in Glasgow, which I represent. The First Minister told people in Scotland to redouble their efforts to suppress the virus. The same must be true for the Scottish Government. We must see prompt action, which must be taken with us all—and the long term—in mind.

We must avoid a situation whereby people are left without the support that they need in order to live or the income that they need in order to get by. The pandemic, and all that has come with it, has had a disproportionately detrimental impact on women, unpaid carers, black and minority ethnic people, poorer people, older people and disabled people. It has also had a disproportionate impact on the people of Glasgow. For those groups, things were already impossibly hard before the pandemic, but the pandemic has made things worse.

I have made it my mission to be a voice for the people who have been left behind. Our unpaid carers are one such group. They are terrified at what lies ahead. Families are having care packages cut as local authorities ask relatives to step up and step in where social care has been stopped and not yet reinstated. The social care system is not ready, prepared or resourced for another wave of Covid-19. As a result, unpaid carers, who are predominantly women, will bear the brunt. They are already broken. We cannot continue to lock down social care services with no end in sight. We need an effective track and trace system—something that we have not really had—to protect people from the virus and allow us to remobilise key services such as social care.

When I talk to carers, they tell me that they feel abandoned, let down and forgotten. Last week, one unpaid carer said of the decision to live with Covid that unpaid carers had been

“sacrificed at the altar of economic growth.”

The pandemic has had a huge impact on disabled people’s human rights too. Inclusion Scotland has said that it is

“not just the”

direct and

“catastrophic impact of the virus”

itself that has had an impact on disabled people, but the

“Inaction, turmoil and ... indifference to our lived experience”,

which has shut them out and left them behind.

Too many decisions have been taken about those groups without them. I have said many times in the chamber that our recovery journey must not repeat those mistakes. We must take all those groups with us, and that includes ensuring that decisions that are made as a result of the new variant and the need to double down on our efforts once more are made with the wellbeing of those who have been hardest hit in mind.

That includes our financial wellbeing. The First Minister set out new guidance that, should test and trace contact us, we must self-isolate, regardless of our vaccination status. That marks a significant change in the guidance. The difference now is that we are faced with no furlough, and much of the support and protection has gone. We do, however, have the benefit of hindsight. We can learn from where we went wrong, perhaps understandably, and where things did not work, and we can support those who were left behind through this uncertain moment.

That starts with ensuring that anyone who needs to self-isolate is able to do so without fear of losing out on income. Affordability must not be a barrier to isolation. That is why I have written to the Scottish Government this week to ask it to update eligibility for the self-isolation support grant to include people who are advised by NHS track and trace to self-isolate, which will now be not just those who are unvaccinated. That is merely reverting to previous guidance. There cannot be additional restrictions without additional resources. The public are doing all that they can to protect themselves and each other, and the Government must do the same and ensure that everyone, regardless of their income, is able to follow the First Minister’s guidance safely without putting themselves at risk of ill health or hardship.

We cannot force people to choose between paying the bills and surviving the virus. There is much that we still do not know about the virus, but we have known from very early on that it does not discriminate in who it affects and that, without proper support, the impacts are felt disproportionately by those who already face significant disadvantage. I hope that the Government will consider my proposal seriously and give people confidence in the new guidance, and that it will reflect carefully on those who have lost the most this year and learn from that, listen to those people and take action to protect us all.

16:17

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): I place on record my thanks to the COVID-19 Recovery Committee, which is convened by my colleague Siobhian Brown, and to all the committee conveners for their contributions today. All have made some important contributions to our understanding of how the public, whom we serve, are feeling about the current situation.

I was privileged to serve on the COVID-19 Committee in the previous session of Parliament, which was very ably chaired by Donald Cameron. It was established pretty much as an emergency committee to consider the changes and regulations that were brought in to try to cope with and thwart the virus as it spread throughout the country.

We have come through the early lockdown and the various levels of restrictions in different parts of Scotland, the emergence and life-saving impact of the vaccine, and the gradual reopening of the economy, if I can put it like that, yet Covid is very much still here.

In the three full months since September, there have been more than 270,000 new positive cases in Scotland, which is 37 per cent of the entire case numbers. There have been just under 1,500 deaths, which is 14 per cent of all deaths. That is just in the past three months. If there is anything that we should learn about the virus, it must surely be that it will find a way to mutate and keep spreading. That is why we need to keep a step ahead of it—to rely on science and the advice from our experts, and to take the measures that we think will protect our population, save lives and help to ensure that our NHS does not become overrun.

I think back to the start of the pandemic and the tragic scenes in Italy that we surely all must remember. There were large numbers of people dying; communities in fear and in isolation; people singing from balconies to try to recover some kind of community spirit; and people experiencing the heartbreak of losing family members without being able to see them. I recall looking at Italy's figures at that time and thinking, "This could kill 500 people in Scotland." I also recall someone writing, "This is what's coming our way next," and come it did.

Now look where we are: we have lost nearly 10,000 people directly to the virus, but it could have been so many more—possibly 27,000 more—without the vaccine and the baseline protection measures that we have had to put in place. Make no mistake, we are still in a battle to save lives. The virus has not gone and it is still killing people every day in Scotland and all over

the world. Yesterday, we lost another 27 people to this dreadful virus.

The COVID-19 Recovery Committee is right to be considering how we prepare for winter and looking ahead at what our priorities for recovery should be. It is deliberating on issues such as how to have effective ventilation and CO₂ monitors in our schools, offices, businesses and homes in the middle of the Scottish winter. We have heard some of that debate today.

It was good to hear the testimony of members of the Scottish Youth Parliament on their thoughts and concerns. I ask the committee to keep taking such evidence as it carries on its work.

We owe the COVID-19 Recovery Committee, the various experts who offer it advice and the parliamentary staff who support it a huge debt of gratitude for the vital work that they are carrying out on our behalf. We are all doing what we can on our committees.

As we move into winter and grapple with the new omicron variant, I sincerely hope that the members of the Parliament will come together, in the main, to agree how best to promote the public health measures that are needed in order to save lives. We dare not drop our guard—far too many lives depend on us getting it right.

16:21

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate and will focus my remarks on how we can help public health to recover from the pandemic. The omicron variant is a painful reminder that we are not out of the woods yet and that Covid-19 is still a very real threat. The Greens have been clear that we need to take a precautionary approach and ensure that a range of mitigation and health protections are in place, including a robust test and trace system, asymptomatic testing and PCR testing for international travellers.

It is indisputable that the pandemic has put severe and serious pressures on all areas of health and social care. Once again, I thank all those who have worked so hard during the pandemic.

Before the pandemic, Scotland was known for its poor public health. The "sick man of Europe" moniker has been hard to shake off. As I have said before, in this session, I would like the Parliament to be the public health Parliament. We need a renewed focus on improving people's standard of living and tackling non-communicable diseases. We should be building on people's increased awareness of their health, which has arisen from the pandemic.

We know that inequality is a main driver of poor health and, as we have heard, the current rise in the cost of living has put a real squeeze on incomes. Everyone has the right to an adequate income to live on, and the Greens have long supported a universal basic income. At the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, we heard from Professor Sir Harry Burns and others about the positive impact that such a policy could have on health and wellbeing. Although our preference would be for a UBI, I am pleased to see that work on a minimum income guarantee is under way. I look forward to monitoring progress on that.

During the earlier part of the pandemic, we saw that emissions fell significantly along certain routes as we took fewer car journeys. Many of those routes are seeing a return to normal and those living, working and playing along them are again being subjected to a high level of pollution. As part of our recovery and to improve health, we need to tackle environmental harm such as air pollution, as well as health-harming products.

We know that more people have been drinking at home during the pandemic and that that is contributing to more alcohol-related deaths, which increased by 17 per cent in 2020. We need to address the ubiquity of alcohol. Given that we are constantly told of the health benefits of sport—and rightly so—why do we allow alcohol brands to sponsor sporting events? That seems counterproductive to say the least, particularly when combined with the fact that more people are engaging with sport at home, where we know that more drinking has been taking place. That also has impacts on children in households.

I have expressed my support for the uprating of minimum unit pricing. The policy was bold when it was introduced, but in order for it to continue to have an impact, we must ensure that it keeps up with inflation. I would also like to see mandatory unit calorie and ingredient labelling as well as prominent health warnings on alcohol products, so that people can be better informed about what they are consuming. We put calorie and ingredient labels on food and other drinks and we need to ensure that alcohol is not the exception to the rule.

Turning to mental health, we know the impact that the pandemic has had on mental wellbeing. The Greens are clear that everyone should have access to the support and treatment that are right for them, whether that be medication, counselling, social prescribing or in-patient treatment. We want treatment options to be diversified, particularly in the community. People should be able to access services through their GP surgery, for example. We also need to make better use of social prescribing. Clinicians' time to engage with social prescribing was limited before the pandemic and, as we know, health services are under more

pressure than ever. The provision of social prescribing can also be patchy.

Alongside an expansion in provision, I would like it to be made easier for clinicians and other professionals to signpost patients to resources and for patients to self-refer. I hope that community mental health link workers will play an important part in that.

While we deal with the on-going impact of the pandemic, it is never too early to set out our positive vision for Scotland. Now is the time to implement bold and radical policies to improve Scotland's public health now and for generations to come.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): I remind members that anybody who has participated in the debate needs to be in the chamber for the closing speeches.

16:26

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): As members who serve on committees of the Parliament will know, there is no doubt that Covid has put a massive strain on our public services. The Scottish Parliament and the UK Parliament have passed sweeping new laws that have given local authorities, health boards, the courts and other public agencies emergency powers to respond to the pandemic. That has allowed them to act quickly in the eye of the storm, often with little or no consultation. However, that is not an approach that any democratically elected representative should be comfortable with.

I want to touch on two issues, both of which are relevant to my constituents in South Scotland, and both of which are in East Lothian. Both show the risks and the damage that can be done when public authorities act with little or no consultation.

The first issue concerns the future of Edington cottage hospital in North Berwick. I hope that the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee will look into that. That hospital is a valuable local resource. It has nine beds for respite and palliative care and a minor injuries clinic. However, it was closed—albeit temporarily—by NHS Lothian in September with no consultation. There was no consultation with GPs or local residents, or even with the Friends of the Edington Hospital. The decision was taken by NHS Lothian and the East Lothian health and social care partnership under emergency gold command powers.

The health board says that the move was taken to ease pressures that were caused by high levels of absence due to sickness and self-isolation as a result of Covid. However, we know that patients do better when they are in their own communities, which is why local health services are so

important. That is why 97 per cent of the 1,929 residents who participated in a recent survey that I conducted said that they wanted the hospital to be reopened.

I raise that issue now because NHS Lothian will review the future of Edington cottage hospital next week. So far, the local health authorities' and the Government's engagement levels have been poor. At a recent meeting, Paul McLennan MSP said that the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care had agreed to meet local campaigners but, as of just a few moments ago, the chairman of the community council was still waiting for a reply to the request for a meeting. I hope that Mr McLennan has not overpromised or that Humza Yousaf will not underdeliver.

Paul McLennan: An email that offers dates has been sent to the community council this afternoon. I am quite happy to forward that email to Mr Hoy. A request that asks for feedback on dates has been sent to the community council this afternoon.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give Craig Hoy that time back.

Craig Hoy: Super.

I have just been in touch with the chairman of the community council, who has pointed out that there are just four working days until the decision on the hospital will be taken. She had not heard anything at that point. However, I very much welcome the fact that the cabinet secretary will reach out. In fact, there will be a meeting at 6 pm tonight. I have the Zoom link, and I would be very happy to forward that, via the Deputy First Minister, to the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care.

The second issue of concern locally is the X5 bus. Again, this development took place with very little or no consultation. In early October, my office contacted East Coast Buses, which issued a standard response outlining the reasons for the continued withdrawal of the X5 service. They included challenges with recruitment, the need to prioritise key services and the focus on delivering the 124 service. I recognise those challenges, but I also recognise that they apply to all routes across the whole of the Lothians, and that they are not confined to the X5 route. I hope that East Coast Buses will engage further with me, other local MSPs and local communities.

Both of those cases reveal the real risks of using emergency powers in the long term. I hope that, once we emerge from Covid, committees of the Parliament will look into that to ensure that local communities' voices are heard, even during emergency situations.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We now move to closing speeches.

16:30

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): Today's debate is very welcome. Trying to sum it up, with the huge scope and variety of issues raised, is a challenge in itself, although it is a very small one in comparison with the many that the whole country faces, which we have heard about today in all the speeches.

Early in the debate, I was struck by Gillian Martin's continued use of the phrase, "As we look towards recovery". For many of us, this week, in particular, that feels like a distant horizon, given the advent of the omicron variant and the challenges that we can anticipate, although we still hope that they can be avoided. If, God willing, the results of the current research into the new strain come back in a more positive vein, some of the plans that we have been talking about today may be more possible in the near future.

John Mason spoke about the challenge of balancing the two competing topics of recovery and management, both in the Parliament and in the functions of Government. It is a question of what we are trying to do. The answer, of course, is both, but that is a particularly pressing challenge for the Government to manage. We are absolutely clear about the scale of the present challenge that people are continuing to face throughout Scotland—in our public services, in our households and in our communities.

Jackie Baillie was incredibly eloquent—as usual—and was very much grounded in the reality that people are facing in the NHS and in our social care services. Beatrice Wishart spoke about universities and the challenges that people are facing in having to travel or in doing online learning. I hope that universities are able to open up more broadly.

Pam Duncan-Glancy spoke about the challenge of disabled Scots and the absence of respite services, not just in Glasgow, as she described, but in my home city of Dundee, where those services have not been reactivated, and they have not been part of the remobilisation, which presents huge challenges for people across Scotland and for families who are often the hardest pushed.

When we talk about the scale of the challenge now, we might also think about the huge disruption that we know will leave a very long legacy and that we will collectively have to try to manage.

Audrey Nicoll described the challenges in the justice system, including the huge backlog in the number of cases. I think she gave the figures of 1,330, rising to more than 3,000. Those are staggering figures. Audrey Nicoll was right to highlight the point that behind every single one of those cases are the families of a victim and people who are seeking justice and some form of

resolution that will allow them to move on with their lives. I have dealt with constituents who have already been waiting for years—and Covid has come to them as yet another barrier to the emotional resolution that they are hoping for. It is right that the Criminal Justice Committee has taken a close view of that.

I did not hear much about what the solutions to that might be. In recent years, the closure of local courts across Scotland, which has removed capacity from our local communities to deal with those situations, has contributed to that backlog. We need a concerted effort from Government so that we can see what can be done about that.

We have discussed the situation in education, and the education challenges that we face in this country were highlighted. I have huge concerns about the Covid cohort of young people who are coming through our schools, particularly those in transition as they go into primary school or into secondary school, or as they leave secondary school. Without familiarisation with their new environment they can struggle to adapt. Trade unions have approached me and said that we require a programme to address such needs urgently. There is little evidence that that is happening, however.

I will close by talking about Mr Swinney's focus on inequality, which he said has to be at the heart of our recovery process. I will believe that when I see it, because, during the pandemic, there was an election in which Mr Swinney's party stood on a manifesto of regressive taxation, and it has not been an ally to those of us who have argued for a fairer society through our approach to taxation and by using the resources of this country to create a more equal society.

Next week, his Government will be judged on what it does on pay for carers and whether it meets the £15 per hour demand. That can be the first step that we put in place to ensure that we begin to build out of this situation, give people respect and realise some of the warm words instead of the cold comfort that we have seen from this Government in recent times.

16:35

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I am delighted to close the debate on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives.

I have always tried to remember that we are called the COVID-19 Recovery Committee, and that we need to start looking beyond the current pandemic, with an eye on how we enable society to recover, where necessary, and get back to a more normal pattern of life.

In our private briefing this morning, I suggested to our advisers that the emergence of the omicron variant was predicted, given that most viruses mutate; that the pattern would probably continually repeat as we move forward; and that the battleground would be in science and medicine as we make sure that vaccinations and treatments stay ahead of those mutations. However, it became apparent that the omicron variant matches a scenario that is worse than was previously modelled by medical science. That means that Governments need to balance their response to the omicron Covid strain while medical science investigates it alongside transmission rates, serious illness potential and the impact on the NHS as well as vaccine effectiveness.

Several members, including Beatrice Wishart, raised education during the debate. Governments must consider how school pupils can recover their education. Despite the huge efforts of teachers, and with the best will in the world, online learning is unlikely to be as effective, academically and socially, as face-to-face learning. That is demonstrated starkly in the rise of poor mental health, with one teach telling me that one in 10 pupils has been referred for mental health issues.

In considering mental health, as an aside, I note that protecting our outdoor learning sector is paramount. We cannot afford to lose that educational tool, so I ask the Scottish Government to support the sector. School heads are desperate to use outdoor learning, but insurance costs are now prohibitive, as Liz Smith and I heard just yesterday.

John Mason discussed how we balance the challenges. I have asked the Deputy First Minister and Professor Leitch several times about the balance between taking steps to prevent and treat Covid and dealing with the rising issue of non-Covid-related conditions. Cancer identification, chronic pain and many other conditions have a mortality attached to them. The current national death rate sits at about 12 per cent above what is expected, and much of that increase is not due to Covid. That is a dilemma, and I fully recognise that the Government faces that pull between treating Covid conditions and treating non-Covid conditions. However, it is incumbent on the Scottish Government to collect the data. In his speech, Sandesh Gulhane recognised that we must collect data on as many conditions as possible, because that would undoubtedly help map the journey ahead and prepare us for what might be coming. As an example, I highlight the need to collect data on the stage at which cancer is being diagnosed now, in comparison with pre-Covid times. That would allow crucial workforce planning to happen and give our NHS an indication of where resource will be needed.

I am focusing on recovery—post-Covid, if you like, although it is unlikely that there will ever be a true post-Covid period. I asked Professor Leitch for his estimate of when normality would return and he suggested that it would be next spring for the UK and five years globally. I am sure that that estimate will have been revised already.

In focusing on recovery, I recognise the real and present danger that Governments face here and now in tackling Covid. However, recover we must. We must move on from the current scenario. It cannot continue indefinitely, especially if we are to continue to take the public with us.

My ask of the Scottish Government is that, as it works to tackle Covid, it is always aware of non-Covid health issues, educational recovery and economic recovery, and that it has a route map out of the worst of Covid. In the end, we have to believe that vaccines and medical interventions will deliver our pathway out of Covid. What happens next must be planned for.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call the Deputy First Minister to close, with a generous six minutes.

16:40

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery (John Swinney): This debate was initiated by the COVID-19 Recovery Committee, which it has been my privilege to appear regularly before since the election; I appeared before its predecessor committee on some occasions prior to the election as well.

I agree with Willie Coffey's comments about the role of the committee; I will come back to some of his further comments in a moment. The committee offers a generally thoughtful place to reflect on the difficult dilemmas that are at the heart of handling the Covid-19 pandemic. I say a "generally thoughtful place", because sometimes some committee members just cannot help themselves, but I, as always, am on my best behaviour in those situations.

In Mr Coffey's reflections on the work of the committee, one of his important points was that he learned, from the expert opinion that the committee has heard from many sources, the importance of not lowering our guard against Covid at any stage. Those are particularly wise words for us to reflect on in this debate, because, at different stages over the past 18 months or so, there have been moments when we could have felt incredibly optimistic about the situation that lay ahead of us, only to have a development come along to challenge us. Just last week—a week past Tuesday—the Cabinet, in its assessment of the pandemic, took a fundamentally optimistic

view of where we were. That view was reflected in the First Minister's statement to Parliament that afternoon, but, by Thursday afternoon, we were dealing with the hard realities of omicron and what it can do to drive the path of the virus. Mr Coffey put on the record some very important words about not lowering our guard at any stage.

Another central point about the COVID-19 Recovery Committee's work is that it airs the dilemmas that lie at the heart of handling Covid. Its predecessor committee heard from me, as the Parliament has on many occasions, about our development of the four harms framework in the summer of 2020. We developed it because we had taken dramatic action to lock down our society and economy in March 2020 for everything other than essential purposes, and we had to have a means of establishing the safest route out of that and of navigating a way through. Therefore, we created the four harms framework, which acknowledged the relationship that exists between the direct health harm of Covid, the non-Covid health harms in our society, and the economic and social harms that could be created. Mr Whittle has regularly revisited the questions about non-Covid health harms; indeed, we rehearsed some of them again at committee this morning.

Those honest dilemmas are difficult to resolve. I will share one illustration that I presented to the committee today. One body of opinion can pressurise us to speed up the vaccination programme, which could involve taking staff out of elective care to put into that programme, at the same time that another body of opinion is quite legitimately asking for more elective care.

Those are the dilemmas that we have to honestly air. Indeed, we have heard about some of them during the debate. Pam Duncan-Glancy talked about the fact that carers feel sacrificed at the altar of economic growth, while Liz Smith argued for our getting on with delivering economic growth. Those are some of the dilemmas that have to be wrestled with, and they are at the heart of the way in which we navigate our recovery from Covid.

Liz Smith added to the debate the aspirations of the business community that we minimise the impact of the virus while securing recovery and growth. I suppose that I agree with both those aspirations. However, we will probably not be able to agree with everything that the business community wants, because we want both those aspirations to have the same volume. Fundamentally, as a minister, I have to ensure that the public are protected from the impact of Covid to enable us to move on to economic growth.

Pam Duncan-Glancy's point drew out the fact that we can try to make progress on the recovery of our society but, to use her words, that risks

saying to carers that their interests do not carry as much weight as the move towards delivering economic recovery.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: The unpaid carers made the point last week not only that they were not involved in discussions, which is a point that we should not lose, but that health and social care services remain locked down while so much else seems to be open. That has an impact on them: they are providing unpaid care and support to family members at a time when social care services are not back up and running in a way that other areas of the economy and society are.

John Swinney: That is an entirely reasonable and understandable point for unpaid carers to make. Although I am certain that there will be dialogue with unpaid carers' organisations, I will ensure that that is the case as a consequence of the debate and the issues that have been raised in it.

A range of different tools are available to us as a society to deal with the challenges of Covid and to enable us to make progress in recovering our society while meeting the challenge of not lowering our guard. That involves us all participating in the baseline measures: hand hygiene, cough etiquette and physical distancing. It also involves the use and maximisation of the vaccination programme. That incredibly successful programme is delivered by hard-working people, and the result is that, on every possible permutation of the programme, we are leading vaccination levels in the United Kingdom. There is a huge amount to be confident about in the resilience that we have in place.

One other tool that it would be helpful to have is financial flexibility. Pam Duncan-Glancy made the point that financial support should be provided in the absence of furlough. That is precisely why, in the aftermath of the discovery of the omicron variant, the First Minister, along with the First Minister of Wales, wrote to the Prime Minister to indicate the need for us to have sufficient financial flexibility to tackle such issues.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I mentioned the letter that I have written to the Government, asking whether it would review the criteria for the self-isolation support grant so that money is available to people if they need to self-isolate and whether it would change that grant to account for new guidance on the omicron variant.

John Swinney: We will consider those issues carefully. The self-isolation support grant is material to ensuring that people who are not in a financially strong position are able to fully comply with the self-isolation arrangements. That, of course, is material to interrupting the spread of the virus. Pam Duncan-Glancy is right that we must

ensure that that tool is effective in interrupting the spread of the virus.

I am pleased that the Government has agreed that the tackling of inequality must be at the heart of the Covid recovery strategy. Mr Marra knows that he and I part company on the rhetoric that he adds to the debate. The first big test of Labour's commitment to take measures on child poverty will be whether it decides to support the Government in doubling the child payment from April next year. That will be the big test of the budget. We will wait and see whether we get any rhetoric out of the Labour Party about that.

If, in the spring of next year, the Labour Party decides to find another excuse not to vote for the Government's budget and not to support doubling the child payment, that will say to all the children and families around our country who live in poverty that it is more interested in political rhetoric than it is in putting in place the practical solutions to tackle poverty. The Government will have no truck with that, because it is prepared to put its money where its mouth is to tackle child poverty. We will see whether the Labour Party is with us.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I now call Murdo Fraser to wind up the debate on behalf of the COVID-19 Recovery Committee, for a generous seven minutes.

16:50

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I look forward to those generous seven minutes. How splendid.

As deputy convener of the COVID-19 Recovery Committee, I am delighted to close the debate and thank all the members who have contributed. I listened with great interest—in particular, to the contributions that mentioned the important Covid-19 scrutiny work that is done in committees other than our own.

During our inquiry into the baseline health protection measures, it has been helpful to hear from people who work in health and social care services, in the hospitality, business and leisure sectors, in schools and in a range of other different environments, about how the measures that have been put in place have affected them and how they have sought to adapt.

Like the convener, I have been struck by how effective some relatively simple measures can be in reducing the spread of the virus. I hope that our evidence sessions and the debate will have helped to highlight those measures.

As politicians, we have strong opinions and differing views about the baseline health protection measures that the Scottish Government should

put in place. It is no secret that some of us have different views on the place of vaccination passports, for example. In the main, the debate has been free of party-political division, with the exception of the contribution of the Deputy First Minister, who did his best to wind up the debate.

Willie Coffey made some important points about the challenges that we face. The country faces a unique public health challenge, so it is right that everybody should try to work together in so far as we can. Although we will disagree at times on the approach that is taken, in most cases there is more that unites us than divides us.

I want to respond to a few of the points that members have made. We heard from a succession of committee conveners. I do not know the collective term for committee conveners—a cacophony of conveners, perhaps. It is interesting that there were many common themes.

Several members spoke about health. Gillian Martin highlighted, in particular, the issues around the workforce in health and social care, who are under unprecedented strain. In our committee a few weeks ago, Donald Macaskill from Scottish Care talked about the issues in social care, and about the big problem of experienced care workers leaving the care service because of pay and conditions, which clearly need to be addressed.

Sandesh Gulhane talked about innovation in medical care and the opportunity that it provides. We can perhaps learn from some of the things that have been done differently over the past year and build on that learning in the future.

Many members talked about the vaccination programme. Jackie Baillie raised concerns about the programme, which we discussed in our committee this morning, and Beatrice Wishart highlighted the importance of vaccines.

A few members—Richard Leonard, Paul McLennan and Gillian Mackay—talked about mental health, which is too often forgotten. They mentioned concern about a rise in mental health issues, which lockdown restrictions and isolation have exacerbated—in particular, in their impact on young people—and that we should consider the funding of CAMHS.

Several members spoke about the economy. Finlay Carson, Claire Baker and Kenneth Gibson, as committee conveners, highlighted the need for on-going business support, and Liz Smith talked about what might be done in the upcoming budget in relation to on-going rates relief for sectors that have been hit hard.

Claire Baker made an important point about debt. Many businesses have built up substantial debt over the past two years, which is a challenge,

because we need businesses to be able to invest in order to move on delivery of our net zero ambitions. That process will be difficult for them if they are already carrying substantial levels of debt from the experience that they have had over the past 18 months.

Finlay Carson talked about the impact on rural communities. One of the interesting things that he said was that changes in working patterns are driving the population out of cities. There are people who, previously, had to work in a city centre, perhaps for five days a week, who might now have shifted to a working pattern in which they are expected to be in the office one or two days a week, which means that they no longer need to live within daily commuting distance of a city centre. I know of several families who have moved out of Edinburgh into Fife, Perthshire or West Lothian because they can afford to buy a nicer house in a nice community setting, now that they no longer have to make a daily commute into Edinburgh.

If we want to encourage that—it is a positive thing for many rural communities—it requires improved connectivity, good transport links, good broadband and, as Finlay Carson said, improved rural services such as access to GP practices. That will be significant as we consider the way in which the economy will develop in the years ahead. Craig Hoy picked up local issues that are impacting people whom he represents and that arise directly from that issue.

We see a significant role for local government in the Covid recovery. Ariane Burgess referred to that in her speech and made important points about local government's need for finance, for certainty in order to be able to plan ahead and, in particular, for multiyear budgeting. We look forward to the Scottish Government's budget next week, when we will hear how the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Economy will respond to some of those points.

Richard Leonard and Pam Duncan-Glancy talked about communities and tackling inequality, and about how that will be really important as we move forward and rebuild society in the wake of Covid.

Audrey Nicoll talked about another aspect of our public services: justice. She highlighted the impact that Covid has had on that public service, with 3,500 delayed trials, a substantially increased prison population and many more prisoners on remand, and an enormous emotional impact on the victims of crime and people who are waiting to give evidence as witnesses, especially people who are victims of crimes such as domestic abuse or sexual offences. There is a major social impact in that.

We talked a bit about what is happening in schools. Richard Leonard referred to the long-term impact that the pandemic has had on pupils' learning—especially pupils in deprived areas and those with additional support needs—and the negative impact that the pandemic has had on attempts to close the attainment gap.

We can agree that, as we move into the winter, we now face a new and unexpected challenge from the omicron variant. At this stage, we do not know exactly what that has in store for us and we do not know how serious it will be. It is right that we take a precautionary approach, as Governments across the United Kingdom are doing, which means us all adhering to the current baseline health protection measures that are at the heart of the work that the COVID-19 Recovery Committee has been doing.

I close by echoing the convener's words: we owe it to the people of Scotland to ensure that there is strong parliamentary scrutiny of the measures that are proposed by the Scottish Government in response to the pandemic. Today's debate has helped to enhance that scrutiny.

Craig Hoy: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. As a new member, I seek your guidance. During the debate that we have just had, I said that the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care, who I see has now joined us in the chamber, had not yet been in contact with North Berwick community council in respect of the closure of Edington cottage hospital.

In an exchange with me, Paul McLennan said that the cabinet secretary had, in fact, been in touch to set a date. Immediately following that, I received an email that was sent directly to the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care from the chairman of the community council, who said:

"Hi Humza, I am watching the live parliamentary meeting. Craig Hoy MSP has stated that we are still awaiting a reply with a meeting date from yourself. However, Paul McLennan MSP rebutted this by advising that meeting dates had been sent to me earlier this afternoon. To confirm, I have received no emails from yourself or your office with dates. However, we would very much welcome this at your earliest convenience."

Now that the cabinet secretary is here, he might be able to say whether a meeting confirmation has been issued. If not, Presiding Officer, I seek your guidance as to how I might correct the record, which might be inadvertently inaccurate.

The Presiding Officer: For clarity, all members—

Paul McLennan: On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

The Presiding Officer: Please take your seat for the moment, Mr McLennan.

All members are expected to be courteous and respectful in their conduct, which includes being accurate during proceedings. I say to members that, although the point of order mechanism has been used to raise questions about the accuracy of contributions, those are not, in fact, points of order.

Members are responsible for the accuracy of their contributions, and that is not a matter for the Presiding Officer to rule on. As noted earlier, if a member believes that inaccurate information has been provided, there are a number of mechanisms available for the record to be corrected. Those include seeking to make an intervention and inviting the member to reflect on the accuracy of what has been said. If timing does not allow that, the matter could be raised in writing with the member and, if relevant, the point could be pursued in written questions, follow-up questions or by lodging motions for debate. In the event that a member wishes to correct information that they have provided in the course of proceedings, there is a mechanism that enables them to do so.

I would now like to move on.

Michael Marra: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I rise to make a point of order in relation to section 1.3(c) of the Scottish ministerial code, noting your previous comments. It sets out the

"importance that Ministers give accurate and truthful information to the Parliament".

On 27 October, the Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport, Michael Matheson, was addressing the Parliament about ambitions for COP26 when I asked him how many times he had personally met the United Kingdom Government in support of the Acorn project for carbon capture in Aberdeenshire. He informed members that he had done so

"on at least two, if not three, occasions"—[*Official Report*, 27 October 2021; c 36.]

in "the past month alone". However, information released as a result of freedom of information requests about the cabinet secretary's diary shows that no such engagements with the UK Government ever took place, despite the cabinet secretary calling the decision on carbon capture not coming to Aberdeenshire "wholly illogical" and saying that it will

"materially affect the businesses and communities in the north-east of Scotland".—[*Official Report*, 26 October; c 55.]

I share those sentiments, but it seems that there was no direct ministerial effort or engagement to persuade the UK Government to invest in that technology in the north-east of Scotland. Our country and my region needs a Scottish Government that is prepared to knock on any door, no matter how little it might like doing so, to

make the case for co-operation, new projects and jobs in green industries.

Presiding Officer, what action can you and the Parliament take, given that breach of the ministerial code?

The Presiding Officer: I know that many members are aware of this, although I appreciate that that may not be the case for all members, but for clarity I reiterate that matters relating to the ministerial code are not standing orders matters and are therefore not for me to rule on. Such matters should rightly be addressed to the First Minister.

Mr McLennan has a point of order.

Paul McLennan: It is not a point of order, but I rise to mention—

The Presiding Officer: If it is not a point of order, Mr McLennan—

Paul McLennan: It is not a point of order. I am responding to the point that was made by Mr Hoy. I want to set the record straight. He made an accusation.

The Presiding Officer: Mr McLennan, we will not engage in a debate about Mr Hoy's point.

Paul McLennan: That is fine. I am happy to show him the email. He is playing politics.

The Presiding Officer: As I was going to say, that concludes the debate on Covid-19: preparing for winter and priorities for recovery.

Parliamentary Bureau Motion

17:03

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of a Parliamentary Bureau motion. I ask George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move motion S6M-02393, on the approval of a Scottish statutory instrument.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Requirements) (Scotland) Amendment (No. 4) Regulations 2021 [draft] be approved.—[*George Adam*]

The Presiding Officer: The question on the motion will be put at decision time.

Decision Time

17:04

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There is one question to be put as a result of today's business. The question is, that motion S6M-02393, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on the approval of a Scottish statutory instrument, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Requirements) (Scotland) Amendment (No. 4) Regulations 2021 [draft] be approved.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Meeting closed at 17:04.

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

Published in Edinburgh by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP

All documents are available on
the Scottish Parliament website at:

www.parliament.scot

Information on non-endorsed print suppliers
is available here:

www.parliament.scot/documents

For information on the Scottish Parliament contact
Public Information on:

Telephone: 0131 348 5000

Textphone: 0800 092 7100

Email: sp.info@parliament.scot



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba