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Thursday 27 May 2021

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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 27 May 2021

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

First Minister's Question Time

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

The first item of business is First Minister's question time. Any supplementaries will be taken after question 7, and I ask members to press their request-to-speak buttons as soon as they can.

I call Douglas Ross to ask question 1.

Relationship with Business

1. Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Does the First Minister agree that the Scottish Government needs to reset its relationship with business?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): The Scottish Government has a duty to have a good, constructive working relationship with all sectors of Scottish society, and that very much includes the business community.

This has been a really difficult period for the business community. I personally—and, to an even greater extent, my ministers—have engaged with business organisations and different sectors of the economy during the pandemic. I took part in business discussions during the election campaign and gave the absolute commitment that if there is a need to reset or restart—whatever language one wants to use—and make sure that we are focusing on all the key issues, as First Minister, I am of course not just willing but very keen to do that.

Douglas Ross: It is not just me or the Scottish Conservatives who are calling for that reset. The Scottish Chambers of Commerce said last month that a reset was necessary, but it has not happened.

Six weeks after it was promised, taxi drivers are still waiting on the second £1,500 payment. Businesses in Glasgow had their plans upturned with 48 hours' notice, which the Federation of Small Businesses in Scotland said was the latest in a line of miscommunications around unlocking that have had serious consequences. The Scottish

hospitality group is now warning that more businesses will go bust unless they are given more help and that they cannot continue with such loss and uncertainty.

Yesterday, the First Minister said in the chamber that she would

“work with the business sector, to provide as much clarity and support as possible.”—[*Official Report*, 26 May 2021; c 9.]

In that spirit, will she set out the specific progress necessary to ease restrictions in Glasgow and, crucially, the further support that will be provided to protect businesses right now?

The First Minister: I understand that the Scottish Chambers of Commerce engaged in a call earlier this week—I think—with the Deputy First Minister in his new capacity of overseeing Covid recovery. I have had a number of calls during the pandemic with the organisation, and that engagement will continue.

I understand the frustration of the business community, just as I understand the frustration of every single citizen across the country as we continue to grapple with a global pandemic of an infectious virus. In the past few weeks, as we were making very good progress, we have been confronted with another new variant of the virus. Unfortunately, with the best will in the world, I cannot take away all the impacts of a virus of this nature, but we work as hard and as closely as we can to give as much notice and detail of our response as possible.

However, I am afraid that, in the interests of health and human life, it is sometimes necessary for people such as me in leadership positions to take very quick decisions because, as we know from bitter experience over the pandemic, it is often the failure to take quick and firm decisions that leads to loss of life. Anybody who is in any doubt about that had only to listen to a fraction of what Dominic Cummings described as the chaotic response of the United Kingdom Government at key moments of the pandemic. I will continue to try to take difficult decisions as well as I possibly can.

A range of different support streams are in place for business. Those will remain in place for as long as is necessary and we will, of course, continue to discuss with the different sectors of the economy what more support we can give.

We want to get Glasgow back on track as quickly as possible, but that must be done responsibly and safely. On today's numbers, I can tell members that 464 positive cases were identified yesterday—1.8 per cent of all tests. Today, we see a reduction in hospital cases and a small reduction in intensive care unit cases. There are reasons to be optimistic but, in the interests of business and everyone else, we must continue to

take careful and cautious decisions in order to get the whole country back to normality.

Douglas Ross: The First Minister answered a question about restrictions in Glasgow and more support for affected businesses by referencing Dominic Cummings. I am sure that there will be plenty of time for her to answer scripted questions about Dominic Cummings from her back benchers. I want to focus on what is happening in Scotland's largest city and the impact that that is having on businesses in our communities.

Glasgow has been under Covid restrictions for 269 days, during which time businesses have been struggling to survive. Yesterday, Stuart Patrick, the chief executive of the Glasgow Chamber of Commerce, said that funding grants "fall far short", that 90 per cent of businesses will get less than they were promised and that

"The financial support offered bears no relationship to the economic damage now being done by restrictions."

Does the First Minister agree with him? What will she now do to deliver on the promises that she and her Government have made to those businesses?

The First Minister: I say to Douglas Ross that the point that I was making in my earlier answer was about the importance of careful, cautious and responsible decision making in the face of a deadly virus. I was also pointing out, with reference to some of what we heard yesterday, what the impact and implications can be if a leader does not take careful, cautious and responsible decisions. I think that most people across the country understand the seriousness of my point, which is relevant and not deflective because we are still facing the pandemic and it remains important that we take those careful decisions.

I know how long the city of Glasgow has been under restrictions because, unlike Douglas Ross, I am a resident of the city of Glasgow, and the restrictions apply to me just as they apply to others. I know how difficult the situation is for residents and businesses across Glasgow, but I also know how dangerous it would be if we were to ease restrictions too quickly and allow a new variant of the virus—a variant that we know is spreading perhaps even more quickly than the variant that we saw at the start of the year—to take a grip again. That is why public health interventions—surge testing and accelerated vaccination—are under way across Glasgow. I said earlier in the week that we see cautious signs for optimism that those interventions are working.

We will continue to monitor that very carefully, and we will continue to discuss with businesses how, in the face of this difficult situation, we can support them to the best of our ability and with the best of the resources that we have at our disposal.

However frustrating I know that it is for business, the worst thing that somebody in my position could do for businesses and individuals would be to act in a way that would allow the virus to take over again, because that would lead to more businesses being closed and more lives being lost. Therefore, we need to continue to steer a careful course through this, and, difficult though I know that it is for everyone, that is what I will seek to do.

Douglas Ross: The First Minister knows Glasgow and, in answering the question, she showed that she knows the numbers relating to Glasgow. However, she completely ignored the point made by the chief executive of the Glasgow Chamber of Commerce, who said that 90 per cent of businesses will get less than she and the Scottish Government promised.

This Government's approach to business needs a reset. More than that, it needs a complete overhaul. Businesses do not see anyone around the Government table fighting their corner. Even one of the First Minister's economic advisers has said that her Government is anti-business. However, instead of businesspeople who understand how to create jobs, it is the Greens who might get a seat at the First Minister's table. The Green Party does not even believe in economic growth, it ignores business unless it wants to celebrate at a high-end bar in George Street, and it wants to risk the entire oil and gas industry and the tens of thousands of jobs that it supports.

This SNP Government needs to reset its relationship with business. Does the First Minister honestly believe that a coalition with the Greens is the way to do that?

The First Minister: I think that most people across the country, and most responsible businesses that I speak to and have interaction with, know that, although it is important to support a strong, vibrant and sustainable economy, it is also vital—in fact, it is a moral imperative—to do that in a way that meets our obligations to the planet and delivers our climate change targets. From his final question, I am not sure that the climate is particularly high up Douglas Ross's agenda. We will continue to ensure that we support industry and the economy, and that we also support the country to move to net zero, which is a key priority and should be a key priority for all of us.

On the questions about the Glasgow business community, I believe that, on Tuesday of this week, Stuart Patrick from Glasgow Chamber of Commerce was in a call with the Deputy First Minister and the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Economy. I expect and assume that the issues that Douglas Ross has raised today were

raised in that call and that the Scottish Government will be taking those issues seriously and working with the business community to address them. That is how we operate as a Government. We always look for ways in which to improve engagement and responsiveness, and we will continue to do that.

To go back to the central point, this country, like much of the world right now, is in the grip of a global pandemic. The pandemic has taken too many lives already and, if we do not get the decisions right, it has the potential to take more lives in future. The situation is very difficult for everybody, including businesses and individuals. My responsibility—I am not complaining about this, because it is what I am elected to do—is to try to take those difficult decisions in the best way possible to get the country through this as safely as possible. I will continue to treat that responsibility with the utmost seriousness.

Queen Elizabeth University Hospital

2. Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): In November 2019, I shared damning evidence from senior clinicians that contaminated water at the Queen Elizabeth university hospital had led to the deaths of at least one child cancer patient, and that the child's family had not been informed. Milly Main's mum, Kimberly, had to learn the true cause of her daughter's death in the newspaper and join the dots, which is unforgivable. The evidence that I shared back then warned that there might have been a second child and that that child's parents, too, might not know the truth.

A case note review in March confirmed that there were more than 30 infections in children and two children's deaths due to waterborne infections. The First Minister promised then that all the affected families would be told within weeks but, this morning, it has been confirmed that one family has not been informed, and it is feared that they are the family of the second child who tragically died. When was the first attempt made to contact the family, how many attempts have been made and why does that family not yet know the truth?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): First, I take the opportunity to yet again extend my deepest sympathies to the families of patients who died and to everyone who was affected as a result of the issues at the Queen Elizabeth hospital. Of course, it would not be appropriate for me to comment on any individual's care, but I will seek to answer the question as best I can in general terms.

The expert panel has provided individual reports to the families of patients who were included in the case note review and has offered to discuss individual findings with them. I understand that the review team has managed to contact all families

with the exception of one. Regrettably, despite extensive efforts by the team and by NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, one family has not been able to be contacted. However, any family who wishes to get in touch with the independent case note review team can email the team at nss.casenotereview@nhs.scot.

I am happy to seek to provide later the specific answers on when the first attempted contact was made and how many attempts have been made, but I have had an assurance that rigorous attempts have been made to contact the one remaining family that has not been contacted and, unfortunately and regrettably, it has not been possible to contact them. I know that NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde will continue to take all reasonable and appropriate steps to locate the family.

Anas Sarwar: I am sorry, First Minister, but that is not good enough. The reason why it is not good enough is because the key question is about when the first attempt was made. I raised the case in November 2019. The case note review team should not be the ones who are trying to inform the family, because senior clinicians informed the health board about the death of two children in July 2019, months before I raised the case. Scotland's duty of candour law means that the families should have been informed as soon as the health board became aware of the issue. That means that the family should have been informed at least 18 months ago, rather than being contacted for the first time just a few weeks ago. You have broken that law.

To be clear: two children died in Scotland's flagship hospital due to a waterborne infection; one family had to find that out by fighting the health board; and the other family may not even know. I say to the First Minister, with all due respect, that handing out an email address is not good enough. One family still does not know. This is the biggest scandal of the devolution era, so will the First Minister take personal responsibility for ensuring that the family in question is found and told the truth about what happened to their child?

The First Minister: This is a matter of the utmost seriousness and, because of that, it is really important to be clear. A case note review was undertaken, which looked at 118 episodes of serious bacterial infection in 84 children. All the families of those children, with one exception, have been contacted and the information from the case note review has been shared with them, and I am sure that a number of questions have been asked. There is one family whom, despite various attempts—serious attempts—having been made to contact them, it has not proved possible to contact. I think that that is deeply regrettable, but in a situation in which 83 out of 84 families have

been contacted, I simply say to Anas Sarwar that it is reasonable to conclude that that is the case not because the health board does not want to contact the family in question, but because, despite its attempts, it has not so far proved possible for it to do so. Therefore, to characterise matters as me simply handing out an email address is unfair. We are talking about an inability to make contact with a family.

I will certainly seek to provide further information about the number of attempts that have been made to contact the family and when the first attempt was made, and I will certainly ensure that the health board is doing everything that is reasonably possible to locate the family. However, as I understand it, this is a case of attempts having been made, but it having proved impossible to locate the family. I think that everybody who is involved wants the family to be located so that information can be shared and any questions can be answered.

I repeat that all the families, with one exception, have been contacted, and it is important that further reasonable attempts to contact the remaining family continue.

Anas Sarwar: I think that the First Minister misses the fundamental point. The case note review happened as a result of families fighting with the health board to get that review, which took place in 2019. The child died in 2017. Clinicians highlighted the case to health board officials in 2017 and then in 2019. Why have we waited until now—this year—to try to find that family? It is one thing to break the law when it comes to a treatment waiting time, but it is another thing to break the law when it comes to telling a family the truth about how their child died.

This scandal involved denials, bullying of clinicians, cover-ups and parents of sick children being blamed for their illnesses. Clinicians have been raising the alarm for years. The result of inaction is tens of children getting infections and, tragically, two children dying but, inexplicably, there are still families fighting for truth and justice. This case proves that the response from the First Minister has not been good enough. She was health secretary when the hospital was commissioned and she was First Minister when it opened. Despite an independent review finding that the water supply was not safe, the only people who have paid the price for the scandal have been the families and the whistleblowers. Years on, why has no one taken responsibility? Why have there been no consequences? Why are families still having to fight for the truth? Who is going to be held accountable?

The First Minister: All the points that Anas Sarwar raises are very serious, but there is one important fact that he omits to raise, which is that

the Scottish Government has established a full, independent public inquiry. That public inquiry is under way and is still to do its work and to report. *[Interruption.]* Anas Sarwar says that we cannot wait for that, but—this is an important point—he called for a public inquiry and we have established one.

In the lead-up to that public inquiry, there has been an independent review. There has been a report from the oversight board that was established, and there has now been the case note review process, which has produced an overview report and also, of course, the individual case reviews for each of the affected children and families.

What I am not disputing, because nobody could or should dispute it, is that this is an incredibly serious matter. What I am disputing is that the Government is not taking it seriously and is not determined—through, ultimately, the full independent public inquiry—to get to the bottom of everything that happened, from the opening of the hospital right through to now, to make sure that families have the answers that they need. That process will continue until we feel that we have got to the point where all questions that can be answered have been answered. I think that it is a real omission to say all the things that Anas Sarwar has rightly said but to leave out the fact of the full independent public inquiry that is already under way.

Finally, I come back to the point that one family has not been contacted. That is regrettable, but I stress that it is not because there have not been attempts to contact them. The health board will continue to take steps to contact that family as it has already contacted the other families involved.

Freedom to Crawl Campaign

3. **Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green):** The United Kingdom Home Secretary has declared that immigration dawn raids in Glasgow are

“what the British public ... voted for”.

I expect that the First Minister will agree that Scotland did not vote for that. The Conservatives were rejected at the ballot box in Glasgow and across Scotland, and this month we witnessed the people of Glasgow taking direct action to protect their neighbours from the actions of an institutionally racist Home Office.

Immigration and asylum are reserved to the UK Government, but there is no doubt more that we can be doing here in Scotland.

Is the First Minister aware of the Freedom to Crawl campaign that is being launched today by the roof coalition, including Shelter and other charities and grass-roots organisations, to draw

attention to the abysmal standard of accommodation that is provided by Mears on behalf of the Home Office for asylum seekers who are pregnant or who have babies and toddlers? Does she agree that the rights that are set out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child are being breached? What will she do to challenge the UK Government on its failings towards some of the most vulnerable people in our communities?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I have not seen the detail of the campaign that Patrick Harvie refers to, but I will look at that.

I have profound and fundamental objections to the principles underpinning the UK Government's system of immigration and asylum but also to many of the practical aspects of that, not least the provision of inadequate accommodation for asylum seekers in the city of Glasgow. This Government has raised those concerns directly with the Home Office on many, many occasions and has often been met with indifference to them, but we will continue to raise them.

The provision of accommodation is an important right for anyone, but particularly where children are concerned. Just before the election, this Parliament took a unanimous decision to incorporate the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child into domestic law. That is being challenged in court by the UK Government, and the issue that we are discussing perhaps brings into sharp focus why the UK Government is seeking to challenge that, because it does not want the decisions that it is taking on things such as immigration to be subject to that kind of legal protection and scrutiny.

In my view, that is exactly why we need the UN convention to apply to everything that happens in Scotland, because the rights of a child matter whether that child was born here in Scotland or is the child of an asylum seeker. They are a child living in Scotland, and all children should have the same rights.

Patrick Harvie: The campaign was launched only today but, just so that the First Minister and everybody in Parliament is aware of the concerns that are being raised about the accommodation for mothers and babies in Glasgow, I note that the campaign says that the rooms are cramped and inadequately furnished; that there is virtually no floor space in the rooms for children to play or move around safely in; that there are multiple safety issues with the living, cooking and sleeping areas; that there is no respect for privacy; and that alleged infractions against the rules are posted publicly, humiliating the mothers. It says that all of that breaches the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the health and care

standards and the current Care Inspectorate space standards.

The Scottish Greens have long argued that responsibility for housing asylum seekers should lie with local authorities, which are much better placed and, frankly, more inclined than the institutionally racist Home Office to provide appropriate accommodation. In the Smith commission, the UK Government and every political party committed to discussions on powers on asylum housing and support services coming to Scotland. More than six years later, those discussions have still not taken place. Will the Scottish Government put that issue on the agenda for the next joint ministerial committee and work with Glasgow City Council and charities to develop a public sector bid for those services so that Scotland can provide them to a standard that we can be proud of, instead of allowing a shameful situation to continue?

The First Minister: Yes, we will seek to put that issue on the agenda for the next joint ministerial committee, but those meetings do not exactly take place frequently, so it is important that we continue to take it up in other ways as well.

Patrick Harvie is right about the Smith commission. Discussions to devolve more powers to the Scottish Parliament in the area of immigration have not progressed. We have a UK Tory Government that is more interested in taking powers away from the Scottish Parliament than bringing powers to it. *[Interruption.]* That is the reality. I know that it is an uncomfortable reality for Mr Ross, but it is the reality nevertheless. I am sorry if it was not Mr Ross but one of his colleagues who shouted, "Rubbish." However, it is a fact that the UK Government seems more interested in taking powers away.

These issues are important because they are about fundamental human rights and fundamental human dignity, and they bring into sharp focus why the powers should lie with the Scottish Parliament. Notwithstanding the many differences that we have across the chamber, I believe that the Scottish Parliament would take a much more humane approach to immigration and asylum and that we would respond more positively to the demographic challenges that we face and the need to attract more people to live and work in Scotland.

This is a good example of why we need to see those powers lie with the Scottish Parliament. As with many other things, the sooner we can get those powers out of the hands of a Tory Westminster Government, the better for everyone.

Trade Deal (Australia)

4. Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP): Congratulations on your new role, Presiding Officer. I look forward to working and engaging with you over the coming years.

To ask the First Minister what dialogue the Scottish Government has had with the United Kingdom Government on the potentially damaging tariff and quota-free trade deal that has been proposed by the UK and Australian Governments. (S6F-00015)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I take the opportunity to welcome Jim Fairlie to Parliament. Seeing him in his place in the chamber makes that afternoon in the torrential rain in Letham all the more worth it.

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands and the Minister for Business, Trade, Tourism and Enterprise met UK Government ministers on 25 and 26 May to reiterate our concerns about the devastating impact that the UK Government-proposed deal could have on our farming communities. That followed an earlier letter from the rural affairs secretary to the UK Secretary of State for International Trade, on 19 May. However, the UK Government seems determined to shut the Scottish Government out of that decision-making process, just as it has ignored our interests throughout the Brexit process.

We are extremely concerned that, yet again, a crucial decision that affects Scotland's future is being taken by the Tory Government not just against the wishes of people who live here but fundamentally against their interests.

Jim Fairlie: Yesterday, the First Minister gave multiple opportunities for the Opposition parties to work with the Scottish Government in supporting the people of Scotland. Does she share the concerns of the president of NFU Scotland, who is based in John Swinney's constituency? He said:

"We were promised that any future deal wouldn't undermine Scottish and UK farmers with any deal ... we would feel betrayed if that were to happen."

Four days after my nomination, Douglas Ross wrote to all the farmers in my constituency and told them that he was going to be the farmers' champion in Scotland. I wonder whether that will be one of the red lines that he will gaily skip over like a new-born calf. Does the First Minister agree that that would be a total betrayal of Scotland's farmers, as it has been with the fishermen?

The First Minister: For some reason that is best known to him, Douglas Ross seems intent on telling Jim Fairlie that he is a lamb, not a calf. However, the general point that no Tory member seems willing to stand up for the interests of

Scottish farmers stands. The Tory party has, of course, already betrayed Scotland's fishing communities, and it now seems to be about to betray Scotland's farming communities.

We must see that any imports of Australian agri-food will be produced to equivalent standards of Scottish production, and imports must be controlled by tariff rates and quotas. Anything short of that, which would be short of what the Tories promised, will be a betrayal of our farmers and deeply damaging to the Scottish economy.

We hear a lot of rhetoric from the Conservatives about standing up for Scottish business; we have heard that again today. Perhaps it is about time that they actually stood up for our farming community and told their bosses in the UK Government that what is proposed is simply not acceptable.

Incinerators (Moratorium)

5. Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): I congratulate the Presiding Officer on her new role.

To ask the First Minister whether the Scottish Government plans to implement a national moratorium on incinerators, such as the proposal at Overwood Farm site near Stonehouse, in light of the reported detrimental impact that incinerators could have on Scotland's bid to tackle the climate emergency. (S6F-00027)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I welcome Meghan Gallacher to Parliament.

Our commitment is to transition to net zero by 2045. To help us to do that, building a circular economy by reducing, recycling and reusing resources is vital. With that and our climate change targets in mind, my party stood in the election on a commitment to review the role that incineration plays in Scotland's waste system, and we will update Parliament on plans for that review as soon as possible. In their capacity as constituency members, my colleagues Christine McKelvie and Màiri McAllan have also been pushing for that.

However, it is worth noting that, in 2019, the whole-life carbon impact of Scotland's household waste reached its lowest level since official recording began. We are fully committed to further accelerating progress by ending the practice of sending biodegradable municipal waste to landfill by 2025.

Meghan Gallacher: I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests, as I am a councillor in North Lanarkshire.

Residents of Stonehouse and surrounding areas feel let down because, for the second time, they have had to fight against a proposal for the

building of an incinerator in their area. What will the Scottish Government do to reassure my constituents that, should South Lanarkshire Council oppose the planning application, the Scottish Government would not overrule that local decision were it to be brought before the Government reporter?

The First Minister: I am sure that, as a councillor, Meghan Gallacher knows that, if I were to answer that question in any way that pre-empted or prejudged a planning decision that could ultimately come to the Scottish ministers, it would not be helpful for any of the interests concerned. Fundamentally—and, of course, initially—it is a matter for the local council. After that, there are rightly robust statutory processes in place for any applications that come to ministers. It is very important that ministers do not prejudice cases.

I understand the concerns that are being raised in general, which is why my initial answer is important. It is time to review—and the Government is committed to reviewing—the role that incineration plays in our overall waste system. It is also important to recognise the progress that we have made in reducing the whole-life carbon impact of household waste and to look at the variety of things that we need to do to continue that progress.

I am sure that, if there is an application in this case, it will be dealt with by all the appropriate processes.

Education (Support for Teachers)

6. Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what action the Scottish Government plans to take to support teachers with the challenges they face, in light of the reported concerns from teaching unions that there is a culture of “fear and anxiety” across Scottish education. (S6F-00012)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): In the past year, teachers have done an extraordinary job in the most challenging of circumstances, and they have refocused their work to support pupils in a range of different ways.

We recognise the pressure on schools and on all teachers at all times to work in a safe, positive, respectful and supportive environment. We have already committed more than £400 million to education recovery, and we have introduced a support package for schools that includes a very important focus on mental health support for staff. That is in addition to existing guidance for local authorities and schools on managing behaviour.

We will continue to put the health and wellbeing of pupils and staff at the forefront of our recovery plans. We look forward to continuing to work

constructively with stakeholders to ensure that everybody nurtures an environment in our schools that has at its core the highest quality of learning and teaching.

Alex Rowley: I am sure that, like me, the First Minister is worried that the NASUWT said this week that violence and the abuse of teachers are “becoming normalised”. It also revealed that a union survey found that 53 per cent of teachers considered leaving the profession in the past year feeling demoralised, unsupported and unrecognised. Does the Government recognise those concerns? Does the Government accept that among the actions that must be taken is a year-on-year substantial increase in school budgets and that we also need to see significant increases in the number of teachers and teaching assistants across the school estate?

The First Minister: Education spending has risen in every single one of the past four years, and significant additional resource has been provided to local authorities in the face of Covid, supporting a range of activities including the provision of additional teachers in our schools.

Of course, I recognise the concerns of teachers and so many others after what has been the most difficult, challenging and bruising of years, when we have all had to cope with the implications of Covid in different ways. It is really important that we listen to and understand those concerns and that we respond in a variety of ways.

No teacher should have to suffer verbal or physical abuse in school, and nobody should ever accept violence becoming normalised in our schools. I am sure that the education secretary will be more than happy to discuss those concerns in more detail with the trade union concerned.

It is important that we support teachers in a range of different ways. We are doing that, and we will continue to talk to teaching unions about what more can be done to support teachers, as they do a very important job on behalf of us all.

Lord Advocate and Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service (Reform)

7. Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): To ask the First Minister what plans the Scottish Government has to reform the roles of the Lord Advocate and Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service, in light of the resignations of the Lord Advocate and Solicitor General. (S6F-00031)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I take the opportunity to briefly put on the record my deep gratitude to the Lord Advocate and the Solicitor General for their extremely distinguished service during the past five years. I am sure that I will have more to say about that in the days and

weeks to come, but I record my appreciation, gratitude and respect for them both.

The Government will put nominations for new law officers to Parliament for approval shortly. Until then, of course, the current law officers will remain in office.

As we said in our manifesto, the Government intends to publish a consultation on the dual functions of the law officers, and we will do that in due course. It is vital that the systems of criminal prosecution and investigation of deaths, as well as the role of the law officers in Government, continue to enjoy the full confidence of the public, and I believe that they do.

Liam McArthur: I, too, pay tribute to James Wolffe and Alison Di Rollo for their service and for their willingness to engage, particularly with those of us who sat on the Justice Committee.

Reform is, however, needed and the First Minister has the power to deliver change. The role of the Lord Advocate needs to be split in order to end the conflicts of interest, including by appointing a director of prosecutions. Fatal accident inquiries must be removed from the Crown Office, as families are still waiting too long. It is a scandal that we still do not know the circumstances surrounding the deaths of Lamara Bell and John Yuill on the M9 six years ago. After the landmark vote in the Parliament in March, we also need change to ensure that those who are in the grip of drugs are diverted to treatment rather than to prosecution and imprisonment.

In hiring the new law officers, will the First Minister commit to those much-needed reforms?

The First Minister: I will make a number of points, which I hope are helpful. Given potential reform of this nature, it is necessary that there is widespread consensus about the path that we eventually take. First, it is really important to recognise—as, I am sure, everybody in Parliament does—that the dual role of the law officers is not new. It was not created under a Scottish National Party Administration; it has been that way since the dawn of devolution, and the dual roles were held under previous Governments.

Secondly, I think that there is a case for reform, which is why my manifesto committed to carrying out a consultation on that, but it is really important that we take the time to get it right. As I was listening to Liam McArthur, one thing came to mind that Parliament will want to consider during the course of such a consultation. Because of the dual role of law officers, they can be called to Parliament to answer questions, and, on all the issues that fall within the prosecutorial function of the law officers, they can be questioned in the chamber. If we separate those roles, it may not be possible to do that in the same way in the future.

Parliament might be comfortable with that, but it is just one example of why there is a need to take care over the matter. We must make sure that we get the consultation right and try to move forward on the basis of as much consensus and proper consideration as possible.

These issues are really serious, and I hope that all members, including Liam McArthur, will engage with them seriously over the course of any consultation that comes.

The Presiding Officer: There are a few supplementary questions. I would be grateful for succinct questions and responses.

Pladis McVitie's (Proposed Factory Closure)

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): The First Minister will be aware of the plan by Pladis McVitie's to close its factory in Tollcross in my constituency, with the potential loss of more than 450 jobs. Will the First Minister reassure the staff, me and my constituents that the Scottish Government and Scottish Enterprise will do all that they can to persuade Pladis to remain in Glasgow?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I thank John Mason for raising an extremely important issue. I was, as were many others in Glasgow and beyond, deeply concerned to learn that Pladis had entered into consultation with its Tollcross workforce. It is a bitter blow to the staff who have been so loyal to the company for such a long time, and it is a big blow to the local area, given the importance of the McVitie's factory to Tollcross.

We—by which I mean the Scottish Government and Scottish Enterprise—will do everything that we can. I know that Glasgow City Council, too, has made that commitment. We have put together an action group that is co-chaired by the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Economy and the leader of the council, Susan Aitken. Membership of the action group includes trade unions, Scottish Enterprise, Clyde Gateway and Skills Development Scotland.

The group met yesterday and will pursue every opportunity to secure the long-term future of the Tollcross site and the associated jobs. However, that requires willingness from Pladis to engage in the process. Let me make it very clear in Parliament today that I am calling on Pladis to do that constructively, in the interests of its workforce.

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Economy is also writing to the United Kingdom Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to make him aware of the situation and the on-going work of the action group.

Post-travel Covid-19 Tests (Cost)

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con):

Recent reports and representations that have been made to me by Aberdeen airport suggest that passengers returning to Scotland from abroad might have to pay more than twice as much for a Covid test than those who return to England. That will price many people in the north-east out of travelling, hinder the ability of Scottish airports to re-establish connectivity and, potentially, push passengers to travel to and from English airports. Will the First Minister offer some comfort to the industry and hard-pressed passengers by committing to reviewing the guidelines and to introducing a more equal testing system?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): We will, of course, do that. I undertake to look at that issue, which was raised with me earlier this week, I think.

I will be corrected if I get wrong any of the details that pertain to England, but my understanding is that the difference is, in summary, that in Scotland we require that all tests be national health service tests, whereas in England many tests are outsourced to private companies. One of the reassurances that I can give, therefore, is about quality, because we believe that the NHS provides quality assurance. To be blunt, I say that I am not sure that going down the same route on testing as England is the right thing to do, but we will review the matter and give those points consideration.

More generally, I do not want—nobody wants it—the requirements for testing and quarantine to be in place any longer than is necessary. However, those protections are important right now. Everybody knows about my frustration with what I might describe as the lack of robustness of United Kingdom border control in the past. They are important protections in trying to do everything that we can to minimise the risk of importing the virus. That is why it is important that everybody abides by the requirements for testing and quarantine, when they come into the country.

Savings Banks Museum (Proposed Closure)

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): The First Minister will be aware that the world's first savings bank was established by the Rev Henry Duncan in the village of Ruthwell in Dumfriesshire in 1810. The very building that housed the bank is today the home of the Savings Banks Museum, but the owner—TSB—has just announced plans to close the museum, to remove the historic artefacts from the community and to place them in its head office in Edinburgh. Will the First Minister consider whether the Government can make representations to TSB, asking it to put the closure plans on hold and to work with the local community to find a way to retain that important

part of our nation's history where it belongs, which is in the village of Ruthwell?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): In the interests of fairness, I note that Oliver Mundell, as the constituency member, indicated in advance of First Minister's questions today that he intended to raise the issue with me, so I thank him and Colin Smyth for doing so.

I am not aware of all the detail of the issue. However, given that two members have raised it with me today, I will look at the circumstances and consider whether the Scottish Government can make representations to retain the museum, which certainly sounds to me as though it is a valued part of the local community that should be treasured to enable future generations to learn all that that history has to offer. I will get back to both members in due course.

Universal Credit (Two-child Limit)

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): The Children's Commissioner said that the United Kingdom Government's two-child limit is a "clear breach of children's human rights".

Dropping the universal credit uplift will, in effect, knock out the benefits that the Scottish child payment brings to families. Does the First Minister think that the United Kingdom Government should focus on strengthening children's rights, rather than on continually undermining efforts to do so?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I agree. That is an important point that shows starkly the difference between our two Governments and our two Parliaments. This Government and this Parliament are focused on tackling poverty through significant investments, including the £100 million fund to support families through the pandemic, the £50 million for expansion of universal free school meals and, of course, the introduction of the Scottish child payment, which we are committed to doubling.

By contrast, the UK Government penalises families through the two-child limit—which cuts £500 million from low-income families in Scotland alone—through the benefit cap and through the plan to remove the universal credit uplift. This Government, with the unanimous backing of Parliament, has strengthened children's rights by enshrining them in law, but the UK Government wants to take us to court over that. That illustrates, again, why we need more powers being taken out of the hands of the Tory Government at Westminster and put into the hands of this Government and this Parliament.

A9 (Upgrade)

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Communities in Perthshire and across the Highlands have campaigned for years for the A9 trunk road to be made dual carriageway between Perth and Inverness, so it is good to see works progressing on one stretch, at the moment.

However, concerns have already been raised that any deal that the Scottish National Party Government strikes with the Scottish Green Party could jeopardise that vital road safety project. Can the First Minister assure us that that will not be the case?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): When Murdo Fraser says that

“concerns have already been raised”,

he really means that he is desperately trying to stir up concerns of that description. He should know by now that the two things are not the same. This Government’s commitment to upgrading the A9 is clear; that commitment continues.

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

12:47

Meeting suspended.

14:00

On resuming—

Covid-19

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

The next item of business is a debate without a motion on the subject of Covid-19. I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons now. I call John Swinney to open the debate.

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery (John Swinney): Thank you, Presiding Officer. I welcome you to your office of Deputy Presiding Officer and offer you all good wishes.

I welcome the opportunity to open one of the first debates of the new Parliament on a topic of such importance to everyone in Scotland. The debate allows us to build on the strong commitment made by all political parties during the election period that the immediate priority for the next Government would be to lead the country through the on-going pandemic and into a fair and just recovery. The Parliament shaped our response to the virus; now there is the opportunity and the necessity for the Parliament to shape our recovery from the pandemic.

I look forward to setting out the Scottish Government’s on-going response to Covid, our approach to recovery and the immediate steps that we intend to take to bring the necessary energy and direction to that particular activity. Just as important, I welcome the opportunity to build on the commitment made by the First Minister yesterday to co-operate with all political parties to put the interests of the country first. With that in mind, I look forward to a collaborative debate on how we work together across the chamber and across sectors to realise our shared mission to build for the future.

In reappointing me as Deputy First Minister last week, the First Minister also asked me to lead the cross-Government and cross-Parliament work necessary to guide the country through the pandemic and into a recovery that supports the national health service, protects and creates employment, backs our young people and contributes to Scotland’s ambition to be a net zero nation. The recovery must take us closer to the

kind of Scotland that we all want to see: a country that is more equal and that eradicates child poverty; a country where the economy guides towards a more sustainable future with jobs and opportunities for all; a country that values, protects and promotes its natural environment, cultural heritage and technological innovation; and a country that has public services that meet the needs of its citizens efficiently, effectively and with compassion.

It is a great privilege to be asked to lead that mission and a responsibility that I am determined to discharge with pace and in an inclusive way. However, it is clear that, despite our undoubted progress as a country, the pandemic is not yet over. I want to take the opportunity to express my sincere thanks and the thanks of the whole Government to all who have already committed so much to supporting the country throughout the pandemic and who continue to do so in the national health service and social care, in the police service and across the whole public sector, as well as in businesses and third sector organisations.

The past year has been difficult, stressful and heartbreaking for so many people across Scotland. We must remember those whom we have lost, as we continue to grapple with the grief and distress that comes with bereavement. Many people continue to battle the consequences of the pandemic that have impacted people's health, social ties and livelihoods—it has been hard for so many in our country. I understand the urgency with which all of us want to get back to as normal a life as possible. Intensive care unit and hospital Covid-19 admissions remain at low levels and, in much of the country, cases remain at relatively low levels. Due to the progress that we have made in suppressing the virus, we have been able to begin cautiously easing restrictions and even to bring forward some of the easings when the data indicated that it was safe for us to do so.

We still need to be cautious, however, not least of international travel. The risk of importation of new cases and variants from international travel remains, so we are asking people to think carefully about whether they really need to travel at this particular time. As we begin to look ahead and prepare for life after the pandemic, it is essential that we continue to protect ourselves and each other from the spread of the virus.

As we have seen in Glasgow and in some other local authority areas, case numbers can quickly increase—we are not yet free of the virus. I am hopeful that, over time, we might be able to move away from the use of lockdowns and severe restrictions on our freedoms to deal with increasing cases and instead take a more targeted approach using our high-performing test and

protect system, enhanced surveillance and local outbreak management to contain and control increasingly sporadic outbreaks.

We still need people to do their part, though. People need to maintain good hygiene, wear a face covering and physically distance where required. If people have symptoms, they should isolate and get tested. Even if they do not have symptoms, they should make use of the universal testing offer and get tested regularly. Above all, people need to get vaccinated. To date, 3,174,807 people in Scotland have received the first dose of the Covid vaccination and 1,942,285 people have received the second dose. We remain on course to have offered vaccination to the adult population by the end of July. We will look back on vaccination as one of the greatest single achievements of both science, and of the value of the public sector working together in that endeavour.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): Does the success of the vaccination programme also show the benefits of the United Kingdom and Scottish Governments working together with a single objective in mind? Is that not a stellar example of what can be achieved when we come together?

John Swinney: I am all for Governments working together on agreed common purposes and doing that in an open and transparent way, where we have the benefit of substantive and detailed engagement on the formulation and execution of policy. Stephen Kerr is right—the vaccination programme is a very good example of that. I could spend the rest of the afternoon giving him a litany of examples where that is not the case and where we do not get enough substantive engagement with the United Kingdom Government, but I do not think that that was the purpose of his intervention, so I will desist from entertaining the Parliament with my views on the matter. I am happy to—I am certain that I will—share those views with him on other occasions. *[Interruption.]* I hear some of my party's back benchers expressing disappointment that I will not be doing that—I am trying to be on my best behaviour.

Despite the progress on the vaccination strategy, we must continue to be on our guard. We have seen that new variants, including the April-02 variant, can impact on case numbers. We are tracking the latest science, which indicates that although the April-02 variant is more transmissible, two doses of either vaccine continue to offer high levels of protection against it. That means that we should, I hope, continue to see a significant reduction in the number of people who are hospitalised with and who die from Covid. However, to achieve wider protection, we need the

whole adult population to be vaccinated. Therefore, when citizens are offered the vaccine, even if individuals think that they are fit and healthy, they should take it—if not for themselves, for the sake of everyone else who might be more vulnerable to the effects of infection. Too many vaccination appointments are being missed. Sometimes that is unavoidable, but we are taking steps to make vaccination as easy as possible for people and to reach those who are often furthest away from health services.

If we can continue to progress on vaccination and make full use of test and protect, I firmly believe that we can progress in the way that we have set out in our plans.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):

We know that people not turning up for vaccination appointments is a major problem. What work is the Government doing to understand why that might be and what is it doing to address the issue?

John Swinney: There is detailed engagement on that very question because, as the health secretary made clear in answers to questions earlier this week, we find that situation unacceptable.

Work is going on in relation to the administrative processes—that is, whether addresses are up to date and whether systems are being updated satisfactorily in that respect. We are also turning some of the issues on their head by providing people with the opportunity to register for vaccination. We have seen fantastic uptake of the invitation to over-18s to register and the health secretary will say more about that. A number of practical steps are being taken to enhance the uptake of vaccination, because it is so critical to the steps that we need to take to make further progress in suppressing the virus.

We have substantial reviews coming up that could result in large parts of Scotland moving to level 1. In parallel, we intend to publish more detailed work on our expectations for life beyond level 0, as we—hopefully—return to something that we all recognise as much closer to normal than even level 0 restrictions. In that work, we will set out the protections that we all need to keep in place and how we can all play our part. We will give clarity to people and businesses, looking beyond level 0 to the summer and the second half of the year.

As we have seen, however, the situation can change quickly. We will continue to monitor the situation constantly and respond effectively as soon as we judge it necessary to do so. Where we need to take tough decisions, we will share the data and the reasoning behind the judgments that we make, and we will give as much notice as possible of any changes.

The Scottish Government will of course continue to take the decisions that are necessary to guide the country safely through the pandemic. However, thanks to the success of the vaccination programme and the extraordinary sacrifices that people across Scotland have made in the past 14 months, we can be optimistic about the future and start the journey towards national recovery.

A serious recovery needs a quick response from Government, which is why we have published the key health, social and economic actions that we will take within the Government's first 100 days. Our immediate priority is to lead Scotland out of the pandemic and to reopen the country as quickly and safely as we can. Alongside our work on recovery, we will take rapid action to boost jobs, tackle the climate crisis, support our children and young people and protect our national health service.

The NHS has faced extraordinary pressure during the pandemic. As we move towards recovery, we must help the NHS to recover, too. We have already implemented a 4 per cent average pay rise for NHS workers. Within 100 days, we will publish an NHS national recovery plan to increase activity by 10 per cent and we will start a consultation on a national care service.

Our resilience to the pandemic has been drawn from our sense of community. The Scottish Government will continue to invest in our communities and our homes. We will support our most vulnerable and disadvantaged communities to ensure that those who have been worst affected by the pandemic are prioritised in our recovery. We will roll out a £20 million summer programme of help for pupils, which will support activities that allow our children and families a much-deserved chance to socialise, play and reconnect. We will also provide low-income families with the first £100 of a total of £520 of support, which is the equivalent of the Scottish child payment.

We have set out how, in the first 100 days, we will establish a cross-party steering group that will look to progress the delivery of a Scottish minimum income guarantee. We will begin to develop a new rented sector strategy and will start cladding safety assessment. We will start work to develop our new five-year social isolation and loneliness plan, which will be backed by £10 million over the duration of this session of Parliament.

On the economy, within 100 days, we will create a council of economic transformation to shape a 10-year strategy for economic development. We will reopen the digital boost fund, which will be backed by £25 million and will provide technology support and training for small and medium-sized businesses. We will set up a new green jobs workforce academy to help people to get the skills

that they need to move into new greener jobs. That is one example of how our recovery from the pandemic must be linked to actions that address the climate crisis.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): The Deputy First Minister has talked about the opportunity for an economic recovery that drives the green economy towards net zero in 2045. What is the Scottish Government doing to ensure that our youngsters can access courses that will be required to deliver that, so that we can rely on our youngsters rather than have to import that resource?

John Swinney: It is important that our education system addresses the skills requirements of the future economy. The Government is signalling clearly the agenda of achieving net zero, and we have to configure our education system to support that. As Mr Whittle will be aware from his local connections, our college system and university community are very well connected with all those areas of activity, and those skill requirements will be reflected in the opportunities that our colleges and universities provide. Of course, those skills are perfectly able to be delivered through Scotland's school curriculum.

Our country will be put centre stage as we play host to COP26—the 26th United Nations climate change conference of the parties—in November. Last week, the First Minister appointed a new Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport as well as ministers for youth employment and just transition.

In the Government's first 100 days, we will launch a national campaign to raise awareness of the climate crisis and announce the locations of Scotland's first low-carbon vertical farms.

While covering far from everything that we will do in the first 100 days, the Government's plan touches on almost every area of policy. It will also help us to create the right conditions to build on our existing commitments to reform and renew Scotland's public services in ways that improve the lives and experiences of our people, communities and places. With those commitments, we set the stage for a bold and ambitious programme for a better, fairer and more prosperous future for our country.

The purpose of our plan for the first 100 days is to bring energy, direction and momentum to recovery. It will also set the tone for delivery of the longer-term recovery commitments that we made in our manifesto and which the First Minister set out yesterday in her statement to Parliament on the Government's priorities.

The delivery of the commitments that we made to the country is my immediate priority. Achieving

that will require the Government to work across boundaries and across sectors. A key part of my role is to ensure that the Scottish Government's combined efforts deliver the greatest possible impact for the people of Scotland.

In embracing the fundamental delivery challenge of working creatively and collaboratively across organisational and sectoral boundaries, I am conscious of the inspiration that can be derived from the way in which Scotland has responded to the pandemic up to this point. In responding to the shock and disruption that Covid-19 brought to all our lives, national Government, local government, businesses, third sector organisations and individual citizens found new and creative solutions to the challenges that faced us. We did it because we had to.

The national vaccination programme provides an obvious example of that, but so do the times when we were not constrained by how the system had previously worked but, instead, focused on delivering for the individual. An example of such solutions is the cash-first approach that was taken to supporting disadvantaged families, whereby national and local government worked together to ensure that the people who needed it the most received money directly into their pockets to provide meals for their children during periods of school closures or school holidays and to address financial insecurity during the winter months. That creative approach was also evident in the collaborative response from local authorities, health boards and front-line homelessness organisations, supported by funding from the Scottish Government, which has brought the number of people who are sleeping rough in Scotland to a record low—a position that we would not have believed possible before the pandemic.

I am determined to harness the spirit of solidarity, collaboration and innovation that was so evident during the toughest periods of the pandemic and to focus it on our recovery. In doing so, I am challenging my ministerial colleagues to work across their portfolios to deliver the first 100 days commitments and to ensure that cross-cutting issues, such as reaching net zero, tackling poverty, addressing inequalities, expanding digital provision and ensuring that public services are holistic and focused on the needs of individuals, are fully incorporated into recovery planning. I am also challenging our delivery partners to retain the collaboration that has guided us through our continued Covid response and to focus that on our Covid recovery.

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

John Swinney: Yes.

Martin Whitfield: I am very grateful, and I apologise for the loud shout from the back.

Encompassing what he has just described, is the cabinet secretary confident that the £20 million that is being provided for the summer programme of support for young children will be able to be delivered in four weeks, which, of course, is when the summer holidays start for children here in Scotland?

John Swinney: I am confident about that. Discussions have been taking place, principally with local authorities. Essentially, the fund is split into two components: distribution to local authorities where there has been extensive engagement throughout the pre-election period; and £5 million being allocated to a range of national organisations that have submitted propositions to the Government about how the proposed support can be delivered. I think that that combination of locally configured schemes to enhance the work that has been proposed by individual authorities and national schemes that will be delivered by organisations with which we will all be familiar will provide the necessary assurance to Mr Whitfield, but we will, of course, continue to explore those issues.

Another example of collaboration is the work that the Government is doing with the Hunter Foundation, which we are partnering with to deliver the ambitious programme of mentoring and leadership that was announced in March to support those young people who have been most impacted by the pandemic.

The contribution from the Hunter Foundation of £7.5 million over the next six years will add value to the programme and, combined with our existing £19.4 million commitment, will significantly improve the life chances of the young people who participate, many of whom are young people who have been most affected by the pandemic.

When I met partners from across the public, private and voluntary sectors on Tuesday, I was struck by the common conclusion that the past 14 months have seen a step change in how we work together for the benefit of all our citizens. A number of partners stressed that Covid has shone a light on and magnified inequalities in our society. That point underlies the intervention from Mr Whitfield.

I also heard some of our small businesses express the view vividly that they feel as if they are still in the middle of the pandemic and that we need to listen to the frustrations that they have felt in their interactions with both local and national Government and to address those issues.

Our challenge now is to use recovery as an opportunity to build forward on a fairer basis. However, the Scottish Government cannot do that

alone; it must be a national endeavour in which we use all the levers that we have at our disposal and work with partners and across sectors to lead the change that we want to see. That is the challenge that I address before this new Parliament today. I know that our best chances to build a legacy out of the pandemic for the generations that come after us lie in working together.

The Government is committed to bringing together people from a wide range of sectors and backgrounds in pursuit of the strongest possible recovery. I know that all parties in the Scottish Parliament are determined to support that endeavour, which is why I have established a new cross-party steering group on Covid recovery. The group met for the first time yesterday and it had a positive initial discussion. We have agreed to consider in detail some core issues in Covid recovery that need to be addressed, and we have committed to working together to make sure that that recovery is as broadly based in our society and as supported as it can be. There will, of course, be many issues for us to confront, but the more we can do that in open, honest conversation between parties, the better and stronger the reaction and response will be to the challenges that lie ahead.

I am immensely proud of and grateful for the way in which our country has come together to respond to the challenges posed by the pandemic. Everyone in this country has been impacted in some way, and that continues today. However, as we focus our energies on our recovery, we have the opportunity to come together again across organisational, sectoral and political boundaries to work with the communities that we serve to improve people's lives. That would be a legacy of which we could all be very proud.

14:22

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Deputy Presiding Officer, I start my first contribution to a debate in this new session of Parliament by welcoming you to your place. I welcome the Deputy First Minister to his new role in leading for the Government on Covid recovery and, because Humza Yousaf is also on the front bench, I welcome him to his new role as Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care. We will hear from him later. This is the first debate in the new session, so I am sure that we will hear a number of first speeches from new members. I look forward to hearing their contributions during this afternoon.

It is entirely appropriate that this first debate in the new session of Parliament is on Covid recovery. The Covid pandemic is the most serious health and economic challenge that has affected any of us in our lifetimes. We made the point

during the recent election campaign that the unrelenting focus of Government for the next five years needs to be on Covid recovery, and that remains our view. I therefore welcome the fact that we will debate the topic not just this afternoon, but throughout next week.

I join the Deputy First Minister in paying tribute to all the people who have worked so hard to protect the public—in the NHS and care services and in other public services, including teaching, the police, the fire service, the military, social work services and across local government.

We should also acknowledge that it is not just in the public sector that people have made sacrifices. Many private sector employers have gone the extra mile to provide safe working environments for their staff, and businesses have had to adapt rapidly to provide safe services for their customers, and have displayed imagination and innovation in doing so.

Despite all that, however, the impact of Covid has been devastating in terms of lives lost and in terms of the wider impact on the NHS, including delayed and cancelled operations, long waiting lists and a long list of undiagnosed conditions.

There is also a huge and largely hidden story about the social impacts of Covid-19 restrictions. It is about growth in loneliness and isolation and a huge negative impact on mental health—the effects of which we are probably not likely to understand fully for some years to come.

We all understand why restrictions on lives were necessary and why lockdowns had to be introduced. They were in order to control the spread of Covid and to prevent the NHS from being overwhelmed. However, we should never forget that those lockdowns have come at enormous cost, both socially and economically, with vast sums having to be spent by Governments to support individuals, businesses and communities. According to the latest estimate, the UK Government has pumped some £23 billion into the Scottish economy. That is most welcome, but that level of support cannot be provided on an indefinite on-going basis. Even with that, we see rising unemployment, people losing their jobs and businesses failing. Even businesses that are surviving are doing so with mountains of additional debt that will burden them for many years to come.

Earlier this week, the First Minister signalled what seemed to be a change in the Scottish Government's approach to Covid, with a shift away from an elimination strategy to a strategy of suppression. That is a welcome shift. We now know that Covid will be with us for the long term. New variants of the virus are appearing and more will develop in the future. Even if eradicating Covid were possible, it would come at the cost of more

on-going restrictions, more lockdowns and closing of our borders entirely on a long-term basis.

I do not believe that those are realistic objectives at this time; I do not believe that we can afford another lockdown or yet more restrictions. We should be looking to open up, not to close down. A suppression strategy that allows general relaxation of restrictions, but can clamp down quickly in specific geographic locations where increases in cases are identified, along with surge testing and rapid increases in vaccination, must be the right approach to take as we go forward. I think that the Deputy First Minister acknowledged that in his opening speech. Just as we have had to learn to live with, for example, seasonal flu outbreaks, we will have to learn to live with Covid in the future.

The biggest weapon in our armoury against Covid for allowing us to relax restrictions more quickly has been the extraordinary success of the vaccination programme. We should pay tribute to the UK Government for having the vision and foresight to establish it last summer, at a time when many voices were saying that it was taking the wrong approach. Today, the UK is a world leader among major nations in vaccinating its population. That is how we will keep people safe and be able to relax restrictions more quickly.

However, the vaccination programme is not without its difficulties; I alluded to that earlier. Last weekend, just half of the people who had been given appointments for vaccination at the Scottish Event Campus in Glasgow on a particular day attended. We have heard from elsewhere in the country about large numbers of no-shows, in particular as we move towards vaccinating younger age groups.

It is essential that the Scottish Government gets on top of the issue and understands the reasons why people are not turning up for appointments. Is there a problem with the computer systems? Is there a problem with the company that has been contracted to dispatch letters? Are too many letters going to addresses that are no longer relevant because people have moved? Are individuals being offered appointments at inconvenient times or locations? People might not have transport. Is there a general reluctance among some individuals or some groups to take up vaccination?

I do not know the answers to those questions, but they need to be answered soon, if we are to achieve the objective of having vaccinated the great majority of the population within the next few weeks. I am sure that the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care will address some of those questions when he winds up the debate.

I have talked a little about the impact of the pandemic on the NHS; I now want to say more about the impact on the economy. Enormous strain has been put on many businesses as a result of Covid restrictions. The grant support that has been paid by the Scottish Government has been welcome, but—I have made the point before and I make it again—too many businesses and individuals have fallen through the net. We should be looking to see where the gaps are and who still needs support.

Nowhere have the problems for business been more acute than they have been in tourism and hospitality, where restrictions have seriously inhibited ability to trade. Even as the restrictions are being lifted, hospitality businesses are teetering on the brink of survival. Many people who have spoken to me cannot understand why restrictions that do not apply elsewhere in the UK apply to them, or why it appears that there are inconsistencies in the approaches for different sectors.

A good example is the events industry. A large number of events that provide tremendous economic benefits to the country have been cancelled: agricultural shows that take place throughout the summer in our rural communities; the Edinburgh festival; the Edinburgh military tattoo; and, in my area, the Rewind music festival at Scone palace. All those events bring in thousands, if not tens of thousands, of people to the local communities. Their cancellation is devastating for the events venues, and has a huge negative knock-on effect on the wider economy. Planning such events takes many months, so events venues are looking for some certainty for the future, so that they can plan a route map for the future.

A similar plea comes from the weddings sector, which has, in effect, lost two summer seasons. Weddings are now permitted with up to 50 guests, but there are still restrictions on live music. That means that many couples still do not want to go ahead until they can have the full experience that they want with their family and friends. I know of couples who have had to rebook their wedding three times. Not only is that frustrating for them, but it causes huge disruption and economic loss—to wedding venues, caterers, dress suppliers, hairdressers, photographers and all the others whose livelihoods depend on weddings taking place.

Those are the sectors that need certainty—they need a forward plan. That can be provided by the Scottish Government.

We have also seen huge disruption in education, to which the Deputy First Minister referred. Too many young people have been left behind over the past year. Despite the best efforts

of teachers and other staff in schools, the experience of home learning—especially during the first lockdown—was not always as good as it should have been. We currently see young people across Scotland facing exam-style assessments in schools, with very little notice and no study leave having been provided, but with their having been told that the assessments will count towards their final grades. That has caused a great deal of stress and concern among the young people who are in that situation. After a year of confusion and uncertainty, it is little wonder that many are disillusioned by their experience of education.

In our manifesto, Conservatives put forward new ideas for improving the situation in education, including a dedicated catch-up fund and a national tutoring programme. I encourage the Scottish Government to look at those ideas and to consider whether they could be adopted. Otherwise, we are in danger of seeing a cohort of young people, particularly those who are in senior school, having their life chances being adversely affected because of the negative experience that too many of them have had over the past year or so.

There was a similar problem for the group of young people, and those slightly older, who became students at Scottish universities for the first time last autumn. Some found themselves trapped, in effect, in halls of residence, with online classes only and not being allowed to go out or to socialise because of Covid restrictions. We should ensure that that does not happen again, as we approach the start of the new university year in September and October.

Covid has been an unprecedented challenge for all of us. Over the past year, mistakes have been made, so I hope that lessons have been learned. I hope that because of progress in the vaccination programme we are now through the worst and are on the road to recovery across our economy, our public services and society as a whole.

I will finish where I started: it is our view that Covid recovery needs to be the unrelenting focus of the Scottish Government for the next five years. If that is its focus, it will have our support.

14:33

Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): I welcome the Presiding Officer to her new role, and I congratulate in advance all the new members who will make their maiden speeches today.

Our country faces a huge challenge as we try to come through the pandemic and build a national recovery. It is important to recognise from the outset the tremendous work that has been done by all those in the front line, over the past year and more, to get our country through the pandemic. Our thanks is not enough, though—we need to

properly recognise and reward them as we come through it.

We must also recognise that, although Government ministers and officials had to make very difficult decisions, the real sacrifices were made by families throughout the country who had to follow and implement the restrictions. That is why it is incumbent on us all to ensure that we come through this as quickly as possible and then do the important work of rebuilding the country that we all love.

There has been a sense of hope and optimism in recent months, and the important challenge for the Parliament is to build on that sense of hope and optimism and not lose it. The defining mission of the current parliamentary session has to be to come through the pandemic and the most difficult year of our lifetime and to build a fairer, more equal and greener nation together.

I will split my speech into two parts. The first part will be about the current crisis and the second part will focus on the recovery phase.

On the current crisis, we are still seeing hot spots, so the virus has not gone away. Lives and livelihoods are still at risk. The virus is still spreading far too fast in some communities across the country, and my home neighbourhood of the south side of Glasgow is one of those hot spots.

Although the Government has rightly been praised for its level of communication, particularly at the start of the pandemic, the challenge that we face is that public trust and confidence in that communication is at risk of breaking because of what is happening in Glasgow. We need to see urgent action and a proper route map or exit plan for the city of Glasgow so that we can keep hold of hope and optimism.

I made some suggestions at the start of the week and I am pleased that some of those have been put into practice, but we still have a long way to go. We are not going to get through the crisis in the hot spots by having perpetual lockdowns and making people wait until Friday to see what their life will look like on the following Monday. The way that we will do it is by having clear criteria for when a local area will face further restrictions. We need proper channels of communication with businesses and other sectors, and we must recognise that, although the pandemic itself poses a risk to people's mental health and wellbeing, how we respond to it—the restrictions that we impose and the consequences that they can have on families, whether in education, through the loss of jobs or through an increase in poverty—can also have mental health and wellbeing impacts on our society.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): Does the member accept that, if more notice is to

be given to businesses and others of when they can open, businesses could end up being closed for longer? There is a dichotomy there in trying to balance the situation.

Anas Sarwar: It is unfair to tell a city that it can open up from Monday and that people can make plans for that opening up—by buying supplies and telling their workforce to get ready to come back in—and then, on Friday, from a television studio, telling them that they will have to wait for another week. We are in a parliamentary democracy and statements of such importance should be made in the Parliament, not in a TV studio.

I will give the member a practical example of that. We are in Parliament today. Why has the Government informed the BBC that the First Minister will make a statement in a television studio tomorrow when we are sitting in the Parliament right now? She should come to the Parliament right now, make her statement and allow the elected representatives of that local area to scrutinise her decisions in the interests of the people.

John Swinney: The Government is available for parliamentary scrutiny at all times when Parliament is sitting. Part of the dilemma relates to the point that John Mason raised. We want to provide as much opportunity as possible to see the data that allows us to make decisions. For example, in the current circumstances, we want to see the data that will allow us to lift the restrictions, if possible. There is a conflict between maximising the time that Parliament has to exercise its scrutiny function and having the opportunity to give notice to individual communities. However, we will always be available for parliamentary scrutiny.

Anas Sarwar: Sadly, that is not true. If the First Minister is going to make a statement at 12.15 tomorrow, she is already planning what she is going to say in that statement—she is already looking at the data that she will cite in that statement. She could come to Parliament right now, up until 5 o'clock, although I am happy to wait until later in the day, if necessary, for her to make her decisions about what is going to happen in the country and for us to scrutinise those decisions.

The important point, which the Deputy First Minister has missed, is that, during the previous parliamentary session, the First Minister was deciding on Tuesday what was going to happen on the following Monday—she was not deciding on the Friday. That is a big difference for a business that has to plan ahead and for individual families.

If the Government is serious about parliamentary scrutiny and having proper channels

of communication with the public, it needs to recognise that, having shared the data in advance, it should come to Parliament and allow elected members to question it in response, instead of relying on that response taking place in television studies.

Alongside that, let us have mass PCR—polymerase chain reaction—testing in the city of Glasgow and in other hot spots. Let us make Glasgow a blueprint for what will happen in future hot spots. The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care will say, in his response, that we are doing more door-to-door PCR testing. However, if we look at the capacity, we see that we are doing only 5,000 such tests across the whole country, not just in the city of Glasgow where the hot spot exists. Let us have mass PCR testing.

We also need the roll-out of the vaccine—*[Interruption.]* The Deputy First Minister should not be getting upset. I am giving him advice that is important to the people of Glasgow. *[Interruption.]* It is not wrong; it is true—it is 5,000. The figures have been published today.

The second point is that, in hot spots, the vaccine should be made available immediately to anyone aged 18 and above and we should have walk-in centres where people do not need an appointment but can just turn up and get their vaccination. That should be happening right now. I saw a tweet from the health secretary from six hours ago that said that there is now some availability in the hot spots for people aged 18 and above, but the vast majority of people in the south side of Glasgow are not sitting on Twitter. They need communication about what is going to happen so that they can access the vaccine.

Alongside that, there are people who are having to struggle and choose. We hear a lot from the Government about how tough it is to make the difficult decisions, but that pales into insignificance beside the tough decisions that individual families are having to make about whether to stay at home and self-isolate or risk their lives and those of their family and other people because they have no choice but to go out to work in order to put food on the table. We need to increase access to the self-isolation grants and look at the value of those grants so that no one has to make those difficult decisions.

We saw what happened in Liverpool and Manchester when they went into higher levels of restrictions compared with the rest of England: those two cities rightly fought for extra business support for their communities. We need extra business support in Glasgow and in any other hot spot anywhere in the country that gets into difficulty, so that livelihoods are not lost and we do not have mass unemployment as a result. *[Interruption.]*

I am already over time, otherwise I would take the intervention. I am happy to take it if I will get the time back, Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I think that we have used up the extra time.

Anas Sarwar: Okay—no problem.

That is the urgent action that we need: extra business support, more PCR testing, rapid access to vaccination and greater access to the self-isolation grants. Let us make Glasgow the blueprint instead of keeping people in perpetual lockdown.

On recovery, the Government underestimates the scale of the challenge that the country faces if it thinks that a 100-day document will cut it—100 days will not cut it. I hear the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills and the Deputy First Minister tutting and humming and hawing over that, but the situation is really serious. I say to the Government that we are willing to work with it on the Covid recovery group, which was a suggestion that I made during the election campaign. The point that I am making, which is not something to hum and haw at, is that we need to recognise that recovery is a long-term challenge for our country. If we are serious about working together on it, we need ideas about long-term economic growth, which means a jobs guarantee into the long term.

We need to recognise that the one year of education that children have missed will not be caught up in 100 days; it will take years to catch up on that. The Scottish Qualifications Authority's exams fiasco is coming before us again, and we urgently need to avert that so that no child loses out on opportunity and becomes part of a lost generation coming through the pandemic. We need to make sure that the NHS and the social care service and workforce, which have done us so proud during the pandemic, are adequately supported and resourced to do all the major catching up that they need to do, so that we find the missing 7,000 cancer care patients and start the hard work of addressing the pandemic that will follow this one, which will be a mental health pandemic.

If the Government is serious in that endeavour, we will work with it on that. We will welcome it when it gets things right, challenge it when we think it can go further and expose it when things go wrong. Let us start with a grown-up conversation and respect the people of Glasgow and beyond.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Gillian Mackay to open for the Greens.

14:44

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): Thank you, Presiding Officer. I, too, welcome you to your new role. As is traditional with first speeches, I take a few seconds to thank all who campaigned and voted for me, and my wonderful family and partner for all their support.

It is a privilege to be here representing Central Scotland and its wonderful diverse communities, and I look forward to engaging with as many of them as possible over the next five years.

The past year has been one that no one in this building could have predicted. We have seen the best from our communities—both in my region and across the country—so much hardship and social isolation, the disproportionate effect that the latter has had on disabled communities and the unprecedented use of the word “unprecedented”.

As the new Green health spokesperson, I want to put on the record my deep and sincere thanks to all our health and social care workers across the country, who have worked so hard for so long to protect lives and provide the care that we need. We need to thank key workers from all sectors, who have kept Scotland going throughout the pandemic. They deserve our gratitude and I am deeply thankful for everything that they have done.

The Scottish Greens are committed to ensuring that the health and care sector does not just recover as we emerge from the worst of the pandemic. We must take this opportunity to build back stronger and better services that have people at their heart, both patients and workers—nurses, doctors, carers, pharmacists, porters, cleaners and all those across all services.

Part of that agenda is clearly about fair pay. If the pandemic has taught us anything, it is to value health and social care workers and the vital role that they play. I am proud that the Scottish Greens played their part earlier this year when we secured an additional £100m investment into public sector pay.

Fair pay, however, is only part of the story. We also need to radically improve working conditions. We have all heard of the toll that working in our NHS takes on staff. We need to change that culture and give staff access to proper mental health support and counselling, as well as ensuring a work-life balance and progression opportunities that allow them to thrive.

I take this opportunity to give my condolences to all those who have lost loved ones, and my sympathies to those who have suffered from Covid—particularly those who continue to suffer from long Covid. Long Covid will be with us for a time, and appropriate support and staff need to be put in place to give patients the best help. We do

not yet fully understand the wide-ranging and complex nature of long Covid and how long many of the symptoms that are experienced will persist, so investment in research and multidisciplinary treatment should be a minimum to ensure that no one is left behind.

Although the vaccine roll-out and current lower prevalence give us cause for hope, we still have a way to go before some form of normality can resume. I encourage everyone under 30 to make sure that they have registered for their jab and to take their appointment once it is sent to them. I also encourage employers to ensure that their employees are available for their vaccine appointments if they happen during work time. Getting the jab is not just about protecting oneself but about protecting everyone, so I ask people to go online, book their appointment and roll up their sleeve.

As we continue our vital work, we must support recovery in the health service, which means the huge task of remobilising services and taking the opportunity to improve on the way in which we did things previously. Our staff have had a hard year and need our support when it comes to the backlog of needs. Measures such as the expansion of the workforce in general practitioners' practices, so that patients can get at least 15 minutes with their family doctor, and growing practice teams to include welfare rights officers and mental health clinicians would improve access to primary healthcare and support at a time when people might have put off a visit to the doctor. Restarting cancer screening and other health screening is a must, as well as ensuring that a cancer workforce plan is agreed to so that services can meet patient demand.

Mental health is another area that lacked pre-pandemic investment. That issue is not just about treatment at the sharp end, however. We need to end the current cycle of crisis management and look upstream to expand mental health support such as talking therapies as well as cognitive behavioural therapy, exercise referral schemes and peer support.

The improvement of self-directed support in care is an issue that many of us heard repeatedly from disabled people during the election. Personally, I cannot wait to get involved in the development of a national care service and look forward to working with the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care on that. However, while we wait for a national care service to become a reality, we should end the process of competitive tendering and invest in our dedicated workforce. A national care service is needed because caring is a national priority. It is also a public need, so it must be a public service.

The recovery of our health and wellbeing from Covid is about the ability of our communities to look after themselves and one another. From Airdrie to Motherwell to Falkirk, we have come together in the past year to keep one another safe from the virus. We need to harness that solidarity to support our health and care services.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I thank Gillian Mackay; I should have said that that was her first speech in our Parliament—well done.

14:50

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): It gives me great pride to rise for the Liberal Democrats.

I congratulate Gillian Mackay on an excellent speech and I extend good wishes to all those who will make their first speech today. It has been evident for some days that the intake of new MSPs has brought with it a welcome breadth of new talent. I wish them well and I look forward to working with them.

Shortly before new year's eve in 2019, Chinese public health officials first alerted the World Health Organization to the human transmission of what was being referred to in the hospitals of Wuhan City as "animal pneumonia". Back then, it all seemed so far away and, in those early days, our principal concern as members was over the Scots who were in that part of China and were unable to leave it. Then, suddenly, the virus was here.

I will never forget the Opposition briefing at which the chief medical officer and the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport appeared, ashen faced, to tell us that the virus could no longer be contained and that our public health priority was to protect our NHS from being overwhelmed. Schools and businesses would close, home working would become the new norm and we would have to teach our children the meaning of the word "lockdown".

As the NHS mobilised, so too did our communities. In that, we have seen humanity at its greatest. I am sure that colleagues of all parties will share my sentiment as I speak of the gratitude that we owe our communities. In my constituency of Edinburgh Western, local hospitality businesses delivered free meals to the vulnerable, and mutual aid groups made a colossal effort to ensure that vulnerable neighbours were not left isolated or without support.

While we should be proud of our communities, we should be doubly so of our care workers and key workers. The nation owes them a debt that I do not think we can every truly repay.

However, in those weeks of high infection, amid the frantic efforts to prepare for an expected

tsunami of Covid cases, part of what was done in preparation undoubtedly led—inadvertently—to catastrophe. When the histories of Scotland's pandemic are written, the tragedy of that story will be found in our care homes.

The minutes of the Scottish Government's Covid advisory group of 2 April 2020 cover several topics, but two points stand out in particular: first, that our scientists were struggling to understand how the virus was moving around in Scottish hospitals despite infection control measures; and, secondly, that it wanted to speed up the movement of elderly patients out of those hospitals and into Scottish care homes.

The international health community had been screaming about asymptomatic viral transmission since January, yet the decision was taken to accelerate the movement of more than 3,000 hospital patients whose Covid status was unknown—and of dozens who had even tested positive—into care homes that were working desperately hard to keep residents safe and to find personal protective equipment. That put a time bomb into the heart of the most vulnerable communities in our country. The response to outbreaks in our care homes was brutal—isolation and the misery of separation.

I do not blame any one person for those realities or those decisions, but it underscores the need and the urgency for the Government to commission an independent public inquiry without delay. That inquiry should not be about politics but should be about catharsis, healing and learning for the remnants of the virus and for any future pandemic that may visit our shores.

In that spirit, I thank the Government for its efforts to include Opposition members in the pandemic response. Ministers and cabinet secretaries made themselves available and responded swiftly—in some instances, to individual cases of constituents who had been left behind or who were unfairly disadvantaged.

When I raised the reality that Edinburgh zoo was just weeks from permanent closure if the Government's timetable for reopening was not amended, I was gratified that I was taken seriously and that the zoo was given the latitude that it needed. When, along with Monica Lennon, I raised the plight of new parents who had spent their pregnancies shielding and were now adrift from support networks, they were granted permission by the Government to visit one another indoors.

Those exchanges showed what the Parliament can accomplish through consensus. We are going to need much more of that—for the wedding and events industry, which still lacks clarity about how the easing of restrictions will allow it to come back

into profit; for those with additional support needs who are still prevented from accessing long-stay or short-stay respite services; and for the young people who did not expect to have to sit life-qualifying exams but who now face a diet of assessments without a clear appeals process.

We often talk about life before the pandemic, before we were confined to our homes, when we could hug our loved ones and go to the pub with as many of them as we chose. Aspiring to get back to life before the pandemic is a low bar to set, because before the pandemic students from our poorest communities were being failed by a system that is widening the attainment gap, our communities were being torn apart by the drug deaths emergency—the worst in the developed world—and children suffering from mental ill health faced the longest queue in our NHS.

We need to put the recovery first, and that starts by recognising that the pandemic is far from over. This morning, I had cause to speak to the headteacher of Davidson's Mains primary school in my constituency for the second time in as many days since an outbreak of Covid closed her school on Tuesday. Twelve classes are now isolating and community transmission is surging. I ask the cabinet secretary to reassure my community in his closing remarks that the outbreak commands the full attention of his Government.

The first debates of a new parliamentary session strike a different tone from those that we were used to in the closing days of the previous session. The eyes of the country are fixed on the chamber in anticipation and expectation. Our success in living up to that expectation will be measured by how we build consensus, how quickly we respond to emerging areas of greatest need and how we resist the divisions of the past.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind members that contributions should be of six minutes, if possible.

I call Neil Gray, who is making his first speech in the Scottish Parliament.

14:56

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): It is a pleasure and an honour to make my first speech in Scotland's national Parliament and to be doing so with you, Presiding Officer, in the chair for the first time—congratulations. I will address the most pressing issue that we all face, not just in Scotland but around the world.

I welcome John Swinney to his new role and congratulate him on it. His cross-departmental responsibility in leading our Covid recovery is of critical importance and he is ideally suited to

bringing together all areas of Government to work towards our best recovery.

I also welcome Humza Yousaf to his new position as Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care. I am pleased to see what my friend has achieved since we both started as staffers many moons ago. I wish him well in following the fantastic contribution of Jeane Freeman, whom I also thank for her incredible service. It will come as no surprise to the new health secretary that I will be in regular contact with him about the new Monklands hospital, as I was with Jeane Freeman.

Like Mr Yousaf, I seek to follow a very successful predecessor. I wish Alex Neil well for his retirement. Although he has retired from this place, I suspect that he will not be searching for his pipe and slippers just yet. He gave an immense service to his constituents over 22 years as a member of the Scottish Parliament, and to our nation over seven years as a minister. I thank him for his friendship and support. I am sure that colleagues will join me in wishing him well for his retirement.

Before I move on, I thank my family for their fantastic support, and my campaign team, led by my agent Graham Russell, for their phenomenal efforts. I would not be here without them.

This has been a year like no other. It has been hard for people in so many ways—missing family and friends, missing events, missing our normal way of life and, of course, missing those who have been lost. Covid has robbed us of our ability to live our lives, mourn those who have lost their lives and support those who have found their lives in lockdown most difficult.

I put on record my thanks to those who continued to work—either paid or voluntarily—to keep services going, support in place and people in touch. There are many amazing examples of groups in Airdrie and Shotts doing what they could to help others, including Shotts Healthy Living Centre, Airdrie Foodbank, Paul's Parcels, Hope for Autism, Diamonds in the Community, Crawfords Pharmacy, Airdrie action partnership and the Salvation Army, to name just a few. Our public sector workers, including our teachers, our social workers, our police and our fantastic NHS staff all had to adapt to very difficult circumstances, but they all responded and should be thanked by us all.

Thanks to the perseverance and sacrifices of people across Scotland and an incredibly successful vaccination programme, I hope that we are now getting closer to a route back to normality. However, it has been a difficult journey and a lot of work will be required—not to get us back to where we were pre-lockdown, but to take us even further forward.

Linked to that, I have a question from a business perspective, which I hope that the health secretary might be able to answer in closing the debate. Businesses have had a difficult time during the crisis, and although I thank the Government for the support packages that it has made available, businesses clearly desire to return to normality as quickly as it is safe for them to do so. Close-contact—particularly beauty therapy—businesses in Airdrie and Shotts have been in touch with me about the rules around face masks. I know that the restriction on treatments and the requirement for face masks are under review and I acknowledge the need to keep people safe. However, local businesses would appreciate any updates that the health secretary might have on when those measures might be relaxed.

I am pleased to see the NHS recovery plan—and significant investment to match it—which will help us catch up with delayed operations and referrals. The time and services that will be required to support people who have suffered a deterioration in their mental health during lockdown will also be substantial. The coming 100 days and beyond will be important, and I am glad that such an emphasis has been placed on continuing to suppress the virus and on building a recovery for our NHS and society that works for everybody.

The issues before us include identifying and delivering opportunities for our young people; maintaining our focus to tackle the climate emergency and achieve our net zero target; investing in schools and teaching staff; and continuing to do what we can, with the powers that are available to us, to eradicate child poverty. None of those issues should be partisan, and I hope that, following yesterday's statement from the First Minister, whose sentiments Mr Swinney reiterated today, we can go back to the founding principles of this re-established Parliament and seek consensus on those critical issues.

The people of Scotland returned the Scottish National Party to Government by a wide margin—by any measure of success—but they also expect us, as political leaders, to work together as best we can. I accept that some parties in the Parliament do not want a second referendum to happen, although the Government has a mandate to deliver one. Those parties fought election campaigns that were opposed to a referendum, while the SNP and the Greens stood on manifestos that were committed to a referendum. As there is no doubt which side won, there should be at least an acceptance across the chamber that the referendum will happen when it is safe for it to do so, and that we should save the debate for whether Scotland should be independent and, of course, where the powers to dictate our economic recovery should lie.

I thank the people of Airdrie and Shotts for entrusting me with the honour and responsibility of representing them in Scotland's national Parliament. I will do so to the best of my ability, regardless of how or whether they voted.

I look forward to working with colleagues across the Parliament to support the work of the Scottish Government in delivering the ambitious programme to build a fairer and more socially just Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Stephen Kerr, who is also making his first speech in our Parliament today.

15:03

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): Thank you, Presiding Officer, and congratulations on your debut in the chair. I also congratulate Neil Gray and look forward to renewing our debates in this Parliament.

It is a privilege to speak in my first debate as a member of the Scottish Parliament and I am honoured to represent Central Scotland.

This is not the first time that I have spoken in the Scottish Parliament. On 2 May 2001, representing my church, I offered time for reflection. The 2001 census had just taken place, and I spoke about the preciousness of every living person and the loving ties that bind us together as the family of humanity. On that occasion, I asked God

“to bless our dear land with healing, love and unity”,

and I prayed for those who sit in Scotland's Parliament,

“that they may be filled with the spirit of fairness, understanding and wisdom.”—[*Official Report*, 2 May 2001; c 246.]

Those words from 20 years ago pretty much sum up how I feel today, as I make my first speech in this Parliament. Scotland's people stand in need of healing love and unity and, as the parliamentarians of the sixth session of the Scottish Parliament, we stand in need of an endowment of the spirit of fairness, understanding and wisdom.

In my maiden speech in Scotland's other Parliament, I said that I believe that

“we have a duty as parliamentarians to personify civility.”

I also said that although we will disagree with one another from time to time,

“we ought not to be disagreeable.”—[*Official Report, House of Commons*, 3 July 2017; Vol 626, c 977.]

Members of the Scottish Parliament have a solemn duty to hold the Scottish Government to account. In the spirit of that duty, I have several

questions to ask the cabinet secretary who will respond to the debate.

The vaccines are a modern-day miracle—a miracle of science. I had my second vaccination on Monday this week, and I am very grateful for it. From the very beginning of the vaccine roll-out, we knew that we were in a race against this deadly virus. Everything that can be done must be done at speed to get vaccines into arms. However, earlier this week, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care was reported as saying:

“I think there is room in the coming weeks to increase the number of vaccines that we are administering per day and per week.”

Will he explain to Parliament why the vaccine roll-out was not being—to use his word—“maximised” already? What was being held back? What is he going to do now that should have been done weeks ago to maximise the roll-out?

The cabinet secretary was asked how long it would take to get the performance of the NHS in Scotland back to pre-pandemic levels. He replied:

“Look, I won’t lie to you, it’s going to take years.”

I accept his words at face value. He says that the recovery of our NHS services in Scotland is going to take years.

The cabinet secretary also says that he is going to “put political differences aside” to focus a national effort on the remobilisation and recovery of the NHS. We will judge him by his own words. Will he put aside political differences and his party’s constitutional obsessions, such as those that we heard about yesterday from the First Minister when she made her statement? Will he and his Government genuinely put the national interest first?

It is going to take years for the NHS to recover. When a matter so crucial as the recovery of NHS services in Scotland is in the balance, we must work together rather than be pulled apart. We are winning the war against the virus—at least in our own little corner of the world, thanks to the vaccines and the farsightedness of the UK Government in procuring the quantities of the vaccines that it did.

I believe that the time has come for us to reassess how we measure the impact of the virus so that we can begin to fully restore our freedoms and our way of life. When we started down this path more than a year ago, it was to prevent the NHS from being overwhelmed. Let us get back to measuring our actions against that objective.

I hope that the SNP Scottish Government will be serious about working co-operatively to tackle the serious challenges that lie ahead of us. I hope that it will set aside its default ideological position and work together with the British Government in order

to tackle those serious challenges. In survey after survey, the people of Scotland say that they want their two Governments to work together now as never before. The question is whether the SNP Scottish Government is listening to the people of Scotland.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I call Stuart McMillan.

15:09

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): I congratulate you on your election as Presiding Officer, and I wish you well in the role.

I thank the electorate of Greenock and Inverclyde for once again putting their trust in me to represent them in our nation’s Parliament. It is a huge honour and privilege, which I never have or will take for granted.

I represent a constituency with hard-working and fine people, with areas of stunning beauty and in which there is potential for greater growth, tourism and economic output. I represent the best constituency in the country. Notwithstanding my constituency’s many positive issues, we face some challenges, and Covid-19 has highlighted some of them.

Recovery from Covid is crucial to aiding and assisting many people in Greenock and Inverclyde. In Inverclyde, 215 deaths have involved Covid-19. Too many families and friends will still be feeling the loss of loved ones. In my community, which really is like a big village, that loss still resonates. Early in the pandemic, we had the highest level of deaths among all local authority areas. Some of the media, and others elsewhere, used a catchy headline-grabbing soundbite, but I never used it. Every time that I heard it, it angered me, and I know that many people in my community were angered by it, too. It was crass and insensitive, and it paid lip service to those who had died because of Covid. The title is, sadly, still being used, but it has passed on to other local authority areas.

I pay tribute to everyone in Inverclyde who has played their part in helping our community as we have been on that awful Covid journey. I thank every public sector worker, third sector worker, private sector worker and volunteer who has played their part. Their efforts have not been unnoticed, and they deserve every plaudit for helping to turn our community around.

As we heard from the First Minister yesterday and many times previously, recovery from Covid is the priority. That is what the electorate want. Irrespective of which portfolio area we consider—whether it is health, the economy, the environment, local government, education or

transport—there are examples of areas in which recovery must, and will, aid every community in the country. I will focus on two areas: health and the economy.

The 4 per cent pay increase for our valued NHS staff is welcome, and backdating it to December is the right thing to do. My constituents have valued the efforts of our NHS during the Covid pandemic.

Abolishing dental charges, which I also welcome, is the right thing to do. Scotland has long had an unenviable record on oral health and hygiene. Although great strides have been made, the first step of removing dental charges for care leavers will continue the improvement.

Increasing mental health spending by at least 20 per cent will be hugely important, because we know that Covid has been challenging for many people. I hope that the additional investment will be used for third sector organisations such as Mind Mosaic and Safe Harbour in my constituency, which both do outstanding work by helping people to rebuild their lives.

The SNP manifesto commitment to invest £10 billion in the NHS estate was welcome, and it will be even more welcome when investment starts to be provided to my local hospital, the Inverclyde royal hospital. I want to see a new-build hospital, and I know that consideration for that idea is growing in the community. However, until such time as that is built, the IRH will need substantial investment. I have regular discussions about that with the health board, and I have raised the issue with the Scottish Government in the past. That is not the only major building project that we need, but it is certainly the most highly charged one among the local community. It was a ridiculous decision in the 1970s to build a hospital of that size with a flat roof at the top of a hill, with no shelter nearby, in Greenock. The hospital has served our community well, but it now needs substantial investment. I have already written to the health board to seek a meeting about the range of services at the hospital and the long-term strategy for the community.

Finally on health, the creation of a national care service will be an outstanding achievement when it is delivered. I encourage the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care and the Minister for Mental Wellbeing and Social Care to visit the Holy Rosary Residence care home in Greenock to witness an exemplar in facilities and what can be achieved. When Shona Robison was the health secretary, she visited and was hugely impressed by what she saw.

The economy matters, and I welcome the creation of a new council for economic transformation. It is abundantly clear that, although we want things to improve, we cannot have

society go back to the way that it was. A fairer, just and greener economy is essential to improving the lives of many people and communities.

My area now includes the most deprived area in the country, according to the Scottish index of multiple deprivation. In addition, it has a growing older population and a declining population. We have had a declining population for some 40 years. We want to be net contributors to the country. Recovery from Covid must be seen as an opportunity to build a stronger Inverclyde and a stronger Scotland.

Part of that will involve increasing our exports, which makes Stephen Kerr's comments in his letter to the UK Government even more ridiculous. Having offices elsewhere provides a chance to engage and highlight what Scotland has to offer, and to do so full time instead of part time, which is what the UK Government would do. Having full-time operations elsewhere is therefore a benefit to Scotland, and I am sure that Baron Duncan of Springbank, the Conservative Deputy Speaker of the House of Lords, would agree with that. For any member who does not know, Baron Duncan—Ian Duncan, as he was then—was the Scottish Parliament's officer in Brussels, helping the Scottish Parliament and its parliamentarians to engage with the European Union.

Recovery from Covid must be and is a priority. We can then move forward to holding a referendum—when it is safe to do so—to make Scotland the country that we want it to be.

The Presiding Officer: I call Pam Duncan-Glancy. This is her first speech in the chamber.

15:15

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): Presiding Officer, I hope that you will indulge me for a moment in what is a lifetime of thank yous. I start, of course, by thanking my family, my friends, my husband and the dug, who I think wonders where I am most days.

Just over three weeks ago, I was working full time in the NHS by day, and by night I was campaigning on the streets of Glasgow, come rain or shine—or, rather, come rain or hail. All that I asked for was the opportunity to serve. Today, I sit before members because the people of Glasgow took a leap of faith and took their place in the history books by making this one of the most diverse Parliaments in the world. To them, I say: thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for the opportunity to serve. I promise that, for as long as I am here, none of you is on your own.

I also thank the Labour Party. I thank James Kelly and Johann Lamont, who sat on the Labour benches directly before I did, for their service to

Glasgow and this Parliament. I thank my party colleagues in the chamber and my comrades across the Labour movement, who should never underestimate what they did—a wee working-class girl in a wheelchair grew up to be a wee working-class MSP in a wheelchair.

As we start this journey in Holyrood, I reflect that it is a journey that people across Scotland—from all parts of our nation—and people in this chamber have played a part in. I did not build my life alone—no one can and no one should ever have to. I grew up with a family who loved me and pushed me hard, and in my formative years I had a Labour Government that had my back. It was a Government that valued diversity, that introduced laws such as the Human Rights Act 1998, the Equality Act 2010 and the Civil Partnership Act 2004, and that lifted people out of poverty. That is what a Labour Government did, and my colleagues on the Labour benches and I will do everything that we can to work across the chamber with anyone who is willing to work with us to again make big and bold changes. We will work to protect the interests of ordinary people like us, and we will use this Parliament and its powers to change the world.

I pay tribute to the disability movement. The fights that we have won for disabled people's rights throughout history have led to this moment. I promise that, for as long as I am in this Parliament, their fight will be my fight. There will be nothing about us without us.

“She’s a fighter” is not just the slogan of my campaign; it is the story of my life and, sadly, it is the story of far too many people’s lives. This past year has been tough for us all. The pandemic has separated us from our friends and family but, despite that, we have come together like never before. However, for too many people, things were impossibly hard before Covid—poverty was rife; insecure and precarious work was too common; social care was creaking at the seams; and inequality was holding people back.

In Glasgow, people have been doing their best and struggling to make ends meet for years. They have been working longer hours, taking less money home and turning to food banks for years. They have needed more affordable homes, a crackdown on unscrupulous landlords and a pay rise for years. Disabled people across Scotland have been living below the poverty line, having their care packages cut and dragging themselves upstairs because there are not enough accessible homes for years.

Things were bad before Covid and the pandemic has made them worse. We cannot go back to that normal; we have to go forward to better—to a Scotland where social care is free at the point of delivery and where equality and

human rights are enshrined in law and delivered in practice; a Scotland where trans people are valued and accepted for who they are; a Scotland where people who use drugs get the support that they need, not a criminal record; a Scotland where no young person grows up in poverty; a Scotland with a social security system that is there for people in and out of work and that guarantees a minimum income. That is the new normal that we need and that members across this chamber must seek to deliver.

I am delighted to have been asked by Anas Sarwar to lead for Scottish Labour on social security as part of that transformation. I am pleased that he put a fighter in the role because, after being in the Parliament for only a matter of days, we can see that we are going to need one. This Parliament has met only in the past two weeks and, although we have had an upgrade in social security powers, we have had a downgrade in its attention.

Colleagues, the road ahead is hard, so the fight for a better future is real and it is going to need grit and guts to get us there. I say to all the people of Scotland who need our country to be one where social security is bold and we go hard and fast to end poverty and inequality—and I say to Anas, who trusted me with this role—I will not waste a second in this place to fight to make that happen. At a time when a million people are in poverty, half of households in poverty have a disabled person in them, 400,000 people earn below the living wage, 83,000 people are on zero-hours contracts and more than 200,000 people are going to food banks, we need a social security system that uses all the powers that we have here in Scotland to ensure that no one is held back by poverty or inequality.

We cannot come through the collective trauma of Covid and go back to normal. We must focus on solutions that build a better Scotland. That starts with making the vaccine roll-out a national priority. It means acting now to prevent unfair evictions. Businesses need more support too and we need an effective recovery plan for vital retail and creative sectors. Further, social care staff have been on the front line risking their lives to save ours—I thank those who have worked with me all through the past year to support me in my life—and they need an immediate pay rise to £12 an hour, with a further increase to £15 an hour as soon as possible.

In this Parliament, we have a big job to do, but that comes with a big responsibility and a big opportunity to rise to that challenge. I have hope. I have hope because for too long this Parliament—and others like it—has not looked like the people that it is here to represent, but this year is different. The people of Scotland broke glass

ceilings and glass staircases, and this room got a bit closer to looking a bit more like the people Scotland. It is now our chance to turn a little hope into lasting change. This is the room where it happens.

To all the disabled children out there and anyone who has ever felt left out or left behind: I am here for you and as long as I am here, you will be here with me. I will fight for you like our lives depend on it.

The Presiding Officer: I call Maggie Chapman, to be followed by Paul McLennan. This is Ms Chapman's first speech in the chamber.

15:22

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): Thank you, Presiding Officer. Welcome to your new role, too.

Covid is one of the greatest challenges of our time. It has transformed our lives. Over 1,000 lives have been lost in north-east Scotland alone, the region that I have the huge honour and privilege of representing, and I want to remember them all now.

The pandemic is not some kind of accident. It is not a natural disaster that could not have been prevented; it is the result of a series of choices and a specific set of circumstances. To understand what we need to do to avoid another disaster of this type, we must look at what caused it. We need to examine how a virus came to leap the species barrier and how that then moved from a local outbreak to a global pandemic.

That chain of events is the result of a now dominant economic model that emerged in the 1970s, a model that seeks to drive free market relations into every interaction of our lives. It is a model that, as the north-east of Scotland knows only too well, does not care about the impact of boom and bust. It has at its core a number of assumptions: that the market is the ideal way of making decisions; that the economy is more important than other things, such as our health; that the poor must be punished if they do not work, while bosses must be incentivised to work; that the state should play a minimal role in our society; and that inequality is a good thing because it increases the power of the wealthy.

In short, that chain of events is the result of neoliberalism. The intensive extraction of value from nature, turning wild animals into profit by harvesting and selling them in a wet market, created the conditions for the virus to leap the species boundary. The global circulation of the rich, alongside the global circulation of capital—both functions of neoliberalism—turned a virus jumping the species barrier from a localised

outbreak into a global pandemic. We have seen repeatedly how neoliberalism has deepened the Covid crisis.

Westminster's idolising of the market meant a delay to lockdown at the cost of thousands of lives. Ironically, the delay meant that the economy also suffered. Countries that locked down early and effectively avoided long repeated lockdowns, avoiding economic damage. The lives of the thousands who died were sacrificed to neoliberalism—a system that was wrong, is wrong and will continue to be wrong however many more lives we sacrifice to it.

"Let the bodies pile high in their thousands"

is not a colourful turn of phrase; it is at the core of what the Prime Minister believes.

This week, we have all seen just how deeply dangerous that commitment is. The UK Government's planning for pandemics was reduced to buying body bags. It wasted billions of pounds on an eat out to help out scheme that helped to stoke a second wave. It briefed that workers had to go back to the office or face the sack. At the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency, that led to the worst Covid outbreak in the UK—at the order of a UK minister—because workers must be punished to make them work. Had money for better sick pay been made available, workers with symptoms could have self-isolated.

Westminster spent £37 billion—close to our Government's annual budget—on a catastrophically ineffective test and trace system for England and Wales. Covid cronyism saw the UK Government funnel public money to its pals. The British state is clearly broken. Where Scotland took a different path, such as on test and trace, we benefited from the willingness to go our own way.

What is to be done? We know that the countries that did best at dealing with Covid are those that are the most equal and that value the lives of their citizens above narrow, short-term economic gain.

We know that the impact of Covid has been so much worse for those, such as black and minority ethnic people, who already suffer inequality. We need to use all our powers to create a more equal society and we need to acquire the powers that we do not already have in order to create that more equal society more quickly. We urgently need to increase social solidarity. We need to take back power and planning from the market.

The Scottish Greens will work with citizens, civil society, institutions and other political parties to identify the risks that we face, from pandemics to climate breakdown, to take those risks seriously and to put in place the measures needed to do what the market simply cannot: protect our citizens from the risks of an ever-more unstable world.

We must make a state that treats its citizens with care and not accept the neoliberal ideology that allows “the bodies” to

“pile high in their thousands”

because we know that we face a global crisis that will make Covid look like a walk in the park. We have to act now.

The Presiding Officer: I call Paul McLennan, to be followed by Sandesh Gulhane. This is Mr McLennan’s first speech in the chamber.

15:28

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): Thank you, Presiding Officer. I add my congratulations to you on your appointment.

I am delighted, honoured and humbled to be able to give my first speech as the first SNP MSP for East Lothian. I thank my family and my fantastic campaign team.

As many of us did, three weeks ago today, on 6 May, I watched people queue to vote all over East Lothian. They were queueing because they believe in our democracy. They queued because they believe in our ability to make things better for them and because they trust us to change their lives for the better. What an honour that is.

All that at a time when every single person has been affected by Covid and when, almost overnight, our lives have been turned upside down. Many people have lost loved ones, their livelihood and hope. I thank all key workers for their amazing efforts over the past 14 months.

I am honoured and humbled to represent East Lothian, where I have lived all my life. It is the constituency where the saltire was born in 832 in Athelstaneford, it is home to the Bass Rock and, of course, it is the birthplace of John Muir in my home town of Dunbar. Our latest addition is the Dun Bear, which is a statue to honour John Muir. It is also located in Dunbar and was designed by Andy Scott, who designed the Kelpies.

In many ways, East Lothian is like Scotland. It is a mix of rural and urban communities. It has areas of prosperity, but there are areas that are some of the most deprived parts of Scotland. My predecessor, Iain Gray, said in his final speech:

“East Lothian is the best constituency, the best county and the best part of Scotland in which to live or work.”—
[*Official Report*, 11 March 2021; c 138.]

I of course concur with his comments, but I am obviously biased.

I want to thank Iain for being the MSP for East Lothian for 14 years and for his unquestionable commitment to the county and its wellbeing. We share a passion for Hibernian Football Club, which

is a harrowing experience at the best of times, but that was especially the case over the past weekend, and I have been reminded of that by some St Johnstone fans over the past few days. I wish Iain and his family well.

Covid-19 has impacted on every element of life in East Lothian, be that in our schools, our hospitals, our fishing and farming communities, our tourist attractions or on our high streets. I welcome the recent announcement of the Scottish Government’s priorities for its first 100 days, and I welcome the establishment of the cross-party group on Covid recovery. I have already reached out to councillors in East Lothian to work with me.

Specifically on health, completing the vaccination programme is, and has to be, our priority. I look forward to meeting representatives of NHS Lothian to discuss the specifics of the NHS recovery plan for East Lothian in relation to the promised 10 per cent increase in activities, including additional services at the East Lothian community hospital. I pledge to work with mental health practitioners as a matter of urgency as we continue to climb out of the pandemic.

On education, I welcome the initial commitment to 1,000 new teachers and 500 classroom assistants and of course the summer programmes to support recovery in our education system. The commitment to fund 5,000 short-term industry-focused college courses is of course welcome. I look forward to discussing those with education colleagues in East Lothian.

On our economy, I welcome the introduction of the council for economic transformation, and I aim to replicate that locally in East Lothian. Additional funding for local partnerships and the youth guarantee scheme will be vital for young people in the county. Tourism is a big part of our economy in East Lothian, as it employs 5,000 people and generates £260 million annually for our economy. I know that the tourism recovery fund was very welcome. Our town centres employ many people, too, and they are the beating hearts of our communities. I look forward to continued working with local traders in East Lothian, who have engaged fully with the Scotland Loves Local message. Our traders do our county proud.

On tackling poverty, as we recover from the pandemic, the Scottish Government’s pledge to support lower-income families is welcome. I pledge to work with anti-poverty groups across East Lothian to tackle the issue as urgently as we can.

In moving out of Covid, we have opportunities. Martin Luther King said:

“The time is always right to do what is right.”

The time is right to address the climate challenge and to make changes to our economy so that it has wellbeing at its core. The time is right to build on the sense of community that we have seen all over Scotland and to work together, whenever we can, to give our communities that sense of hope, trust and belief in us that made them turn out in record numbers three weeks ago.

I will close with another quote, this time from John Muir, who said:

“The power of imagination makes us infinite.”

Let us all endeavour to work together to make that power of imagination change lives in Scotland.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you.

I call Sandesh Gulhane. This is Dr Gulhane’s first speech in the chamber.

15:33

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): Glasgow elected me, but I am also here to represent the Scottish NHS, my patients and my colleagues, and to make them feel that they truly have a voice. I want to be the strongest advocate for our Scottish health service.

Today, I am going to give voice to some of the most urgent issues that are facing our health service. They are issues that need to be dealt with today, which is imperative for the future health of our nation. It is about rebuilding and recovering—recovering from staff burn-out, rebuilding strategies to deal with burgeoning waiting lists and helping the people who have been affected directly by Covid.

Why should people listen to me rather than to the health ministers who have spoken here in the past? Well, I was born to immigrant parents from India. They came here with nothing, but through hard work and sacrifice they educated me. I began life as a doctor in 2006 and, like all junior doctors, I moved regularly—from London to Birmingham to Wolverhampton to Sunderland to Glasgow. It was in Glasgow that I found a home, a family and a community.

I am a front-line doctor, having worked in accident and emergency, in out-of-hours services and in seeing patients in general practice. As the pandemic struck, I did what thousands of other Scottish healthcare workers did: I kept on seeing my patients. The brightest lights shine only in the darkest skies, and during the pandemic, I have seen the bravery and humanity of my colleagues shine very brightly indeed.

However, I had low points, too. When my lockdown baby was born, I stayed away because of the fear of passing Covid to her. I did not hug her—my new-born baby—for eight weeks, but I

kept on seeing my patients. I kept my distance from my seven-year-old son because of the fear of passing Covid to him. One day, he asked my wife why I did not love him any more and whether he had done something wrong. However, as my nursing colleagues did, I kept on seeing my patients.

The Scottish Government sent me out-of-date PPE that put my life at risk, but as the hospital physiotherapists, porters and occupational therapists did, I kept on seeing my patients until I realised that I could no longer say nothing, feel nothing and do nothing. I stood for election to give voice to the pain of my patients and the burn-out of my colleagues, and to voice everyone’s desperate wish that we work together. That is why I stood for election.

Who needs help? Well, imagine a teenage boy who was doing well at school. He was happy and had friends, but then, one day, Covid came along and stole everything. He is unable to leave his house and cannot bring himself to eat, but he faces a 52-week wait for assessment. He needs our help.

Imagine a man who was coming up to retirement. He was happy and content; he had savings and a job he loved, but then, one day, Covid came along and stole everything. He became depressed and tried to commit suicide. He needs our help.

It is not necessary to imagine those things. They are the reality of my daily medical practice. That is our shared reality in Scotland. We stand on the precipice, before a tsunami of a mental health crisis, so we need to spend our money wisely. I can help with that.

Imagine a single mum who was fit and well and who had worked all her life and had bought her dream house, but then, one day, Covid came along and stole everything. She had to move in with her parents so that they could help her to look after her kids. She had nowhere to turn for treatment of her long Covid. She needs our help.

Imagine a doctor—a GP—who was happy and fit, but then, one day, Covid came along and stole everything. She cannot talk on the phone without being breathless. She cannot work as a GP all day because of brain fog and fatigue. She has lost her job. She has nowhere to turn for treatment of her long Covid. She needs our help.

Long Covid affects 10 to 35 per cent of people who contract Covid. That is 60,000 to 210,000 people. Members do not need to imagine it; it is our patients’ reality. They suffer from fatigue, breathlessness, heart failure, mental health problems and much more. They are our workers, who will turn our economy around. They are doctors and nurses and supermarket staff. They

are dock workers and teachers and bus drivers. They are your kids, your brothers, your sisters, your parents, your grandparents—they are you and me—but we are not funding their help, here in Scotland.

In England, bespoke clinics have been set up with new money. As for us, although there is no new money, there are models that exist that work. We need the Scottish Government to help, to care and to fund such clinics.

Over the coming months and years, I will stand here and advocate for real change and real help for real people. I do not care which party members represent; if they want the same as I want—to rebuild and recover from the pandemic—I will work with them.

It has been said that he who has health has hope, and he who has hope has everything, so I implore the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care to give the people hope again. I will work with all members for a brighter and healthier future for Scotland.

15:39

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): I congratulate Sandesh Gulhane on his first speech.

There are so many people to whom we need to be grateful for bringing us through the pandemic so far. Clearly, they include NHS staff, but there are many other carers and key workers. In particular, we should be grateful to the people around the world who have worked on inventing and producing vaccines. We are fortunate in Scotland and the UK to have rolled them out so quickly—I think that only Israel has been significantly ahead of us. We can mention political leaders such as Nicola Sturgeon; I want to mention in particular the previous health secretary, Jeane Freeman and all the work that she did. Having been a member of the Parliament's COVID-19 Committee, I know that experts including Jason Leitch and Linda Bauld have also been incredibly helpful.

It is easy to look back and to think that better decisions could have been made—perhaps especially in the light of Dominic Cummings's statements yesterday. The UK Government's eat out to help out scheme last summer was probably wrong, although I confess that I was keen on it at the time. I had a meal out as often as I could in order to help local businesses in Glasgow, and when I was on holiday in Galloway and around Ullapool, when I had a few days' break. Looking back on it, I think that encouraging people to gather indoors might not have been the best idea. However, I accept that the scheme, among other ideas, was operated with good intentions at a time when we thought that things were improving, so I

do not think that we should look back and blame the Chancellor of the Exchequer for that. We have to cut people a bit of slack when we have the benefit of hindsight.

Another decision that has been and will be questioned is whether we should have left elderly and vulnerable people in hospital or moved them out, as was done. At the time, many of us thought that hospital was a risky place to be. Historically, infections have spread around hospitals rapidly, and we saw pictures of overflowing hospitals in Italy, so I certainly thought that it was the right decision to move people out of hospital as fast as possible, even if there were some risks attached to that. I suspect that we had fewer deaths than we would have had if people had remained in hospital, but it is still desperately sad that so many people died.

Whether schools should have been open or closed and how exams should have been dealt with have also been contentious subjects. One of the most vociferous lobby groups who contacted me comprised parents who felt that schools should have been kept open all the time. The question whether we should have exams or teacher assessments was a lose-lose situation; whatever decision was made would have been criticised.

It remains my belief that if we want a consistent standard of testing across the country, we have to use national exams. Teacher assessments might sound good in theory, but we inevitably lose consistency and comparability. Some teachers will be optimistic for their pupils, while others will be pessimistic. Some will be stricter in assessing work, while others will be more lenient. I therefore believe that we have to return to national exams as soon as possible.

Moving on to the economic side of things, I note that the UK and most European countries have borrowed heavily to pay for furlough and other business support schemes, as well as for extra spending on health and services. The UK is now very heavily in debt, to the tune of some £2.1 trillion—or £30,000 per head. That is not unmanageable, but we cannot keep borrowing at that rate. Interest rates are low at the moment, which might or might not continue.

At some point, the debt will have to be reduced and repaid, so both the UK and Scotland will have to make some difficult choices in the future. Should we raise taxes or reduce spending? Many organisations and individuals have done very well because of Covid and could afford to pay more tax now. However, others have clearly not done well, and with the ending of the furlough scheme the economy might well take a turn for the worse. Company failures were lower than normal last year, so some companies might still exist that would have gone bust in a normal year. I accept

that many people feel that this is not the right time to raise taxes, but we will have to consider it at some point.

I will move on to the Glasgow situation. It is perhaps inevitable that cities will be hotspots for the virus. It was understandable, although it was incredibly disappointing, that Glasgow was left at level 3 when the rest of the country moved to level 2. I hope that that will not be the case for too much longer. I feel that there is less willingness to follow the guidance as time goes by, and people are travelling into Glasgow to shop and eat out.

I confess that I was faced last Saturday with the dilemma of whether or not to attend the demonstration against the McVitie's factory closure. I wanted to attend and show support for the factory staff, but that meant going against the advice and guidelines. In the end, I decided to break the rules and attend the demonstration. However, other people are being faced with much more difficult choices than I was faced with. The sooner we can reach the point at which the number of infections is acceptable the better.

Amnesty International's briefing for today's debate raises the concern about human rights being curtailed during the pandemic. Constituents have raised with me the right to visit care homes and the right to attend places of worship, for example. Those rights are all incredibly important in normal times, but we have not been in normal times, so it was inevitable that some human rights had to be temporarily curtailed. Of course, such curtailment must always be kept to a minimum, but we must always remember that exercising one's rights might lead to someone else's life being impacted. In that regard, I was a little disappointed that some churches went to court to have restrictions on them lifted. I hope that that will not set a precedent for more court action by more groups, if we have a similar situation in the future.

Finally, I want to mention the rest of the world. There is always a danger that we will become too focused on Scotland and the UK. By world standards, we have done incredibly well with vaccination; I think that some 35 per cent of people have had both doses.

However, many countries—especially poorer countries—are nowhere near us in respect of giving their populations a jag. The figure for India is about 11 per cent and that for Nepal is 7 per cent, to mention but two countries in Asia. In Africa, the situation is even worse. The figure for Uganda is 0.005 per cent, and the figure for Congo is 0.02 per cent. I know that our primary responsibility is for this country and that most people are desperate to get their jag, but please let us not forget countries that are not as rich and fortunate as we are.

The Presiding Officer: I call Meghan Gallacher. This is Ms Gallacher's first speech in the chamber.

15:46

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): From working at home to transforming the relationships that we have with family and friends, Covid-19 has changed our lives. In my first speech to the Scottish Parliament, I put on record my thanks to each and every front-line worker who has made sacrifices in order to keep us safe and our country moving during the most difficult of times. I also take the opportunity to thank those who helped with my election campaign and voted for me in the Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse constituency and for the Scottish Conservatives on the peach ballot paper to stop a Scottish National Party majority.

I am honoured to be here as a newly elected MSP for Central Scotland. I pay tribute to Margaret Mitchell and Alison Harris for their service as they step down from their roles in front-line politics.

To ensure that Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom recover as quickly and efficiently as possible, we must find a way to build back better together. That means that people and jobs must be at the heart of every decision that is made in the chamber, and not just in the first 100 days of the new parliamentary session.

As a councillor in Motherwell, I have witnessed at first hand the incredible efforts made by local community groups during the pandemic. Although many have suffered losses due to the spread of Covid-19, the help and support shown by others make me proud to be Scottish and British. It is pride in my community that drives me as a person, and that is why I decided to enter the world of politics. I know that we are not out of the woods yet, but I hope that the community spirit shown during the lockdown period will continue as we move into a post-pandemic world.

For me, politics is about community. Growing up in North Lanarkshire, I witnessed decades of SNP and Labour politicians who were never able to improve life expectancy, create positive destinations for our young people or make a lasting impact where I lived. To put it bluntly, most politicians in my area were invisible. That is why I joined the Scottish Conservatives. That was not just because I believe that Scotland's place is within the United Kingdom but because I believe that elected members should be there to help their community and champion decisions being made locally.

My gran and papa were also passionate about helping their community. They both stood as Conservative candidates in local elections, and I

thank them to this day for encouraging me to get involved in politics. Although they are no longer with me, I hope that I can do them and my family proud as I start my new adventure as an MSP.

One of my key priorities during the election campaign was rebuilding Scotland. Today, I would like to focus on the recovery phase.

We know that the spread of the new variants will always be a real concern, but we must now focus our efforts on job creation and economic recovery. We know that an economic crisis is looming due to the strain on our country's finances because of the pandemic. As the Scottish Fiscal Commission has stated, our economy may not return to pre-pandemic levels until 2024 at the earliest. Plans must therefore be put in place now to protect and grow our nation. We cannot afford to end up with a lost Covid generation, with young people missing out on educational opportunities, university and college graduates unable to find work, businesses unable to reopen, and people unable to train in a new skill set if they have been made redundant.

For those issues to be addressed, we need a Scottish Government that is solely focused on Scotland's recovery as we rebuild from the pandemic.

If the SNP is serious about Scotland's recovery, it will take another referendum off the table and focus on what matters to the people of Scotland.

As we know, the economy will be key to securing the best possible recovery plan for Scotland. We need to see businesses back on their feet as soon as possible, as well as the Government looking to the future to create jobs. In our manifesto, the Scottish Conservatives pledged a skill grant every year for training and skills development, which is aimed at those who are unemployed or facing redundancy. We need the SNP Scottish Government to back our plans to implement a rebuilding road map, so that we can reopen our economy sooner and protect jobs and businesses from the looming economic crisis.

My party has also called for unlimited apprenticeships for Scotland's young people—a policy that I am passionate about. Although I am pushing 30 and soon will no longer be able to call myself a young person, as shadow minister for children and young people, I want to ensure that no one leaves school without good job opportunities.

When I left Brannock high school, I did not have a clear career path, and it was a really daunting experience. Although I went on to study politics at university, there was no support network in place, especially for a school that was located in an area of high deprivation. I believe that it is our responsibility as MSPs to make sure that we implement policies to provide young people with

the tools that they need to succeed in life. We need to build a future where our young people do not need to worry about their mental health and where they feel confident in themselves to go out and achieve, regardless of their postcode or which field they choose to enter.

It is those innovative ideas from the Scottish Conservatives that will help regrow our economy as we emerge from the pandemic. I look forward to supporting the bills that my party will bring forward that will show that we have Scotland's interests at heart.

For Scotland to recover fully, we need a Government that is 100 per cent focused on rebuilding Scotland. Our country is still deeply divided from past referendums, and we must use this time to pull our country back together. I therefore call on the SNP to put Scotland's recovery first, so as to rebuild a country that is free of the constitutional arguments that have divided it for far too long.

The Presiding Officer: I call Michelle Thomson, to be followed by Michael Marra. This is Ms Thomson's first speech in the chamber.

15:52

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): Thank you, Presiding Officer, and I welcome you to your place.

It is a great honour to be called to speak in this debate as the new member for Falkirk East. I would like to put on record my grateful thanks to everyone who helped me get to this point, and in particular, my constituents.

The previous distinguished member, Angus MacDonald, was noted for his hard work, his complete commitment to the people of Falkirk East and his drive to bring new ideas and innovation to the fore. In that respect, perhaps his qualities are a metaphor for the qualities that we need to shape post-pandemic Scotland.

Reflecting for a moment on history, in the aftermath of world war two, no country sought to return to the past—a new international order had to be built. Many nations sought to reprioritise their domestic agendas and fundamentally change the face of their societies. Empires broke up and many countries entered the world stage as independent states.

We face a different context, but the response must be no less ambitious and no less audacious. That is why I applaud the first 100 days plan from our Scottish Government but note that it is only the start of our ambitions.

I particularly welcome the support for business and the economy. My friend Professor David

Simpson has recently spoken about the need to move beyond talking about economic growth or green growth to talking about economic development—a sentiment with which I agree. It allows us to capture in economic strategy our commitment to wellbeing, and I welcome the recent report by the Social Justice and Fairness Commission.

In my opinion, a key feature of economic development for Scotland must be its becoming the most talent-friendly country in the world. We must become much more entrepreneurial in outlook and in practice, and we must encourage the type of entrepreneurial activity that supports our climate change and environmental ambitions. Women must be at the heart of that.

There is also a qualitative richness to our society that is part of our ambitions. I have a long-standing interest in music and was heartened by the ideas involving music in our manifesto. Music not only enriches our lives but develops cognitive capacity in children. The arts also contribute a great deal in terms of gross value added, which can often be overlooked, and—let us face it—music brings us joy.

Whether in music or in manufacturing, financial services or tourism, people and skills are at the heart of everything. That is why I welcome the ambition to put skills at centre stage, particularly for young people, as we move out of the pandemic. We can go further, however. It is time that we moved beyond ideas of skill competence and embraced the pursuit of excellence. It is time that we stopped limiting our ambitions by comparing ourselves mainly with the rest of the UK. We should be in the forefront of international benchmarking. We should be fully engaging with international movements such as WorldSkills just as we want to retain the full benefits of international programmes such as Erasmus.

In addition to our domestic ambitions, we need to think about how Scotland is positioned and seen far beyond our borders. I have been involved in researching Scotland's business diaspora, communicating with more than 1,000 business leaders in 74 countries. A key positive feature of Scotland the brand includes having a reputation for fair dealing, for being trustworthy and for having a strong ethical business environment.

Those positive qualities need to be not only safeguarded but developed. They need our focus more than ever, given the trashing of values by the Tories in Westminster. Dependence on Westminster is a dead weight holding back our ambitions, and we must be up to the challenge of standing by the rights of the people of Scotland to safeguard our own future.

The most successful countries in the world are countries of a similar size to Scotland, whether we measure that in terms of economic development, being the least corrupt countries or having the happiest citizens. Unlike Scotland, they are independent. This is therefore no time to limit our ambitions. I cannot and will not accept a paucity of ambition for Scotland. It is time we too joined the international community of independent nations, and I am looking forward to putting my heft behind doing everything I can for Scotland and my constituents in Falkirk East.

The Presiding Officer: I call Michael Marra. This is Michael Marra's first speech in the chamber.

15:57

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): It is a singular honour to give my first speech in our Parliament as a representative for North East Scotland, and to do so in the first debate of the session. I thank all my colleagues for their welcome and support, particularly Labour members for their acceptance of what some are calling the Marra downgrade. I extend my thanks for the welcome that has been afforded to all new members by parliamentary staff in what remain very challenging times for them and their families. Most of all, I thank the people of the north-east for affording me the opportunity to serve. That is, of course, all we ask.

Each new session of Parliament is a new stage in a journey that was begun long ago and that has no end. That is to invite perspective on our small efforts in our long history and the greater hope for our future. History will record a pandemic of a scale that has been unseen for a century, which has profoundly changed our way of life and whose global ramifications we can only guess at so far. The immediate consequence of that is that, as of this morning, 10,114 souls have been lost to families across the breadth of our land. Our response must be to rapidly evolve the speed of the vaccine roll-out to ensure that as few further lives as possible are lost.

Across Scotland, the lockdown has created an unemployment crisis, particularly for the young, an education crisis that we are only beginning to grasp, and a health crisis in what remains one of the sickest countries in Europe. Such a level of simultaneous disruption to childcare, transport, retail, international travel and so on is truly unprecedented, and recovery will demand the fullest efforts of the entire nation.

Lockdowns have worked, but they are, of course, a product of failure. We did not act quickly enough. Our public health system was weakened by years of cuts. We failed to contact trace. We

did not shut airports. What followed were necessary acts of communal restraint until scientists could bail out our Governments. That we were unprepared is unquestionable, but our unforgivable vulnerability was neglect, decline and division. We came into this crisis far weaker and more vulnerable than one of the richest countries on earth should have been.

As inequality has grown, our social fabric has weakened. We can now see that anew, not just as a moral affront but as a practical impediment to our shared lives—respiratory disease, obesity, unsafe workplaces without trade unions, poor housing, services that are less accessible to ethnic minorities, grotesque and growing health inequality that is proved by stagnant life expectancy, and the gap between the richest and the poorest growing ever greater. One quarter of our children, and each day more, are living in grinding poverty.

Our most impoverished communities, such as parts of my city of Dundee, are beset by the worst drugs crisis in the world. That is an extraordinary national shame. Let us not doubt that, if it was any middle-class epidemic, we would have locked down, legislated, incurred unlimited debt, educated widely and reformed indiscriminately. The great inconvenience of those dead Scots is that their passing cannot, by any conscious examination of the facts, be blamed on the demon “other”. Drug laws are the same across the United Kingdom, yet the number of drug deaths in Scotland is four times that in England.

Those Scots died because they were poor and were somehow believed to be worth less. Well, they were my schoolmates. I stood with them on the terracing. Each of them was a son, daughter, parent, friend. That is inequality—not how it starts, but certainly how it ends—and no real recovery is possible unless we address the broader inequalities. We must find the ways and the will to deal with those things together.

During the election campaign, the First Minister said—tellingly, I believe—that in the end politics is about picking sides. That is not how I see politics. I believe in all honesty that we have common cause. Politics can be about building movements, starting and winning debates and creating common purpose in a workplace, a street, a town, a city and a country and around the world. That is the ethos that we need in our recovery. Taking every road to what divides us rather than to what we have in common is an easy route, but it will lead, ultimately and inevitably, to despair.

This is a time, globally, when fame and often power are forged in division—in loud words rather than considered action. I would counsel caution on one issue that there has been locally in recent days. Ministers have spoken of anti-Catholic

hatred—strong words, but for 200 years we have listened to the same old songs in Scotland. Ministers have now decided that it is time, in their words, to call it out, but the Catholic community in Scotland has organised. We won hard-earned protections and we integrated and survived. We have our voice and we know how to use it, and I have to say that there is deep unease at that old siege becoming a new front in what we are invited to call the culture wars. I am sure that that is not the intent, but there are risks in how we portray and deal with the issues as they are, rightly, pursued.

Instead, let us look to dialogue, education, justice and peace. We can be sure that a politics that elevates sentiment over action will be the end of progress so, in this moment of pandemic crisis, there is a rightful expectation that we will act deliberately and with consideration, but with principled intent, to make better Scotland's ills. It falls to us to bind the nation's wounds and care for those who shall have borne the battle. We must, as we shape our recovery, work together for a future built from the first principles of social justice.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Before I call the final speaker in the open debate, I remind members who have been participating in the debate that they need to be in the chamber for closing speeches. The final speaker in the open debate is Collette Stevenson. Members will wish to be aware that this is Ms Stevenson's first speech in the chamber.

16:04

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): Thank you, Presiding Officer. I welcome you to your new role—congratulations.

First, I thank the people of East Kilbride. It is an honour to stand here representing my home town in our national Parliament. Secondly, I add that it is a special privilege for me as I am a fourth-generation daughter from the original village of East Kilbride. I pay tribute to my predecessor, Linda Fabiani, who served East Kilbride so well for so many years. Linda has been a friend and a mentor to me and has left a fantastic legacy on which I intend to build.

East Kilbride has faced a few challenges in recent years and Covid has added to them. I want to reflect briefly on some of the community spirit that has helped East Kilbride get through the pandemic. Community organisations managed to respond quickly to the crisis. The town has had food banks for several years—including in the East Kilbride churches and Loaves and Fishes—which had to ramp up their work, supported by local residents who donated more than usual. Share Alike was able to deliver food packages to

people across the town, as did Older and Active in East Kilbride, alongside a much valued prescription delivery service that ensured that elderly and shielding residents could still get access to medication.

The council's community engagement team has also worked hard to support those organisations. Staff at University hospital Hairmyres have gone above and beyond in caring for people and ensuring that the hospital has remained available for a range of treatments, regardless of whether they were Covid related. We have also seen the Alistair McCoist complex turned into a super vaccination centre, and I thank everyone who is involved for helping to deliver thousands of vaccine doses in a very efficient manner. I look forward to working with NHS Lanarkshire and the staff at Hairmyres, and in GP practices and health centres, as we now hope to forge ahead with our NHS recovery.

Our teachers at the four secondary schools and many primary schools in the town have continued to deliver for our children and young people, aided by many support staff, including cleaners, whose roles have become even more essential.

Like all retail areas, East Kilbride's town centre has had challenges, particularly as large retailers such as Marks and Spencer and Debenhams had to shut up shop. As it is a shopping centre rather than a high street, it has faced additional barriers. In the early days of lockdown, most shops had to remain closed, even when the high streets had reopened. The Scottish Government's Covid-related grant schemes have offered a lifeline for many businesses, and I am sure that the extension of rates relief for another year will safeguard many jobs and livelihoods. With the continued easing of restrictions and the further roll-out of the vaccination programme, I hope that footfall will increase and that the town's businesses will be able to succeed again.

Over this five-year session of Parliament, we have to face many challenges, but we also have many opportunities. East Kilbride needs more social housing, our young people deserve the right to employment or training and our public services and staff need the tools to recover properly. The SNP Government's plans will tackle those challenges and I know that we will do so much more with the full power of independence. As well as having a manifesto that is full to the brim with policy ideas, I know that the Scottish Government has worked hard to implement our 100-day plan, which outlines a commitment that will provide great foundations for going forward.

It is great to see that Kate Forbes has an expanded portfolio that covers finance and economy, and I know that she will continue to deliver for people across the country. I welcome

Tom Arthur's appointment and look forward to hearing more about the Government's plans on community wealth building. The Scottish Government has an excellent record on fair employment practices, and I hope that we can encourage more businesses to become living wage employers, offer more apprenticeships and implement other fair work principles.

Our recovery must and will be multifaceted, focusing on health, society, the economy and the environment. One great achievement of the SNP since entering government in 2007 has been the decision to invest in infrastructure, building new schools and hospitals and better transport links. Those bring obvious benefits and, importantly, they create jobs. For example, our manifesto commitment to build 100,000 more affordable homes over the next decade will support 14,000 jobs per year.

The Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport will be pleased—or perhaps not—to hear that I plan to be as vocal as my predecessor on the matter of the East Kilbride railway line. I hope that, through the dualling and electrifying of the line, the railway will better serve the needs of the people of East Kilbride and more people will consider using the train as a green alternative to driving. The Government's intention of bringing ScotRail into public ownership will provide additional benefits for passengers.

Over the next five years, I want to work at local and national level to get East Kilbride back on track and to make it a more vibrant town. That includes engaging with small and medium-sized businesses, to see in particular how we can start to use more local businesses and to build our community wealth. We need a recovery that works for everyone, and we have an opportunity to reimagine the kind of society that we need and want. I commend the Scottish Government's work on that, so far, and I look forward to hearing more in the debates that are scheduled over the next couple of weeks.

I am honoured to be here serving the people of East Kilbride, and I look forward to championing the town.

16:11

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): Presiding Officer, I welcome you to your role, as I welcome the two cabinet secretaries to theirs. I believe that they will bring a breadth of cross-portfolio experience to their new roles and will help to lead us through the recovery from Covid.

In his opening comments, the Deputy First Minister mentioned the need for innovation and collaboration in the Parliament. Given what I have

heard during the debate, from all parties, I am quite heartened that we have considerable strengths and that we will be able to rise to that challenge.

In particular, I welcome the contributions from new members. I am not able to mention everybody, but what I have taken from all speeches is that there is an incredible level of lived experience, a connection to communities and a diversity. I highlight the contributions of Sandesh Gulhane, Michael Marra and Gillian Mackay.

I think that we have all reflected on Pam Duncan-Glancy's first speech in the Parliament. Her words,

"for as long as I am here, none of you is on your own",

will ring out from the chamber and be heard across Scotland. I congratulate her.

We have diversity, including diversity of political thought. I welcome Maggie Chapman's challenge to every member of the Parliament to design an economy in which people matter. We need to take on the big issues and think about restructuring our economy.

There are many lessons to learn, which is why the need for an independent public inquiry, as called for by Alex Cole-Hamilton and many other members, is absolutely pressing. The most obvious lesson for all Governments around our islands and in Europe is that we treated the virus not as a severe acute respiratory syndrome—SARS—virus but as a flu virus and that, as a result, major mistakes were made. During the previous session of Parliament, the COVID-19 Committee took evidence on that issue. Professor Mark Woolhouse, from the University of Edinburgh, said:

"we did our homework but, when we were given the exam, it was the wrong test."—[*Official Report, COVID-19 Committee*, 25 February 2021; c 24.]

Governments simply got it wrong. They had planned for a flu virus but it was something far more serious.

The committee also took evidence from Professor Michael Baker, who led New Zealand's response to the virus. He admitted that New Zealand had got it wrong early on as well—that they were caught on the hop and did not have adequate planning. However, they were prepared to learn and did so very quickly from the experience in China and from the evidence that came out of the Taiwanese plan to tackle the SARS virus back in 2003. They effectively applied their flu plan in reverse: they threw everything at Covid at the beginning, whereas we gradually increased the response as the pandemic worsened. We have serious lessons to learn. I think back to March last year, when, unfortunately,

our chief medical officer at the time was on TV advising people that it was perfectly safe to go to six nations rugby matches. We need to take a long, hard look at our pandemic preparedness in the months to come.

We must become more prepared for the future. We finally got the testing capacity that will be critical in dealing with the later stages of the pandemic and in preparing for the future. The Greens made the case early on that we needed to ramp that up. We need to ensure that there is proper support for people to do the right thing and self-isolate. No one should have had to choose between going to work to earn a wage and self-isolating. Although there are self-isolation grants—the criteria for which were widened twice as a result of Green pressure in the previous parliamentary session—many people are still being denied those grants and are having to make the choice between going to work and doing the right thing. Figures on BBC TV last night showed that 45 per cent of applications for those grants were rejected in recent months. It should not be a question of entitlement to benefits; those grants should be available instantly at a decent level, and they should be universal alongside a package of wider support to help people to do the right thing whenever there is a pandemic.

We have had a wide-ranging debate this afternoon, and in my remaining time I will touch on education. Murdo Fraser raised an important point on the challenges that young people face in relation to exam-style assessments. Let us go further than that: let us question why we have exams—full stop. Why can we not have continuous assessment? We need to think big in relation to education and closing the attainment gap.

Members have also talked about the huge toll on business. We have all seen that. I have seen it on my high street in Stirling, with shops closing down. The way to have avoided the cycle of lockdowns was to have taken the bold move early on to have a full lockdown that would get the virus under control. The point was made by Anas Sarwar that business needs that certainty.

We need to get back to a regular cycle of announcements from the Scottish Government and parliamentary scrutiny of those. It is important that the machinery of the Parliament gets up and running again and that we have a Covid committee that can go through the data, take expert evidence and assess the restrictions on a week-to-week basis. We have to do that on a cross-party basis—and we will do that.

In relation to the national health service, Gillian Mackay absolutely nailed it: the debate is about fair pay and working conditions, but it is also about moving away from the crisis management that we

have seen in relation to mental health and the drugs crisis, which Michael Marra eloquently spoke about. The defining mission that Gillian Mackay spoke about—the establishment of a national care service—has to be at the heart of the Parliament's work.

I will finish with Paul McLennan's John Muir quote:

"The power of imagination makes us infinite."

I thank the member for reminding us of that. We should be aiming for the stars.

16:18

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I welcome the Deputy Presiding Officer to his new role and I congratulate all those who have made their maiden speeches today. They were all fantastic, but I will pick out those made by Pam Duncan-Glancy, Sandesh Gulhane and Michael Marra. I say to my colleagues that they have raised the bar for us all. I very much look forward to working with Gillian Mackay on the health portfolio.

As many members have said, the past 15 months have been some of the most challenging that many of us have ever experienced. I send my condolences to everyone who has lost a loved one to Covid and I thank the NHS, social care and council staff who have worked so hard to keep us safe.

More than 10,000 people in Scotland have died of Covid-19, and well over a third of them were care home residents. Each loss is devastating, and many people with no underlying health conditions have ended up on life support machines, which shows how seriously we must all continue to take the virus. It is particularly hard to come to terms with the scale of deaths in our care homes, and the way in which our older people and our care home staff, who worked round the clock to care for us, were treated is nothing short of a national scandal.

Figures that show the true extent of the impact of Covid in our care homes are still emerging. The families of those who died, as well as the staff, deserve answers, so a public inquiry is essential. However, I do not think that we can wait for a four-nations inquiry. Many of those decisions were taken exclusively in Scotland, so we need an inquiry in Scotland.

Yesterday, we all watched with a degree of shock as Dominic Cummings outlined the chaos at the heart of the UK Government. However, in the early stages of the pandemic, the Scottish Government mirrored the UK Government's approach. I will illustrate that with a Channel 4 interview about herd immunity. Scotland's national clinical director, Jason Leitch, was asked:

"Do you agree with Sir Patrick Vallance, the chief scientific adviser, that one of the aims of the UK Government is for people to develop some immunity to this disease?"

Jason Leitch's response was:

"I do. I absolutely agree with him, because we have no choice."

Therefore, the SNP went along with some of the decisions of the UK Government, which Dominic Cummings exposed yesterday. As Michael Marra rightly said, the Government failed to deal with the pandemic quickly enough, and that cannot be allowed to happen ever again.

The pandemic started off as a health crisis and quickly became a crisis that affected every part of our society—our economy, our education system and normal, everyday life. Businesses have gone to the wall, many are still struggling to survive, thousands of workers lost their jobs immediately and hundreds of thousands were put on furlough. Gross domestic product has fallen by a staggering 8.4 per cent, the unemployment figure has risen to 123,000 and, for some of the 300,000 people on furlough, there is the potential for more joblessness as the crisis unwinds.

The scale of the challenge that we face is huge. It is more significant than the banking crisis that took 10 years for the country to recover from, but, unfortunately, it is not yet matched by the scale of ambition that is required from Government. I will illustrate that by talking about the fair start Scotland scheme. Just 14 per cent of those who enrolled in the first three years of fair start managed to sustain employment for more than 12 months. Even worse, more than 13,000 people left the scheme early—almost 3,000 more people than the number of participants who started a job.

There is no point in introducing a jobs scheme if the majority of people do not end up in sustained employment. We face a real, impending jobs crisis, and the SNP's existing programmes lack ambition and will not meet the scale of the challenge. In a comprehensive programme to tackle the jobs crisis, Scottish Labour set out plans to guarantee a job for six months in the public sector for every young person, the long-term unemployed and those with a disability.

However, we also need action to help businesses to remobilise, to stimulate growth and to reinvigorate our tourism and hospitality sector, which is vital to jobs and the economy. Scottish Labour suggested a £75 debit card to spend on our struggling high streets and we had exciting proposals for a great Scottish staycation, both of which I commend to ministers.

Let me turn to education. Our young people have had a really tough time. They have been out of school for the best part of the year and have

been isolated from their friends, so they have missed out on education and opportunities. Our young people cannot be made to suffer any longer, but they face a second year of chaos with their school qualifications, which is causing anxiety and misery for thousands of families across Scotland. I know that the cabinet secretary has left the education portfolio, but I hope that he agrees that it is essential that his replacement publishes the appeals process next week. We must have a resit guarantee for all affected pupils, and the Scottish Government must work with colleagues in colleges and universities to ensure that no young person misses out as a result of the pandemic.

Turning to the NHS and social care, there is no doubt that the work done by staff at the front line of the pandemic has been truly heroic. Many of them went to work without adequate PPE, putting themselves and their families in danger while doing their very best to care for us. Many of them are now considering early retirement because they feel burnt out, and that will have a huge impact on remobilisation plans. However, workforce capacity is not a new problem; the Scottish Government has been told about workforce capacity many times over successive years and the problem is not yet fixed. When Nicola Sturgeon was health secretary, she was warned by the Royal College of Nursing and the British Medical Association that cuts to the numbers of nurses and doctors would have severe consequences. She did not listen and now the NHS is suffering as a result.

Pam Duncan-Glancy rightly made the point that many problems existed before the pandemic but that Covid has made things worse and has served to heighten inequalities. Nowhere is that more obvious than in access to mental health services. We need an urgent increase in in-patient, out-patient and crisis mental health services, because we face an impending crisis. Waiting times were bad before the pandemic and they are even worse now. When the treatment time guarantee of 12 weeks was introduced in 2012, 62 patients were waiting for treatment—now there are 62,000 people waiting.

We know that at least 7,000 people who have cancer have not been diagnosed and have not been treated. A catch-up programme is urgently required, otherwise people could lose their lives. We have made several suggestions on that issue, which I will talk about next week, when we debate the NHS recovery.

I will conclude by talking about the Government's cross-party Covid recovery group. We need to look at recovery in the short and long terms, and we must recognise that Covid will remain with us. I look forward to making a contribution to that group. However, we need to plan for the continued suppression of the virus,

which means having targeted business support, robust testing and tracing that responds rapidly to outbreaks, improvements to the self-isolation grant and a ramping-up of vaccinations. There are 980,000 doses of vaccine allocated to Scotland that remain unused, and we are behind Wales and England in the vaccination programme. There is no doubt that, while Scotland and the UK stockpiled vaccines, in Wales they got the vaccine into people's arms. I welcome the health secretary's promise to speed things up, and I recommend mass testing and mass vaccinations, especially in areas such as Glasgow.

The Labour Party will work with the Government, the business community, our colleagues in local government, the voluntary sector and those in the health and social care sector to build a recovery and a fairer Scotland. However, we will be critical of the Government if it fails to heed the lessons that it needs to learn for our recovery.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Annie Wells to wind up for the Conservatives.

16:27

Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): I, too, welcome you to your new role, Deputy Presiding Officer.

Today's maiden speeches were fantastic, but I will pull out just a couple. Pam Duncan-Glancy's speech was phenomenal; it was passionate and powerful, as was Dr Sandesh Gulhane's speech. All the new members' speeches, across the chamber, show the breadth of talent that the Scottish Parliament has gained.

I congratulate John Swinney on his new role. I also congratulate my fellow Glasgow MSP, Humza Yousaf, on his appointment as Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care. Overseeing such a vital portfolio is a huge responsibility in normal circumstances, but doing so while Scotland remains in the midst of a global pandemic is truly a significant challenge. I wish him well in that.

I stress that, as the Conservative Party's shadow cabinet secretary for health, alongside my brilliant team of Sandesh Gulhane—who, as I said, gave a powerful maiden speech—Sue Webber and Craig Hoy, I am open to having a constructive relationship with the Government where possible. However, the cabinet secretary will be aware that my Scottish Conservative colleagues and I will not hesitate to hold the Government to account when there have been clear shortcomings.

If we assess where we are as a country in our battle against Covid, it is certain that the light at the end of the tunnel is getting that bit brighter. Thanks to the sheer brilliance of the scientific community, both at home and internationally, each

dose of the vaccine is steadily guiding us towards freedom, which I am certain that we will never take for granted again.

The vaccination roll-out has been a success story in Scotland and the United Kingdom as a whole, demonstrating the overwhelming benefits of working together to emerge from the pandemic. However, as my colleague Murdo Fraser highlighted, significant and difficult questions remain to be answered, particularly if we are to maximise uptake as the roll-out proceeds through the younger age groups.

There is no question but that vaccines are our best route to lifting restrictions, which continue to have a huge impact on Scotland's economy, especially in Glasgow, where many businesses have been, to be quite frank, struggling to survive. Therefore, to echo what has already been said loudly and clearly by the Scottish and UK Governments, I say to people that, when they get the call, they should go and get the jab.

As we all know, the NHS has been placed under immense strain. However, even before the pandemic began, there were serious concerns about the NHS backlog. As we look to emerge from the immediate threat of the pandemic, the NHS backlog is at great risk of spiralling out of control. Although it is right that there has been a focus within our NHS on tackling Covid, it is true that thousands of non-Covid-related appointments, treatments and operations have been postponed due to the pandemic.

Only this week, the latest Public Health Scotland statistics revealed that about 20,000 patients have spent 52 weeks or more on NHS lists, awaiting planned hospital treatment. Meanwhile, as of March 2021, about 100,000 Scots were still waiting on key diagnostic tests. Leading charities such as Cancer Research UK have already expressed deep concern about the on-going backlog of individuals who are waiting to receive critical tests and a diagnosis. To confront that challenge head on, the Scottish Conservatives called for an additional £600 million to tackle the NHS treatment backlog in 2021-22. Suffice it to say that the NHS continues to face one of the most challenging periods in its history. The substantial impact of failing to tackle the backlog will be felt by tens of thousands of people across the country, so tackling it must be a top priority for the cabinet secretary if we are to avert a full-blown healthcare crisis.

The impact of Covid-19 on our social care system has also been felt by thousands of people across Scotland. For too long, this cruel virus has meant that the families of care home residents have been separated from their loved ones and have been unable to give them support—even so much as a hug.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the Scottish Conservatives have consistently pressed for a judge-led public inquiry into the more than 3,000 deaths from the coronavirus in Scotland's care homes. In the previous parliamentary session, members voted for an inquiry twice, but that was ignored. The pandemic has been unprecedented, so mistakes have, of course, been made. However, the actions that were taken by ministers at the time must be properly scrutinised. The reasoning behind crucial mistakes must be established, particularly with regard to moving elderly patients from hospitals into care homes. The Government has a responsibility to give families who have lost loved ones who have tragically passed away from Covid in care home settings the closure that they not only need but deserve.

Looking ahead to the future of social care reform in Scotland, the Scottish Conservatives support many of the recommendations from the Feeley review, including viewing social care as an equal partner to the NHS. I look forward to engaging in further discussion with the cabinet secretary, councils, families and providers on that matter in the coming weeks.

An issue that remains very close to my heart and that has been exacerbated by the pandemic is the drug deaths crisis in Scotland. It is time that we took meaningful steps towards ending it. In my area of Springburn, I have seen at first hand the impact that drugs have on victims, their families and the wider community.

Although the Government finally admitted that more could have been done to prevent people from losing their lives to drugs, we need decisive action now. In that light, and as Douglas Ross said yesterday, the Scottish Conservatives have appealed for cross-party support to tackle drug deaths by opening up access to treatment and rehabilitation programmes. Stemming from my motion on the right to recovery, we will reach out to parties across the chamber, and I am determined to build a consensus around new legislation that ensures that no one is denied the rehab support that they need.

As has been mentioned, the success of the vaccination roll-out means that we are more confident than ever that we can soon put the pandemic behind us. However, we must acknowledge that the peak of the mental health impact of the pandemic is still ahead of us, so mental health support and treatment must be another top priority for the Government during this parliamentary session. The Centre for Mental Health has estimated recently that, across the UK, a staggering 10 million people may need mental health support. Here in Scotland, the latest statistics suggest that up to a fifth of people are

waiting too long for mental health treatment. The picture for young people is even more concerning, because more than 1,000 children and young people have waited for more than a year to begin vital treatment.

The Scottish Conservatives called for the share of health funding that is spent on mental health to be increased to 10 per cent by the end of the session but, as much as more funding would help, we need practical steps to improve services and, ultimately, get better treatment for people who need support. To that end, we suggested a permanent shift to community mental health services by expanding programmes such as cognitive behavioural therapy, social prescribing, exercise referral schemes and peer support.

As a nation, we have a significant challenge ahead of us, and the time to act is quickly running out. From the NHS backlog to the mental health crisis, this Parliament must be 100 per cent focused on rebuilding Scotland. The differences in political opinion in the chamber are stark—we all know that. However, given the immense gravity of some of the challenges that lie ahead, the best interests of the Scottish people will be served if we co-operate on the areas that I have outlined this afternoon. The Scottish Conservatives are ready to put recovery first.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care to wind up the debate. I would be grateful if you would take us up to around 10 to 5, Mr Yousaf.

16:37

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Humza Yousaf): I welcome you to your role, Presiding Officer.

I am grateful for the opportunity to close today's debate as the new Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care, and to have listened to some phenomenal, extraordinarily powerful and passionate speeches from new members. The old timers were not too bad, either.

Other members have talked about their predecessors, so I will say a word or two about mine. I pay tribute to Jeane Freeman, the former Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport. Many members have told me that I have big shoes to fill. I am not convinced that I will be able to fill them quite like Jeane Freeman did, but I will do my best to do as well as she did. I think that history will judge her kindly, as someone who took the toughest of decisions in the toughest of times.

I have been told by many members from across the chamber that they do not envy me my new job. That is fair but, as Annie Wells said, it is a huge honour at any time to be the health secretary, let

alone to be entrusted with the responsibility during these most challenging of times.

I will do my best—I promise that I will try, although I am sure that, at times, I will falter—to work on a cross-party basis for the national interest, which we are all focused on and is the focus of this debate.

As the Deputy First Minister did, I pass on my deepest condolences to all those who have lost loved ones during the pandemic. The virus has touched every family and every community in Scotland. We talk about passing on our condolences because, in the heat of debate—there will be plenty of challenging debate on Covid recovery—we should remind ourselves that we are trying to pay ultimate respect to those who have passed on by learning lessons and ensuring that we do everything that we can in order to recover.

I again reference the phenomenal first speeches of a number of members from across the chamber. I will respond to as many as possible—in particular, to those who asked questions of me.

I welcome Gillian Mackay to her health brief and look forward to working constructively with her. She made an excellent speech and raised a number of good points. In particular, she touched on mental health support for NHS staff, which is an important point for us to raise.

I was at University hospital Monklands yesterday—my first official visit—and was delighted to meet the staff there. I was in the very good hands of senior nurse Karen Goudie and many others at Monklands hospital. I thank them for the care and attention that they gave me during my visit. However, every person to whom I spoke—nurses, doctors, consultants, porters and cleaning staff—told me that they have had the most challenging and difficult 14 months of their lives. They also said that they are indebted to what they described as the NHS family, who have all pulled together.

However, it is my responsibility—and our collective responsibility—to ensure that we do everything that we can to support their mental health. We are doing that with the mental health and wellbeing hub, but there is more that we can do, so I accept Gillian Mackay's challenge in that regard. She also spoke very well about the importance of the social care sector. Mark Ruskell mentioned it in his summing up, and a number of other members also referred to it. If any of us were ever in doubt about its importance—none of us should be—the past 14 months has challenged us all on that.

I am therefore delighted to be working closely with Kevin Stewart—the minister who will help to progress our national care service, who has already done a lot of work on the matter in his first

week in his role. Of course, in the Government's first 100 days we will launch a consultation on a national care service so that we can improve the terms and conditions in the sector.

Gillian Mackay also referred to looking above and beyond CBT, while saying that it is very important. I assure her that my wife, who is a pluralistic counsellor, also tells me that we have to look above and beyond CBT. As much as I get pressure in the chamber about that, I get it at home, too.

I will speak to what a number of other members said. Neil Gray spoke extraordinarily well. He is a seasoned politician, although his speech was his first in the chamber. He asked me about close-contact services and when guidance will be updated. It was updated yesterday; I have sent him a link to it while we have been in the chamber. He is a good friend of mine and I have no doubt that he is going to make an extraordinary contribution to Parliament.

Stephen Kerr also spoke powerfully and asked me a number of questions. I was really interested to hear about his background. I was not in Parliament when he made a contribution on behalf of his church; I did not know that he had gone from being a preacher to being a politician. Some people might suggest that he has gone from saint to sinner, but I will do no such thing. However, he had serious points and questions for me.

Again, I say that I welcome the challenge in relation to vaccination roll-out, to which a number of members referred. I am pushing as hard as possible to go as fast as possible because the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation's guidance has changed from suggesting administering the second dose after 12 weeks to suggesting that it be done after eight weeks. We are pushing our health boards to go faster and to schedule appointments earlier. We can do so because we have a good supply of the AstraZeneca vaccine, which has not always been the case. As members will know, the guidance is not to use the AstraZeneca vaccine for under-40s, where possible, so we have that supply available in order—I hope—to increase the amount of second doses for the over-40 cohort.

A number of members raised the performance of the NHS in relation to its recovery. I have said that that will take longer than weeks and months. I have to be honest about that. As health secretary, I could sit here and pluck a figure out of the air for when we will have NHS performance back to pre-Covid levels. I want us to reach even better levels, which a number of members have challenged me to do. However, I cannot pluck a figure out of thin air for when we will do that.

That is why it is important that the NHS recovery plan—which I hope will come from cross-party effort and have cross-party endorsement—be published in the Government's first 100 days. That does not mean that we will get NHS recovery in the first 100 days, although I will do my best to push things as far and hard as I can. I have emailed all the parties' health spokespeople to ask them to meet me. I am sure that we will meet soon and that a substantial part of our conversation will be about remobilisation of the NHS.

Pam Duncan-Glancy has rightly been getting plaudits from across the chamber. Her speech was one of the best first speeches, if not the best, that I have heard. She quoted John Smith extraordinarily well on the opportunity to serve—as, I think, did Michael Marra. I cannot speak for John Smith, but I know his family well—as I suspect Pam Duncan-Glancy does—so I am sure that he would, like his family, be very proud to see her in the chamber. She is clearly excellent in her own right, so many people will look up to her as a role model. I suspect that I was not the only one who had a lump in their throat and was about to shed a tear when watching her first interview at the Emirates arena after she was first introduced as Pam Duncan-Glancy MSP. She will be a fighter. I look forward to working with her.

Maggie Chapman challenged all of us to create an economy that focuses on wellbeing and is person centred. I know that Ben Macpherson, in his role, and a number of others will, like me, be looking forward to working closely with her.

I turn to Dr Sandesh Gulhane. We were political opponents in Glasgow Pollock. I was impressed with him throughout the campaign and am even more impressed with him now. He spoke emotively, emotionally and powerfully about his role in the NHS throughout the pandemic. I thank him for his efforts. He also spoke extremely emotively about the challenges that he, as an NHS worker, faced as a father. That really struck a chord with me. I think of myself as a new father because it seems like my daughter was born only a moment ago, but she is two years old. I cannot imagine having not been able to hug my newborn daughter for eight weeks. I commend Dr Gulhane for the sacrifices that he has made and for the fact that, in his first speech, he said that he will be a champion for the NHS. I look forward to working with him on a cross-party basis.

Meghan Gallacher spoke very well on a number of issues, especially education. I look forward to having many discussions with her about health, but I am sure that my colleague Shirley-Anne Somerville will look forward to speaking to her about education. Meghan Gallacher asked about our education recovery plan. Ms Somerville will give more detail on that in the debate next week.

Of course, it has already been said that we are putting a significant amount of money into education recovery. We are not just funding councils to increase teacher numbers by 1,000 and classroom assistants by 500 as part of our commitment to provide 3,500 additional teaching staff; we also have a summer programme—many members rightly asked questions about it—that is also hugely important.

My step-daughter, who is 12, is in the transition from primary to high school. It has been really tough. She is in the year that children probably most enjoy. She might lose some of her friends as they go to different high schools. She has really felt the effects of the pandemic. We promise Meghan Gallacher that our focus will be on pupils' educational attainment and on the other important aspects of life that our young people have missed out on, including play and socialising. Again, Shirley-Anne Somerville will give more details about that.

I also commend Michelle Thomson, Michael Marra, Paul McLennan and Collette Stevenson for their first speeches.

In the remainder of my time, I will try to address a couple of other issues that were raised. A number of members rightly asked me about Glasgow. This week, Anas Sarwar has spoken well about the challenges that Glasgow faces. We both represent the south side of the city. Our father's businesses have been in the south side—my father's business is still in the south side and has been there for 40 years. We went to the same school in the area. We have a love for it and a desire to see that part of the city do well. We also want to see the city as a whole come out of the current challenging situation. I give him an absolute guarantee that the Covid clusters in the south side of Glasgow are getting our urgent attention. In those hot spots, vaccination for 18 to 29-year-olds has been prioritised.

Anas Sarwar also asked about walk-in vaccinations for 18 to 29-year-olds. That is a fair question and a fair challenge that is being urgently explored. However, we must be careful; our priority will often be to provide second doses because having had a second dose is 88 per cent effective against the variant with which we are dealing, whereas having had one dose is only 33 per cent effective. We know that our older cohort are more vulnerable and susceptible to severe illness and possibly to death, so our priority is to provide them with second doses for maximum protection.

However, can we do both? Can we maximise second doses and have walk-ins for 18 to 29-year-olds and the other cohorts under the age of 40? That is a fair challenge and is something that I am looking at. A number of members mentioned the

“did not attend” for vaccination appointments. I have made it clear to health boards across Scotland that my expectation is that when they get towards the end of a day and have left-over vaccine, they put out immediate calls—as the Hydro did a couple weeks ago—to ask people to come down to get vaccinated.

However, the step before that is to address why people are not attending. We are doing that at the moment. Tayside NHS Board has done a power of work on trying to understand that better.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I am sure that members are gratified to hear about the measures to deal with the hot spots in Glasgow, but hot spots and outbreaks of Covid-19 are not limited to Glasgow. As I said in my speech, Davidson's Mains primary school in my constituency was closed on Tuesday, and 11 classes are now self-isolating. There are dozens and dozens of infections there. Can the cabinet secretary reassure people in my community that the Government's focus is very much on them and that they will receive due attention?

Humza Yousaf: I am conscious that I am running short of time, Presiding Officer.

I was coming on to talk about Lothian after speaking about Glasgow. This morning, I spoke to the national clinical director, Jason Leitch, about the concerning situation in Lothian. As I have, Alex Cole-Hamilton will have seen the case numbers. We have organised two additional mobile testing units in Lothian, which are focused on the clusters. The member mentioned Davidson's Mains primary school. If he will forgive me, I will go away and look to see whether appropriate testing facilities are in place, then I will get back to him. I am happy to engage with him directly on that.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): Will the cabinet secretary look into reports in today's *East Lothian Courier* that suggest that residents are routinely being sent to vaccination centres in Midlothian and West Lothian, even when there is capacity in East Lothian? If that is due to a computer glitch, will the cabinet secretary get the issue sorted soon before it impacts on vaccination take-up and on the number of young people who might come forward?

Humza Yousaf: I thank Craig Hoy for raising that issue. I will look to find out the reason for that.

I am conscious that I am out of time, Presiding Officer. Next week, we will have a debate on the NHS and its recovery; in fact, it will be next week's first debate. I look forward to giving more details of what I intend to do. My ultimate priority and the absolute priority of the Government is to respond to the immediate Covid crisis and to ensure that the NHS recovers and remobilises. I have family members who are affected—in particular, a family

member who was waiting for an operation when Covid came along. I know the impact that the situation is having on that individual, and I am just one person in that situation.

I will end where I started, by saying that this has been an excellent debate. I am pleased that the subject has been the first subject for debate in the sixth session of the Scottish Parliament. I look forward to working with all members, including new members and those who are not so new. Covid-19 will be our collective focus. We will have plenty of disagreements and heated arguments but, ultimately, the people of Scotland have entrusted us to work together in a period that none of us could have envisaged or imagined. I am certain that, ultimately, on this issue, we—by which I mean not just the Government but every single one of us, regardless of party colours or stripes, tribalism or any other issues of ideology that divide us—will not let the people of Scotland down.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on Covid-19. I am minded to accept a motion without notice to bring forward decision time to now. I invite George Adam to move the motion.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 11.2.4, Decision Time be brought forward to 4.53 pm.—[*George Adam*]

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

16:53

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): As there are no questions to be put as a result of today's business, I close the meeting.

Meeting closed at 16:53.

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

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