



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Meeting of the Parliament (Hybrid)

Thursday 8 September 2022

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 8 September 2022

CONTENTS

	Col.
GENERAL QUESTION TIME	1
Residential Outdoor Education Centres	1
Scotland-domiciled Students (Scottish Universities).....	2
University of Dundee (Pensions).....	3
School Meals Debt and Access to Universal Free School Meals	5
Energy Price Rises Report	6
National Planning Framework 4 (Derelict and Abandoned Buildings and Land)	7
Wind Farms (Removal of Objections)	8
FIRST MINISTER'S QUESTION TIME	10
Ferries Procurement.....	10
Cost of Living Crisis	14
Suicide Prevention.....	17
Rowan Glen Yoghurt Factory	17
E coli	18
Nuclear Power and Fracking	19
NHS Dumfries and Galloway (Staffing).....	19
Nursing (Pay).....	20
Tenants (Support).....	21
A9 and A96 (Dualling)	23
National Health Service (Overtime).....	24
Sexual and Violent Crime	25
FAIR TAX WEEK	27
<i>Motion debated—[Rhoda Grant].</i>	
Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab).....	27
Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP)	29
Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con).....	31
Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab).....	33
Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP)	34
The Minister for Business, Trade, Tourism and Enterprise (Ivan McKee)	35
PRESIDING OFFICER'S STATEMENT	39
PORTFOLIO QUESTION TIME	40
Copenhagen Office (Opportunities).....	40
Copenhagen Office (Opening).....	41
Brexit (Impact on Scotland)	42
Ukrainian Refugees (Support for Organisations)	43
Ukrainian Refugees (Support).....	45
Supersponsor Scheme	46
International Office Network (Programme for Government).....	48
DISPLACED PEOPLE FROM UKRAINE	50
<i>Statement—[Neil Gray].</i>	
The Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development and Minister with special responsibility for Refugees from Ukraine (Neil Gray)	50
NATIONAL MISSION ON DRUGS	63
<i>Statement—[Angela Constance].</i>	
The Minister for Drugs Policy (Angela Constance)	63
FUTURE OF SCOTTISH FERRIES	76
<i>Statement—[Jenny Gilruth].</i>	
The Minister for Transport (Jenny Gilruth)	76
COVID-19: WINTER VACCINATION PROGRAMME	89
<i>Statement—[Humza Yousaf].</i>	
The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Humza Yousaf).....	89
PARLIAMENTARY BUREAU MOTIONS	101
<i>Motions moved—[George Adam].</i>	
DECISION TIME	102

Scottish Parliament

Thursday 8 September 2022

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

General Question Time

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Good morning. The first item of business is general question time. Short and succinct questions and responses will enable us to get in as many questions as possible.

Residential Outdoor Education Centres

1. Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions ministers have had with residential outdoor education centres regarding the provision of bed spaces for 2023. (S6O-01340)

The Minister for Children and Young People (Clare Haughey): The Scottish Government values the benefits of outdoor learning for children and young people, which includes the specific role of outdoor education centres. We have supported outdoor education centres with £4 million of Covid emergency funding to prevent closures during the Covid pandemic, and we have provided guidance to encourage and support visits by schools.

Ministers, Government officials and representatives of outdoor centres continue to discuss a wide range of issues relating to the sector on an on-going basis.

Liz Smith: I thank the minister and the Scottish Government for the assistance that was provided to outdoor education centres during the pandemic in 2020 and 2021, when many of them could not operate. Their problems have been eased, but by no means have they been eradicated.

It is important that we have accurate data as to exactly what facilities are available, so that schools, in particular, can make informed decisions about where pupils can access residential facilities. Will the Scottish Government undertake to provide that data in conjunction with outdoor education centres?

Clare Haughey: I can provide Liz Smith with the latest data that sector representatives have shared with our officials. The data indicates that there is a capacity of 4,400 operational beds in around 50 centres across Scotland. However, that does not cover the full capacity of the sector, and the bed capacity figure does not take into account seasonal availability.

We will continue to engage with the sector and consider how we can more accurately reflect what is on offer to local authorities for bookings for schools and other organisations.

Scotland-domiciled Students (Scottish Universities)

2. Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the number of Scotland-domiciled students attending Scottish universities. (S6O-01341)

The Minister for Higher Education and Further Education, Youth Employment and Training (Jamie Hepburn): In the latest figures that we have, which are for the academic year 2020-21, there were a total of 180,170 Scotland-domiciled students attending Scottish universities.

Pam Gosal: According to Universities and Colleges Admissions Service figures, there has been a 56 per cent increase in the number of people attending Scottish universities since 2006. However, there has been an 83 per cent increase in the number of Scotland-domiciled applicants being denied a place.

The Scottish National Party-Green Administration claims to be on the side of Scotland, but the current model short-changes Scottish pupils. Does the minister consider that that is a problem? What action is needed to address it?

Jamie Hepburn: Ms Gosal says that the Scottish system leaves Scottish students short-changed. Let me tell her about that system. It has delivered 180,000 Scotland-domiciled students in the most recent academic year, which is up from 167,030 in the year before, and it is delivering that number on the basis of those students not having to pay £9,000 a year, as is the case under her party's Administration south of the border.

In that regard, I could not help but notice former Tory MP Luke Graham's article in *The Times* this week, which was headed "Time to be bold on national education". In it, he said:

"There now exists a unique opportunity for the new prime minister to hold the devolved governments to account."

That sounds very much like unsubtle code inviting the United Kingdom Government to introduce tuition fees here, in Scotland.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): I welcome the record number of Scotland-domiciled students who have secured a place at university. Let us not be negative, Ms Gosal; that is a testament to the hard work of students and teachers across Scotland.

Minister, how many of those new university students come from deprived areas?

Jamie Hepburn: What I can say to Mr Doris about the process for the current year—we do not have the final numbers, as we have still to go through the clearance process—is that, as things stand, the number of 18-year-olds from deprived areas who have secured university places has gone up by 29 per cent since 2019, which is the most recent year in which there were exams. We are making good progress in achieving our target of ensuring that, by 2030, 20 per cent of students come from Scottish index of multiple deprivation 20 areas.

Good year-on-year progress has been made in that regard. Indeed, in Mr Doris's home city, over the period that I mentioned, there has been significant growth in the number of 18-year-olds from SIMD20 areas attending the three universities there. That figure has gone up by 15 per cent at Glasgow Caledonian University, by 22 per cent at the University of Strathclyde and by 76 per cent at the University of Glasgow. That is the progress that is being made under this Administration.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): Despite what he has said, the minister must acknowledge that there are many excellent Scottish students who are being deprived of a place at Scottish universities because of the cap on places. Is he saying that he is going to do nothing to resolve that problem? Does he not recognise that issue? Will he agree to meet me to discuss it further?

Jamie Hepburn: I am always delighted to meet Mr Rennie, so I will be happy to accept his invitation to do so.

It has always been the case that there are people who apply to university who, unfortunately, do not manage to access university. That is always very disappointing for those individuals. Incidentally, it is not a unique phenomenon in Scotland—it happens in other jurisdictions in the United Kingdom. Not everyone who applies to university in England, Wales or Northern Ireland goes on to access university.

I have already made the point that, under the current system, 180,000 Scotland-domiciled students are being supported into Scottish universities. That is up on the previous figures and is a good direction of travel. Those students are not having to pay to access university. That is a record of achievement that I am proud of.

University of Dundee (Pensions)

3. Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had and has planned with the University of Dundee's management team regarding the

reported pensions dispute between the university and trade unions representing staff. (S6O-01342)

The Minister for Higher Education and Further Education, Youth Employment and Training (Jamie Hepburn): I regularly meet university principals and the campus trade unions, and industrial action is often one of the items discussed.

Since the beginning of the dispute in question, I have regularly engaged with the principal of the University of Dundee, as well as unions at the university. This week, I have again written to Professor Iain Gillespie to encourage the university and its workforce representatives to come back together to resolve the current issues.

Michael Marra: I welcome that intervention from the minister. He will remember that I have raised the issue with him on numerous occasions over the past year.

On 25 August, a majority of Dundee university court voted to impose cuts to the pensions of the university's lowest-paid employees. Unite members are now taking all-out strike action, with permanent pickets. Unison members have voted for strike action on the issue for a third time, which I believe is unprecedented in Scotland. Management seem set to ride out the situation and are refusing to even respond to requests for dialogue.

Employees tell me that their trade unions have, in effect, been de-recognised at the University of Dundee. That collapse in industrial relations is unacceptable.

The Presiding Officer: Can we have a question, please?

Michael Marra: Will the minister contact the principal again today and urge him to do his duty and get his management to engage on the dispute immediately?

Jamie Hepburn: I have already made the point that I regularly engage with the principal. I have written to him this week to request an update and to urge for the engagement that we want to see. I will, obviously, prosecute some of the issues that Mr Marra has laid out. If what Mr Marra is hearing is correct—I am not suggesting that there is no foundation to what he has said—that is a cause for concern. I strongly believe that the trade union voice—the workforce voice—must be heard across the entirety of the labour market. Our universities are no different in that regard, and Mr Marra can be assured that I will continue to engage with the university on the matter.

School Meals Debt and Access to Universal Free School Meals

4. **Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab):**

To ask the Scottish Government, in light of reports of increasing hidden hunger due to the cost of living crisis, what action it is taking to address school meals debt and expand access to universal free school meals. (S6O-01343)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Shirley-Anne Somerville): We fully acknowledge that steep cost of living rises are putting a huge strain on some families and that they are facing many unforeseen challenges. All pupils in primaries 1 to 5 at publicly funded schools currently benefit from universal free school lunches during term time, while free school meals remain in place for eligible pupils in other age groups after primary 5.

We continue working with our partners in local authorities to plan for the expansion of free school meal provision to primaries 6 and 7 during this session of Parliament. That work is being supported by £30 million of capital funding in this financial year to support the expansion of catering and dining facilities.

We are working with our partners in local authorities to fully understand the impact of school meals debt on families. In the meantime, I urge all local authorities to do all that they can to resolve any payment issues without withdrawing meals from pupils.

Monica Lennon: I am grateful to the cabinet secretary for that update and welcome the commitments that we have heard about this week. We have seen an anonymous donor donate a generous, five-figure sum towards offsetting school meals debt; we need the Government to cover the rest.

Given the cost of living crisis, we must go further and faster on the extension of free school meals. Can the cabinet secretary tell us the dates when pupils in P6 and P7 can expect those to be available? When will we see that equality in our secondary schools?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As I said in my original answer, we are working closely with local authorities to determine what capital work must be undertaken—for example, to increase the capacity of kitchens and dining facilities. That work is ongoing and is being supported by £30 million from the Scottish Government. We are continuing that work with local authorities.

I do, of course, recognise the impact of the cost of living crisis on families. That is why there is additional support—for example, through the increase of the Scottish child payment to £25 per week from 14 November for current recipients and

the opening of applications for children aged up to 16, which will be a welcome additional support for families across Scotland.

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): I welcome the Scottish Government's commitment to extending free school meal provision. We already have the most generous universal offer anywhere in the UK. Will the cabinet secretary provide an update on the number of free school meal registrations in Scotland's schools?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Indeed, Scotland has the most extensive provision of free school meals in the UK. More than 300,000 pupils are currently registered for free school meals at schools across Scotland.

Energy Price Rises Report

5. **Fiona Hyslop (Linlithgow) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government when it will respond to the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee's report on energy price rises. (S6O-01344)

The Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport (Michael Matheson): I am keen to provide the committee with as up-to-date a response as is possible. Now that we have details of the August price cap from Ofgem and the announcement by the United Kingdom Government this morning, I intend to provide the committee with a response shortly.

Fiona Hyslop: The cabinet secretary will be aware that the report reflects evidence taken in April and May and that it stated, even then, that the looming crisis in energy prices must be responded to, by both the Scottish and UK Governments, on a scale similar to the response to the Covid pandemic.

Will the cabinet secretary agree to improve awareness of and access to the advice, advocacy and home insulation services that the Scottish Government is responsible for, on top of the immediate and welcome financial support, based on devolved powers, that was announced by the First Minister? Does he agree that any UK Government decision to freeze energy prices, even at this late stage, should be welcomed, although that decision would have been made more swiftly by an independent Scottish Government with similar powers?

Michael Matheson: The committee's report makes a number of important recommendations to both the Scottish and UK Governments about the action necessary to avert the crisis caused by the increasing costs that households face due to rising energy prices.

We have already announced £1.2 million of additional funding to support advice services and support customers who are experiencing difficulty,

alongside a doubling of our fuel insecurity fund to help support those who are at risk of self-rationing or of self-disconnection from the energy network.

We will continue to look at what further measures we can take and will reflect on the announcement made by the UK Government this morning. There is absolutely no doubt that there has been a vacuum in political leadership from the UK Government on this issue for the past two months. In an independent Scotland, we would have been able to move swiftly to reassure households about how we would tackle the cost crisis.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): The report notes that homes that are not connected to the gas grid are often more expensive to heat. Given the Scottish Government's drive to get owners of such homes to adopt electric heat pump technology, and noting Fiona Hyslop's correct request for clear advice, can the cabinet secretary help me to understand the running costs of such technology, compared to the cost of fossil fuels in the current market?

Michael Matheson: One of the key things that could be done to help to reduce the cost of electricity is to uncouple it from the wholesale gas price. The UK Government has the power to do that, and it would have an immediate impact in bringing down electricity costs for those who use electricity-based heat pumps.

One of the other measures that the UK Government could take to help to offset the very high costs of energy in rural areas and in those areas that are off grid is to regulate the oil market. That would help to reduce the costs of heating oil for the many households that are dependent on it. Despite a request for the UK Government to do that, however, it has continued to refuse to make it a part of the regulated sector.

National Planning Framework 4 (Derelict and Abandoned Buildings and Land)

6. Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how the national planning framework 4 will help to address vacant, derelict and abandoned buildings and land, including across Aberdeen city. (S6O-01345)

The Minister for Public Finance, Planning and Community Wealth (Tom Arthur): We know that vacant and derelict land and buildings are a blight on communities, are challenging to deal with and often result in local authorities and other agencies bearing costs to keep them safe. The national planning framework 4 will change the way that we plan our places and support Scotland's journey to becoming a net zero nation.

The draft NPF4, which was published in November 2021, proposes strengthening national

planning policy to prioritise the reuse of vacant and derelict land and buildings in order to reduce impacts on communities and contribute to meeting our climate change targets. We are giving careful consideration to the wealth of views on the draft NPF4 from both the public and this Parliament in order to inform the final version. The finalised draft framework will be laid in Parliament once that process is complete.

Jackie Dunbar: Scotland has almost 11,000 hectares of vacant and derelict urban land. That means that almost a third of the Scottish population lives within 500m of a derelict site. These sites blight communities, harm wellbeing and limit opportunities, and they could be so much more. Will the minister outline what action is available to local authorities such as Aberdeen City Council to deal with these sites? Can he commit the Scottish Government to continuing to address them as a priority?

Tom Arthur: As the member will fully understand, local authorities can direct development to vacant and derelict land through their local development plans. In our draft national planning framework 4, we propose to strengthen national planning policy to prioritise development of vacant and derelict land. If approved by Parliament and adopted, our updated policies in the finalised NPF4 will directly influence planning decisions.

Our £50 million vacant and derelict land investment programme was launched in 2021 to complement our existing investment support for place-based regeneration across Scotland. We are keen for all authorities, including Aberdeen City Council, to work with their communities and other partners to develop suitable project proposals and apply to the programme.

Wind Farms (Removal of Objections)

7. Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it supports property purchases, direct payments to property owners and the use of non-disclosure agreements as a means of removing objections to large-scale wind farm applications. (S6O-01346)

The Minister for Public Finance, Planning and Community Wealth (Tom Arthur): The Scottish Government does not support such measures. Our planning and consenting systems ensure that all relevant parties, including individuals and local communities, can have their say on development proposals, including for large-scale wind farms. It is beneficial for all those with an interest in a proposal to provide their comments where they wish to do so. I cannot recommend that individuals give up their right to comment, but, if they choose to do so, that is a matter for them.

Oliver Mundell: I thank the minister for that very clear answer. We should make no mistake—such agreements are destroying rural communities, turbocharging rural depopulation and changing the character of our uplands for ever. Will the minister urgently seek a review as to how such impacts are monitored and assessed during the application process? Sadly, these agreements are becoming the new norm, and they are corrupting our planning process.

Tom Arthur: I thank the member for his supplementary question. I am happy to consider what he has asked me to do. I would also welcome the opportunity to meet him to discuss that in more detail, particularly if he can provide evidence on the matters that he has raised.

First Minister's Question Time

11:59

Ferries Procurement

1. Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I start by welcoming the decisive action that was announced by our new Prime Minister to halt rising energy bills. That vital support will save families £1,000 on their bills, and it comes on top of the £37 billion of help that had already been announced. I am sure that the whole chamber will welcome the measures from the United Kingdom Government to support people and businesses across the country.

Yesterday, the First Minister's Government announced £560 million-worth of cuts. The cost of living crisis means difficult decisions for Governments across the country. Does the First Minister regret that so much money was wasted on ferries that have not been built? So far, that scandal has cost taxpayers £250 million, which could have been used to address the cost of living crisis.

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I, too, take the opportunity to welcome the very belated action on energy bills that the new Prime Minister has just announced in the House of Commons. I have not yet seen all the detail, but I am aware of the headline.

Although I welcome it, we should be clear that it does not represent a halt to the rise in energy bills. Average energy bills are just under £2,000. A cap of £2,500 means that people will still pay more for their energy. Of course, if we go back to spring of this year, average energy bills were around £1,200. People are seeing soaring energy costs because of a broken energy market and the utter incompetence of the UK Government.

Lastly on that issue, all the costs of what has been announced today are going to fall on consumers and taxpayers, although oil and gas companies that make windfall profits should be making a contribution. We can see whose side the UK Government is on.

Secondly, yes, the Deputy First Minister outlined savings that are having to be made in the Scottish Government's budget this year. I remind members that the purpose of those savings is, first, that we can ensure that public sector workers get the fairest possible pay rises and, secondly, that we continue to target resources to those who need them most in this cost of living crisis. That is the backdrop: a budget this year that, because of inflation, is worth £1.7 billion less than it was worth when we published it. The other thing that we need the new Prime Minister to do is increase

funding for devolved Administrations so that we can support public services and public sector workers.

Lastly, no, I do not regret the actions that the Government took to save Ferguson's shipyard and ensure that those who were working there still have a job. That is important. We will continue to take action to ensure that the two ferries are completed. That work continues.

Douglas Ross: There we have it—it is official. Nicola Sturgeon does not regret wasting £250 million of taxpayers' money, when that money is needed right now to help our services. If her Government had not wasted a quarter of a billion pounds on trying and failing to build ferries, that money could have been used elsewhere in the Scottish National Party's budget.

Those failures leave islanders without lifeline services and take money away from the front-line spending that we need here, in Scotland. We know that nearly £50 million of emergency Covid support went towards fixing those ferries, instead of going to the businesses that needed it. An internal analysis by the ferry operator Caledonian Maritime Assets Limited has indicated that the number and severity of the issues and faults with the ships means that it will be, to quote it, "difficult" for the vessels to achieve acceptance by CMAL and enter into service.

What plans does the First Minister have in place if, as the experts fear may be the case, those vessels never become fit to sail and more money needs to be diverted away from the cost of living crisis to make up for those failures?

The First Minister: What Douglas Ross has just said about Covid money being directed to Ferguson's is simply not true, and he should take the opportunity to reflect on that and withdraw what he said. That misunderstanding came from the name of a budget line. It did not reflect how money had been allocated. If I am wrong on that—*[Interruption.]* Media sources have already corrected that, so perhaps Douglas Ross will want to reflect further.

On the issues around ferries, I have made clear on many occasions my regret at the cost overrun. That is why it is important that we continue to focus on completing the ferries. However, even if we took Douglas Ross at his word about £250 million—which, of course, would not be in one year—it would still leave the rest of the £1.7 billion by which our budget has been eroded because of inflation soaring out of control under the UK Government. It would still leave us with the unbudgeted £700 million that we have had to allocate for higher pay deals because of the soaring inflation that is being presided over by the UK Government.

We will continue to make the hard decisions to get support to where it is needed most. One of the pressures on all construction projects right now is inflation, which the UK Government is failing to get under control. We will continue to focus on ensuring that the ferries are now completed on the revised budget and timeline.

Douglas Ross: I mean—*[Applause.]* Well done. There was muted applause because the First Minister did her usual thing: blame Westminster for everything but not actually address the question that I put. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I will not have members shouting at one another from a sedentary position. Please just resist the temptation.

Douglas Ross: I hope that the Deputy First Minister resists that temptation, although he seems to do it quite a lot because he does not want to hear what members say.

The First Minister's answer was all about what the UK Government has done wrong and nothing about what CMAL is saying about the fact that the ships might never enter service. All that money—hundreds of millions of pounds—could be wasted.

Today, the First Minister's former right-hand man, the disgraced Derek Mackay, appeared before a Scottish Parliament committee to discuss the ferries scandal. That scandal has hit Scottish public finances and we still do not know why the Government made the disastrous call that it did. At the Public Audit Committee, the ex-finance minister outlined what he believes went wrong with the contracts before—as we understand—he was smuggled out of the building by Parliament officials. Does the First Minister agree with all the evidence that Derek Mackay gave today?

The First Minister: I have not had the opportunity to look at all the evidence that Derek Mackay gave to the committee. I will take the opportunity to do that as soon as I am able to and then, I am sure, Douglas Ross will come back and ask me more about it.

Douglas Ross keeps quoting CMAL and saying that its view is that the ferries will never be in service, so let me quote what the chief executive of CMAL, Kevin Hobbs, said in June:

"There is not much now which is standing in the way of both of them being delivered. There are a lot of detractors out there saying rather spurious things about them, but we've always had a view that both would be finished."

I would not suggest that the

"detractors out there saying rather spurious things"

was a reference to Douglas Ross. Others, of course, might reach that conclusion.

Douglas Ross: The First Minister does not like it, but CMAL has said that the number and severity of faults might lead to the ships never sailing. If the First Minister does not want to hear it, that is fine, but it comes from CMAL. It seems that she does not like to hear a lot of things. It is amazing how often Nicola Sturgeon has never seen or heard anything that is potentially a difficult question.

We know that Derek Mackay gave significant evidence today but, during the First Minister's recent run at the Edinburgh fringe, she said that the disastrous ferry contracts were not a scandal. We saw her say that this summer. Her words at the Edinburgh fringe were—*[Interruption.]* I will wait for the SNP members to be quiet, because it is important that everyone hears this. The First Minister's words were:

"There hasn't been a scandal with these ferries. It's a situation."

A situation! Two hundred and fifty million pounds has gone up in smoke, with nothing to show for it. If that is not a scandal, I do not know what is.

Today, even disgraced Derek Mackay accepted that the purchase of the ferries was catastrophic. Perhaps that is the bit that Nicola Sturgeon did not see today. Her former loyal lieutenant admitted how awful the mistake was, even though it further ruins his already trashed reputation. Why can Nicola Sturgeon not admit that it is a downright scandal that is taking hundreds of millions of pounds away from tackling the cost of living crisis that we face in Scotland right now?

The First Minister: First, I am happy to answer any questions on the issue. I have answered many questions on it and I have made my views very clear. Douglas Ross does not like it when he quotes CMAL and I quote the chief executive saying the exact opposite, so perhaps he should be less selective in that.

On the wider issues, Douglas Ross has stood up here—I think that this is quite staggering—and said that there is nothing to show for the investment in Ferguson's shipyard. I do not know about a Conservative, but I think that almost 400 jobs does not equate to "nothing to show". We value people's jobs and we take action wherever we can to protect people's jobs. That is perhaps the difference between this Government and the Conservatives.

We will continue to focus on the job at hand—that is what people expect of us—and I will happily answer any questions for as long as Douglas Ross wants to ask questions on the issue. However, I suspect that Douglas Ross's choice of topic is more a reflection on his own difficulties than anything else. After all, it is not me who started this new parliamentary term with one MSP standing down from his front bench and another

MSP quitting Parliament altogether, so perhaps he has not got his own troubles to seek.

Cost of Living Crisis

2. Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): The cost of living crisis is a national emergency. Therefore, I welcome that we have finally seen action from the United Kingdom Government, but I do not believe that it goes far enough. Let us be clear: this is not a freeze. Energy prices will still be going up for households across the country, there is not enough support for businesses and charities, and there is no meaningful windfall tax, which means that households and businesses—not companies that are making record profits—will pay in the long term.

Moving to the action that the Scottish Government can take, I welcome the commitment to a rent freeze and a winter eviction ban. That is long overdue, but the Government needs to go further, so I ask the First Minister the following questions. When will the legislation be brought to Parliament? Given that the majority of social rents will rise on 1 April, will she extend the freeze to cover that period? Will she commit to a review towards the end of the freeze period, with an option to extend if necessary? Finally, to avoid a sharp hike when the freeze is lifted, will she commit to putting in place a rent regulator in order to cap any future rises?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): First, the emergency legislation will be introduced very soon. We have not yet determined the date for that, but we need to introduce it soon, because Parliament needs to act at pace to pass it. We want that legislation to be passed within three months so that the freeze that I announced is effective from that date. That work will happen at pace, and I encourage all members to engage constructively with the detail of it. As all members will be aware, it is important that we get legislation right to ensure that, if there are any legal challenges to it, it has the best possible chance of withstanding those.

Secondly, I will commit to an on-going review of the emergency legislation. We have said very clearly that we intend the two proposals that I announced on Tuesday—the rent freeze and the moratorium on evictions—to be in place until at least the end of March. We will review that regularly, and we will, of course, keep open the option of extending the period further, depending on the wider situation.

Lastly, as I said on Tuesday, the emergency measures are, by definition, temporary. How temporary they prove to be will depend on the reviews that I have just spoken about, but they are intended to pave the way for longer-term reforms that bring greater affordability to the rented sector,

particularly the private rented sector, and that give greater protections to tenants. The wider issues that Anas Sarwar has raised today will be fully taken into account in that longer-term work.

Anas Sarwar: I welcome that response from the First Minister. We will engage proactively with the legislation, and the sooner we can do that, taking into account the legal complexities, the better. We will continue to push for the freeze to cover 1 April, because that will give people certainty. We welcome the agreement to a review, with an option to extend, and I again push the First Minister on creating a rent regulator so that we can make sure that there are not excessive increases when the freeze is finally lifted.

However, rents are not the only costs that are rising. We have been calling for a rent freeze since June, but we have also been calling for a reduction in rail fares since April. In the summer, the Scottish National Party published a document outlining what actions European countries were taking in the face of the cost of living crisis. That document included examples from Germany, Spain and Ireland, which have all cut rail fares. ScotRail is now in public ownership. The decision on rail fares is for this Government, so will the First Minister commit to Labour's plan to halve rail fares, which could save commuters up to £130 a month?

The First Minister: Again, I will address two aspects of that issue. In what I am about to say, I intend to be constructive, and I invite Labour to engage constructively on these points.

As I announced on Tuesday, we have confirmed a freeze on ScotRail fares until the end of March, and, yesterday, the Deputy First Minister said that, in the context of our emergency budget review, we will consider extending that further. We will also consider a range of other areas where we can go further to help people with the cost of living crisis. However, it is important—not just important, but inevitable and essential—that that is done in the context of that budget review. I set out starkly—as did the Deputy First Minister yesterday—the realities of our position, saying that our budget is worth £1.7 billion less than it was when we published it. We also face increasing pressures from issues such as public sector pay and the costs of housing Ukrainians, which none of us grudge at all. We cannot raise taxes within a financial year, we cannot borrow for day-to-day spending, and all of our reserves are already allocated. If we want to spend more on anything, we have to find other places in our budget to take the money from. That process started yesterday.

I say in all sincerity to Anas Sarwar that we will consider in good faith any suggestion that is made, but any suggestion that involves more spending in this financial year has to come with a

saving from elsewhere. I encourage and ask Anas Sarwar to engage with that part as well.

Anas Sarwar: We need to go further than a freeze. Let me be clear: getting more passengers on our railways potentially makes money for our railways, and changing people's pattern of behaviour by getting them out of private vehicles and on to our railways helps us to confront not only the cost of living crisis but the climate crisis. I push the First Minister to be bolder and more ambitious, because this is not a time for timidity or delay. Our "Emergency Cost of Living Act" included a rent freeze and a winter eviction ban—we welcome the Scottish Government's action in that regard—but it also included halving rail fares, capping bus fares, a £100 water bill rebate, writing off school meal debts, topping up the Scottish welfare fund and establishing a business hardship fund to keep small businesses going.

I know that the First Minister will say that the Scottish Government has to find the money. That is why I welcome an emergency budget review, but it has to be an open, genuine and transparent one. Therefore, in recognition of the national emergency, the Scottish Government should open up the books to all parties so that we can have a team Scotland approach to actually using the powers of this Parliament to confront the cost of living crisis and help people here, in Scotland.

The First Minister: We will engage on that basis, and I am sure that the Deputy First Minister will be happy to have open discussions with any party about how we meet that challenge, as long as the starting point for any discussion is an acceptance of the reality that, if we want to spend more on anything this year—as, I think, all of us do—that money must be found elsewhere in our budget.

With regard to Anas Sarwar's suggestions, we will consider everything in good faith. However, taking bus fares as an example, I point out that about half of the Scottish population—nobody under 22 or over 60—already do not pay for bus travel. That is a sign of how we are using the powers of this Parliament. On increasing money, I know that Labour called for an increase in the tenant hardship fund, but we have doubled the fuel insecurity fund and have committed to increasing the budget for discretionary housing payments. Further, we are extending free school meals beyond the limits set by any other Government in the United Kingdom, and, once the extensions that were announced earlier this week take effect, the Scottish child payment will deliver £1,300 in support for every eligible child under the age of 16. Again, that does not exist anywhere else in the UK. We are using our powers and we will continue to do so.

I will share some reflections by someone who is well known to Anas Sarwar:

“this week’s programme for government, announced by the First Minister, was a creative and coherent response to the poverty pandemic we are all facing ... Credit where it’s due. The SNP have been upfront in explaining what’s happening to the public finances and the principles underpinning their decisions.”

Those are comments by Kezia Dugdale, one of Anas Sarwar’s predecessors as Scottish Labour leader.

The Presiding Officer: We move to constituency and general supplementary questions.

Suicide Prevention

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): As the First Minister is aware, this is international, as well as national, suicide prevention week. Without scaremongering, I would say that both domestic and business inflationary pressures may very well push some folk to the brink. What measures can the Scottish Government take to help desperate people, liaising, for example, with organisations such as the Samaritans, which I commend for all that it does?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I thank Christine Grahame for raising an extremely important issue.

The cost of living crisis, which has come so quickly on the back of the Covid crisis, is, of course, having an impact on the mental health of many people across the country. The Scottish Government will continue to do all that we can, working with third sector organisations such as the Samaritans, which does a fantastic job in the area, and we will continue to invest in mental health services. That will continue to be a priority for the foreseeable future and, I am sure, much beyond that.

Rowan Glen Yoghurt Factory

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): The First Minister will be aware of the worrying news of the possible closure of Rowan Glen yoghurt factory in my constituency, with the potential loss of 50 jobs. That would be a hugely significant loss of jobs in a rural area, and it could result in the loss of a well-known and respected brand that is located in the heart of Scotland’s milk field. I appreciate that businesses across Scotland face extraordinary pressure, particularly with energy costs, but given the importance of the dairy industry, and the food and drink sector more widely, to Galloway, will the First Minister assure the workforce and other stakeholders that her Government and its agencies are prepared to look

at extraordinary solutions, think outside the box and be proactive in exploring every opportunity to give the loyal and skilled workforce the platform to continue producing these much-loved and valued products?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Yes, I will give that assurance. That is the approach that we always take when businesses are in difficulty.

I was certainly very concerned to hear that the Dale Farm group is holding a consultation on the proposed closure of the Rowan Glen dairy factory in Newton Stewart, and I know that this will be a very difficult time for the company’s staff and their families. The people affected by that development are, of course, everybody’s immediate priority, and the Government will do everything in our power to help those affected, including through our PACE—partnership action for continuing employment—initiative.

South of Scotland Enterprise held discussions with the company this week, and it is working closely with it to investigate all areas of potential assistance so that it can provide help to try to mitigate the need for any job losses.

I encourage the Dale Farm group to explore all available options to secure the site’s future and for redeploying any affected staff, to help to minimise the impact on the workforce. I know that the Minister for Business, Trade, Tourism and Enterprise has already spoken to local MSPs and will take steps to ensure that they are kept updated.

E coli

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): I am concerned about the E coli outbreaks that are being experienced in nurseries in Musselburgh, and my colleague Martin Whitfield has raised concerns about the outbreaks in Haddington. In the guidance notes that families received, they were told that, under the Public Health etc (Scotland) Act 2008, they were required to isolate, but the formal exclusion letter that they received 13 days later gave contradictory advice. Therefore, families have had no help, despite their loss of earnings. What action is the Scottish Government taking in response to those outbreaks of E coli? Will it look to put in place a loss of earnings scheme to support families that have borne the brunt of the debacle?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I thank Sarah Boyack for raising that issue. Obviously, I am very well aware of the E coli outbreaks, and I share her concern about them. Public Health Scotland will not only monitor the situation but take or advise on all appropriate steps.

On the particular issue of contradictory information that Sarah Boyack raised, if she can

make that available to my office or to the office of the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care, I would be very happy to give an undertaking to look into it as quickly as possible and to come back to her with more detail once I have had the opportunity to do so.

Nuclear Power and Fracking

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): At Prime Minister's question time yesterday, we heard Liz Truss advocating her belief that nuclear power and now fracking have a role in abating the energy crisis. I know that the commitment of the Tories to the transformational changes needed to achieve net zero is wafer thin, just as I know that the Scottish Government's position on those matters is clear. What is the First Minister's response to the Prime Minister's comments?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): First, let me take the opportunity to reaffirm the Scottish Government's position on fracking. That is a devolved matter, and our position is unchanged. We do not intend to grant licences for fracking, and we do not think that it is the solution to the crisis that is currently faced. Let me quote someone else:

"No amount of shale gas ... would be enough to lower the European price".

That was, of course, the new Chancellor of the Exchequer speaking earlier this year.

Similarly, our position on nuclear is unchanged: we do not support new nuclear, certainly not with existing technology. The reality is that Scotland has vast potential in renewables. Offshore and onshore wind power can already be generated more cheaply than gas-fired power or nuclear power—that is where we need to focus our efforts and that is exactly what the Scottish Government is going to do.

NHS Dumfries and Galloway (Staffing)

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): I would kindly ask the First Minister not to seek to politicise my family life, just as I would never seek to do so when it comes to hers.

I have received reports from national health service whistleblowers in Dumfries and Galloway that paramedics attending a call-out in the past week were told, having urgently requested a doctor as required under the Mental Health Act 1983, that there was no on-call doctor available in the region. That comes on top of concerns being raised about unsafe staffing levels at Dumfries and Galloway royal infirmary and allegations of bullying.

First Minister, this is completely unacceptable. My constituents are worried. NHS staff are

sounding alarm bells. What steps can the Government take to make sure that our NHS is functioning safely and meeting basic health needs?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): On Oliver Mundell's first point, although I am not sure that there is any aspect of my life that the Tories would not seek to politicise if they thought that they could, I genuinely wish him well—I do that in all sincerity.

On the serious question that he has raised, the health service is operating under extreme pressure, and the health secretary and the Government are acting to support it as it recovers from Covid—that applies to all aspects of healthcare, from ambulance waiting times through to accident and emergency and out-patient and in-patient waiting times—while also seeking to support our staff.

On the serious issue that has been raised, if more detail can be provided to my office and to the health secretary, we will look into the specifics of that and reply to Oliver Mundell as soon as possible.

Nursing (Pay)

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): The First Minister will be aware of the *Sunday Mail* investigation showing that the use of private agency nurses in the national health service is spiralling out of control, but can the First Minister understand the frustration of hard-working and exhausted nurses when those same agencies put out recruitment adverts saying that they will pay nurses the rate that they deserve, meaning a much higher rate than NHS pay?

Will the Scottish Government commit today to fair pay for all NHS workers, who we all clapped for during Covid and who are holding our NHS together under significant pressure?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): First, spend on agency staff in the NHS is a tiny, tiny fraction of the overall NHS budget. Secondly, the majority of temporary staffing comes from the NHS staff bank and those are NHS staff on NHS contracts at NHS rates of pay.

I agree with the member on NHS pay and I think that that is evidenced in the fact that agenda for change NHS staff in Scotland are already better paid than they are in other parts of the United Kingdom, because we take so seriously our obligation to reward them properly.

We are in extremely difficult financial times—that has been set out clearly to members in the chamber this week. NHS negotiations around pay are on-going but, just as was the case with other public sector workers, we want to ensure that our

NHS staff get the fairest possible deal, and I know that the health secretary is taking that extremely seriously in those negotiations.

Tenants (Support)

3. Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green):

To ask the First Minister what further steps the Scottish Government will take to support tenants facing the cost of living crisis. (S6F-01341)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): The impacts of the cost of living crisis are being felt by all households and there is a disproportionate impact on people on the lowest incomes, which can, of course, include tenants. Therefore, as announced this week, we will introduce emergency legislation to deliver a moratorium on evictions and a rent freeze until at least 31 March next year.

We are also extending the tenant grant fund and investing an additional £5 million in discretionary housing payments, increasing our total financial support to over £88 million for housing support that mitigates United Kingdom Government policies such as the bedroom tax, the benefit cap and the local housing allowance.

This Parliament does not yet have the levers that we desperately need to respond fully to the cost of living crisis. Therefore, we will also continue to urge the UK Government to comprehensively and urgently take the actions needed to combat it.

Gillian Mackay: I thank the First Minister for her welcome response.

Does she agree that the ambition that she outlined in the programme for government to introduce a rent freeze and a halt to evictions puts the Scottish Government far ahead of anywhere else in the UK in protecting tenants? Does she also agree that the commitment should rightly be seen as a central part of our far-reaching programme of reform, as outlined in the new deal for tenants, which is being led by my Green Party colleague Patrick Harvie as Minister for Zero Carbon Buildings, Active Travel and Tenants' Rights, and that our shared commitment shows the value of political co-operation in developing detailed, workable and robust protections for tenants?

The First Minister: Yes, I agree with that. It is a statement of fact that the announcement on rent freezes puts us ahead of any other part of the UK on that, as on so many other issues. The mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, commented on Tuesday that he wished that he had the powers to do something similar.

Our commitment to introduce a rent freeze is important and it will help to ease the cost

pressures that people are facing; therefore, it is very important in that context. I agree that the policy is an example of what can be achieved when parties come together constructively to work together in the interests of the people of Scotland, which is what the Scottish National Party and the Green Party are doing. The policy is one good example among many of joint and constructive working.

Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): Paul Johnson, the director of the Institute for Fiscal Studies, has told the BBC that the support package from the UK Government will mean that the

“majority of the money will go to better off people who use more energy”,

and that the package is “very poorly targeted”.

What are the First Minister's views on that assessment? Does she agree that nothing that has been currently proposed by the Tories goes far enough to ameliorate the deepening crisis for people and businesses?

The Presiding Officer: Ms Whitham's question was not related wholly to the substantive question. I would be grateful if the First Minister could address it briefly.

The First Minister: I share the concern that we have a new Prime Minister who does not think that redistribution is important, and that she does not think that there is anything unfair about giving more help to those who are better off than those who are worst off. However, my main concern about what has been announced about the UK Government's energy support package—this is relevant to rents, because it is relevant to the overall cost crisis—is that it does not freeze energy bills. We need a proper freeze in energy bills, and I think that it is important to continue to press the UK Government to do that.

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): When Living Rent and I first raised the need for an emergency rent freeze with the First Minister, in April, the average rent in Scotland was £780. It now stands at £840, which is at least a 10 per cent increase in just five months. The Labour Party proposed a rent freeze in June, but SNP and Green MSPs teamed up with the Tories to block that. Their political choice to unnecessarily delay support for a rent freeze led to further financial hardship for tenants. In fairness to tenants, will the First Minister explore backdating the rent freeze to June?

The First Minister: As has been well canvassed and rehearsed in the chamber, there were real reasons why the amendment to the Coronavirus (Recovery and Reform) (Scotland) Bill proposing a rent freeze could not be

supported. As I said to Anas Sarwar, and as I hope everyone who wants the policy to be successfully implemented will accept, we need to make sure that the policy can withstand any legal challenge. That test is unlikely to be met if legislation were to be applied retrospectively, which is an important point to take into account.

Finally, I pay tribute to Mercedes Villalba for the work that she has done on the issue. It has been important and it is to her great credit. I thank her for the work, because we have taken many of the points that she has made into account when reaching the decision to freeze rents and implement other measures to protect tenants, as we announced to the Parliament.

A9 and A96 (Dualling)

4. Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): To ask the First Minister, in light of the loss of life as a result of road traffic incidents on the A9 over the summer, on sections of the road that have not been dualled, what plans the Scottish Government has to publish a timetable setting out when the dualling of the A9, and A96, will be delivered. (S6F-01315)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): First, I express my sympathies to everyone who has been affected by the loss of a loved one, and to anyone who has been injured on our roads over the summer. Road safety is of paramount importance to the Government and, indeed, to everyone. Our road safety framework is backed by £21 million in funding.

Work is continuing on the A9. The section between Tomatin and Moy is currently under procurement, and it is expected that the construction contract will be awarded later this year. Design work is progressing on the rest of the programme, with the statutory process well under way for seven of the remaining eight schemes.

The evidence-based review on fully dualling the A96 between Inverness and Aberdeen will report by the end of this year, and we will take forward enhancements on that corridor to improve connectivity between surrounding towns, tackle congestion and address safety and environmental issues.

Fergus Ewing: I join the First Minister in sending our thoughts to the families of those who have, sadly, lost their lives. I emphasise that my constituents sincerely believe that more lives are lost on single-carriageway sections because, unlike dual carriageways, they have no central reservation to separate the opposing flows of traffic, and hence the risk of head-on collisions is not reduced. Will the First Minister provide reassurance and confidence to my constituents and to the civil engineering sector by publishing

revised and detailed timetables for delivering our long-standing pledges on dualling the A9 and the A96, starting from Inverness to Auldearn—including the Nairn bypass—which will help to save lives in the future?

The First Minister: I will not repeat all of my first answer about the processes that are under way to deliver exactly such clarity. I certainly share Fergus Ewing's concerns about safety, which is of paramount importance to the Government.

As Fergus Ewing knows, procurement is a complex process that involves many rules that must be adhered to. I assure him that the work to determine the most suitable procurement option on the A9 is on-going and that an update will be provided when the work is completed.

On the A96 from Inverness to Nairn and the Nairn bypass, we need to complete the statutory approval process before setting a firm programme for delivery. However, we are continuing to progress the preparation stages, with a view to completing the process as quickly as possible.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): The consultation that has been referred to did not offer the option of dualling the A96 between Huntly and Aberdeen. Can people in the north-east take it that that means that dualling of that stretch has been quietly dropped?

The First Minister: There is no change to what we set out in the Bute house agreement. In my answers to Fergus Ewing, I have already given detail on the processes that are under way.

National Health Service (Overtime)

5. Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): To ask the First Minister what assessment the Scottish Government has made of overtime in Scotland's NHS. (S6F-01338)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Our national health service is the largest employer in the country, with nearly 180,000 staff—many more than was the case when the Government took office. Paid overtime accounts for a tiny fraction of the total hours that are worked in our health service.

Like most organisations, health boards make limited use of paid overtime to help to manage unplanned absences. Alongside the NHS staff bank, paid overtime can be used to ensure that care for patients is delivered. We continue to build on 10 consecutive years of increasing NHS staffing, which is why we are investing £11 million over this parliamentary session in domestic and international recruitment.

Craig Hoy: Last weekend, we discovered that hard-working NHS staff have put in 11 million hours of overtime in the past five years, as a result

of SNP workforce failures. They are burned out and they are worn out, and the present situation is not sustainable. How can it be right that hard-pressed doctors and nurses are being forced to work millions of extra hours to make up for the First Minister's failings on our NHS?

The First Minister: It is worth noting what we are speaking about—the reported sum of money is less than 0.7 per cent of total NHS workforce spending. Of course, it is the case that staff work overtime, and it is also the case that health boards use agency and, to a greater extent, NHS bank staffing.

On the Government's record, there are 28,000 more staff working in our NHS now than when we took office. We have a significantly higher staffing level per head of population than that in England, where the Conservatives are in power. Of course, we have the best-paid NHS staff anywhere in the UK. We will continue to build on that progress and to support the staff, who do such a fantastic job in our NHS.

Sexual and Violent Crime

6. Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what action the Scottish Government plans to take in light of reported figures showing that sexual and violent crime in Scotland has risen significantly over the last five years. (S6F-01325)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Crime, including violent crime, has fallen under this Government. However, recently, there has been a rise in recorded sexual and violent crimes. That might in part be because women are now feeling more confident to report such crimes to the police.

We are taking forward a range of activity to reduce violence as well as challenging behaviours and attitudes that we know can lead to violence against women and girls. Through the victim-centred approach fund, we have invested £18.5 million in specialist advocacy support for survivors of gender-based violence, and the delivering equally safe fund is providing £90 million per year to support projects that are focused on early intervention, prevention and support.

Additionally, building on the recommendations of Lady Dorrian, the criminal justice reform bill will further improve the experiences of victims in the justice system.

Pauline McNeill: I welcome the fact that the Scottish Government has made justice such an important part of the programme for government. I know that the First Minister agrees that underlying those horrendous figures is the huge societal and global problem of male violence against women, which we need to tackle with urgency in Scotland. However, the length of time that a case can take

to come to court does not help victims to come forward. We should also bear in mind, as the First Minister said, that such crimes disproportionately affect women and children.

However, the Government recently extended time limits for court cases in the justice system. For example, in the preparation of a Crown case for the High Court, the limit used to be 80 days, but it is now 260 days. Therefore, some victims of sexual assault and rape have been dropping cases because they cannot bear to wait the years that it sometimes takes to go to trial.

What can the First Minister do to ensure that, month on month, those delays are coming down as we go towards 2025? What reassurance can the First Minister provide to victims of sexual crime that they will not have to wait years for justice?

The First Minister: I know that Pauline McNeill accepts that I agree entirely with the sentiment of her question. The trauma that anyone who is a victim of sexual crime or domestic abuse goes through is only compounded if there are delays in bringing the perpetrator to justice. Therefore, there is a real seriousness of intent on the part of the Government.

Ms McNeill's question was about what we can do. We need to ensure that the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service is supported and resourced to tackle those backlogs and bring down those waiting times, and we are determined to do that.

The matter is also extremely important to the Lord Advocate, and I am sure that she would be willing to speak to Pauline McNeill and provide further information to MSPs about the work that has been done in the Crown Office to tackle the issues. Therefore, if it is of interest, I will convey that to the Lord Advocate, although it is entirely up to her what information she chooses to share. I assure Pauline McNeill, the Parliament and the wider public on how seriously we take the issue and that we will continue to work to deliver improvements.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes First Minister's questions.

I am aware that a statement has been made at Westminster on the health of Her Majesty the Queen. I will, of course, monitor developments and keep members updated over the course of the day. My thoughts and, I am sure, those of all in the Parliament are with Her Majesty at this time.

Fair Tax Week

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): I ask the members of the public who are departing the gallery after First Minister's question time to please do so quickly and quietly, as we hope to start our next item of business shortly.

The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-05082, in the name of Rhoda Grant, on fair tax week. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes that Fair Tax Week took place from 11 to 19 June 2022 and that the week celebrates companies and organisations that hold the Fair Tax Mark, which certifies that the company or organisation pays the correct level of tax in the correct jurisdiction at the correct time; understands that many companies and organisations in the Highlands and Islands, including the Co-op Party, the Co-operative Group, Scotmid Co-op, SSE and Scottish Water, have already received the Fair Tax Mark; acknowledges the results of recent polling, which reportedly found that 66% of people believe that governments and local authorities should at least consider a company's ethics and how it pays its tax; notes the calls on local authorities in Scotland to consider signing the Councils for Fair Tax Declaration, and further notes the calls on the UK Government, Scottish Government and local government to look at ways of incorporating the Fair Tax Mark into public procurement processes in order to ensure that public funds go to companies that pay their way

12:47

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I thank the members who signed my motion to allow this debate to take place. I also refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests, which states that I am a member of the Co-operative Party, which is a party that holds the fair tax mark and actively campaigns for the promotion of not only the fair tax mark itself but the ethos that lies behind it.

The motion was lodged to mark fair tax week in June, but the debate is as pertinent today as it would have been then—possibly more so, because we are facing a cost of living crisis. Many people are concerned about how they will afford the very basics for survival this winter.

Tax is our investment in the society in which we wish to live. The money that we pay should be invested in creating a better and more caring society and providing security to our citizens. Therefore, taxation should be viewed as a positive contribution to society. The fair tax mark seeks to highlight that. It seeks to recognise the companies that have paid the correct rate of tax, at the correct time and in the correct jurisdiction; companies that take pride in the fact that they contribute to our collective wellbeing.

Sadly, not every company wants to make that investment. It is estimated that shifting tax liability has led to a loss to the Exchequer that is equal to 28 per cent of the tax collected. That is income that could have been invested in the national health service and other essential services. Instead, it was offshored to boost fat cats and shareholder dividends. That is not illegal, but it should be.

The United Nations Principles for Responsible Investment states:

"Earnings that are reliant on tax planning rather than genuine economic activity are vulnerable to changes in tax regulation and enforcement ... Even if specific tax regulations are not changed, more proactive enforcement by regulators suggests the earnings risk resulting from these strategies is increasing. As countries and their tax authorities become increasingly concerned with the exploitation of loopholes in international tax frameworks and are under fiscal pressure to fund additional government programmes, the incidence of tax disputes and litigation will increase."

Therefore, staking a company's future success on a strategy that is based on tax avoidance is not only morally wrong—it is risky.

Tax avoidance is of concern not only to Governments but to citizens. The annual survey by the Institute of Business Ethics showed that 47 per cent of respondents were concerned about corporation tax avoidance, and it has topped the list of public concerns for nine years in a row. Those findings are in line with the Fair Tax Foundation's polling, which found that 74 per cent of people would rather shop with a business that is paying its fair share of tax.

We, in the United Kingdom, can take steps to stop tax avoidance and offshoring, but we must also try to build global consensus to ensure that corporations pay their taxes where their profits are earned. That requires agreement between Governments, and I urge the UK Government to initiate those discussions and broker a global response.

There are also things that we can do in Scotland to promote the payment of fair taxation. The Scottish Government and the whole of the Scottish public sector procure services from the private sector. We need to use stringent procurement methods to ensure that companies pay their taxes. That must be an essential requirement in all public contracts.

We could also use that approach for licensing. Did the ScotWind bidders have to show that they had paid their taxes where their profits were earned, and were they required to continue to pay their fair taxes on profits made from our renewable energy?

The fair tax mark allows companies that pay their tax at the correct rate, in the right jurisdiction

and on time to be easily identified. That accreditation can be trusted by procuring authorities, allowing them simply to ask contractors and suppliers whether they have achieved the fair tax mark. Councils across Scotland have been calling for ethical action in procurement by signing up to the councils for fair tax declaration. South Lanarkshire, Edinburgh, Midlothian and Dundee have already signed, but we need more councils to sign up as well.

The public agree: 66 per cent of people believe that the UK and Scottish Governments and local councils should at least consider a company's ethics and how it pays its tax as part of the procurement process. During the pandemic, 80 per cent of people believed that businesses benefiting from Government bailouts should have received that bailout only if they had agreed to the conditions that prohibit tax avoidance. Frankly, I believe that they should not have received a bailout if they had not paid their fair share of tax in the past, given that it was those very taxes that paid for the bailout.

Many companies and organisations have received the fair tax mark accreditation, and I want to pay tribute to them. They include ones that we would expect, such as the Co-operative Party and co-operative societies such as Scotmid and the Co-operative Group—organisations that have fair practice at their very core. Government-owned companies such as Scottish Water have also achieved accreditation, as have large plcs, such as SSE, and smaller firms, such as Glasgow-based accountancy firm Brett Nicholls Associates and North Berwick-based Jerba Campervans. It is a long list, but not long enough. We need to make sure that all companies that work with government at any level should attain this accreditation.

I believe that we must change the culture around taxation. It should be acknowledged and valued when companies pay their fair tax in the country where they make their profit. That is fair to their workers and it is fair to customers. That payment is their investment in our society. It enables Governments to provide the services and security that we all require.

12:54

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to speak in the fair tax week debate, and I congratulate Rhoda Grant on securing it. Ms Grant has outlined the issues really well.

Fair tax week is an opportunity to celebrate the companies and organisations that are proud to promote responsible tax conduct. Paying a fair share of tax is one of the principal ways in which businesses contribute to society, helping to fund

the public services that we all rely on. Championing a level playing field for businesses, fair tax week provides an opportunity to highlight the importance of fair tax principles in protecting and advancing public services in Scotland, as well as across the UK.

The growth of tax havens and unethical corporate tax conduct has become the subject of much debate in Scotland, across the UK and around the globe. Aggressive tax avoidance negatively distorts national economies and undermines the ability of business to compete fairly, both domestically and internationally.

For example, eight large tech companies made an estimated £9.6 billion in profit from sales to customers in Scotland and the UK in 2019, but, by moving money out of the UK, those companies ended up declaring a fraction of the profits in the accounts of their UK subsidiaries, thereby radically reducing their tax liabilities. Amazon, eBay, Adobe, Google, Cisco, Facebook, Microsoft and Apple faced UK corporation tax liabilities of £297 million in 2019, putting the total amount of tax that those companies avoided in the UK at an estimated £1.5 billion in 2020, the latest year for which figures exist.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): Did Emma Harper agree with or find interesting the points that Rhoda Grant made about the ScotWind contracts and ensuring that we get transparency on the companies that have been awarded options to lease? Does she agree that we need to look at companies such as Amazon that the Scottish Government contracts with? We should surely expect higher standards from them or not award contracts to them if they do not meet standards.

Emma Harper: I am interested in how any company can be transparent on its taxation. Many taxation powers are not part of the devolved settlement, so I look to the UK Government to support any opportunity for the likes of Amazon to declare their tax in a fairer and more appropriate way.

I was talking about the amount of money—£1.5 billion in 2020—that those eight companies avoided paying in tax. That money could have been invested in our country's infrastructure, culture or civic society or, topically, in helping the people who are most in need with the cost of living crisis. Rhoda Grant mentioned that, too.

However, instead of aggressively working to tackle the issue and make companies pay their fair share, the UK Government has spent three and a half times more on chasing fraud and error in the benefit system than it has on pursuing tax-dodging millionaires. The Department for Work and Pensions is spending the vast sum of £510 million to prevent fraud and error in the benefit system

and to collect more debt from people on universal credit. The DWP estimates that it can claw back £3.15 billion from benefit claimants, while Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs estimates that £3 billion could be raised from putting additional resource into chasing tax dodgers. In 2020, the pandemic tax gap of unpaid revenues was £70 billion. It is simply astonishing that that is receiving less additional resource than social security fraud and error.

I ask the minister for a commitment that, when we receive full taxation powers, which are currently reserved, the Scottish Government will focus its efforts on working with businesses to ensure that they pay their fair share in tax, and that we will not spend billions of pounds to penalise the most vulnerable people in society.

Fair taxation—specifically, corporate tax—is so important for investing in public services, which are the thread that binds our communities together. I thank the Fair Tax Foundation for all the hard work that it does to support companies to pay their fair share.

12:59

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I congratulate Rhoda Grant on securing today's debate on fair tax week.

Fairness is one of the core principles of governance. As Rhoda Grant's motion touches on, the public show an overwhelming desire for taxation to be fair, for it to be applied in an even-handed way and for businesses, as well as individuals, to pay their share.

The fair tax mark, which is at the centre of the Fair Tax Foundation's work, deals with the tax affairs of businesses and organisations. It is worth remembering that businesses operate in a competitive market. For that competition to work, there must be rules—rules that provide a level playing field for everyone and that do not distort competition or embed the position of those who are already successful. We must not ignore, either, the obvious interest that we have as a Parliament in gaining revenue that can be used to support public services and the spending that Government undertakes.

There has been increased interest in cracking down on tax evasion and the sort of aggressive avoidance activity that takes advantage of legal loopholes and involves constructing tax affairs in such a way as to reduce transparency. Governments across the UK have taken action. In 2013, the UK Parliament voted to support the general anti-abuse rule, which is sometimes referred to as the general anti-avoidance rule. In 2014, the Scottish Parliament followed by implementing a Scottish anti-avoidance rule

through the Revenue Scotland and Tax Powers Act 2014. Both rules are part of a package of measures that have been taken to tighten up tax regulation, while seeking to reduce the burden on those businesses and organisations that are paying.

Of course, where tax liabilities arise is not precise and often depends on self-reporting. Tax arrangements can reasonably be construed in different ways, and it is often a clear intention of tax rules to allow for exemptions and deductions to provide support to organisations or to encourage positive practices.

Unfortunately, there remain many mechanisms for evasion and avoidance. HMRC's central measure of liabilities versus payment is the tax gap. There has been a positive decline in the gap between what is estimated to be due and what actually ends up in the hands of the state, with stabilisation at a lower level in recent years, but that is not a definitive conclusion of the issue. Tax rules change regularly, and the approaches that are taken to evade or avoid them evolve, too.

Of course, the spirit of the law is not a value-neutral or necessarily objective judgement, particularly where complicated tax regimes are involved. Despite work under several Governments to promote simplification, the complexity of corporate tax remains. The ultimate decision on who is paying their fair share must be for independent bodies, working on the basis of what is due.

Uncertainty over such a standard lies within the Fair Tax Foundation itself. Last year, Richard Murphy, who has given evidence to the Parliament's committees in the past and who claims to have created the fair tax mark, resigned from the foundation, partly because of concerns about the mark's international standards.

As a broader point, I would caution against increasing the administrative burden of procurement policy. It is good, as a point of principle, for the public sector to make ethical procurement decisions but, too often, we have been perplexed by the fact that a small number of large suppliers to the public sector continue to secure public contracts at the expense of smaller and more local suppliers.

Procurement reform has attempted to address that gap, but, fundamentally, many businesses feel that they cannot compete, as a result of the administrative burden and requirements that are placed on them. Although small businesses may have more straightforward tax arrangements, they may also be less likely to be able to justify the investment in time and cost that is involved in being accredited by such standards.

It is certainly positive that we are discussing ensuring that tax is fair and that businesses, as well as individuals and other sorts of organisations, pay their way. However, although bodies such as the Fair Tax Foundation are making a positive and useful contribution to the discussion, I would be cautious before applying too great a reliance on such standards, given the potential costs that they could create.

13:03

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank my colleague Rhoda Grant for bringing this important debate to the chamber. I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests: I am a member of the Co-operative Party.

In a week in which we have debated the impact of the cost of living crisis, it is only right that we support fair tax week, debate the importance of ensuring that every company is held firmly to account and note the positive steps that have been taken by co-operatives and other companies.

It has been known for years that powerful corporations and super-rich individuals are exploiting a rigged global system that allows them to avoid paying their fair share of tax. As always, it is the poorest people in our country—the low-paid workers—who pay the price. We have spent this week talking here about how people in our communities are struggling to afford necessities such as food and heat. It is appalling that we should have to celebrate companies that pay the appropriate level of tax in the correct jurisdiction and at the correct time. That should be the norm. Alas, the actions of the super-rich bring us here today.

Extreme economic inequality is being fuelled by an epidemic of tax evasion and avoidance that has reached an unprecedented scale. In that context, I thank the Fair Tax Foundation for its work in celebrating those companies that do pay fair taxes and for getting individuals, companies and parliamentarians to talk about responsible tax conduct.

Governments should take note that polling by the Fair Tax Foundation shows broad public support for the use of the fair tax mark and for a greater interest in tax behaviour: 66 per cent believe that Governments and local councils should at least consider a company's ethics and how it pays its taxes when awarding public contracts; 80 per cent believe that all businesses benefiting from Government bailouts should have to agree to a set of conditions; 77 per cent believe that all companies, whatever their size, should have to publicly disclose the taxes that they do, or do not, pay in the UK; and 74 per cent of the public would rather shop from or work with

businesses that can prove that they pay their fair share of tax.

Part of what we can do is engage with the public. By doing so, we can put increased pressure on companies to behave properly and on Governments globally to reform a broken system.

I congratulate the co-operative movement for its part in achieving the fair tax mark, both by highlighting tax avoidance practices and by supporting the Fair Tax Foundation's call for reform of Scottish public procurement rules to allow contracting authorities explicitly to reward good tax conduct when awarding public contracts.

Businesses must make public commitments to shun tax avoidance, profit shifting or any artificial presence in tax havens. They should make the fullest possible disclosure of their finances and of their beneficial owners and persons having significant control. I hope that the minister will respond to those points.

Significantly, the Fair Tax Foundation also opposes any efforts by the UK Government to reverse the planned increase in the rate of UK corporation tax, which would further facilitate an international race to the bottom. Surely, no one wants to go there.

I thank my colleague Rhoda Grant for bringing the debate to the chamber and hope that it allows us all to raise the important issue of ensuring that companies in Scotland, the UK and across the world are properly held to account.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Michelle Thomson will be the last speaker before I ask the minister to respond.

13:08

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate. I thank Rhoda Grant for bringing it to the chamber and for her very good speech.

I have had an interest in taxation issues for a number of years, not only because I have to pay quite a bit of it. Back in 2016, when I was an MP, I was a sponsor of a double taxation treaties bill. The bill sought to right some injustices, such as the fact that if African countries were able to access the corporate taxes that they are due, the money would exceed the total amount of aid supplied by the rest of the world. The bill reached a second reading and, although it was not picked up in full by the UK Government, it brought about some changes.

As has already been highlighted, one problem with the UK tax system as a whole is its complexity and large number of loopholes. There is a huge industry to milk those loopholes, limited

resource in Government agencies to plug them and a limited appetite from the UK Government to narrow the tax gap, which stood at £32 billion in 2020-21. I am reminded of the joke about an accountant's children being told the story of Cinderella and interrupting to ask, "But, Mum, when the pumpkin changed into a golden coach, would that be classed as income or a capital gain?"

Although the Scottish Government has very limited powers over taxation, I applaud its efforts to create a fairer and more efficient taxation system in those areas within its control.

On re-reading Tom Arthur's excellent Reform Scotland blog post from June of this year on the Government's framework for tax, I noted that he explained the need for fairness, transparency, engagement and good guardianship. I suspect that those things hark back to the four principles of good taxation that Adam Smith set out in 1776.

One of those principles was fairness, by which Smith meant the ability to pay, and it appears to be a guiding light for the framework for tax. Similarly, Smith argued for certainty, by which he meant that taxpayers should be clearly informed about how and why taxes are being levied. In other words, he argued for what we today term transparency. Again, I note that Tom Arthur has taken forward that concern. He knows that there is considerable scope for improvement in that regard, and he has pointed out that 61 per cent of people in Scotland know very little about the tax system. Transparency and fairness are fundamental to further progress. It is fair to say that we are on a journey but we have some way to go before we reach our destination.

A further thought is that it is difficult to conceive of any tax that does not have unintended consequences. That is inevitable, as the way in which individuals respond to tax changes may be very different from the intentions of Government. I am sure that we have all seen examples that we can relate to.

My concerns about the world that we live in include concerns about the growth of shell firms and, not least, the massive abuse enabled by the existence of Scottish limited partnerships—which, despite huge efforts over the years, the UK Government, which is responsible for the relevant legislation, has steadfastly refused to reform.

We are making progress, but we have a huge way to go.

13:11

The Minister for Business, Trade, Tourism and Enterprise (Ivan McKee): I thank Rhoda Grant for bringing this very important debate to the

chamber. I thank everybody who has participated, and I encourage members to continue the conversation, because it affects everybody in Scotland. I thank the local authorities that have signed up as fair tax councils, and I also thank the Fair Tax Foundation for the work that it is doing in that regard. Although councils are independent corporate bodies with their own powers and responsibilities, we strongly encourage them to endorse the principles of the fair tax declaration.

Fair tax week recognises businesses that pay the correct amount of corporation tax in the correct jurisdiction at the correct time. Across the chamber, we all agree that our tax system should be fair and that businesses have an ethical obligation to deal openly with their tax affairs and pay the correct amount of tax. After all, the money that we raise through our taxes is spent to benefit people across the country. However, this debate is not just about the levels of tax that individuals and companies are paying; it is also about the values of our tax system.

Since the devolution of powers over taxation, the Scottish Government has created a fairer and more progressive approach to the tax system, following our distinctive Scottish approach to taxation. That approach continues to be founded on Adam Smith's four canons of taxation—namely certainty, proportionality, convenience and efficiency.

Another cornerstone of our approach is taking a tough approach to tackling tax avoidance. As Jamie Halcro Johnston mentioned, the Scottish Government has introduced its own general anti-avoidance rule, which was established by the Revenue Scotland and Tax Powers Act 2014. Our GAAR is wider than the corresponding UK GAAR, because that focuses on a narrow test of abuse rather than the wider test of artificiality that the Scottish GAAR covers.

During the pandemic, we implemented measures to ensure that grants and funds did not go to recipients with links to tax havens, and as a consequence of the Bute house agreement we are exploring what else we can do in that regard.

However, it is also important to recognise that corporate taxation and the issues that go with it are reserved to Westminster, and the Scottish Government is therefore constrained in what we can do in that regard. That point was well made by Emma Harper. With further devolution—or, indeed, if those powers were transferred as a consequence of Scotland becoming a normal independent country—we would be in a position to do much more in that regard than we are able to do at the moment.

The Scottish Government strongly condemns companies and individuals who artificially arrange

their affairs in order to pay less tax—after all, every penny that is lost to tax avoidance is a penny less to be spent on helping the people and businesses of Scotland at this very difficult time. Of course, the relevant powers lie with the UK Government and HMRC, and we strongly urge them to do more to tackle tax avoidance and evasion, and, as has been highlighted by a number of members, to work internationally for co-operation across tax jurisdictions to establish processes that allow those global issues to be addressed in a global context.

Michelle Thomson's points about the international aspects and the impact on certain countries in Africa were extremely well made, as was her point about the complexity of the UK tax system, which makes progress in many areas more complicated and difficult than it might otherwise be. I know that she has a significant interest not just in good tax practice but in wider aspects of corporate governance, and I thank her for the work that she takes forward on that.

I turn to the issue of procurement, which has been mentioned more than once. The Scottish Government and I, as the minister responsible for procurement, absolutely recognise the £14 billion public sector procurement spend in Scotland as a lever that we can and should use to its full extent in order to make progress on wider social, environmental and societal agendas.

It is important to recognise that we already use our procurement levers within the constraints that exist. We do not control employment law, but we have done significant work to move forward the real living wage and fair work agendas. We have done significant work to support and encourage the shift of as much spend as possible towards small and medium-sized enterprises in Scotland—we have had significant success in that regard compared with other parts of the UK—and, through the sustainable procurement duty, to further the community-building agenda. Members can rest assured that we are focused on doing everything that we can in that regard.

It is important to recognise the constraints within which we operate when it comes to procurement. The Public Contracts (Scotland) Regulations 2015 require that public bodies exclude bidders that have been found to have breached their legal obligations on the payment of tax or social security, and the regulations allow public bodies to exclude bidders when they can demonstrate such a breach of legal obligations by any other appropriate means. However, neither the Scottish Parliament nor the Scottish ministers have the power to exclude companies from public contracts on the basis of the offshore tax planning practices that Westminster allows. It is important to recognise that, because, as I said, those powers

are reserved. I can continue to work with procurement officials and others who have an interest in the area to explore further opportunities for tightening up those practices. However, as I said, it is hugely important to recognise that, because those powers are not devolved, legal restrictions limit how far we can go. We are not able to go as far as we would like.

The debate has been helpful and useful, and it is good to raise such issues. My colleague Tom Arthur, who has responsibility for tax, will be watching very closely. It is important to recognise that, through a Scottish approach to taxation, we are committed to ensuring that individuals and businesses pay the right amount of tax at the right time and in the right place. As I have indicated, we are also committed, through the Bute house agreement, to exploring and taking forward any further measures that we can execute within our limited powers.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate. I suspend the meeting until 2.30 pm.

13:18

Meeting suspended.

14:30

On resuming—

Presiding Officer's Statement

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Members will be aware that Buckingham Palace has advised that the Queen's doctors are concerned for Her Majesty's health and have recommended that she remain under medical supervision at Balmoral. Like Westminster, we will continue with our business at this time and will keep members updated. On behalf of all members and staff at the Scottish Parliament, I send our thoughts and our prayers to Her Majesty and the royal family.

Portfolio Question Time

14:30

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): We now move to portfolio question time. The portfolio is constitution, external affairs and culture. I remind members that questions 1 and 5 and questions 4, 7 and 8 are grouped together and that supplementaries on those questions will be taken when they are answered. Any member who wishes to ask a supplementary question should press their request-to-speak button or indicate that in the chat function.

Copenhagen Office (Opportunities)

1. **Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what trade, investment and cultural opportunities it expects to arise from its Nordic office in Copenhagen. (S6O-01332)

The Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): On behalf of the Scottish Government, I join the First Minister, the Presiding Officer and members across the chamber in extending our best wishes to Her Majesty the Queen and to her family at this difficult time.

Denmark, Norway and Sweden are already some of Scotland's biggest trading partners, with all three in our top 20 export markets, and with £2.6 billion of goods and services being exported to those countries by Scottish businesses in 2019. The Nordics are also responsible for major inward investment into Scotland, including in ScotWind.

On 26 August, the First Minister visited Copenhagen to open our new Nordic office. As part of that trip, she had conversations with a number of major energy companies and investors. It is clear that the energy transition, renewable energy and hydrogen will be major opportunities for Scotland in the region. I am also struck by the scale of the opportunity for life sciences and medical technology, with Copenhagen being the base of the United Nations Children's Fund, which is one of the world's largest buyers of crisis and medical supplies.

Kenneth Gibson: Does the cabinet secretary agree that this new office is essential to boost trade with our Scandinavian neighbours, ultimately creating and sustaining jobs, and that Tory opposition to it shows that party's utter lack of ambition for Scotland, Scottish business and the Scottish economy?

Angus Robertson: Scotland has borrowed some of the best Nordic policies, from baby boxes to rural parliaments and, most recently, district

heating, but Nordic colleagues are also interested in what we know how to do, particularly around community engagement. There is also a high level of interest in our recent period poverty work, which was, of course, supported across the chamber.

Our cultural exchange with Nordic neighbours is a reality, with Finnish and Danish showcases at Edinburgh international festivals, a strong showing of 12 Scottish bands playing in one of Europe's largest folk music festivals in Denmark, and a joint exhibition between the Danish natural history museum and the national museums in Edinburgh next spring. Further, of course, there is much to learn from Danish broadcasting, whose success has been marked over recent years.

Copenhagen Office (Opening)

5. Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife)

(Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the opening of its new Nordic office in Copenhagen. (S6O-01336)

The Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): The First Minister visited Copenhagen on 26 August to officially open the new Nordic office. The office has been operating since May, in line with our programme for government commitment. Productive meetings with the Danish Government and with the private and public sectors were held, and we look forward to following up with opportunities for trade, investment and cultural exchange.

Alexander Stewart: I acknowledge that the First Minister visited Denmark to launch the new Nordic office recently, and I acknowledge that there are opportunities for trade co-operation to be advanced. However, we already enjoy substantial economic links with the country. Given the current cost of living crisis, is that the best use of taxpayers' money at this time?

Angus Robertson: Yes, it is. The Scottish Government has had overseas offices since the Scottish Parliament reconvened in 1999. Those offices continue to generate significant economic and reputational benefits to Scotland at a time of increasing global uncertainty, and we need our friends and allies more, not less.

We are pleased to see the enthusiasm for, and consensus on, the excellent job that Scotland's international offices do from day to day in the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee's recent report on the Scottish Government's international work. I invite Alexander Stewart to read the British Council's 2019 report on Scotland and soft power, which suggests that we should expand the network as we are now doing.

Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands)

(Con): I associate Conservative members and the Scottish Conservative Party with the comments of the Presiding Officer and the cabinet secretary in relation to the health of Her Majesty the Queen. Our thoughts and prayers are with Her Majesty and her wider family at this time.

How is the Scottish Government's new office in Copenhagen working with the United Kingdom embassy to pursue common aims of the UK Government and the Scottish Government?

Angus Robertson: I thank my colleague for his introductory comments on behalf of the Conservative and Unionist Party.

I confirm to Donald Cameron—I think that he is aware of this—that the Scottish Government team is based in the British embassy, as is the case for most Scottish Government offices around the world, and there is very strong and collegial co-operation between the Scottish Government officials and the rest of the UK embassy.

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP):

The new Copenhagen office will, of course, offer a new way for the Scottish Government to realise its ambitions on Nordic co-operation. Will the cabinet secretary detail how the new office's mission will enhance the aims of the existing Nordic Baltic policy statement?

Angus Robertson: There is nothing better than having people in place in a region to understand the opportunities that exist in that particular region. For us, our northern European neighbourhood—whether we are talking about Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, the three Baltic states or, indeed, Iceland or the Faroes—is our immediate neighbourhood. There is much that we share in respect of needs, interests, concerns and expectations, and across policy issues, including energy, economic growth and sustainability and cultural exchange issues—and much besides. There is much that we could and should be doing. Having a dedicated team that is focused on delivering what the Scottish Government wishes to pursue in Scotland but also working as a conduit to colleagues in our Nordic neighbourhood is the ideal way in which we wish to pursue the collegial relationship that we want to have with our nearest overseas northern European neighbours.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Question 2 has been withdrawn.

Brexit (Impact on Scotland)

3. Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie)

(SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it continues to assess the impact of Brexit on Scotland. (S6O-01334)

The Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): As the Scottish Government has repeatedly warned, Brexit has been hugely damaging to households, communities and businesses across Scotland. Due to the hard Brexit chosen by the United Kingdom Government, Scotland's total trade with the European Union was 16 per cent lower in 2021 than it was in 2019, while Scotland's trade with non-EU countries fell by only 4 per cent over the same period.

Marie McNair: With yet another Brexit-obsessed Conservative in Downing Street and the cost of living crisis escalating, will the cabinet secretary reiterate the need for the people of Scotland to have the opportunity to decide their own constitutional future to make up for the worsening democratic deficit, which has seen Scottish concerns utterly ignored under the Tories at Westminster?

Angus Robertson: I agree with my colleague on the democracy point and, to remain with the economic challenge, Brexit has, of course, had visible impacts. For example, analysis in April by researchers at the centre for economic performance at the London School of Economics showed that post-Brexit trade barriers had led to a 6 per cent increase in food prices in the UK.

We, in the Scottish Government, continue to engage with stakeholders to understand the impacts that they are experiencing, and we will continue to carefully study further economic indicators as they are released.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I am glad that the cabinet secretary is monitoring the impacts of Brexit. He and I share the view that Brexit is incredibly damaging, but he also knows that I feel obligated, every time that that question is asked, to point out the parallels between Brexit and independence. In his quieter and more reflective moments, does he, too, recognise those parallels?

Angus Robertson: The short answer is no, there is no parallel. The Scottish Government's plans are for Scotland to reapply and to become part of the European Union again. That is totally diametrically opposed to the Brexit priorities of the UK Government.

Ukrainian Refugees (Support for Organisations)

4. **Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab):** First, I echo the comments of the Presiding Officer and the cabinet secretary and say, on behalf of Scottish Labour and my colleagues, that our thoughts are with Her Majesty and her family today.

To ask the Scottish Government how much funding it is providing to third sector organisations in the Lothians that are supporting refugees from Ukraine. (S6O-01335)

The Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development and Minister with special responsibility for Refugees from Ukraine (Neil Gray): First, I thank Sarah Boyack for her reflections, which, of course, we all share.

The Scottish Government has committed £1.3 million to the Scottish Refugee Council to increase its capacity and extend invaluable help and support to arriving Ukrainians.

The Scottish Government has also provided £48,000 to JustRight Scotland's Ukraine advice service, where displaced people can receive confidential, free legal advice on safe routes to Scotland. Further, we are providing a funding uplift of £77,000 for Edinburgh's third sector interface organisations, the Edinburgh Voluntary Organisations Council—EVOC—and Volunteer Edinburgh, to assist with their important work. I commend all the organisations across Edinburgh and the Lothians, such as the Association of Ukrainians in Great Britain and Help Ukraine Scotland, which are doing such phenomenal work on behalf of our guests.

Sarah Boyack: The minister agrees with me that the volunteers and the voluntary sector are doing a commendable stretch of work to support the high number of people from Ukraine who have arrived in Edinburgh and across the Lothians.

Last week, I visited the Welcoming, a charity that supports new Scots who are making Edinburgh their home. The charity told me that the demand for its services has increased substantially and it has had to turn away Ukrainians staying in Edinburgh who needed to access its English language sessions. It also said that it is now receiving referrals from the Department for Work and Pensions, the council and service teams on the MS Victoria, but it has not received any additional funding.

Groups such as that one are providing front-line services, so will the minister commit to meeting with the range of third sector organisations that provide direct support on the ground to people who have fled Ukraine and ensure that those groups receive funding to continue their incredible work in what is an incredibly tough financial time for them?

Neil Gray: Yes, absolutely—I would be more than happy to meet the groups that Sarah Boyack has mentioned, and I commend them for the work that they are doing.

There are a number of points to respond to. First, on English for speakers of other languages

support, part of the funding that is going to local authorities relates to providing ESOL classes. It is up to each local authority to ensure that such classes are provided in the way that best fits their areas.

The Scottish Government has also been campaigning with the United Kingdom Government to uplift provision and to provide parity for Ukrainians with the ESOL provision that was provided—quite rightly—for Syrians and Afghans.

Of course, if there is more that we could do within the very tight financial situation that we are in, we will look to do that, but it would be useful for me to meet the excellent group that Sarah Boyack referred to, in order to hear more about its work.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: As the Presiding Officer advised, I will come to the supplementaries at the end of this group of questions.

Ukrainian Refugees (Support)

7. Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government in what ways it will continue to ensure refugees arriving from Ukraine will be provided with adequate shelter and support on arrival in Scotland. (S6O-01338)

The Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development and Minister with special responsibility for Refugees from Ukraine (Neil Gray): The Scottish Government's priority is to ensure that displaced people arriving from Ukraine are able to stay in appropriate temporary accommodation and get the right support, ahead of moving into safe, sustainable longer-term accommodation.

Welcome hubs across Scotland continue to provide immediate support, such as healthcare, language support, clothes, food and trauma support, as well as access to temporary welcome accommodation.

We are taking significant action to increase our temporary accommodation capacity, including the chartering of two passenger ships. We are boosting our matching system to maximise the number of people who can be placed with volunteer hosts who have completed the necessary safeguarding checks.

Fulton MacGregor: Along the same lines as the previous question from Sarah Boyack, I note that it is important that people who come here get as much support as possible. Therefore, can the minister provide an update on the increased support that local charities in my constituency, Coatbridge and Chryston, are likely to receive in order to manage the increased workload that is

associated with the arrival of people from Ukraine and with helping them to settle in the local community?

Neil Gray: I thank Fulton MacGregor for his positive engagement with the work that is going on in his constituency and across North Lanarkshire to provide new long-term accommodation for those who have been displaced from Ukraine.

The engagement between the Scottish Government, local parliamentarians including Fulton MacGregor and Clare Adamson and local authorities will be important. We fund third sector interfaces to provide single points of support for third sector organisations, with one in each local authority area. The TSIs have been heavily involved in co-ordinating efforts to welcome and settle people who have been displaced from Ukraine.

Local authorities are also given funding to support activities to welcome displaced people. They can decide how best to use those funds, taking into account local circumstances and needs. Local authorities may choose to use some of that funding to contract with third sector organisations in order to increase their support.

The refurbishment of up to 200 homes in North Lanarkshire, supported by £5 million of Scottish Government funding, is an example of our commitment to providing safe and sustainable accommodation. As always, my door is open to Fulton MacGregor and others to discuss any further support that might be required.

Supersponsor Scheme

8. Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the supersponsorship scheme. (S6O-01339)

The Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development and Minister with special responsibility for Refugees from Ukraine (Neil Gray): We have exceeded our initial commitment to welcome 3,000 people under the Scottish supersponsor scheme. As a nation, Scotland is now providing safety to over 16,500 people from Ukraine, which is 18.6 per cent of all United Kingdom arrivals, and the highest number per head of population in the four nations.

Although the Scottish supersponsor scheme has been temporarily paused for new applications, the Scottish Government continues to work with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and local councils to provide safe, suitable accommodation and a wraparound support offer to displaced Ukrainians who are already in our country and to those who have been granted permission to travel here.

Jeremy Balfour: Has the Scottish Government set itself a target for how long an individual will be housed on the ship in Edinburgh before they will be moved into more permanent accommodation?

Neil Gray: We want people to be out of temporary accommodation as quickly as possible, regardless of whether that is hotel accommodation, the ship that has arrived in Leith, or the ship that is being worked on in Glasgow. We want people to be in temporary accommodation for as short a period as possible and to be moved to longer-term accommodation as quickly as possible, and we want to give people the opportunity to be able to rebuild their lives in Scotland. We do not want people to be staying in short-term accommodation for any longer than is absolutely necessary.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): I associate myself with comments from colleagues across the chamber about the health of Her Majesty the Queen.

The minister will be aware that Ukrainians are not the only people who are seeking refuge and asylum in Scotland. There are almost 5,000 asylum seekers in the country. Extending the concessionary travel scheme to all those asylum seekers would improve their lives immeasurably. The discussions that I have had with the Government have generally been positive, but progress has been painfully slow. Can the minister confirm whether the Government agrees that the concessionary travel scheme should be extended to all asylum seekers?

Neil Gray: For people who are arriving from Ukraine, which is my responsibility, the concessionary travel scheme already applies—so people over 60 and young people already have access to that scheme. I have heard the representations and have met Mr Sweeney, Bob Doris, Mark Ruskell and others to discuss their proposal to extend the concessionary travel scheme. We continue to work on doing what we can to see whether there is more that can be done with the limited financial resources that we have.

Siobhian Brown: What assistance is the Scottish Government giving to third sector and charitable organisations, such as the Micah Project in Troon, that are giving vital support to Ukrainian refugees in Scotland?

Neil Gray: First, I pay tribute to the work that the Micah Project in Troon is doing.

The Scottish Government has provided additional funding to national charities. It has committed £1.3 million to the Scottish Refugee Council and £36,000 to JustRight Scotland's Ukraine advice service. That funding will increase the capacity to extend valuable support to arriving Ukrainians. Along with support from local

authorities, that will provide local charities with the assistance that they require to support displaced people from Ukraine who are living in Scotland.

It is worth reiterating the fact that we have also provided support to local authorities to ensure that there is assistance for local organisations, too. If more needs to be done, I am happy to hear such representations and to see what more is possible.

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): Councils need to know how many Ukrainians are arriving so that they can provide support. However, ministers are often better informed than they are. I am often referred to Home Office data when I raise such questions; however, that does not show which local authorities will receive Ukrainians under the supersponsor scheme, or how many.

Will the Scottish Governments publish its own detailed breakdown of people who are arriving under the supersponsor scheme in the near future?

Neil Gray: Yes.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Emma Roddick will ask the final supplementary question on the group.

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): Following comments from the now former refugees minister at Westminster, and given that the cost of living crisis is escalating across the UK, has the UK Government asked the Scottish Government for views on increasing monthly payments to homes of Ukraine hosts?

Neil Gray: I record my thanks to Lord Richard Harrington for the work that he did, collaboratively, with the Scottish Government and the Welsh Government. We worked well together and I am sorry that he has moved on. We wait to see whether his position will be replaced in the UK Government reshuffle.

We are actively pressing the UK Government to increase funding for hosts, particularly during the cost of living crisis, when energy bills are soaring. I agree with Richard Harrington that it is essential that the UK Government increase the "thank you" payments for hosts to £700, and I hope that the new Chancellor of the Exchequer will reflect on that as he considers future support for the Ukrainian schemes.

International Office Network (Programme for Government)

6. **Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what next steps the programme for government proposes for Scotland's international office network. (S6O-01337)

The Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): Scotland's international network creates domestic opportunities, attracts investment and ultimately benefits the people of Scotland. I am sure that my colleague Willie Coffey was delighted to see the First Minister open our new Nordic office in Copenhagen. We are also committed to opening a new office in Warsaw during this parliamentary session.

We will ensure that our international work is measurable, transparent and available to the public. From next year onwards, we will publish an annual report that explains how our international offices work to promote our values, objectives and priorities around the world.

Willie Coffey: The Copenhagen office is tightening our ties with our Nordic neighbours. The proposed Warsaw office promises to facilitate our dialogue with central Europe. Will the cabinet secretary elaborate on how the expanded international office network will amplify Scotland's distinct voice on the world stage? How does the global affairs framework guide such work?

Angus Robertson: It is hugely beneficial that the network is growing—that we have a greater footprint in northern Europe and in central Europe. It is worth observing, in value-for-money terms, that the Scottish Government manages the network with significantly less resource than similar devolved Governments elsewhere in the world spend.

At present, we are living within financial constraints, so our plans have focused on delivering the opening of the office in Copenhagen and moving forward in the central European region, which is so important for Scotland—not least because of the great many people from there who have chosen to move to Scotland. There are many opportunities that we can pursue.

I hope that we will, in time, look at growing the network further. In the here and now, I am absolutely delighted that we have been able to open the office in Copenhagen officially and that we are moving forward with opening an office in Warsaw.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions. There will be a brief pause before the next item of business.

Displaced People from Ukraine

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a statement by Neil Gray on displaced people from Ukraine. The minister will take questions at the end of his statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:54

The Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development and Minister with special responsibility for Refugees from Ukraine (Neil Gray): Scotland continues to stand in solidarity with Ukraine and remains committed to supporting Ukrainians who have fled the war.

When we opened the supersponsor scheme, like others around the world, we hoped that the crisis would be quickly and peacefully resolved and that Ukrainians could return to safety. However, we are now more than six months into the conflict and we expect the numbers of people who will find a place of safety in Scotland to continue to increase.

We are now providing safety to more than 16,500 people—18.6 per cent of all United Kingdom arrivals and the highest rate per head of population in the four nations. More than 13,000 people have arrived through our supersponsor scheme, which demonstrates its success.

To date, just under 35,000 visas have been issued to Ukrainians with a Scottish sponsor, many of whom have yet to travel. That compares with more than 85,500 visas that have been issued to those with an English sponsor and 8,000 for Wales. That far exceeds our initial commitment to welcome 3,000 people under the supersponsor scheme, which we introduced so that people could travel to a place of safety without needing to find a named private host.

We want to ensure that we are able to support displaced people who are already living here, as well as the thousands who might arrive in the coming weeks and months. Therefore, in July, we took the very difficult decision to pause the scheme, in order that those who had already applied could be provided with our warm Scottish welcome.

The sharp rise in applications to the Scottish scheme at the start of the summer highlights, first, the scheme's undoubted success and popularity and, secondly, the fact that routes into other parts of the UK were—and are still becoming—harder to come by. Our colleagues in Wales, understandably, took the difficult decision to pause their scheme in June, and private matches across the UK have become scarcer.

We have taken steps to ensure that we can house as many Ukrainians as possible in safe, suitable, welcoming accommodation. As part of that response, we have rapidly mobilised a passenger ship in Edinburgh, which is successfully providing temporary accommodation for up to 2,200 people, with wraparound support, including from Ukrainian-speaking crew. The Ukrainian consul general welcomed the ship, and we have since secured a second, with capacity for a further 1,750 people. It docked in Glasgow last week; the inspection that we requested by the Maritime and Coastguard Agency is complete; any issues that were raised are being resolved; and the MCA will return to confirm that ahead of the first guests being welcomed aboard in the next few days.

Countries including the Netherlands, France and Estonia are also using ships to provide a place to live for people who are fleeing war. I visited the Glasgow vessel yesterday, MSPs visited the Edinburgh vessel the other week, and the media have also been aboard and spoken to guests.

Any fair-minded person who visits the ships or sees the television coverage would conclude that both ships are comparable with hotel accommodation. They provide easy access to support in a centralised, safe space, as well as services from children's play facilities to social security support.

To anyone who questions that safe and secure—but temporary—arrangement, I ask what credible alternative they would offer that would safely support the thousands of people whom we are able to accommodate, and who have arrived within a matter of months, while we work to support people into longer-term homes.

We want accommodation and support as part of our warm Scottish welcome to be as good as it can be. That is why we recently contracted with the Palladium Group—an organisation with specialist experience in humanitarian support interventions, planning and logistics—to provide broad support to enhance our delivery and the experience of displaced Ukrainians.

Our support has been rolled out at pace, with co-operation across national and local government, as well as the voluntary and third sectors, to which I offer thanks for their efforts.

We are grateful to everyone across Scotland who has offered rooms and properties to host Ukrainians. Scottish local authorities are working to conduct the necessary person and property checks for volunteer hosts. To hosts who have not yet had all those checks completed, we appreciate your patience while local authorities undertake them.

After potential accommodation is checked, the matching process that occurs is, by its nature,

resource intensive, because multiple and often highly sensitive conversations are required with the displaced person and the potential host. Not all properties will be suitable for all households. A family with children might need more space, while some hosts are offering one spare room.

We know, too, that, for understandable personal or work reasons, some families have been reluctant to stay outside the central belt. Matching has progressed more slowly than I would wish, and I continue to urge local authorities to complete checks as quickly as possible, drawing on the £11.2 million of funding that we have made available.

The challenges that are inherent in such a large and tragic displacement of people, which I have seen for myself when visiting Poland and Germany, are being felt all over Europe, both in providing short-term accommodation and in helping people to move into sustainable longer-term accommodation. Scotland shares that experience and, along with our partners, we are taking action to improve and increase our support.

We have funded additional staff in local authorities to speed up the process of matching people to suitable accommodation. We are rolling out a new digital matching tool to support that, and we are planning a fresh exercise to recruit hosts, implementing what we have already learned to make it easier for people to offer homes that match Ukrainians' needs. We are introducing a user-friendly application form, which will quickly advise on a property's suitability, which will mean more certainty for people who are offering accommodation and will help local authorities to direct resources and efforts towards housing that is most likely to support a match.

We are also working with social landlords and partners to secure additional longer-term housing. That is in addition to the 300 homes that are being made available through the Wheatley Housing Group Ltd and the refurbishment of 200 properties in North Lanarkshire.

We are mindful that the people whom we are supporting are fleeing war, and we are listening to Ukrainians about their experiences in Scotland and hopes for the future. In engagement events with Ukrainians, we heard that, like all of us, they are keen to see their children enrolled in school, to register with a general practitioner and to find work. Accordingly, those are key parts of our response for new arrivals, both when they are in temporary accommodation and as they move into longer-term homes.

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills and Councillor Tony Buchanan, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities spokesperson for children and young people, wrote jointly last week

to all directors of education affirming Ukrainian children's right to education and setting out available support, including specialist modules for teachers to support pupils who are dealing with trauma.

Ukrainians who are here through the homes for Ukraine, Ukraine family or Ukraine extension schemes and who want to study at a college or university in Scotland from this academic year will be eligible for free tuition and living cost support. For those who want access to English language classes, in addition to Scottish Government English for speakers of other languages funding through colleges, we are calling on the UK Government to make the £850 per adult ESOL tariff that is provided for Afghans and Syrians available to Ukrainians, too.

We have made sure that displaced Ukrainians are able to access the Scottish Government's full range of employment support services, such as fair start Scotland and employability services that are offered with local authorities and local employability partnerships. Work coaches from the Department for Work and Pensions are also providing vital support.

The Scottish Government is working closely with business organisations, including the Scottish Chambers of Commerce, to ensure that Ukrainians are able to access business-led job-matching support as well. We are also providing health services, to ensure that Ukrainians understand how to access primary care, and providing advice on and access to Scottish social security benefits. All pregnant women and families with young babies are entitled to a baby box, with boxes being ready at major welcome hubs for new arrivals in need.

Beyond those formal activities, as part of evident solidarity with Ukraine, we have seen people across Scotland bring our warm Scottish welcome to life. From offering up their homes to fundraising and donating toys, people here have embraced people arriving from Ukraine. Equally, we have seen the community spirit of Ukrainians arriving in Scotland, although we know that they want it to be a temporary home.

We do more than provide support to those we welcome here: we are providing £4 million in humanitarian aid to provide humanitarian assistance in Europe, including health, water and sanitation, and shelter for those who are fleeing Ukraine. We are working with the Ukrainian Government to provide medical supplies worth around £2.9 million and £65 million in military support.

As announced in the programme for government, we will build on that by investing a further £300,000 in a project led by the HALO

Trust to respond to the risk of explosive remnants of war in Ukraine, thereby enhancing security and reducing the risk of death and injury.

Scotland's response to this Europe-wide challenge has been remarkable—our wholehearted response displays the best of us. I thank all those who have played their part to respond as quickly and effectively as possible to this humanitarian crisis.

While we continue to welcome and prepare for those who are still to arrive, we reiterate our call for the end of Russia's illegal invasion and the restoration of peace in Ukraine.

Finally, I have a direct message for our friends from Ukraine: Shotlandiya—vash dim, i vona bude nym doty, doky vam tse bude potribno. Scotland is your home and will be for as long as you need it to be.

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

Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I thank the minister for the advance sight of his statement. I associate members on the Conservative benches with his opening remarks.

The daily horror that we continue to witness in Ukraine as a result of Putin's invasion remains deeply troubling and must continue to be condemned. The UK remains a firm friend and ally of Ukraine, and I am pleased that the new Prime Minister has reaffirmed our commitment to supporting Ukraine and its people in any way that we can.

People across Scotland have opened their doors to families who are fleeing Ukraine, and that generous spirit continues even in these trying times. The minister's statement shows that 35,000 sponsored visas have been issued in Scotland, but only 13,000 people have arrived under the supersponsor scheme, which implies that more than 20,000 sponsored refugees have yet to arrive here. In other words, we might soon be seeing refugee numbers increase significantly.

Last month, the minister stated that more than half of Scots who had expressed an interest in hosting Ukrainians have withdrawn that interest, which is concerning. I appreciate that this is a fast-moving situation, but there are clearly significant issues the supersponsor scheme.

Given the need to provide certainty to refugees, hosts and local authorities, what information can the minister give on the amount of time that it will

take from a refugee arriving in Scotland to their being physically placed with a sponsor?

Neil Gray: I thank Donald Cameron for the introduction to his question and the tone with which he has approached the situation.

On the point that I made about there being available less than half of those who had initially expressed an interest in being private hosts for a displaced Ukrainian, Mr Cameron suggests that all those people have withdrawn. There are various reasons why people have either withdrawn or their property has not been found to be suitable—either they or their properties might not have passed checks. There are number of different reasons why we are fishing in a pool that is smaller than had been initially anticipated.

On timescales, as I set out in my statement, we are looking for people to be in temporary accommodation for as short a period as possible. I am very grateful and thankful for those who have already provided sponsorship in private homes and those who are still willing to do so. As I said in my statement, I am keen for people to remain patient while the checks are completed and the process is sped up.

I think that Mr Cameron and I would agree that staying in somebody else's home will be, by its nature, a temporary situation. That is why, as I set out in my statement, we are looking to get more longer-term accommodation available as quickly as possible, and the review that is taking place during the scheme's pause is looking to achieve that. There are a number of steps that I hope we will be able to take in short order to help achieve that.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests.

I thank the minister for the advance sight of his statement and for his willingness to engage with MSPs on a cross-party basis since the invasion of Ukraine in February. I also put on record my thanks to the Ukrainian community in Edinburgh and across Scotland, to those who have volunteered to host Ukrainians in their homes and to the third sector organisations and charities. Last but not least, in my own area of Edinburgh, I thank the City of Edinburgh Council for the fantastic work that it has done not just through its staff in the arrival hub—which has been crucial—but in the schools, and I thank our businesses across the city that have opened their arms to help.

Where is the investment now to support our councils across the country? Why are we not seeing more forward planning, given that it is six months on from the invasion? The issue of support for people from Ukraine is centre stage for our councils, and they need support now to deliver the

homes, to work with communities and to provide the schools, the help with transport costs, the access to English courses and the advice that will enable Ukrainians to recover. Being in a warm home, having access to the support that they need and, crucially, being able to use their skills and knowledge to work and support themselves and their families is what those people who have arrived in Scotland want and need now.

Yesterday, the Deputy First Minister said that the cost of supporting Ukrainians requires us to

“find around £200 million, which was not planned for at the time of the budget, just as the invasion began.”—[*Official Report*, 7 September 2022; c 25.]

Will the minister clarify how the investment will take place? He mentioned an investment in 500 more homes, but do we not need many more new homes than that? For example, in the case of City of Edinburgh Council, there are £1 million-worth of unfunded one-off costs across the piece and more than £5 million-worth of unfunded recurring costs. When will councils get the money that has been promised for supporting Ukrainians? Councils are providing support now and they desperately need the investment.

Neil Gray: I thank Sarah Boyack, and I reiterate her thanks to all those whom she addressed in her remarks, not least City of Edinburgh Council, with which I have had an incredibly good working relationship. The council has gone above and beyond, as have many other local authorities. Obviously, given the nature of where Ukrainian people are arriving, our involvement with Edinburgh council has been intensive, and I am greatly appreciative of its officers and teams for everything that they have done.

On direct council support, Sarah Boyack will be aware of the £11.2 million that we made available early on to allow local authorities to ensure that accommodation could be made available and to support them through the matching process. We have provided additional funding to local authorities of £1 million for welcome arrangements.

Sarah Boyack will also be aware of the £10,500 tariff that the UK Government is responsible for. I have taken the representation that has been made to me by local government on the adequacy of that sum, and I have sought to do what I can to appeal to UK ministers to invest more than £10,500. I have also appealed to them to provide parity of support, regardless of the scheme that Ukrainian people have arrived on—which might be the homes for Ukraine scheme or the family scheme—to ensure that our local authorities are adequately supported through the process.

As always, I am more than happy to engage further—as Sarah Boyack alluded—with her, her

council colleagues in Edinburgh or councils elsewhere if there are challenges that require further Scottish or UK Government intervention.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): Given that the vast majority of displaced Ukrainian people who have come here are women and children, and given that many of them are being housed together in high-rise flats such as those in Coatbridge, in my constituency, what steps are being taken by the Scottish Government to ensure that that vulnerable group of people are being afforded the best security and support as they settle in Scotland?

Neil Gray: I thank Fulton MacGregor for not only his question but his proactive engagement in the on-going work in North Lanarkshire. I also thank North Lanarkshire Council for its work. It was proactive in coming forward about the potential for those properties to be refurbished.

Ensuring the wellbeing and safety of displaced people arriving from Ukraine is our absolute priority, which we set right at the start of our scheme. Through our supersponsor scheme, we are ensuring that people are able to stay in appropriate temporary accommodation and receive the right support before moving on to safe and sustainable longer-term accommodation that meets their needs.

An initial triage of all guests' needs takes place at the welcome hub. Local authorities are equipped to support the individual needs of displaced people and are best placed to direct people to local advice services for women and children. We have provided £1.3 million to the Scottish Refugee Council to support arriving Ukrainians, many of whom have experienced significant trauma.

I reiterate to Fulton MacGregor—and other members—that, if there is anything further that I can do through engagement that would be helpful to him and the community in his constituency, I will be happy to do that.

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): Home Office figures show that only 75 Ukrainians have arrived in South Ayrshire, but council officials tell me that the real figure is closer to 500, with the bulk of arrivals occurring through the supersponsor scheme and with people staying in temporary accommodation.

Councils want to help, but many are close to breaking point. They need more help and more information about the timing and quantity of arrivals. What efforts is the minister making to improve communication with local authorities so that they can best co-ordinate their response?

Neil Gray: We, too, are reliant on information that comes through the Home Office and Border

Force about potential arrivals. We proactively try to contact people who have received a visa, in order to get more intelligence on when they might arrive and to find out, ahead of their arrival, what their requirements will be.

As I said in previous answers, we are working very closely with local authorities to ensure that we give them as much information as we can, so that they can prepare for those arrivals. If the member has particular concerns on behalf of her local authority that she wants to pass on, I will be more than happy to do what I can to assuage those concerns.

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): What provisions are being made to ensure that Ukrainians are supported when homes for Ukraine hosts are no longer in a position to host after the initial six-month period?

Neil Gray: The UK Government is contacting hosts who are approaching six months of hosting Ukrainians under the homes for Ukraine private sponsorship route to encourage them to consider extending their hosting. I encourage any Ukrainians who will not be staying with their current host to speak to their local authority about what support is available in their local area.

Although it is a three-year visa scheme, so far the UK Government has confirmed funding for only one year. We continue to urge the UK Government to provide clarity on the funding of future years of the scheme. I support the now former minister for refugees Richard Harrington's recent call for the UK Government to double thank-you payments for hosts to £700. Evelyn Tweed can be assured that I will look to have an early meeting with the new minister who has responsibility for Ukrainian refugees, and with Treasury ministers, to ensure their continued support for the schemes.

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): Is the minister able to say whether he is happy with the level of communication and co-ordination between national and local government? I have heard from council colleagues examples of situations in which the level of communication has not been up to scratch. For example, when busloads of displaced Ukrainian people went to Dumfries and Galloway late in the night, officials at Dumfries and Galloway Council got very late notice of that. Occasionally, Ukrainian parents and children have turned up at schools on the first day of term, with the relevant authorities having been given no prior notice that those children were to start term that day.

Has the minister had any information from local authorities about instances of homelessness as a result of hosts no longer being able to accommodate Ukrainian families?

Neil Gray: I thank Mark Griffin for his questions. As he will understand and expect, I have regular meetings, correspondence and engagement directly with individual local authorities and through COSLA, as do my officials. I put on record my thanks to the whole team of officials in the Scottish Government, who have bent over backwards, done everything possible and thrown all their energies at making sure that the scheme works well. I pay tribute to them, alongside local authority officials. The relationship between officials at the Scottish Government and local authorities is very strong.

With regard to the issue of last-minute arrivals that we have not been aware of, the nature of the scheme—because we do not have overall control of the visa system—is such that there will be points at which there will be communication difficulties. I again put on record my thanks to the hosting authorities for the work that they are doing. We are sharing all the information that it is possible for us to share with local authorities on family composition to ensure that authorities can plan as effectively as possible. The welcome hubs at arrival points are important for that, although not everybody comes through the welcome hubs.

If there are specific issues that Mark Griffin wants to raise with me about those areas or any areas in which he feels that we could do better, I will be more than happy to hear from him about that at any stage, and I will do what I can to ensure that the necessary improvements are made.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I point out that another six members hope to ask questions, so I make a plea for more succinct questions and answers.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): Questioners have already mentioned a variety of accommodation that might work for Ukrainian displaced people, such as private homes, the ships and council accommodation. Can the minister give any examples of what kinds of accommodation he is looking for? For example, would small bed and breakfasts and hotels be an option?

Neil Gray: John Mason is pithiness personified.

Work to procure a range of accommodation to meet the needs of people from Ukraine continues. This humanitarian crisis requires a whole-Scotland response. The Scottish Government has sourced suitable temporary accommodation for displaced people, including hotels, apartments, student accommodation and passenger ships.

What is key to decisions about the temporary accommodation that can be used is ensuring that appropriate support can be put in place by local authorities for those who are accommodated.

Beyond immediate temporary accommodation for the thousands of people who have arrived in the past few months, we are working closely with councils and the housing sector to bring forward more long-term housing solutions in addition to the 300 homes that are being made available by the Wheatley Group and the refurbishment of properties in North Lanarkshire.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): On behalf of the Liberal Democrats, I state our grave concern about the health of Her Majesty the Queen. I also refer members to my entry in the register of interests about my association with the homes for Ukraine scheme.

The minister said that there are tens of thousands of Ukrainians already here and tens of thousands still on the way. I am not sure that we are ready for them. I am very concerned that so many are yet to be matched with accommodation. I went with the minister to visit the ship that he described and was very impressed, but it is not a permanent solution and is certainly not what Ukrainians will have had in mind as they made their way across Europe.

We need more homes, but we also need the means for Ukrainians to move between those homes and opportunities for work and training. Will the minister reiterate the call for homes for Ukrainians, because many people thought that that call had ended with the closure of the supersponsor scheme? Will he also enrol not only Ukrainian refugees but any refugees who are here through a particular scheme in the discretionary travel scheme, so that they can move between their new accommodation and job opportunities? The distance between home and work may be one of the main reasons why people do not wish to move outside the central belt.

Neil Gray: I am glad that Alex Cole-Hamilton was impressed by the accommodation that has been offered on board the MS Victoria, which is currently docked at Leith. To pick up on what Sarah Boyack said, I think that the work that has been done by City of Edinburgh Council, Scottish Government officials, third sector organisations and the shipping company to provide a superb wraparound support service is incredible, and I am greatly appreciative of all who have been involved in doing that.

I reiterate and share Alex Cole-Hamilton's suggestion that that is a temporary solution. Of course it is. We are working to provide longer-term accommodation as best we can. I do not think that it is fair of him to characterise Scotland as being somehow uniquely underprepared in comparison with other European nations. This is a Europe-wide crisis: 7 million people have been displaced in the greatest movement of people since the second world war. Every nation in Europe is facing

that challenge—not grudgingly, but willingly—and we are doing everything possible to provide safety, security and support for people arriving from Ukraine. I look forward to further constructive work with Alex Cole-Hamilton to ensure that we can continue to do so.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): The minister has spoken of boosting the national matching service where he can to speed up the transition from temporary accommodation. Will he elaborate on how matching can sustainably be accelerated?

Neil Gray: We are bringing forward a new digital solution that we hope will speed up the matching, and we also look to learn lessons from the initial wave of people who expressed an interest in hosting, in order to provide more streamlined systems for those who want to offer their homes. I again express my gratitude for the generosity of people across Scotland.

It is important to recognise that matching people with hosts is a complex process and that time must be taken to ensure that the needs of both the host family and the Ukrainians are met and that both are suitably supported to make decisions that are right for them. We have made £11.2 million of additional funding available to local authorities to use to bolster their resettlement teams, enhance the pace of host checks and support the refurbishment of properties. We have also funded additional staff in local authorities to speed up the process, and, as I said, we are looking to introduce a new digital tool to support the matching process.

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I thank all those across Scotland who have opened their hearts and homes to Ukrainians who have been through a traumatic and life-changing few months. Will the minister provide more detail about the trauma support that is in place in schools and elsewhere, given that we know that trauma is not processed in the same way by everyone and that it often takes time to come to the surface?

Neil Gray: Maggie Chapman is absolutely right: everybody will be impacted differently by the trauma that has been experienced in this horrific war at Putin's hand. People will also display the symptoms of their trauma in different ways and at different times. As I said in my statement, we are looking to provide further support for our school staff to ensure that they are able to recognise that and deal with it. We are also working with other organisations to ensure that, as best we can, we are able to provide further trauma support as and when it is required.

Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con): Can the minister outline further details of how the HALO Trust project will be delivered?

Neil Gray: We have provided £300,000 to the HALO Trust so that it can clear munitions of war that have been laid in Ukraine, in order to provide greater safety and security for those who are looking to rebuild their communities. Given Mr Golden's interest in the area, I would be happy to write to him with further details of the support that we are providing there.

Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): The Scottish Government has been tireless in acquiring safe and comfortable temporary accommodation for Ukrainians who have newly arrived in Scotland, with the assistance of councils such as Argyll and Bute Council in my area. The minister touched on this in answering previous questions, but can he provide any additional information on the on-going dialogue with COSLA and local councils to ensure that all levels of government in Scotland are working closely on this immense and important challenge?

Neil Gray: Jenni Minto can be reassured that we are working very closely with both COSLA and individual local authorities, because they are playing a key part in the response to this humanitarian crisis. We value the important part that they are playing in our warm welcome and we are in close and on-going communication with them.

This is a humanitarian crisis that requires the whole of Scotland to respond collectively. We are working closely with local authorities and COSLA to speed up the matching process, including by enhancing teams to boost capacity and exploring creative solutions to bring forward longer-term accommodation.

The Scottish Government, COSLA and local authority officials have been working jointly over August on a rapid review of the supersponsor scheme to provide more input, to make the scheme even more successful and sustainable and to provide a welcome to the thousands of Ukrainians whom we expect to arrive in the coming weeks and months. I look forward to setting out the detail of the response of that review in the coming period.

National Mission on Drugs

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a statement by Angela Constance, who will give an update on the national mission on drugs. The minister will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

15:28

The Minister for Drugs Policy (Angela Constance): First and foremost, I want to convey my deepest condolences to those who have lost a loved one, and to reaffirm my commitment, and that of the Government, to saving and improving lives. Every loss of a life to a drug death is as tragic as it is unacceptable. During the recess, National Records of Scotland published its annual drug-related deaths report, which confirms that we lost 1,330 fellow citizens to drugs in Scotland in 2021. This remains a public health emergency.

Although there has been a slight decrease from the previous year, deaths continue to rise for some groups of people and in some geographical areas. Deaths among women, for example, increased again in 2021. That is particularly concerning, and it emphasises the need for us to do more for women and families. I am pleased to inform the Parliament that the Phoenix Futures family service and the first Aberlour mother and child recovery house will come on stream soon, and I have seen for myself the progress that is being made at River Garden Auchincruive in developing new accommodation for women.

There has been a reduction in the number of deaths among under-25s—although the figure remains too high, as every death is one too many. A survey of young people on their drug and alcohol use is currently being analysed, and we will use the information from it to co-produce service standards in order to meet their needs.

As in previous years, the majority of drug deaths involved more than one drug. While opiates remain the most prevalent, benzodiazepines—particularly street benzodiazepines—were implicated in nearly two thirds of deaths.

Some key outcomes from our recently published “National Mission on Drug Deaths: Plan 2022-2026” are fewer people developing problem drug use, the tackling of multiple disadvantage, and support for families and communities—alongside the need to reduce harms and promote treatment and recovery. That plan, alongside Public Health Scotland’s recent “National Drug-Related Deaths Database (Scotland) Report”, will help us to understand where and when to better target our response.

In July, the Scottish Drug Deaths Taskforce published its vital final report, “Changing Lives”, and again I thank all its members, past and present, for their contribution. The final report contains 20 recommendations and 139 actions. It is comprehensive, critical and challenging; I asked for a bold blueprint for action and I welcome it.

The task force asked that we publish an action plan within six months, setting out how we will deliver its recommendations. I commit to doing that and, ahead of my appearance next week at the joint meeting of the Criminal Justice Committee, the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee and the Social Justice and Social Security Committee, I will publish our first response to those recommendations in more detail.

Taking forward the task force report, we have also given alcohol and drug partnerships £3 million to invest in their response. Officials will be working with ADPs on the priorities for that funding in line with the task force recommendations.

The task force report is a challenge to all of us across Government, the Parliament and wider society. Culture change is at the heart of the report’s call for a system to be based on care, compassion and human rights. The Government will lead by example, through developing a cross-Government programme of work to support that change. That work focuses on three challenges: ensuring more holistic support; prioritising prevention and early intervention; and tackling stigma. Those cannot be delivered by one department, nor indeed by Government alone, but will require co-ordinated action and commitment from a range of sectors in public life. That co-ordinated programme of work will be published in a cross-Government action plan and will set out how other portfolios—for example, housing, justice, education, mental health and primary care—will support the work of our national mission.

That work will have to be delivered against the backdrop of the rising cost of living and the additional pressures that that will undoubtedly bring to bear on individuals and the services that support them.

The task force report is clear that a cultural shift is required in how we treat, think about and speak about people who use drugs. “Stigma,” it says, “kills people”. Stigma cuts deeper, though, and can blight many aspects of people’s lives, not just those relating to drug and alcohol services. Stereotypes and prejudices put up unnecessary barriers that prevent people from flourishing. There are practical steps that all of us in Scotland should take to address that stigma, remove those barriers and improve access to services. As outlined in the programme for government, we will

publish a stigma action plan. I will provide a further update on that work in the autumn.

We know that complex challenges exist around recruitment, retention and service design. We have recently established an expert group on workforce to identify immediate actions that can be taken to tackle those challenges. As recommended by the task force, the group will develop a workforce action plan, which will set out the longer-term actions required to deliver a sustainable skilled workforce that is valued for its work. I intend to return to the Parliament in November to provide a further update on that work.

It is also important to acknowledge that, throughout its lifespan, the task force regularly made recommendations and engaged with Government and others, which means that a wide range of the activity that it has proposed is already under way. The medication-assisted treatment standards, which were initially developed by the task force, form a key part of our national mission.

As members will know, in June, I wrote a letter of direction to health boards, integration authorities and local authorities to make sure that local partners are in no doubt about the Government's commitment to the standards and their responsibility for their delivery. By the end of September, chief officers must publish improvement plans for implementing the standards. In line with the task force's recommendation, those plans must involve and include the voices of people with lived and living experience.

The continued roll-out of naloxone is another area of action that the task force has spearheaded. Many of our emergency services now routinely carry naloxone as a result. That includes Police Scotland, which began the national roll-out of its naloxone carriage programme in August.

However, we need to progress in other areas that are highlighted in the report, including improving accountability. To better do that, I established the national mission oversight group to provide scrutiny, challenge and expert advice to the Scottish Government and the wider sector as services are adapted and improved to save lives. I have invited David Strang, the former chair of the Drug Deaths Taskforce, to be the independent chair of that group, bringing his skills, knowledge and leadership to the oversight of the national mission.

The task force also calls for the Scottish Government to continue its work with partners to implement a safer drug consumption facility. I confirm that the Crown Office is considering the proposal that was shared with it at the end of

June, before briefing the Lord Advocate on the matter. I will update Parliament further once a response has been received from the Lord Advocate.

The UK Government has also published a white paper, "Swift, Certain, Tough", which outlines new consequences for drug possession, including measures such as passport confiscation. Increasing or expanding criminal sanctions have not in the past proven successful in preventing drug deaths. Given that some of the proposals might apply in Scotland, I have written to the UK Government setting out some of my concerns. Much of what is included in that paper runs contrary to our public health approach, but I would welcome views from across the chamber on the matter.

In addition to consulting parliamentary colleagues, I will return to Parliament to provide updates on our work on stigma, workforce, MAT standards and the cross-Government plan in the coming months. The Government will redouble its commitment to the national mission on drugs, the principles of which will guide us through the emergency. They are: follow the evidence, invest to transform services and trust our lived and living experience.

The independent national collaborative, chaired by Professor Alan Miller, will produce its vision for integrating human rights into national policy and local service design and delivery. The collaborative is recruiting to its change team and reference groups. It will ask tough questions and demand clear answers, and I have no doubt that it will hold us all to account, ensuring that people with experience can participate in decisions that affect them.

September is international recovery month and, so far, I have had the pleasure of attending community events in Kilmarnock and Penicuik. I also look forward to the forthcoming recovery walk in Paisley. The visibility of the recovery community reminds us all that people can and do recover. As well as saving lives, it is our job—indeed, our mission—to ensure that our families, friends and neighbours not only survive but thrive.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The minister will now take questions on the issues that were raised in her statement. I intend to allow about 20 minutes for questions.

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): I thank the minister for advance sight of her statement.

We can all agree that, when someone is brave enough to come forward for support, they should not have to wait months for help, but, sadly, that is exactly what is happening on the ground. One of my constituents, James, first sought help in February this year, having been directed to the

local recovery hub in south-west Edinburgh. James did not get his place in residential rehabilitation until the end of August. That was six months—half a year—of waiting, of jumping through hoops and of barriers. That is the case of someone who knew the system.

There is nothing new in the statement that would have expedited help for James. There are just more working groups and oversight groups. That is far removed from what is needed: actual action on the ground.

Access to residential rehabilitation should be immediate upon request. I do not need to remind the minister that saving a life is all about grasping that window of opportunity—a window that is often both narrow and closing. I could hear the frustration and pain in James's voice as he relayed to me the process that he was forced to go through. To really cap it off, when he finally got his residential rehab placement, James was then means tested for it.

Does the minister think that it is acceptable that people are having to wait six months for a placement and that local councils are, in some cases, using means testing for access to out-of-area residential rehabilitation placements?

Angela Constance: Let me say directly to Ms Webber that people should not be waiting months for the treatment that they are assessed as requiring. She will, of course, be aware, as I am, that decisions on access and assessments are taken at local level.

Nonetheless, the Government has taken action through the residential rehabilitation working group, which has provided all areas with a good practice guide that I expect to be implemented. All areas now have—or so they inform us—operational pathways into residential rehabilitation. I would obviously appreciate receiving any more detail about Ms Webber's constituent's experience of that pathway.

It is my job to ensure that there is funding, because I want to ensure that people who are assessed as requiring residential rehabilitation can access it when that is clinically appropriate. We are monitoring and evaluating how each ADP area is using the funding that has been allocated by the Scottish Government. I appreciate that it might be of little comfort to Ms Webber's constituent, but I know for a fact that, over the past financial year, more than 500 placements were publicly funded via ADPs. That is a substantial increase. The financial investment that we have made to date will increase capacity by 20 per cent.

The point that Ms Webber makes about using existing capacity in the system is well made, and that is why, despite housing benefit being reserved to the UK Government, I developed the dual

housing support fund. I do not want people having to choose between funding their residential care placement or their tenancy.

There is always more work to do, and we will do that. I accept that there is certainly more work that needs to be done at local level.

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I thank the minister for advance sight of the statement, and I welcome the appointment of David Strang as the chair of the national mission oversight group.

More strategies and structures have been announced today, but it is three years since the public health emergency was declared, with at least 2,500 people having died from drug overdoses. Those were preventable deaths, and those people leave behind devastated loved ones. I will hold the Government to account for that, for the lamentable lack of delivery on MAT standards and for the cuts to ADP budgets, which are only now being reinstated. However, we all want the same outcomes—the deaths to stop and people to be supported, accepted and able to live a life.

In order to ensure a more rapid response—one that does not wait for the action plan or for a decision on priorities—will the Government ensure that people who have had a near-fatal overdose, including those who have already experienced one, are always contacted and offered support, regardless of which health board area they live in? I know that MAT standard 3 says that, but the task force's report says that not all health boards are delivering that due to capacity and resourcing issues.

The minister also mentioned the impact of street benzos. When will we see the final clinical guidance and a strategy to address their widespread usage?

Angela Constance: Ms Baker is quite right: I have no doubt that members across the chamber all want to see the same outcomes, and the deaths are, indeed, preventable.

With respect, I remind Ms Baker that, since I came into this post, a long list of actions have taken place over the past 18 months or so. Those include more timely reporting of suspected deaths, the establishment of a treatment target, the 191 projects that are being funded over five years to the tune of £35 million, the continuity of funding that I have provided to both front-line and third sector organisations, the 511 residential placements that have been funded, and the work that is going on right now to continue the widening of things such as distribution and support to families. It is a little disingenuous to decide that it is all about plans and that there has been no action.

On the point that Claire Baker makes about MAT standards, I think that we are on the same page. MAT standard 3, which involves outreach and quick action following a non-fatal overdose, is crucial, as there is a window of opportunity. Claire Baker will be aware of the improvement plans that have to be published in all areas as a result of ministerial direction. Some areas will be under quarterly oversight and reporting arrangements and some areas will be under monthly ones. We are currently documenting the capacity of ADPs to improve and measure standards. I want MAT standards, including MAT standard 3, to be implemented ASAP. MAT standards are not optional; they are necessary and they save lives.

On benzodiazepines, the progress that has been made with MAT standards has brought about positive improvements in some areas, with people being able to access a better and more holistic treatment option. Claire Baker will be aware of the work that we are funding, again through MAT standards, in relation to the benzodiazepine treatment clinic in Fife. Two sets of clinical guidance are currently available in relation to the prescription of benzodiazepines, but I accept that we need to do much more work to increase the confidence of medical practitioners in the use of that guidance.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before I call the next MSP who wishes to ask a question, I make two points. First, I remind all members who wish to ask a question to ensure that they have pressed their request-to-speak button. Secondly, in order to get through as many questions as possible, we will need more succinct questions and answers.

Joe FitzPatrick (Dundee City West) (SNP): I take this opportunity to offer my condolences, along with those of the minister, to all those who have lost a loved one.

I know that the minister is familiar with the important work of the Dundee drugs commission, which made a number of recommendations earlier this year. What support has been provided to assist in taking forward the commission's recommendations? What monitoring is in place to ensure that sufficient and rapid progress is being made on those and on the implementation of the MAT standards in Dundee? It is worth noting that Dundee is excelling in relation to MAT standard 3, but, as the minister said, it is all of the MAT standards that count.

Angela Constance: Although the recommendations in the report were for the Dundee partnership, I assure the member that I have engaged with the commission and the partnership. The MAT standards implementation support team regularly meets Dundee City Council, and it is providing clinical expertise as well as practical support to make the necessary

changes to embed the standards. A monitoring system is in place, and ADPs have been supported in setting up the reporting schedule for the progress towards implementing each of the MAT standards. I can advise the chamber that NHS Tayside will be doing that on a monthly basis.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): Does the minister realise that we have spent the last 15 minutes listening to cans being kicked down the road? Does she share my concern about the steep rise in the number of drug misuse deaths in which cocaine is a contributing factor—up from 6 per cent in 2008 to nearly one in three last year? What more can the minister do to combat cocaine use, particularly among younger and middle-aged men, a disproportionate number of whom are falling into the trap of a downward and dangerous spiral of regular cocaine use, which is damaging their health, leading to financial hardship and, ultimately, costing lives?

The minister and I talked about that last year, so how about having no more action plans and no more working groups and, instead, having action on the ground—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: And, as we get to the final question, how about having succinct questions, which I have just asked for? Minister, could I have a succinct answer?

Angela Constance: I dispute the allegation that we are kicking anything down the road. Action is taking place and progress is being made right now in every community in Scotland, supported by Scottish Government funding. We are not only investing in services; we are also reforming services.

It is imperative that those in this chamber who, at times, accuse this Government of being overcontrolling and centralising, and who champion local accountability, remember that, as this Government takes on our responsibilities—we will not shy away from our commitments—we also want to have a transparent system in which there is accountability at every tier of government.

I will do everything that I can to monitor, support and scrutinise work that is going on on the ground and to facilitate it.

On the question about cocaine, we have to remember that cocaine use is often in the context of poly-drug misuse, and that that makes treatment options more complex. However, we should not forget that this is not just about medication-assisted treatment; in respect of cocaine in particular, it is about psychosocial interventions, and we need to have parity. I assure members that there is parity between medication-assisted treatment and the more psychosocial interventions.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): The national mission outlines the Scottish Government's commitment to increasing distribution and availability of naloxone. I recently worked in partnership with Alcohol and Drugs Action in Aberdeen to train my staff to administer naloxone. Further to the update that was provided in her statement, will the minister outline how the Scottish Government will ensure that those who work in our emergency services and our prison population and staff have access to and training to administer naloxone, given its efficacy in saving lives?

Angela Constance: I commend the action that has been taken by Ms Nicoll and her staff. The Scottish Drugs Forum provides free training to members of the public and professionals on how to administer naloxone.

We fund the award-winning and innovative click and deliver service that is provided by Scottish Families Affected by Alcohol and Drugs to improve access and make that more simple for individuals or, indeed, their families.

We have invested to widen access within the Scottish Ambulance Service, the police and the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service in a pilot. The very important peer naloxone programme that is taking place in communities and prison settings is in recognition of the heightened risk of overdose on release from prison. However, there is, of course, more that we could do—in particular, to improve the supply of naloxone in prisons.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): I thank the minister for advance sight of her statement.

The minister will be aware that the consultation on my proposed drugs death prevention (Scotland) bill closed at midnight last night, and that more than 85 per cent of respondents to that consultation believe that an oversight body must be entirely independent of Government in order to be effective. Sadly, that is not the case with the new national mission oversight group, which appears to be a continuation of the task force, rather than anything else. Will the minister commit to establishing an independent body, such as my proposed drug death council, or are we just going to continue to keep doing the same thing over and over again, as we have for the past 15 years, while expecting different results?

Angela Constance: On the one hand, colleagues say that there are too many groups, working groups and organisations. On the other hand, Mr Sweeney is asking me to establish another group. The national oversight group is not a replacement for the drug deaths task force. The drug deaths task force's work is done—that work is complete and it is now for the Government to take it forward and deliver.

On national oversight, other members—I think that Mr Alex Cole-Hamilton did so—have recommended that we tap into international expertise. There is, in fact, international as well as home-grown expertise on the national oversight group. I am very pleased to say that Mr Strang has agreed to take on being the independent chair of that group.

As well as the national oversight group, accountability is within Parliament, first and foremost. As a minister, I welcome the fact that the biggest and best body to hold the Government to account and to scrutinise it is our Parliament. I would always advocate that.

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): I welcome the commitments in the programme for government to publish a cross-Government action plan and an anti-stigma plan as part of the national mission. Taking a whole-person approach and doing everything that we can to eliminate stigma are essential, alongside the Scottish Government's work to improve access to treatment. Can the minister provide more details on those plans and the benefits that they could bring?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, could you please try to do that reasonably briefly? Thank you.

Angela Constance: Yes, Presiding Officer.

I know that Ms Stevenson is a great advocate for and champion of people who are affected by drugs, and that she is always fearless in tackling stigma.

The stigma plan will propose concrete actions. We need to do that in a meaningful way. We will roll out the stigma charter that was developed by the task force, but there is also a key strand of our anti-stigma work that connects very closely with our work on the workforce, the national collaborative and the work that we are doing to roll out MAT standards. The national media campaign and the Stop the Deaths campaign were also important in that regard.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): I am grateful to the minister for having acted on our calls to bring in international expertise in that way. It is vital.

The report highlights that the impact of substance use is not limited to the user; it also exerts an impact on the families around them, especially children. On any given day in Scotland, as many as 25,000 children are affected by parental substance use. I therefore welcome the announcement of Phoenix Futures' family service in Aberlour's mother and child house. I worked with Aberlour when it had a previous iteration of that service; however, the service had to close,

due to a myopic decision by Glasgow City Council at the time, which decided that the service was just not being used enough. What guarantees can the minister give to members about the longevity of such services? I ask because we are going to need them, even when we might think that we do not.

Angela Constance: I very much agree with Mr Cole-Hamilton that we need to be in this for the long term, and that our services, particularly around supporting children and families and early intervention and prevention, are not just available when things are challenging. We need to be committed to such services in good times and bad.

On the action that this Government has taken, support for Aberlour alone will be to the tune of £5 million. I spoke in my statement about the other services that we are expanding for women and children.

Mr Cole-Hamilton will also be aware of the programme for Government commitment in relation to the whole family wellbeing fund, which is a substantial commitment of Government resource. However, it is not just about the quantum of resource, of course; it is also about how it is used. We have a very keen eye not just on the quantum of investment but on the impact of that investment and on ensuring that it reaches where it is needed. I am determined to keep a keen eye on that.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): I remind members that I am a board member of Moving On Inverclyde, which is a local addiction service.

The minister will be aware of the increasing and improving approach that is taking place in Inverclyde among all agencies and the third sector organisations, which I believe has led to a reduction in drug deaths from 33 to 16. However, clearly there is still a lot more to do, because those are still 16 people who have died.

One of the key challenges is mental healthcare provision in helping people to deal with addiction. That point has been raised with me consistently over a number of months, including last week, when I attended quite a number of events in my constituency on international overdose awareness day—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr McMillan, can we please have a question? I have already indicated that I want to get through all members' questions and I need co-operation for that. I need succinct questions and succinct answers.

Stuart McMillan: Will the minister consider using Inverclyde as a pilot area for an enhanced mental health programme to help to deal with the addictions issues that we face? Would she agree

to meet local organisations to discuss the situation?

Angela Constance: I will, of course, meet the member and local organisations. The task force made a number of really important recommendations in that regard, which I fully support.

People should not be turned away; they should not be left to navigate their way around fragmented services; and treatment for one health condition should not be dependent upon the other.

MAT standards are important in that regard, and mental health and addiction services need to be joined at the hip. I think that I am on record as saying that we need to be doing much more in that regard; members will be aware of the work that I and Mr Stewart are involved in, both in relation to the rapid review of mental health and addiction services and in relation to investment on the ground to help better connect services and provide better holistic and person-centred support to people and communities.

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I thank the minister for her statement and reiterate that the Scottish Greens believe that one drug death is one death too many.

This is a public health issue and should be treated as such, and not by applying punitive or criminal sanctions that we know do not work. Can the minister provide more detail about the timescales for the cross-Government action plan and say, specifically, what interaction those who are involved in developing and implementing it will have with the Lord Advocate, Police Scotland and the Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service?

Angela Constance: Of course, I cannot comment on the actions and decisions of the Crown Office or the Lord Advocate. However, Ms Chapman and I come from the same place, as does Mr Sweeney, when it comes to the comfort that is sought of being able to implement the harm reduction measures that have been proved to work in other countries across the world.

Between now and the end of the year, I will be regularly coming back to report to Parliament on the anti-stigma action plan and our workforce. I have made a commitment to Ms Baker to provide updates on MAT standards, and we will consult Parliament on the cross-Government action plan.

I am also keen to discuss members' views on the recent UK Government white paper, because aspects of it might apply to Scotland. The consultation for that closes on 10 October, so I urge members to look at the letter that I have written to the UK Government and to communicate any views on that matter.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): Quite rightly, the Scottish Government's approach is to treat people who are caught in addiction. However, it is my belief that in order to prevent adding to the appalling numbers, and to effectively tackle the issue, we must understand why Scotland's figures are so bad compared with the rest of the UK and Europe. Therefore, I ask the minister: what work is being done to understand why Scotland is such an outlier in drug abuse?

Angela Constance: We have debated and discussed "Why Scotland?" fairly extensively in the chamber, I believe. The member will be aware of my view that it is about prevalence, poly-substance misuse and benzodiazepines.

I have always been direct and blunt that we have not succeeded in getting enough of our people into the treatment and support that they need. I also say to the member that, as a matter of fact, although the situation in Scotland is worse than it is anywhere else in Europe, there has been a rise in drug deaths across the UK and a rise in the prevalence of drug use.

As well as looking at some of the initiatives in England that I agree with and that fit with the public health approach, we also need to be setting our eyes further afield, so that we can learn from the very best of international practice. We know what works. It is my view that all of us now need to get on and do it.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: As I had anticipated, we have run out of time. I was not able to call two members; I would have liked to call them. I am sure that if they wish to pursue the matters that they had planned to raise, they will write to the minister. There will be a short pause before we move on to the next item of business.

Future of Scottish Ferries

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a statement by Jenny Gilruth on the future of Scottish ferries. The minister will take questions at the end of the statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

16:03

The Minister for Transport (Jenny Gilruth): Every time a vessel has a fault, every time a service is delayed and every time a sailing cannot be made, lives are affected. I want the chamber to be in no doubt about how seriously I take the Government's response to the challenges that are presented by the delivery of the services on the Clyde and Hebrides ferry network. Things have got to improve for our island communities. Project Neptune represents a key opportunity to bring about the necessary rigour and focus that will be required to deliver those improvements.

Earlier this year, I committed to publish the report in Parliament. A full copy, comprising sections on governance and future thinking, has been placed in the Scottish Parliament information centre for all members to access.

For absolute clarity of purpose, my statement will focus only on those services that are delivered in the west of Scotland by the Caledonian MacBrayne fleet. I will consider some of the learnings from project Neptune and the necessary challenge to Government; I will also set out a way forward that will look to work with all parties across the chamber and, fundamentally, to better meet the needs of island communities. We are time limited today, so I intend to return to the chamber for a full debate on what future delivery should look like.

Project Neptune considers, in an international context, recommendations for improvement in the current arrangements for delivering ferry services in the west of Scotland. There is much in the current arrangements that delivers well, but there are clearly actions for the Government.

In summary, Neptune first highlights the need for a statutory framework on the governance of ferries. Secondly, the tripartite structure is challenged. Thirdly, the report calls for improved vision and leadership to develop long-term strategic planning and improved collaborative working.

The project Neptune report is extremely technical, and I appreciate that members will not have had a chance to fully digest all the detail this afternoon. To that end, I make the offer to all members that Transport Scotland will host a

session with Ernst & Young, which wrote the report, to explain the report in further detail.

Before today's statement, I met all stakeholders who might be affected by any changes in the future. I give them the absolute assurance that there will be no takeover imposed on any one organisation. However, the Government must improve the delivery of ferry services on the Clyde and Hebrides network. We need a better culture of collaborative working to meet our island communities' needs.

The tripartite structure of CalMac, Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd and Transport Scotland was brought in by the then Scottish Executive to comply with European Union law. Not unhelpfully, project Neptune evidences what that can sometimes mean in practice—when, for example, the members of the tripartite do not agree. The report notes challenges in holding the tripartite to account because of confusion over roles and responsibilities. It also points to a lack of a formalised process for ministers to engage with the tripartite. That needs to change.

The second part of the report evaluates different approaches to bringing together organisations that deliver ferry services. It considers the introduction of a ferries commissioner but notes that that innovation could bring

“another stakeholder into an already crowded sector”.

The report sets out a range of potential options for reform. The First Minister has been absolutely clear that we will not consider unbundling or privatisation, and the report sets out in further detail some reasons why that will not be pursued. However, alongside improving existing arrangements, I am open to exploring what improvement could result from more formal integration.

It would not be right to announce any changes without community consultation, but we also need to be cognisant of the organisations that are involved in service delivery today. A key part of the next steps will therefore directly involve staff at CalMac, CMAL and David MacBrayne Ltd and the relevant trade unions.

I am a mainlander. As with many of us, my family's roots can be traced back to Benbecula, Islay and Arran, but I do not need to take a ferry to my work; I do not need to take a ferry to a food shop; and I do not need to take a ferry to a family funeral.

These services are lifeline services. My commitment today is to reform how we deliver the services, with the central guiding principle that our island communities have to be part of what comes next, so I announce that we will directly consult island communities on next steps. I am pleased to

update the chamber that Angus Campbell, who is chair of the ferries community board, has agreed to lead this vital work. He brings with him a wealth of experience and I look forward to working with him.

Since January, I have spent a great deal of my time with the unsung volunteers who give up their time to be part of ferry committees. They might not all agree on how services are delivered, but they are all united in seeking better ferry services for their communities. That is a simple ask, and the Government—and the organisations that run ferry services on our behalf—need to do better at engaging with, listening to and acting on island communities' needs.

We also need to ensure that such organisations are representative of the communities that they serve. To that end, I am delighted to confirm that Morag McNeill will take up position formally as the chair of Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd. She will be the first woman to hold the role of chair and I look forward to working with her.

Project Neptune requires action from the Government, so I can announce that we will re-establish and refresh the islands transport forum, which will focus initially on ferries provision and islands resilience. I will chair the forum, but it will also involve regular attendance from the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands and the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Veterans, who has responsibility for resilience. That will ensure the cross-Government approach that is vital for the next steps.

For every period of prolonged disruption, I will convene a resilience group with the ferries community board, CalMac and local partners, so that Government's response at a national and local level reflects the scale of the impacts that the loss of a lifeline service can have on our island communities.

Accountability also matters. As part of the consultation on the islands connectivity plan that will take place later this year, measurable performance indicators will be developed. They will be distinct from contractual targets and will better reflect the real experience of passengers. They will be visible, published performance indicators, against which we can monitor performance, but they will also help to progress regaining communities' trust in our services.

Of course, I will also consider carefully and respond to any recommendations from the Public Audit Committee and Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee reports.

I know that island communities might be anxious about the winter. The beginning of this year brought some of the most unpredictable weather ever experienced and it directly impacted on

service delivery. To help reduce the number of delays and cancellations related to weather, the Government will expand to third-party ports the tide and weather monitoring equipment that is currently in place at CMAL ports.

Ministers also need to ensure that we derive full public value from every penny and pound invested in our ferries. Currently, there is a lack of transparency about the application of harbour dues. There is no clear mechanism that guides increases in harbour dues, and there is an expectation that Government will always fund repairs, maintenance and enhancements, even where we do not own the harbours.

This year alone, the Scottish Government will invest £40 million in ports and harbour services. I want to explore with relevant local authorities and other third-party owners how we can improve matters. As part of the islands connectivity plan, I will set out the long-term investment programme for vessels and ports that project Neptune calls for and islanders need to see.

In conclusion, I thank everyone who works for us in David MacBrayne Ltd, CMAL and CalMac, as well as my officials in Transport Scotland. Those people are crucial to all aspects of the delivery and operation of our ferries. They often go above and beyond to maintain and enhance services and infrastructure. Their role has been key in the past and will continue to be so in the future.

We have a good track record of providing high-value, high-skill job opportunities to people from remote rural and island communities and of offering people lifelong career progression. During my engagements and visits this summer, I have met many people who started their careers young and have worked their way up to senior positions, staying and maintaining their lives in rural and island towns. That feels and looks like success to me, and it is a success that I want to build on, in order to provide more such opportunities in the future for young people from island and remote communities.

However, I also know that, increasingly, ferry employees and, often, the crew bear the brunt of people's frustration. Many experience verbal abuse and intimidation, as I heard on my visit to Oban last month. That is not and never will be acceptable. There is more that we can do to nurture a culture of respect between passengers and staff—even across this chamber.

It is too easy for politicians to ramp up the rhetoric, to play fast and loose with the facts and to encourage headline-grabbing media stories about our ferries being broken, which gives the completely wrong impression that our islands are closed and, in some instances, unreachable. The

statistics do not bear that out, and there has been anecdotal evidence of inaccurate perception becoming reality. Responsible, constructive debate and critique are possible, desirable and, indeed, essential. Surely, we should all be seeking more light and less heat.

I therefore look forward to hearing from all members today about their constructive ideas and views on how we create that sustainable, resilient ferry service in the future, to help island residents, communities and businesses to thrive. Surely, that has to be our shared goal.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The minister will now take questions on the issues raised in her statement. I intend to allow around 20 minutes for questions, after which we will have to move on to the next item of business. Members who wish to ask a question should press their request-to-speak buttons now or as soon as possible.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): I thank the minister for advance sight of her statement and the long-awaited project Neptune report. I first asked her to release the report on 24 February, and she said that she would. Had she released it then, I might have had time to digest it by now. It is quite a heavy read, as she recognised in her statement.

Had it been shared earlier, we could have had the kind of discussions that I am absolutely certain the minister wants to have. I will take part in any talks that she wants to set up. It would be hugely beneficial if we could all agree on what changes are needed to the way we do ferries. The clunky governance structure should change—it does not make sense to have the minister, Transport Scotland, CMAL and CalMac—because it does not deliver for islanders. Does the minister agree with that, and will she commit to changing the structure? I am not asking her what she wants that structure to be; I am asking whether she thinks it should change.

I will also ask about timescales, because there was nothing in the minister's statement about that. What is her deadline for reform, what is her deadline for putting a new west coast contract out to tender—we are up against the clock on that—and what is her deadline for announcing a ramped-up ferry replacement programme, which is what we need so that we can improve ferries and get new ferries every single year?

Jenny Gilruth: I thank Mr Simpson for the tone of his questions. He is correct; I did give him an undertaking earlier this year that I would publish the report, and I am glad that he has welcomed that today.

It is important to remember that a number of different organisations are involved in the delivery of ferry services just now, and there are

sensitivities involved, so it was essential that we got that right. I put on record again my assurance to those organisations that nothing will be happening overnight; however, we will now have those discussions. I cannot say on record whether we will all reach agreement, but I have given an undertaking that I want to work with parties across the chamber on what future delivery should look like. However, it is hugely important to recognise that it is not only about us; it is about island communities, the trade unions and the staff who work in those organisations.

Mr Simpson mentioned the “clunky governance structure”. To some extent, I agree with him. The report illustrates in more detail that a complex structure is currently in operation, which I do not think is beneficial to island communities at times, and it is certainly not beneficial to ministers either. Therefore, I agree with Mr Simpson to that extent.

I will not update members on the Clyde and Hebrides ferry services 3 contract, but I am aware that we are approaching the end of that contract, and any future decision will have to be considered. I am sure that we will have further conversations on that matter throughout the afternoon.

The future plan is what islanders need to hear about next. That is why I will come back to the chamber for a wider debate on next steps and the island connectivity plan, which sets out some of the progress in more detail. It will also give people dates and the opportunity to look forward to a timeline of investment coming down the track, which will allow them to be hopeful for the future.

I am sure that we will come to this later today, but there is a requirement on Government to consider what more we might be able to do in the interim period around second-hand tonnage and the opportunities that we can bring to bear. At this time, I am looking at all opportunities. Mr Simpson will be aware of the MV Loch Frisa, which was brought into the fleet in June, and we will have additional tonnage with hulls 801 and 802 and, later, the Islay vessels. However, there is a challenge in terms of having that additional vessel in the fleet, and I am alive to look at opportunities to bring about that investment.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am conscious that after the previous statement, the Presiding Officer was not able to get in every member who wanted to ask a question. I am determined that that will not happen in relation to this or the subsequent statement, so I would be grateful for succinct questions and more succinct answers.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): I thank the minister for advance sight of her statement.

The serious problems with Scotland’s ferries have gone on for far too long, and the ultimate responsibility for that lies with the Scottish

Government; however, we will work with the minister to try to fix them.

We cannot afford to make a bad situation even worse, which is why Scottish Labour welcomes the commitment to rule out privatisation and the unbundling of routes on the Clyde and Hebrides network. Why was a report commissioned and paid for by the Scottish Government to tell it to privatise CalMac and unbundle routes in the first place? If there is a tendering process, privatisation is evidently still possible. Will the minister confirm that there will not be a costly tendering process for the Clyde and Hebrides network?

Although we need to look at the governance structures, the Scottish Government cannot distract us from the fact that islanders have an unreliable ferry service, mainly because we have an unreliable ferry fleet. Therefore, it is disappointing, but not surprising, that the statement on the future of Scottish ferries does not give islanders one single more Scottish ferry. When will capacity be increased, by how much and on which routes?

Although I believe that Ukrainian refugees should be housed in homes rather than on ferries, it proves that the Scottish Government can charter ferries at short notice. Why have ferries not been chartered for Scotland’s islanders before now? Finally—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call the minister—

Neil Bibby: —will the delayed and unfinished ferries be ready on the new timescales?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Bibby! I call the minister.

Jenny Gilruth: I thank Neil Bibby for his question. He covered a number of points, and I will try to address them in detail.

In relation to responsibility, I accept responsibility as Minister for Transport—that is why I am here today sharing the report. Of course, the report should not be taken on its own. We have already had a report from the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee in the last parliamentary session, we have had the Audit Scotland report and now we have the project Neptune report. Two further inquiries are running in parliamentary committees at this time. However, it is important that we have cross-party consensus, where that is possible, on a way forward.

On the remit that was given to Ernst and Young, nothing was ruled out at that time. I appreciate and accept that that issue has concerned people, but I hope that, given the First Minister’s expression on this issue and my own, we will not be pursuing any routes that look to privatisation in the future, and we are always considering unbundling. I

appreciate what Mr Bibby has said, but the remit that was given to Ernst and Young was wide, and that is why that was included in the report. I encourage Mr Bibby to look at the details in the section of the report on the future, which is at times critical of the privatisation option. That again strengthens our beliefs—certainly the beliefs of this Government—on privatisation.

On CHFS3, I think that Mr Bibby asked me to rule out that it would go out to tender. I believe that it is important that communities are consulted as part of any future delivery model. I also think that Mr Yousaf said on the record in 2017 that, if we were to pursue direct awards in the future, we could only do so if and when island communities were content to do that. I have announced today that Angus Campbell will lead some of the next steps in terms of consultations. I will be keen to speak to—and I will speak to—Mr Campbell early next week about how we can better consult communities on their views on direct award, because I think that that is hugely—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, I have to ask you to wrap up, please.

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): The minister will be aware of the longstanding desire of communities in North Uist and Harris to be served by a dedicated vessel each, rather than to share a vessel. That would bring numerous benefits. What can the Government do to engage with communities and develop a proper case for such an arrangement?

Jenny Gilruth: I would reiterate that that option is actually being looked at. In a recent engagement with the community and stakeholders, I alerted them to that work. Earlier this year when I was in Mr Allan's constituency, I spoke to a number of stakeholders in Harris on that very point.

I will, of course, continue to keep communities updated as to the progress on those developments. We recently received a very helpful study that was undertaken by the Lochboisdale ferry business impact group as part of that work. The group has also been speaking to the local authority about the assessments that it has commissioned. I would encourage more people to get that sort of information and share it with Government where they are able to. I know that Dr Allan will keep encouraging his constituents to engage with this process so that a fully developed case can be considered. I want to reassure him that the option that he raises is actively being considered now.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): I welcome today's statement, but what we do not have is a firm commitment to procure and build new ferries. Given that we know how long it takes

to design, procure, build and manufacture, and fund ferries properly, if we are to replace the current fleet of ferries, we need to start building them now. When will we actually see a firm plan, so that islanders can have some faith that the Government will be replacing those ferries and that history will not repeat itself in five or 10 years?

Jenny Gilruth: In relation to additional tonnage, Mr Greene will understand that, as commercial discussions are currently on-going, I am not able to say publicly where we are in that respect. However, I am hopeful that in the coming weeks we will be able to say more on that very point. I recognise that, as we go into winter, there is a level of anxiety in our island communities, and I want to give them a reassurance. The best way that we can do that is to bring in an additional vessel.

I hope that that has given Mr Greene a level of assurance, although I am not able to give more detail, just as I would not have been able to for Mr Bibby, in relation to those on-going commercial discussions.

Fiona Hyslop: Does the minister recognise the view that this review of governance of the publicly owned ferry sector was long overdue, after two decades of devolution? As part of the next steps in response to the report, how will the Scottish Government ensure that more transparency and accountability are built in? Unlike the provision of roads, ferry provision is not underpinned by a statutory framework. Is it not time to change that? A legislative framework would provide greater clarity and accountability, which is what the public and the communities that are served by ferries are demanding and should expect.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister.

Jenny Gilruth: I agree with Fiona Hyslop: the governance review was much needed and it is important that we consider all the findings and recommendations to ensure that what we do in terms of reform makes the improvements to delivery and governance that we and island communities need to see. That includes how we best demonstrate transparency, public value and accountability, including in governance.

As I set out in my statement, we have already made improvements within the tripartite itself on some of the issues that are addressed by the findings, but I accept that more needs to happen.

Vital in next steps is engagement with stakeholders, which includes employees and unions, because we want to take staff with us, as well as communities, residents and businesses. I want us to produce improvements that not only make sense but provide more clarity on who is responsible and accountable under the current arrangements.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):

The ferry disruptions impact on the economy, leading to cancellations by tourists, freight being delayed and people being stranded at terminals overnight. What is being put in place to help people who are stranded due to cancellations and the businesses that are impacted?

Will the minister give a commitment that there will be no reduction in capacity to and from Harris and Uist during the winter closures and no disruption during the summer months while the work at Uig harbour is being progressed?

Jenny Gilruth: Rhoda Grant touched on a number of points. First, in relation to people being stranded, there would be a role in that not just for Transport Scotland but for the local resilience partnership. That is why it is important that we have a cross-Government approach. Therefore, we have officials from the rural affairs secretary's side of the house and we draw in resilience expertise from Keith Brown's side of Government. It is hugely important that we have a holistic and well-informed approach in Government that better equips us to provide support when people are stranded. Of course, CalMac would have a level of responsibility in that situation, too.

I have completely forgotten the second part of Ms Grant's question. I apologise.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am sure that you can follow up in writing.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Does the minister share my disappointment at the intransigence of Peel Ports, which has dragged its feet on the upgrade of Ardrossan harbour since 2015? Will she confirm that, although the long-term mainland port for Brodick is Ardrossan, the Scottish Government is committed to the people and communities of Arran by investing, with Associated British Ports, £3.6 million in Troon to ensure that the Glen Sannox can sail to Brodick from next spring?

Jenny Gilruth: I share Kenneth Gibson's disappointment that we have not been able to make progress on the works at Ardrossan, particularly given how much time has passed. We in the Government are frustrated—I am certainly frustrated—at the lack of progress.

As Mr Gibson has indicated, and as I mentioned in my statement, one of the issues is that we do not own the port, so the complexities around the legal and commercial arrangements have been challenging, although all parties are now back around the table on the matter. That is welcome, and I hope that we can make the rapid progress that we need, but there are limits to ministers' and the communities' patience.

I am pleased that work is almost complete at Troon to allow the vessel to operate from there in the interim, until the Ardrossan work is complete. Having invested in improvements at Troon harbour to allow that short-term activity to be undertaken, it feels appropriate to consider a longer-term purpose for it, and it is our intention to use the harbour as an alternative port of refuge in the longer term.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): We will work constructively on this matter. There is an inference in the minister's statement that the current terrible state of the ferries service is, in part, a result of the tripartite structure. Is she really saying that? If that is the case, why is the pace of reform not more urgent?

Jenny Gilruth: I do not accept that that is what I said to members this afternoon. If Willie Rennie has read the report, he will realise that it is about the tripartite structure, which is why it was the central feature of my statement to the Parliament.

I welcome Mr Rennie's offer to work constructively. Again, I do not accept that the issue is all to do with the tripartite structure, but I accept that the tripartite structure brings challenge. If and when he reads the report, he will recognise some of that challenge in further detail.

It is hugely important that we have a governance structure that works for people, but there are wider challenges on the network in terms of additional tonnage, as I mentioned in my answer to Jamie Greene's question.

I recognise that the issue is not just about the tripartite structure. However, this afternoon we are discussing a report that focuses on governance, which is why it has been the focus of my statement.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): Can the minister provide any further assurance about measures to improve the short-term resilience of the existing fleet this winter?

Jenny Gilruth: On infrastructure, I can confirm that we will complete the Skye triangle port investments at Tarbert and Lochmaddy by spring 2023 and at Uig by spring 2024. In the coming year, we will upgrade infrastructure at five ports for Islay vessels and progress construction of the two new Islay vessels. We will progress work to improve harbour infrastructure for Arran services. As I have just indicated, we will have a temporary solution in place at Troon to ensure that the MV Glen Sannox can operate. As the Minister for Business, Trade, Tourism and Enterprise confirmed on Tuesday, we expect the Glen Sannox to be delivered in the spring of 2023.

On Mr McMillan's second question, a lot of work is under way to improve resilience in the short

term. I have just announced that we will pay for and fund weather-monitoring equipment at harbours that are owned by third parties, including Stornoway, Lismore, Leverburgh and Eriskay.

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): Can the minister expand on how we ensure that the interests of island communities, including as full a range of voices as possible, will be at the forefront of decision making in future?

Jenny Gilruth: It is essential that we involve young people in the next steps on delivery. To that end, next week I will discuss further with Angus Campbell how we can get a broad range of views to inform our next steps.

Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Residents on Harris remain worried that they will not have a ferry service during the 14-week closure of the Uig pier on Skye next year. Fresh concerns have been raised that, in addition to that, there may be a further 12-week period of disruption. Can the minister assure residents and businesses on Harris that there will not be any additional disruption? Will she explore securing a temporary ferry service for Harris during the period of closure?

Jenny Gilruth: I am more than happy to answer questions on the situation in Harris. As Mr Cameron may know, since I visited the community in Harris in April, I have spent a lot of time trying to find a better mitigation for the outage. Of course, the original plans for Harris would have involved a six-month closure of the port, which I do not think was sustainable for island residents.

We will now have a split in the outage period, which will be reduced from the 24-week period that was originally planned to 14 weeks over two shorter periods. That has involved a lot of work by CMAL, Highland Council, which is leading on the work, CalMac and Transport Scotland. Importantly, there has also been engagement with local communities.

I have heard about the risks that Donald Cameron highlighted, but I have been keen to work with the community to reassure it. On Tuesday of this week, I convened a resilience meeting with the community and all partners involved in the project. CalMac gave an absolute assurance that there should not be any more impacts on the network in terms of what regularly runs on the route. Therefore, service delivery should not be adversely affected.

Mr Cameron asked for an additional vessel during the outage period. As I said in my response to Mr Greene, I hope to be able to say more about that in the coming weeks.

Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): As an Islay resident, I welcome the commitments that the

minister has given today, especially her commitment to improve communication with local island communities and businesses. We also need to ensure that more islanders are more involved in decision making on lifeline ferry services. What can be done to improve that?

I would also like to take the opportunity to invite the minister to Islay.

Jenny Gilruth: I will gladly accept Ms Minto's invitation. I am sure that, like me, she will be delighted that Angus Campbell has agreed to support the engagement work on next steps. We are all agreed that hearing from and including the views and experiences of people, businesses and communities on our islands is key not just for our islands but for the more rural and remote communities that are connected by ferry to our islands.

My predecessor Mr Dey made a commitment to look at how we could improve the process of including people with island experience in board appointments, and I undertook to take forward that commitment. I agree whole-heartedly with Ms Minto that we need more islanders to be involved in decision making on lifeline ferry services. To that end, I can confirm the appointment of Murdo MacLellan to the board of CMAL. He is from the Western Isles and has a wealth of experience to bring to the board.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): The west coast of Scotland is not the only location where there is a need for extra tonnage. The northern isles face known pinchpoints, such as the current livestock sales seasons. The minister has indicated that Government needs to do better, but what can she say to businesses in Shetland, which have learned that a recent opportunity to charter a suitable vessel to alleviate the situation was rejected by the service operator of the northern isles ferries contract?

Jenny Gilruth: Beatrice Wishart may be aware that I discussed that issue at length with Shetland Islands Council and other stakeholders when I visited Shetland last month. I recognise the real challenges that exist for businesses during the busy livestock season.

I am told that a freight vessel was identified late in the process, despite Serco making an earlier approach to the owner, but that because of existing capacity on the current services, it has not pursued that option at this time. I would be more than happy to write to Beatrice Wishart in more detail on that point, because I recognise the challenges that stakeholders raised with me when I was in Shetland last month.

Covid-19: Winter Vaccination Programme

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is a statement by Humza Yousaf on protecting those most at risk: the Covid-19 vaccination programme, winter 2022. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of his statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

16:35

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Humza Yousaf): I welcome the opportunity to provide an update to Parliament on the winter vaccination programme for 2022. This winter's vaccinations for the most vulnerable began on Monday, so this week marks another key milestone in our continued effort to protect people against Covid-19 and to provide resilience for the national health service this winter.

As a nation, we have faced enormous challenges since the start of the pandemic, stretching beyond the initial and serious health impacts of the virus. However, it is important to recognise how far we have come. For many of us—although I accept that it is not true for all of us—life feels as if it has largely returned to normal. We have lifted all legal restrictions and protective measures. That was possible only because of the game-changing Covid-19 vaccination, the high level of uptake among the Scottish public who have come forward to receive it and the army of vaccinators up and down the country to whom we are all eternally grateful.

More than 12 million Covid-19 vaccine doses have now been administered in Scotland. In fact, we have among the highest rates of uptake of first, second and third doses of the Covid-19 vaccine anywhere in the United Kingdom. At one point during last winter's vaccination programme we had one of the fastest vaccination roll-outs in the world, which was a fantastic achievement in protecting the most vulnerable in our society against serious illness and death. The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control estimates that Scotland's vaccination programme has averted around 28,000 deaths among those aged 60 and over. Due to the vaccine, Scotland had an estimated total reduction of 86 per cent in fatalities, which is the highest percentage in Europe after Iceland. Every single one of those saved lives is someone's family member and someone's friend, so it cannot be stated enough that our health service and everyone involved in the vaccination programme are owed a huge debt of gratitude by all of us.

This autumn and winter, we will build on the success of our previous programmes, including of the spring and summer programme that has just drawn to a close. As with previous rounds of vaccination, Scotland's spring booster programme enjoyed tremendous uptake: as of 5 September, 70 per cent of those with suppressed immune systems, 86 per cent of elderly care-home residents and 92 per cent of those aged 75 and over had received a spring booster dose. That represents 87 per cent of all those eligible for a fourth dose, and has exceeded our expectations and planning assumptions. I express my sincere thanks to all those who came forward and to those who made that immense effort possible.

Advancing our continued offer of vaccines and boosters will ensure as much protection as possible for those who are most at risk. So, we are today publishing the deployment plan for the winter 2022 vaccinations, which sets out the detail of how we will administer vaccines to those who are in most need here, in Scotland.

Although this year's deployment plan still has at its heart the aim of tackling Covid-19, it recognises that there are other challenges that put pressure on the NHS and endanger the health of some of the most vulnerable members of society.

Seasonal flu is a key risk as we move into the winter. As Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care, I am acutely aware of the pressures that flu and Covid-19 combined place both on the NHS and on people's personal health. That is why I am pleased that we will, where possible, offer Covid-19 and flu vaccinations in the same appointment to those who are eligible.

As part of our approach to tackling winter pressures head on, we are aiming to vaccinate as many people as possible against flu and Covid by the beginning of December while ensuring that we have the necessary capacity in the system to achieve that. I am all too aware of the strain that the NHS is under and, in order to achieve the pace that we need, we need to accept that there may well be some overlaps of cohorts receiving their vaccines and some small and, I hope, limited geographical variation, as we do not want to hold any one area back, particularly later in the programme. That will not be unique to Scotland, I suspect. However, against that challenging backdrop, the goal remains to vaccinate those who are most vulnerable as soon as possible.

As ever, our decisions on who to vaccinate and when are guided by the clinical expertise of those on the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation. In line with the committee's recommendations, this winter, a Covid-19 booster will be offered to residents and staff in care homes for older adults; front-line health and social care workers; all adults aged 50 and over; those aged 5

to 49 who are in a clinical risk group, including those who are pregnant; those aged 5 to 49 years who are household contacts of people with immunosuppression; and carers aged 16 to 49.

Everyone who is eligible for a Covid-19 vaccination will also be invited for a flu vaccine, and they can safely receive both vaccines at the same appointment. That is why, this winter, as I mentioned, we will aim to administer the Covid-19 and the flu vaccines at the same time where possible. That will save time, it avoids the need for repeat journeys to vaccination centres, and we hope that it will protect as many people as possible against the serious health risks that are posed by both Covid-19 and seasonal flu. That final point is particularly important as we know that, this year, seasonal flu arrived in the Southern hemisphere much earlier than was expected.

In addition to setting out those who are eligible for a Covid-19 winter vaccination, the deployment plan sets out a range of other groups who will be offered the flu vaccine.

Prioritising those who are most at risk has been our approach from day 1. In accordance with the advice from the JCVI, the winter vaccination programme started on Monday with care home residents. Many care home staff are being offered their vaccines at the same time. Alternatively, they, along with health and social care workers, can book their appointment through the online portal, which has been open since 22 August.

Alongside care home residents and staff, health and social care workers and individuals who are housebound are being vaccinated from Monday, too, ensuring that we protect the most vulnerable first, as I said.

We have already scheduled more than 800,000 winter vaccination appointments for those aged 65 and over, with hundreds of thousands more being scheduled this week. I urge all those who are eligible to please wait until they are contacted. Anyone who is in any doubt about whether they will receive an appointment should visit the NHS Inform website for more information.

Given that the immunity that is conferred by vaccination can wane over time, it is important that we maximise protection for the most vulnerable ahead of winter, when the threat from Covid-19 and flu is likely to be at its greatest. By prioritising those who are most at risk, we can also limit strain on our NHS as it recovers from the worst effects of the pandemic.

On 15 August and 3 September, the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency granted regulatory approval to two updated bivalent vaccines. Because of their dual aspect, they target both the original strain of Covid-19 and the omicron variant. Bivalent vaccines have been

deployed as part of our winter vaccination programme from the start of this week.

The vaccine that is used will depend on clinical eligibility, but also, crucially, on vaccine availability. I reassure the public that both the existing and the new bivalent vaccines provide excellent protection from severe illness and hospitalisation, and I urge all those who are eligible to take up the offer of a vaccination when they are called forward.

The vaccination programme is a vital step in our plans to address as many of the winter pressures as possible. We are also well aware of the bigger picture. We cannot fail to acknowledge the cost of living crisis and all that it entails; the potential for industrial action, although we will work hard to ensure that that does not happen; and the inevitable bad winter weather. All those issues and more may well make it more difficult to travel to large-scale vaccination centres than it was previously. Also, the fact that legal restrictions have been lifted means that those large-scale venues are, quite understandably and rightly, going back to their original purposes.

For those reasons, we are instead offering smaller, local clinics to facilitate access for those who need it most. Across Scotland, more than 440 clinics are available during the programme, as of 6 September. We are also taking steps to ensure that people who may experience barriers, or who feel less confident, are able to come forward for vaccination.

Although we have a general level of assurance on vaccine supply and delivery, that may be impacted by extreme adverse weather or disruption to transport routes. We will do all that we can to overcome those challenges.

This year's winter vaccination programme will, no doubt, confront serious challenges. Our NHS is still in the middle of a period of recovery, which involves sustained and significant challenge as we work towards ambitious targets in bringing down the backlog that has been left by the Covid-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, I am confident that the programme will be delivered in line with current JCVI planning, with the most vulnerable being vaccinated by the beginning of December, and that it will achieve a high rate of uptake, as previous rounds of vaccination did.

I say again to the Parliament and to the public: the vaccines provide excellent protection from severe illness that could otherwise strike at the worst time of year. I strongly encourage everybody who is eligible to take up the offer of vaccination. I look forward to providing a further update to the Parliament in the coming months, detailing our progression through the programme.

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

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): I welcome the roll-out of the winter flu and Covid vaccination programme. This is the first bivalent vaccine for targeting both the omicron and the original strain of Covid-19. As has been seen throughout the pandemic, working together as the United Kingdom, we are able to swiftly get jabs into arms, and early procurement of the bivalent vaccine is only possible because of the broad shoulders of our United Kingdom. As a general practitioner, I urge everyone who is eligible to please get vaccinated, as that will save their life.

With the best will in the world, some people will not receive their letter, through error, and some eligible people—for example, unpaid carers—may also not be lettered, through not being known about. How does somebody book an appointment who feels that they are eligible but has not received a letter?

Humza Yousaf: I thank Dr Gulhane for his comments, and I reiterate that, if people are eligible, they should please come forward.

There is good four-nations working. Obviously, I have not had the opportunity to meet the new Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, but I am certain that that will continue with her.

When it comes to those who are eligible, various cohorts will sometimes be contacted differently, depending on the local structures. For example, the way of contacting household contacts of those with immunosuppression might be different in Orkney from how it is done in Glasgow. However, if people have any doubt about their eligibility, we can direct them towards NHS Inform. If they are digitally excluded or unsure, they can call the vaccination helpline for confirmation about whether they are eligible and how they will be invited.

Dr Gulhane is aware that this is our second winter vaccination programme. For many people, it may well be the fifth dose of the vaccine. I therefore suspect that people are now in the rhythm of knowing whether they are eligible. Some may not be in that rhythm; if they have any doubt, they should not hesitate to call the vaccination helpline for further information.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I thank in advance those who will be involved in running the winter vaccination programme. We are grateful for their efforts.

We know that the Covid vaccine lessens the impact of Covid; however, we also know that it does not stop people from getting Covid in the first place. That remains a significant concern. Some people have underlying health conditions, were originally on the shielding list and were told to stay at home. Not all of them are eligible for the antiviral medication, and we have yet to see the use of prophylactics to prevent those who are most at risk from getting Covid in the first place. When will the cabinet secretary extend the eligibility for antivirals to all those who were on the shielding list, and when will access to prophylactics be given, so that we can protect the very vulnerable from getting Covid in the first place?

Humza Yousaf: First, I point out that I forgot to say in my response to Dr Gulhane that I am writing an update—it should have landed in most MSPs' inboxes—on the winter vaccination programme. That will include details of who is eligible. As Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care, I have a leadership role and, of course, I hope that all MSPs will cascade that information locally. If they hear of any individuals who have any doubt about whether they are eligible or who think that they are eligible but are not getting any further information, I am more than happy for them to contact me.

I recognise what Jackie Baillie says. I recognise that there are people who, for whatever clinical reason, might not be suitable to receive a vaccine. Although the vaccine remains the best protection against the serious effects of Covid, some people might just not be able to exhibit an immune response due to a clinical condition that they have.

A clinical discussion is taking place on widening access to antivirals. I have been contacted by the likes of Parkinson's UK, which is very keen for its members and the people with Parkinson's disease whom it represents to be eligible for certain antivirals. I understand that one of the clinical trials that is under way is in discussion with people with Parkinson's to gather clinical data. The evolution of eligibility for the antivirals is an on-going process.

On prophylaxis, Jackie Baillie will be aware, but I am happy to give her more detail in writing, that a particular prophylactic, Evusheld, is of interest to many people. It has received a conditional marketing authorisation from the MHRA. However, that authorisation was given before Evusheld was tested against omicron, so there is insufficient data to give us any credible evidence that it is effective against that variant.

I understand that the UK Department of Health and Social Care has offered to explore the possibility of a clinical trial for Evusheld. I am very supportive of that and will make it clear when I

meet with the UK Secretary of State for Health and Social Care that I expect that Scottish patients would also take part in that clinical trial.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): As a nurse, I, too, encourage everyone who is eligible to take up the vaccine offer. Many of those who are eligible for vaccines will face accessibility requirements, particularly those who are housebound. Accessibility should never be an obstacle to people receiving healthcare. With that in mind, what arrangements have been considered in the roll-out of the next round of vaccinations for people with accessibility needs?

Humza Yousaf: That issue has been well rehearsed in previous iterations of the vaccination programme, but it is absolutely right that Emma Harper raises it. There might be people who are now housebound who were not housebound in previous iterations of the programme. I give an absolute assurance that they have not only been thought of in the programme but given real priority.

Housebound patients will be offered flu and Covid vaccinations within their homes and at the same appointment where appropriate. Those who are eligible will be contacted by their local boards. Much like anybody who feels that they should be eligible but has not been contacted, whom Dr Gulhane asked me about, people who are housebound who have not been contacted should call the national helpline. The number for that is 0800 030 8013.

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): The deployment plan highlights the fact that many health boards are using the Scottish Ambulance Service to reach deprived or rural communities. We know that the service is already under pressure. How will it be adequately resourced to ensure that those communities are not overlooked?

Humza Yousaf: I pay tribute to the work that the Scottish Ambulance Service has done. I think that many members have visited its mobile units up and down the country. Tess White is right that some of those units have been in remote and rural areas but some of them have been in urban areas. However, they have been a great asset to us in the vaccination programme.

The planning for the winter vaccination programme has been done hand in glove with the Scottish Ambulance Service. In remote and rural parts and island communities in Scotland, there is still largely a reliance on those hyperlocal vaccination centres. As I said in my statement, there are around 440 vaccination centres. I hope that that will give some level of confidence to Tess White that remote rural and island coverage is very good indeed in terms of the vaccination centres, let alone the additional complementary

assistance that the Scottish Ambulance Service can provide through its mobile units.

Fiona Hyslop (Linlithgow) (SNP): The cabinet secretary may be aware that West Lothian has a bigger population than the city of Dundee and that my constituency of Linlithgow has the most constituents in Scotland, with a significantly disproportionate number of over-50s residing in it. The Pyramids facility in Bathgate provided the space for the very welcome more than one third of a million Covid vaccinations but, like other mass vaccination centres, it is now understandably closed. What assurances can the cabinet secretary give me that, if vaccinations are to be based in GP surgeries in my constituency, and across the country, staffing levels and venues will have the capacity and support that they need to ensure that demand from the large number of people who will be eligible to have their winter Covid booster will be met?

Humza Yousaf: I agree with everything that Fiona Hyslop has just said. For various reasons, those large mass vaccination centres are no longer available to us. They are being used for their original purposes and some may have closed down, but there are still large centres in some parts of the country. However, I am reassured by the plans that I have seen made by local health boards up and down the country that by using those local sites with high volume they hope to provide that reach right across the country.

Fiona Hyslop is absolutely right about staffing. The very constrained timetable that the JCVI is asking us to work to means that we will have to hit a run rate every single week that is near the record run rate that we hit last winter, when we had the boosted by the bells campaign, if members remember that. That is on top of the usual winter pressures that we may well face. If there is another wave of Covid, for example, that will undoubtedly have an impact on staffing, so those things are being monitored. Contingency plans are absolutely being put in place, but it is fair to say that this is a really ambitious programme and the impact and pressures on staffing are significant. However, we all know the importance of the vaccination programme. That is why I am so grateful to every single member of the vaccination programme who is helping us with the winter programme.

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): I note what the cabinet secretary said about vaccination services being as local as possible, but we know that the rhetoric does not always match reality. There have been numerous examples of NHS Highland patients being made to make 100-mile round trips, and in Inverclyde there have been numerous examples of people with respiratory illness being instructed to travel to Glasgow. In

terms of delivery, it is also critical to recognise that the Royal College of Nursing is balloting for strike action, with more than 90 per cent of nurses having rejected the Scottish Government's pay offer. What specific actions are being taken to ensure that vaccination centres will be as close to people as possible, and what further action is the Scottish Government taking to resolve the pay dispute and ensure that nurses are paid a fair wage, including those who provide vital vaccination roles?

Humza Yousaf: I am satisfied that the number of venues that we have is sufficient for the ambitions of the winter vaccination programme. If, for example, there is a need for more vaccination centres, I would expect local health boards to adjust their programme accordingly. Paul O'Kane mentioned NHS Highland, which alone has 121 vaccination centres. I hope that gives some level of assurance to him about its coverage.

On the second part of his question, we are in regular dialogue with the trade unions. I want to see a fair settlement. I understand why the RCN is asking for an above-inflation increase but, of course, as John Swinney has said in the past couple of days in the chamber, our public finances are constrained. Nonetheless, while I am disappointed that 5 per cent has been rejected, I completely respect the mandate that trade unions have been given and, therefore, we are getting back around the table with them to get, I hope, to a fair deal for our NHS staff up and down the country.

Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): As Scotland has rightly opened its doors to refugees in the past few years, most recently to those fleeing from the war in Ukraine, what steps will be taken to ensure that all refugees, who may not be registered with a GP, can be made aware of the vaccine programme and access appointments?

Humza Yousaf: Gillian Martin raises an important point. That has been part of winter planning for this vaccination programme, and materials have been translated into Ukrainian and Russian. Of course, we know where those Ukrainian refugees are and, therefore, there is a targeted effort to ensure that the material gets to them directly. They do not have to be registered to a GP in order to get the vaccination. We will continue with those efforts and we are also talking to a number of community and third sector organisations that can assist us with that communication.

Good work is going on. I have said to the health boards that cover areas that are hosting Ukrainian refugees, which is a suitable portion of them, that we will work with them to be as proactive in this endeavour as we possibly can be.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): Vaccine hesitancy will be as big an issue in this roll-out as it has been in previous roll-outs, particularly because people believe that we are now living with Covid and that it is just a way of life. What additional messages can the Government give to people who are sceptical about the efficacy of vaccines in order to ensure that they understand how important it is to get the new booster jab?

Humza Yousaf: Mr Cole-Hamilton is absolutely right. I have been concerned about the fact that Covid is perhaps not as prominent on the agenda as it was during previous iterations of the programme, and I do not want any complacency to set in. The indications thus far from the portal that has been opened for health and social care workers and the work that has been done in care homes do not suggest that the uptake has been affected, but we will not be complacent about that.

All of us—primarily me, given the role that I hold—have a responsibility to continue to communicate the benefits of the vaccine. I urge everyone to do that, and I will certainly do that in my position.

The issue is not just to do with vaccine hesitancy. We know that there are certain groups in the population among whom the uptake has been lower. Going back to Tess White's point, that is where our mobile units can be effective if they are deployed outside particular community facilities. Previously, they have been deployed outside the Glasgow gurdwara, mosques and areas of high deprivation, where they have proved to be a fantastic resource.

I can give Alex Cole-Hamilton an absolute assurance that nobody in the Government is being complacent, and I urge everyone present to communicate the benefits of taking up the vaccine.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): The COVID-19 Recovery Committee has been told that, worldwide, some 20 million lives have been saved by the vaccines, yet there is a lot of misinformation and disinformation about them on social media. Can the cabinet secretary confirm that 20 million is roughly the number of lives that have been saved, and can he reassure people who have been made nervous by social media?

Humza Yousaf: John Mason is referring to a study that was conducted by Imperial College London, and he is right to say that the number of lives saved is around 20 million—it is 19.8 million. As I referenced in my comments, we know that, in Scotland, 28,000 lives have been saved by the vaccine.

There is a lot of disinformation, and we are doing our best to counter it by promoting the benefits of the vaccine on social media platforms,

where we can reach a far wider audience than—I say this with no disrespect—the people who are watching our proceedings in the chamber.

We will continue with our efforts to counter that disinformation. As I said to Alex Cole-Hamilton, every one of us—not only me—has responsibility to do that.

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): We are in a cost of living crisis and I am sure that the cabinet secretary would not want anyone to be unable to make their appointment due to not being able to afford to get there. Has the Scottish Government had any conversations with health boards about what support might be offered in those circumstances?

Humza Yousaf: Again, we have told health boards that we have to factor the cost of living crisis into our planning, and they have been willing to do that. We know that the cost of living crisis is a public health crisis.

That planning is well under way. If people feel that they cannot leave the house because they cannot afford to do so, they should, of course, contact the national vaccination helpline or the health board. My absolute expectation—I will reiterate this to health boards—is that we will do everything in our power to get to those people or, indeed, get them to us at no cost to themselves if the cost of travelling to a vaccination centre is prohibitive for them.

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Centralised vaccination centres simply do not work in rural areas. One house-bound and vulnerable elderly couple in Strathspey have been given their appointments on two different days in two different locations, with one being asked to make an eight-hour round trip of 70 miles to Inverness. That does not fit in with the cabinet secretary's statement to provide more local centres. I favour GPs in rural areas rolling out vaccines, as they did earlier in the pandemic. If GPs are willing to do that, is the cabinet secretary willing to support them?

Humza Yousaf: In short, yes—absolutely. If Mr Mountain wants to furnish me with specific details about that matter, I would be happy to follow it up with the appropriate health boards. I have given details of the local arrangements and how many local centres there are. If there has been an issue with scheduling, that is, of course, regrettable.

My colleague Fergus Ewing and I had a meeting with a local GP. If local GPs in north Highland, for example, are keen to be part of the vaccination programme and they are needed, there should be no restriction on behalf of Government, for example. We know that GPs have been used—in fact, I visited a GP in Rothesay on the island of Bute who was administering vaccinations. There is

not a legal restriction in that sense if GPs are willing to do that, although we know that that is not part of their contract.

I am happy to delve further into Mr Mountain's specific point about his constituents, if he is able to provide the details.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): Clearly, we want vaccination centres to be as accessible as possible and to minimise—again, as far as possible—lengthy travel to get vaccinations, especially for people who are reliant on public transport. Will the number of venues for vaccination be kept under review?

Humza Yousaf: In short, that absolutely will be kept under review. I expect that, if there is a need to adjust, health boards will adjust accordingly. They will absolutely do that. I have seen that happen in previous iterations of the vaccination effort.

I will make the point that I made in response to Gillian Mackay's question. If anybody is concerned about the cost of travel or their ability to travel and arranging transport to and from vaccination appointments because of mobility issues or other issues, support is available from each board. People can go to the NHS Inform website for the details of that, or they can call their local health board, the vaccination helpline or, indeed, the national helpline, which can direct them to the right place. We want no barriers to anybody coming forward for the vaccination. Again, I urge anybody who is eligible to come forward to protect themselves and others and, of course, our NHS, please.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

17:07

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of two Parliamentary Bureau motions. I ask George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move motion S6M-05910, on committee membership, and motion S6M-05916, on a committee substitute.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that Edward Mountain be appointed as a member of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee.

That the Parliament agrees that Sue Webber be appointed to replace Russell Findlay as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee.—[*George Adam*]

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

Decision Time

17:07

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There is one question to be put as a result of today's business. I propose to ask a single question on two Parliamentary Bureau motions. As no member has objected, the question is, that motion S6M-05910, on committee membership, and motion S6M-05916, on a committee substitute, be agreed to.

Motions agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that Edward Mountain be appointed as a member of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee.

That the Parliament agrees that Sue Webber be appointed to replace Russell Findlay as the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party substitute on the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

I appreciate that members are deeply concerned about the health of Her Majesty. I advise members that Parliament will ensure that they are informed of any news that we may have to share with them with regard to business over the coming days.

Meeting closed at 17:08.

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