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Scottish Parliament

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

Time for Reflection

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

The first item of business is time for reflection. Our time for reflection leader today is Aparna Ramesh, who is Interfaith Scotland's development officer and secretary of the Hindu Temple of Scotland in Rutherglen.

Aparna Ramesh (Interfaith Scotland and Hindu Temple of Scotland): Namaste. Presiding Officer and members of the Scottish Parliament, I thank you for the opportunity to address you today.

I will begin with a few lines from Hindu scriptures.

"Mata bhumi putro'ham prthivyah."

In translation, that means, "The Earth is my mother and I am her child."

"Samudhra Vasane Devi, Parvatha sthana mandale
Vishnu Pathni namasthubyam, Paadha sparsham
kshamasvame".

My morning begins every day with that prayer to our Mother Earth. In Hinduism, the Earth is revered as Mother, and we are her children. Thus, we have a responsibility to this Earth, which supports our lives and livelihood. We can fulfil that by treating the Earth and all our fellow living beings with respect and kindness. To me, that is what climate action is trying to achieve.

I grew up in India, where I was taught not to waste water or any resources that are provided by nature. It is also the place where I faced water scarcity and floods in the same year. Such adverse climate conditions have only got worse over the years, but people are resilient. Humanity has proved time and again that, in the face of adversity, we can come together and work to overcome it.

Humanity is at a pivotal point in the fight against climate crisis and, with the 26th United Nations climate change conference of the parties—COP26—happening in Glasgow now, it might very well be the time that the most important decisions are being made in this battle. It fills me with hope to see people from around the world overcoming

barriers of language, culture, distance and disease to come together for the planet.

With this being Interfaith Scotland's year of climate action, faith communities and interfaith groups across Scotland have actively been working towards the goals of sustainability and climate education. From 31 October to 7 November, we celebrated Scottish interfaith week, which began with a prayer vigil in George Square in Glasgow. Religious leaders and people of different faith communities across the United Kingdom led the prayer. People of all faiths and none came together in person and joined us online to pray for a positive outcome from COP26.

Together for the planet is the theme for COP26, and I hope that it continues to be the motto for humanity's future.

Ohm Shanthi Shanthi Shanthi hi!

The Presiding Officer: I thank Aparna Ramesh for her words. I am sorry that we were unable to provide a videolink today.

Topical Question Time

14:04

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is topical question time. In order to get in as many people as possible, I would be grateful for short and succinct questions and responses.

COP26 Protests (Kettling)

1. Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on the reported use of kettling during recent protests in Glasgow. (S6T-00268)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Veterans (Keith Brown): The right to peaceful protest is not only a crucial component of the success of the 26th United Nations climate change conference of the parties—COP26—but a right that is fully supported by the Scottish Government.

As we enter the second week of COP26, Glasgow has lived up to its proud tradition of activism and of peaceful protest. That is a source of pride for the whole of Scotland.

The policing of the summit is an operational matter for the chief constable, who has been clear from the start that the planning for and delivery of the event would comply with human rights legislation, facilitate peaceful and lawful protest and ensure public safety.

Maggie Chapman: I appreciate that operational matters rest with the chief constable, but Parliament sets the limits within which the police can operate and it is important to understand the Government's position on those limits.

Police officers declare that they will

"uphold fundamental human rights and accord equal respect to all people".

I am concerned that some of the tactics deployed during the COP have not taken account of those important principles. The use of kettling tactics with peaceful protestors seems wholly disproportionate.

I have read reports of journalists being kettled for hours with no access to water or toilets, and of a young mother and her baby, who was in a pram, being trapped. It cannot be right that children are being kettled. Does the cabinet secretary think that kettling is a proportionate tactic to use when dealing with peaceful protestors?

Keith Brown: I have had daily conversations with Police Scotland throughout COP26, as I did regularly beforehand. I am satisfied that the police have tried extremely hard to ensure that they have

facilitated protest and that their response has been proportionate.

There have been 300 protests. The vast majority, as Maggie Chapman's letter to Police Scotland rightly acknowledges, have been peaceful. Those protests have been accommodated by a flexible response from the police.

The independent review group met on 5 November to discuss some of the issues that have been raised by Ms Chapman and others. The group will meet again today to discuss those issues. It is right that that should happen. It is also right that Ms Chapman should write to Police Scotland if she has concerns. The Scottish Police Authority may also look at the issues in due course. I am satisfied by all the conversations that I have had with Police Scotland that the police have tried to act proportionately, to facilitate protest and to work within the bounds of the legislation set for them by Parliament.

Maggie Chapman: At Saturday's climate march, one particular group of marchers was, without clear cause, subjected to a police kettle from the moment that they arrived at Kelvingrove park. As the march passed through the city centre, those in the kettled group were halted by the police and prevented from moving any further. In turn, that prevented thousands of other marchers behind the group from continuing with the march. There were minors in that kettle, and the group just wanted to continue marching with everyone else.

Will the cabinet secretary confirm the legal status of kettling in such situations? Will he say whether he has any concerns about the conduct of the officers involved, many of whom—as colleagues in the chamber can confirm—did not seem to know what was happening or who was in control?

Keith Brown: I repeat the point that I made about the independent review group, which includes John Scott QC and some of the organisations that made complaints of the kind that Maggie Chapman mentioned. I have been told that that was a constructive meeting.

The police would refer to the practice as "moving containment" and would also say that they have used that tactic because protestors sat down in front of the march, for example, and were stopping the rest of the march from taking place and thus presenting a danger to the public.

As I said, any member of the Parliament—indeed, anyone—can make a complaint to Police Scotland. It is for the police to address the points that have been raised. The independent review group, which includes groups that have raised concerns, such as Friends of the Earth, has had

one discussion about the issue and is having a second discussion today. I hope that that is how such issues can be resolved.

Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): Will the cabinet secretary join me in condemning those who tried to antagonise the police into confrontation, and will he commend brave officers for stepping in to stop disruptive protesters?

Keith Brown: Mr Findlay raises a good point. There are examples of officers having had paint or liquid sprayed into their eyes but immediately returning to the front line, and of officers being hit over the head with banners. Many officers have been goaded.

Such actions were carried out by a very small minority of the thousands of people who have been involved in protests, but it is wrong. I condemn it and I praise the officers concerned.

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): What actions have the Scottish Government and delivery partners taken to support peaceful relations at COP26?

Keith Brown: We fully recognise that there should be clear dialogue between the protesters, the police and others, and we should not underestimate the extent to which that happened long before COP26 started. The dialogue has included discussions at the marches, which can help to de-escalate tensions and allow protesters to exercise their right to protest while public order is maintained. That is why the Scottish Government has funded the keeping our cool initiative, which is ensuring that independent mediators are present at protests and marches throughout COP26 and can intervene when appropriate to facilitate dialogue between protesters, the police and others in order to achieve positive outcomes.

Emergency Service Workers (Bonfire Night Attacks)

2. **Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to reports of numerous attacks on emergency service workers while on duty during bonfire weekend. (S6T-00270)

The Minister for Community Safety (Ash Regan): The Scottish Government is appalled that anyone should make such despicable attacks on emergency service workers, and our thoughts are with those who were injured. I am pleased to have been informed that all are expected to make a full recovery.

Both Police Scotland and the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service have reported that numbers of calls were significantly down this year. The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service has specifically

advised that the number of attacks on crews fell by a third. However, there is still an unacceptable level of antisocial behaviour in our communities related to fireworks.

I am engaging with our emergency services as they debrief and analyse the data to ensure that we maintain the downward trend in call-outs and maximise the protection that is given to those who are called out. I am committed to bringing forward the bill that was announced in our programme for government to implement the remaining recommendations from the independent fireworks review group.

Jamie Greene: Members on the Government front bench are right to condemn the attacks on police both at COP26 and during bonfire night. It is a great shame that attacks happen year after year in our society, and although the numbers are going down, any attack is unacceptable. The attacks at the weekend were horrific. Police and fire crews were assaulted with fireworks and golf clubs and one person required hospitalisation.

This Parliament, too, must send a strong and simple message to the public that attacking our emergency service workers is simply not on. In that regard, I ask the minister why the Scottish Government will not support our proposals to double the maximum penalty for assault under the Emergency Workers (Scotland) Act 2005 from 12 months to two years' imprisonment.

Ash Regan: The misuse of fireworks in our communities is not acceptable, and I believe that that message has been sent out very clearly both from this Parliament and from all our partners including the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and Police Scotland. To anyone who misuses fireworks, the line from our prosecutors and our courts is very clear that people who offend will be dealt with robustly.

We condemn any attack on our emergency services. It is a relief that, as I was able to report to the Parliament, the personnel who were injured will be able to make full recoveries, and it is hoped that on-going police inquiries will identify the perpetrators.

Where we have powers, we have acted. That applies to fireworks and it applies to sentences for attacks on police officers and firefighters. We have the Emergency Workers (Scotland) Act 2005, which supplements the common law and contains specific offences that can be used, which carry sentences of up to 12 months in custody. We are always prepared to keep the law under review, as I am sure that the member is aware, but we have no real evidence that sentencing rules are encouraging criminality.

To help to bring the offenders to book, I encourage anyone who has any information about

these senseless attacks on our emergency services or any wider disturbances that occurred to contact the police. They can do that either directly or anonymously through Crimestoppers.

Jamie Greene: The minister wants some evidence that the current common law and legislation are not enough. Let me give her some evidence. Last year, the number of assaults on emergency workers rose to an all-time high of more than 8,000 incidents. The number has gone up by 600 year on year. If that is not evidence, I do not know what is.

In 2018-19, 160 people were convicted under the 2005 act, which carries a maximum sentence of just 12 months. If we couple that with the presumption against short sentences, the end result is that fewer than a third actually went to jail for assaulting emergency service workers. Other parts of the United Kingdom have, rightly, doubled that ceiling from 12 months to two years. I therefore ask again: why can we not do the same in Scotland?

Ash Regan: As I have said to the member, we are always prepared to keep the law under review, and I do not have evidence that sentencing rules are encouraging such criminality. A range of tools can be used by the police and prosecutors for such offences; for serious offences, that includes sentences of up to life imprisonment. I therefore believe that the courts have at their disposal the tools to be able to prosecute such offences appropriately.

I am sure that the member is aware that the Government is committed to curtail the misuse of fireworks and bring it under control through a number of short and longer-term legislative and non-legislative actions. We set up the fireworks review group to look at how Scotland's regime for the sale and use of fireworks could be improved, and I am committed to progressing its recommendations. This year, we have changed the law, and the early signs from the gold commanders to whom I spoke last year are that has had a positive effect. We have also funded a number of public awareness campaigns and have funded trading standards officers for education and enforcement.

The Government is committed to curtailing the misuse of fireworks and to creating a regime, in sentencing and in legislation, that will improve Scotland's relationship with fireworks.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): I acknowledge that call-out numbers were down this year, but much work still needs to be done. What progress has the Scottish Government made in implementing the recommendations of the independent fireworks

review group, to ensure that fireworks are used safely and appropriately?

Ash Regan: The Scottish Government set up the independent fireworks review group, chaired by former chief fire officer Alasdair Hay, to undertake a thorough review of the evidence on the sale and use of fireworks, including data on the impact of firework use in Scotland and international case studies.

Last year, I welcomed the group's recommendations and committed to progressing them as soon as possible. We have already legislated to implement a number of them, which means that, this year, the times of day at which fireworks can be supplied to the general public are restricted, as are their volume and the times of day at which they can be set off. Following a consultation this summer, we will shortly be introducing primary legislation to implement the group's remaining recommendations. Taking that together with the non-legislative actions that we are progressing with our partners, we aim to deliver a fundamental change in the culture of Scotland's relationship with fireworks, to better protect our communities and our emergency services.

Covid-19

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is a statement by John Swinney on a Covid-19 update. The Deputy First Minister will take questions at the end of his statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:19

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

I will provide the update on the latest Covid-19 situation, on behalf of the First Minister. In giving the update, I will provide an assessment of the current course of the pandemic and our on-going consideration of how to respond; an update on the pressures on the national health service, looking ahead to the winter; a report on the progress that we are making to deliver the vaccination programme; an update on changes to international travel rules; and an update on the management of the risks of transmission at or around the 26th United Nations climate change conference of the parties—COP26.

First, though, I will report on the most recent statistics. Yesterday, 2,233 positive cases were reported, which is 12 per cent of all tests that were conducted. There are 753 people in hospital with Covid, which is 23 fewer than yesterday, and 57 people are receiving intensive care, which is four more than yesterday. Sadly, a further 20 deaths have been reported over the past 24 hours, which takes the total number of deaths registered under the definition to 9,313. I send my condolences to everyone who has lost a loved one during the pandemic.

More positively, the vaccination programme continues to make good progress. I confirm that 4,324,440 people have received a first dose, 3,918,528 have had both doses and 1,017,359 have received a booster vaccination or third primary vaccination. The vaccination programme is continuing at considerable pace. I am pleased to say that the United Kingdom Government's Covid data dashboard confirms that our booster programme continues to be the best performing roll-out in the United Kingdom.

Today is also a major milestone in that programme, as we have reached 1 million Covid boosters and third doses, totalling 2 million doses of both Covid and flu vaccines. That is an amazing achievement and I thank everyone involved for their extraordinary efforts. It further demonstrates that the booster programme is performing exceptionally well.

In total, 88 per cent of the over-18 population is now fully vaccinated with two doses. That includes

99 per cent of the over-50s, 88 per cent of those aged 40 to 49, 77 per cent of 30 to 39-year-olds and 68 per cent of 18 to 29-year olds. In addition, 76 per cent of 16 and 17-year-olds and 55 per cent of 12 to 15-year-olds have had a first dose. For most people in those age groups, a single dose only is recommended at this stage.

After the most recent peak in new cases at around the start of September, the spread of the virus has not reduced to anything like the low levels that we had seen following the lockdowns. At slightly more than 2,500, the number of new cases each day is holding at a concerning high level. The situation is precarious and unpredictable. If the previous pattern—characterised by waves of infection—is repeated, there is a risk that the spread of the virus could very quickly increase again during the coming weeks, perhaps over the Christmas period.

Starting from the current high level of infection in the community and the intense pressure that the NHS is already under as a result, some scenarios for what may happen next are very concerning. We need to avoid the most dangerous of those scenarios. There are also specific reasons to suspect that case numbers may increase in the weeks ahead: with the onset of colder winter weather, increased time spent indoors means that there will be more opportunities for Covid to circulate; COP26 has seen people from all over the world meet in Glasgow, which presents a known infection risk; and many of us will wish to spend time visiting loved ones over the festive period.

However, we are not yet able to predict with confidence what will happen next. We certainly want to avoid the sort of strict lockdowns that we saw before most of us were vaccinated. We do not want to repeat the sort of disruption to our daily lives, businesses and the economy that was required at earlier stages in the pandemic. However, we need to take appropriate measures to keep the pandemic under control.

It is because we want to avoid more difficult restrictions that we cannot rule out strengthening the baseline protective measures that are currently in place as the best way to head off any prospect of future lockdowns. Indeed, all Governments in the United Kingdom have said much the same—not least, for example, through the United Kingdom's Government's plan B.

We have been considering, for example, whether we may need to extend the Covid certification scheme to bring more settings into scope, such as indoor hospitality and leisure settings. Among other possible interventions, we are exploring how we can help improve ventilation, what we could do to increase home working and whether changes are needed to extend the use of

face coverings. I stress, though, that we have not yet taken any decisions about strengthening the existing baseline measures and that we will discuss options with business sectors in the course of this week.

As members would expect, the Scottish Government has been exploring all options for how it will respond to the evolving situation.

We have been reviewing our strategic framework, which defines the Scottish Government's overall approach to responding to the pandemic, and the next three-weekly review of the existing baseline measures will take place a week today. The First Minister, my Cabinet colleagues and I are, of course, watching the situation closely. We stand ready to respond at the right time, when the data indicates that that is necessary and proportionate.

The challenges that we currently face and the continuing spread of the virus mean that now is certainly not the time to relax our approach. We all need to redouble our efforts to adhere to the protective measures that are in place and to follow the guidance.

For that reason, I take this opportunity to reiterate the appeal that the First Minister, my Cabinet colleagues and others have been making to members of the public, to businesses, to transport providers and to organisations throughout Scotland. Please get vaccinated, including getting booster jabs and flu vaccinations if you are eligible. Please wear face coverings when it is required, ventilate indoor spaces where possible and wash your hands and surfaces regularly. Use lateral flow device tests regularly and book a polymerase chain reaction—PCR—test if a lateral flow test shows up positive, if you have symptoms of Covid or if you are identified as a close contact of someone who has tested positive. Please also continue to give contact details when you visit pubs and restaurants, and show your Covid certificate if you visit a venue where that is required. Also—this is critical—please continue to work from home whenever possible. The Government knows that none of that is easy. However, it is vital that those efforts continue.

The entire health and care system continues to be under considerable pressure. For many months, our health and social care services have been dealing with levels of demand that are usually experienced only in winter. Across the country, hospitals are at, or are close to, capacity. The social care system is also under pressure and is reporting an increase in the number of people who require care packages.

Indeed, the continuing high numbers of cases of Covid-19 mean that the pressure on our national

health service is greater than it has been at any time in its 73-year history. As of today, Covid-related hospital occupancy—the number of patients in hospital with Covid—is 753, compared with 932 a week ago. Hospital admissions remain high, although they have decreased slightly. In the latest week, 585 people with Covid were admitted to hospital, compared with 687 in the first week of October. Admissions to intensive care units have also decreased slightly over the past month. NHS staff are dealing with significant numbers of Covid patients, alongside providing other patient care. They are also preparing for and responding to wider winter pressures, and are dealing with the backlog of care that built up in earlier stages of the pandemic.

As I have set out, there is a real risk that the pressure on the national health service could intensify further during the weeks and months ahead, including as we enter the winter flu season. The Scottish Government is working closely with health boards as they deal with those pressures. Last week, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care set out the measures that we are taking to support the NHS in preparing for and responding to the pressures now and the challenges that lie ahead.

As we know, vaccination has proved to be one of our most effective public health interventions against the pandemic. The first phase of the programme delivered more than 8 million Covid-19 vaccinations in 10 months. With Covid boosters, flu vaccines and jabs for new groups, we now need to deliver roughly the same number of vaccines—7.5 million—by early next year.

The vaccination programme is continuing at considerable pace. We have now administered, in total, more than 1 million boosters and third doses. We are, nonetheless, continuing to explore how we might increase capacity further, for example by establishing additional clinics, particularly at evenings and weekends.

We are confident that the programme remains on track. We are now sending letters to people aged 60 to 69 and to people with underlying health conditions to invite them to appointments at local community clinics, which will run throughout November. We will then, from mid-November, launch the online self-booking portal for adults aged 50 and over, people aged over 16 who are unpaid carers, and household contacts of immunosuppressed individuals, with the aim of offering vaccines to everyone over 50 by early next year.

Vaccination has been a huge job for the national health service. I again offer our thanks to the national health service staff who are working tirelessly to help keep us safe.

I also take this opportunity to reiterate our thanks to the armed forces for agreeing to support our vaccination effort by complementing our existing workforce. We have asked the people of Scotland to help us to deliver the vaccination programme by attending appointments where possible and rescheduling when that is necessary. By being vaccinated and having a booster vaccination, we can protect each other and help the national health service through what will be another exceptionally busy winter period.

I turn to international travel. Colleagues will be aware that the UK Government yesterday announced a change to international travel rules for England and recognised a wider range of vaccines. The Scottish Government will also make that change to regulations for arrivals here. With effect from Monday 22 November, we will recognise vaccines that are on the World Health Organization's emergency-use list, as well as those that are approved in the UK by the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency. The additional vaccines are Sinopharm and Sinovac, which are manufactured in China, and Covaxin, which is manufactured in India. Travellers who have been vaccinated with those products will be eligible for quarantine-free travel if they have a certificate of vaccination status from a country that is listed in our regulations and meets the data and security standards that are required at the UK border.

There are now more than 130 countries whose vaccine certificates we recognise, although China is not yet on that list. There is a process of engagement that is led by the Foreign Office to work with international partners so that we can bring more countries in scope as soon as possible, when we are satisfied that it is safe and secure to do so. Further announcements on that matter will be made on a four-nations basis. In addition, we will simplify rules for children under 18. All children, whether or not they are fully vaccinated, will now follow the rules for eligible vaccinated travellers. That means a test on day 2 after arrival, but no isolation and no test before departure or on day 8.

My final update today relates to the 26th United Nations climate change conference of the parties—COP26—in Glasgow. The summit is one of the most important gatherings of the century so far, and the Scottish Government has been doing everything that it can do to make it a success. We have been working closely with the UK Government and with partners in Scotland, including Glasgow City Council, Transport Scotland, NHS Scotland and Police Scotland, to ensure that the summit is delivered safely.

Covid-19 has presented significant challenges to staging this unique event. The scale and

worldwide draw of COP26 poses the risk of spread of Covid-19, both among delegates and to or from the local population of Scotland and the UK. A comprehensive and exceptional package of mitigation measures has been in place to ensure that the event is delivered safely, which is helping to protect the welfare of everyone who is involved and the wider community. In addition to vaccination, measures include a robust testing regime, contact tracing, hygiene measures and ventilation.

Of course, although public health measures can mitigate the spread of Covid-19 to an extent, there remains a risk that COP26 could increase the spread of the virus. That is why Covid-19 continues to be closely monitored by all relevant agencies, and why the Scottish Government is closely involved in operational decisions during the event. As of 5 November, the cumulative test positivity results for blue zone pass holders, based on lateral flow tests, was around 0.1 per cent. However, we have only just passed the midpoint of the conference and we continue to monitor the situation carefully. We will provide a further update following the conclusion of COP26, unless there is a need to do so sooner.

The successful roll-out of the vaccination programme has been enabling us to live with far fewer restrictions and mitigations in place than were necessary a few short months ago. However, case numbers remain high and, looking ahead to the winter months, there is a real risk that they might increase again. Still, each week, hundreds of people are being admitted to hospital with Covid, and our NHS is under intense pressure.

Covid remains a threat, so we all need to play our part in keeping the virus under control. For that reason, I make no apologies for repeating the three things that we can all do to help to protect each other. First, I ask everyone who is eligible, but has not yet done so, to get vaccinated. That includes going for a booster jab. It is never too late to get vaccinated and it remains the single most important thing that any of us can do to protect ourselves and the people around us.

Secondly, I ask everyone to take regular LFD tests. Testing kits can be ordered through the NHS Inform website or collected from a local test site or pharmacy. Anyone who tests positive, who is identified as a close contact or who has symptoms of the virus should self-isolate and book a PCR test.

Thirdly, I ask everyone to comply with the mitigations that are still in place. People should work from home when possible, wear face coverings in indoor public places such as shops and public transport and when moving about in hospitality settings, and wash hands and surfaces thoroughly.

People should also meet outdoors if they can. I know that that will be increasingly difficult as we get deeper into winter, but outdoor environments are safer. When people meet indoors, they should open windows; anything that improves ventilation will help. People should also try, where possible, to keep a safe distance from people in other households.

Those precautions make a crucial difference. They will protect individuals and the people around us all, and they will help to ease the burden on our NHS.

I express once again the Scottish Government's thanks to everyone in Scotland for what they are doing to help to protect each other, and I encourage people to continue to take the steps that are necessary to ensure that we all remain safe.

The Presiding Officer: The Deputy First Minister will now take questions on the issues that were raised in his statement. I intend to allow around 40 minutes for questions.

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): It is welcome that we have reached a new milestone with the Covid booster jab. I encourage everyone who is able to do so to take it up as soon as possible.

The vaccine has been immensely successful and should be our main weapon against the virus. Considering reintroducing restrictions at this stage in the pandemic, when we have a vaccine that 4.3 million Scots have received, is the wrong approach.

Today, John Swinney says that the Government is considering the need to extend the Covid vaccination passport scheme to more premises. The same John Swinney last week said that there was no evidence that Covid passports had reduced the spread of the virus. If he does not know whether the scheme is working, why does he want to expand it? How can the Government take those plans forward when it knows the damage that the scheme is already doing to Scottish businesses and the impact that it is having on people's jobs?

John Swinney says that he is considering expanding the scope of the scheme to include further indoor hospitality and leisure settings. Exactly which venues will be impacted by that change? The statement only brings more uncertainty for businesses at an extremely difficult time. They need to know whether they are on the cusp of being hit with added costs and extra hassle.

The Deputy First Minister also says that the Government is considering extending the use of face masks. Does that mean keeping them in

classrooms throughout winter, knowing the disruption that they cause in our schools, when the Government's own advisory sub-group on education and children's issues said more than a month ago that the time was right to end their use?

John Swinney: I thank Douglas Ross for his welcome of the progress on the booster vaccination programme. It is important that we acknowledge the significant landmark that has been achieved by the staff in the national health service, the armed forces and the volunteers, who have delivered an exceptional and at-pace programme, given the volume of vaccinations between the flu and the booster programme. It is an enormous physical undertaking, so I very much appreciate Mr Ross's comments on that.

On the vaccination certification programme, throughout our handling of the pandemic, the Government has been open with the public about what we feel necessary to consider. I say to Mr Ross—I recounted this to the COVID-19 Recovery Committee last Thursday—that we are at a pivotal moment in the pandemic. We are about to approach winter. Cases are sitting at what has to be described as an uncomfortably and consistently high level of, on average, around 2,500 per day. That is much higher than when we came out of the lockdown restrictions. Admissions to hospital have still been in excess of 500 in the past seven days. We face significant threats and dangers, so the Government has to be open with the public about the fact that we may have to take other decisions—I stress the word “may”—should the situation become more challenging.

Mr Ross knows that the Government has to satisfy itself that any measures that it may take to place restrictions on individuals or businesses are proportionate and can be justified as proportionate in law. The Government is satisfied that that has been the case in what we have done so far, and any further judgment would have to pass that test.

On the question about vaccination certification, I made the point last week to the COVID-19 Recovery Committee that I cannot establish a direct connection between an individual measure and levels of the virus. We have never been able to do that and we have been very candid about that, but the Government has to be satisfied that we have adequate protections in place to safeguard the public in relation to the rise in the number of vaccinations that have taken place and the levels of hospitalisation and cases. That is the framework that we consider and we will take decisions accordingly.

The Government has judged, with the input of the chief medical officer, that it is appropriate to maintain face coverings in schools for some pupils and staff. That judgment will be subject to review

and the Government will consider the issue when we undertake the three-weekly review and report to Parliament accordingly.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): I begin by expressing my condolences to all those who have lost a loved one to the virus, and I pay tribute to all those in the health service who are on the front line of battling the pandemic.

What the Deputy First Minister stated in relation to the prospect of rolling out vaccination passports in more contexts will be of significant concern to those who run hospitality businesses, especially given the broad and non-specific nature of his statement. Will he clarify the following things? What process and timeline will the Government adhere to in examining the roll-out of vaccination passports? Will the Government publish further evidence on transmission in hospitality settings and will the Deputy First Minister confirm whether a negative test will be accepted in lieu of a vaccination passport?

In relation to enforcement, the hospitality industry raised the point with me last week that, although nightclubs have door staff and therefore have a natural point to check such things, cafes do not have door staff, so the practicalities of checking vaccination passports in those contexts is hugely more challenging.

I also ask about the booster programme. I, too, welcome the landmark that we have reached in the programme, but its progress continues to be variable. In my area, people are waiting two to three hours to receive their booster. The accessibility of the location of vaccination sites is problematic, and the promise of combined flu and booster jabs being given at the same time is not a reality. There are very variable roll-out rates across health board areas, so what steps will the Government take to support health boards that are struggling to roll out the booster vaccines?

John Swinney: I have stressed in the remarks that I have made to Parliament today that the Government has to be open with the public about what steps we are considering. Mr Johnson will know that there is a three-weekly review that we will undertake next week and those issues will be part of that consideration.

At this stage, I cannot say to Parliament whether those discussions will be concluded by then because, fundamentally, the judgment on whether the Covid certification scheme needs to be extended any further has to be driven by the evidence of the pandemic—the prevalence of the virus in the community, the level of pressure on the national health service and the level of vaccination that is under way. The Government has to make a proportionate judgment on those questions.

Daniel Johnson asked whether a negative LFD test would be a possible alternative to vaccination certification, and I confirm that the Government is considering that question as part of its deliberations.

On the question of enforcement by proprietors and operators of hospitality venues, there is, obviously, still a requirement for contact tracing data to be retained by many of those venues. We encourage people to participate in that. Therefore, there are opportunities for operators of venues to have such exchanges and to undertake discussions to satisfy themselves on that point.

On the booster programme, I have heard and am aware of points that have been raised about the accessibility of certain venues for individuals and the waiting times that have been involved. The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care has been discussing those issues with individual health boards. Obviously, a huge volume of activity is being undertaken and, as a consequence, there may well be congestion at individual facilities at times. However, I give Mr Johnson the assurance that the health secretary and officials are in active, on-going dialogue with health boards to offer support where it is necessary to do so, and to enable health boards to deliver the joint programme for the flu vaccination and the booster jabs with the inconvenience to members of the public kept to a minimum as they participate in those important programmes.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): Given the remarks about workforce pressures that the Royal College of Nursing made to a parliamentary committee this morning, the crisis affecting our NHS is really scary. We have already seen that the waiting times crisis has proved fatal. However, the last thing that the Government should do is rush towards and embrace solutions that are ineffective.

The Deputy First Minister has answered questions from Douglas Ross and Daniel Johnson by citing evidence and saying that he will follow the evidence. However, research that was published by *The Lancet* last week showed that, although vaccines are excellent at preventing harm, they are ineffective at preventing transmission. Liberal Democrats warned that when vaccination certification came in, there would be a steady creep into other aspects of our lives. The statement is the start of that creep.

The Deputy First Minister has dangled the threat to the festive period as possible justification for the further roll-out of vaccination certificates, but clinicians are showing him evidence that there no evidence base for their use. Will he therefore rule that out today, as it will not save Christmas?

John Swinney: I do not see how Mr Cole-Hamilton can possibly expect me to give a positive response to his question given what I have just put on the record in my parliamentary statement. There is a fundamental contradiction at the heart of his question. He marshalled the dangers that the national health service faces over the next few months. I could not have said it better myself: that was an accurate reflection of the challenges that are faced. We have to ensure that we have sufficient protection in place to reduce any impact on the national health service. We know that people who are double vaccinated have less-worse symptoms than people who are not vaccinated, which naturally answers Mr Cole-Hamilton's question. If people are double vaccinated and therefore have a Covid certificate as a consequence, they are likely to be exposed to less danger, and we will be able to sustain more aspects of our social and economic activity. It all follows. The only problem is that Mr Cole-Hamilton missed a fundamental step of logic in his question. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Can I have a moment, please, Deputy First Minister? There is on-going dialogue across the chamber, and I am trying to understand what is being said. I would therefore be grateful if colleagues could be quiet when the Deputy First Minister is responding.

John Swinney: My simple point to Mr Cole-Hamilton is that there are a number of steps that we can take to try to avert the enormous pressure that he foresees—I agree with him on that—in the national health service in the winter. The Government is trying to take the necessary and proportionate steps to ensure that we can do that.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): I very much welcome the indication in the statement that COP is not, so far at least, having a negative effect on Covid. Last night, I attended an event at which we had to show our certificate and wear masks, and it all went perfectly well. Has the Deputy First Minister any further advice to give to those attending COP?

John Swinney: My one appeal would be for people to apply and follow the guidance and restrictions that we have in place. I do not think that those are, in any way, an obstacle to individuals successfully participating in COP. The routine measures that Mr Mason experienced last night are of the type that we would like to see in place across the board. They aim to minimise the risk of transmission and maximise the chances of protecting the public, and that is what we have focused on in preparation for and during COP. We are working hard with Glasgow City Council, the UK Government and NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde to ensure that we manage any implications that arise from COP.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): The NHS and social care sector is under unimaginable pressure. I thank the workers in the sector for what they do.

In 2014, the then health secretary, Shona Robison, said that she would urgently prioritise and eradicate bed blocking in hospitals. Some six years on, hospital beds are filled with 1,615 medically fit people with no place to go. I ask the Deputy First Minister to put himself in the shoes of those people and their families. What measures will the Government put in place to resolve the indignity of bed blocking for thousands of vulnerable and elderly people across Scotland?

John Swinney: I acknowledge that that is a serious issue. The Government has put in place measures, in dialogue with our partners in local government, to ensure that individuals can be safely released from hospital and into appropriate settings, whether that is in their own home or in some other form of care facility.

One of the points at the heart of the matter is the availability of staff in the social care sector, which has been the subject of extensive dialogue with our local authority partners and third sector providers. One of the issues that we face, I am afraid, is as a consequence of Brexit and the loss of free movement of citizens. *[Interruption.]* Rachael Hamilton may feign exasperation, Mr Kerr may shout out at me and Ms Webber may shake her head, but the reality is that the evidence is staring the Conservatives in the face: we are suffering because we have lost access to people who were providing a vital support to our social care sector.

One measure that we are taking is to improve the remuneration for social care workers, which was part of the measures that the health secretary announced some weeks ago. We are working with our local authority partners to ensure that we have the maximum amount of arrangements in place to support the transition of individuals from hospitals to the community, and we are supporting local authorities with the resources to do that. However, one of the points that local authorities consistently feed back to us is their difficulty in recruiting staff to enable them to deliver those services. We will support them in those efforts, but we must have an honest understanding of what the problems are.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): My question is about booster jags. I appreciate that these are exceptions, but several elderly constituents of mine, some of whom are in the catchment area of NHS Lothian and some of whom are in the catchment area of NHS Borders, were unable to get through to the vaccination helpline. Those who did were told that the earliest date for their booster would be late December. I even have one

Penicuik couple in their 80s who were given a date of 1 January 2022. Can that be right, given that younger age groups are being offered boosters now and can even book online?

John Swinney: I am concerned about that information from Christine Grahame. Certainly, the vaccination booster programme should be completed for people in the over-70s group well before the end of December. I ask that the member shares specific information with the health secretary on those issues, which we will explore.

As I said, the booster programme should be delivered at an earlier stage to that age group. As I said in my statement, we are beginning to issue letters to those in the 60 to 69 age group, so the older categories should be satisfactorily resolved by then. I would appreciate it if Christine Grahame could write to the health secretary.

Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): I associate myself with the thanks given to all our vaccination staff as we acknowledge the vaccination milestone.

The Deputy First Minister referred in his statement to concerns about winter flu and the pressures of the flu season. The roll-out of the flu vaccine must go faster if we are to ensure that vulnerable Scots are not left unprotected this winter. In common with colleagues across the chamber, I have heard about issues for people who have respiratory problems but have not been called for their flu vaccine and people who provide transport for someone else in their household being unable to travel with them. Nursery staff in my region were told that they will not be vaccinated against flu in school along with the teaching staff because they work in a separate area of the school campus. Instead, they were told to make their own arrangements. Given the urgency of the situation, with the flu season approaching, will the Deputy First Minister tell me what percentage of people who are eligible will have received a flu jab by Christmas and provide a firm date by which he expects the most vulnerable people to be protected from flu before the onset of midwinter?

John Swinney: I recognise the importance of the points that Mr O’Kane raises. However, I am sure that he will appreciate that it is difficult to take account of all the circumstances and scenarios that he put to me, which are reasonable points, in a programme of such complexity and magnitude. The online portal system, which we are putting in place for younger age groups, is designed to give people a bit of flexibility and will address some of the practical circumstances that he mentioned.

Mr O’Kane asked for some data. The flu vaccination programme has so far administered

more than 1.4 million doses and is making very good progress. Taking the flu and the Covid third dose programmes together, we have surpassed 2.5 million doses in the relatively short time since the start of the flu vaccination programme. I hope that that gives Parliament some confidence, because if we have 7.5 million doses to give by the spring, 2.5 million since the start of September is a pretty substantial effort in getting to that. I assure Mr O’Kane that we are trying to be as flexible as possible, but what is critically important is ensuring that we cover the volume of vaccinations that are required. Parliament should be encouraged by the progress that has been made to date.

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): Is the Deputy First Minister aware that many young adults who have recently turned 18 and are now eligible for their double vaccination are losing out financially? They have purchased expensive tickets for concerts and other events, but cannot now use them because of the timing of the vaccinations and the requirement for certification. Might the Government look at whether we can persuade events management organisers to agree refunds for those young people who, as we know, have already borne the brunt of many of the restrictions during the pandemic?

John Swinney: Some of the scenario that Mr Coffey puts to me can be addressed by the fact that we invited young people who were 17 to come forward for vaccination before their 18th birthdays, which would have preceded the introduction of the certification scheme. However, I am happy to explore in further detail some of the issues that Mr Coffey raises, to identify whether there are practical steps that we can take to address the situation. Nobody wants to see anybody disadvantaged, but we are trying to maximise the protection that is in place for the wider population by ensuring that individuals are double vaccinated. If Mr Coffey wishes to write to me with further details about that scenario, I will happily consider it.

Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con): As Douglas Ross said, last month, the Scottish Government was advised by its expert education advisory group, which is chaired by Professor Linda Bauld, that the rules on face coverings in schools should be relaxed due to their impact on the wellbeing of young people. Why was that advice rejected, and will ministers now consider removing the blanket requirement that pupils and teachers wear face coverings, given that it is plainly a disproportionate and damaging measure?

John Swinney: Mr Cameron raises an issue that the Government has considered carefully.

Ministers were given the advice when the pandemic situation was deteriorating. After taking further medical advice from the chief medical officer, ministers concluded that it was better to take a more cautious approach, given that the pandemic's wider course was deteriorating.

Throughout the discussion with Parliament, I have maintained the argument that we must make a set of balanced judgments while looking at the pandemic's overall course. Much as we might not like components of the steps that we must take, we must use a range of measures that will avoid the need for more dramatic interventions to stem the virus's circulation.

I explain to Mr Cameron that the Government is looking at the evidence in the round and making a judgment. If we believe that there are opportunities for us to relax the restrictions, we will take them. However, we must be mindful of the pandemic's likely course, given what I said today about the onset of winter, the possible impact of COP and people spending less time outdoors and more time indoors.

We must wrestle with a complex picture, because nobody wants our national health service to be overwhelmed at any stage in the future. We have consistently tried to avoid that. I marshalled before Parliament today, as is shared with members regularly, the pressure that the NHS is experiencing. Nobody wants the NHS to be overwhelmed.

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): My question is about ensuring fair access to events and travel. What arrangements are in place to ensure that people who cannot receive Covid vaccines because of confirmed or suspected allergic reactions obtain a medical exemption letter from the vaccination certification scheme?

John Swinney: The evidence that has been gathered demonstrates that vaccination is of benefit to the overwhelming majority of the population, but vaccination does not operate compatibly with some individuals. Local vaccination centres can answer questions about vaccines and advise about the arrangements that can be put in place to enable safe vaccination.

In the rare cases in which an individual cannot be vaccinated, they will be identified as being able to safely receive a vaccine but having decided not to do so or as clinically unable to safely receive a vaccine, in which case they will receive a secure paper exemption certificate by post. That certificate will provide them with the ability to access venues on the clear understanding that there is an appropriate justification for their not being double vaccinated.

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): I am concerned about the vaccination of people whose priority group has changed since the vaccination roll-out started. Someone who was classed as being clinically extremely vulnerable or at risk but is no longer considered to be so will have received their initial doses earlier than others but might not qualify for a booster because of their change in status. The same could be said of people who were unpaid carers and whose circumstances might have changed because of the deaths of those whom they were caring for. When will people whose category has changed get their vaccine booster?

John Swinney: It is difficult for me to give a specific answer to the general but legitimate proposition that Gillian Mackay puts. The best advice that I can give to individuals who find themselves in such circumstances is that they contact the helpline for advice or secure alternative clinical advice, which will enable us to judge the best course of action, individual by individual.

Even in the scenarios that Gillian Mackay describes, the circumstances might have accelerated or delayed someone's access to the programme. An individual assessment of circumstances through engagement with the helpline is the best way forward, potentially with the pursuit of other clinical advice.

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I thank the Deputy First Minister for his statement and for saying that it is his ambition that we should return to social and economic activity as quickly and safely as possible.

Last week, following the Chancellor of the Exchequer's budget statement, Office for Budget Responsibility official Sir Charlie Bean predicted that real household disposable incomes will not reach pre-pandemic levels until the end of 2023. Does the Deputy First Minister agree that the chancellor needs to do a U-turn on his spending plans, including the cut to universal credit uplift, as those plans will leave millions of people worse off across the United Kingdom?

John Swinney: At the heart of the Government's Covid recovery strategy is the determination to do all that we can to eradicate child poverty and address the inequalities that existed before the pandemic and that have been exacerbated by the pandemic. The point that Clare Adamson puts to me is an important point about how we deliver recovery from Covid for the population.

I made it clear to Parliament in my statement on 5 October that the tackling of inequality that has worsened under Covid would be at the centre of the Government's Covid recovery strategy. If the

chancellor maintained the uplift to universal credit, as Clare Adamson suggests, that would assist us in our efforts to reduce child poverty and support families that are experiencing the difficulties that come with living on low incomes.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): Like others, I put on record my thanks and congratulations to everyone who is involved in the vaccination programme, including the delivery of the booster vaccination, with regard to the milestones that we have reached to date.

In September, I wrote to the health secretary, highlighting several concerns about the current crisis in our NHS and the Scottish Ambulance Service. This week, I received a reply from the chief operating officer of NHS Scotland in which he explained that additional assistance—including but not limited to more than 100 military personnel, around 100 second-year paramedic students, the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, the British Red Cross and private transport companies—has been brought in to support the hard-working health service staff. To any reasonable onlooker, that, indeed, represents a crisis. However, that letter said that the NHS is not overwhelmed, and the Government is still saying that.

I am really worried about the NHS. I am worried about the staff who are working in it and I am worried about my constituents and people across Scotland who need that service to deliver. I have heard countless stories of people having surgery cancelled and of ambulances being delayed for unacceptable lengths of time. The current situation is letting down people who rely on the service and those who are working within it, who have gone above and beyond throughout the pandemic.

The Presiding Officer: Could we have a question?

Pam Duncan-Glancy: If this is not a situation in which the NHS is overwhelmed and in crisis, what would the Deputy First Minister say that it is? When can people expect to have a functioning health service again?

John Swinney: In a sense, the detail that Pam Duncan-Glancy puts on the record reinforces the fundamental argument that I have a making this afternoon, which is that the national health service is under extraordinary pressure. I do not think that it is overwhelmed, but it is under extraordinary pressure. The fine balance that the Government is trying to strike is about enabling as much of our economy and our society as possible to function without interruption or restriction at this moment while not allowing so much of that to happen that the national health service becomes overwhelmed. Pam Duncan-Glancy is absolutely right in saying that that would help nobody.

When I am under pressure to relax the restrictions that we have in place—as I have been this afternoon—I simply say to members of Parliament that there is a fine balance to be struck. The points that Pam Duncan-Glancy puts to me are completely legitimate worries about the prospects for the national health service, so we have to take certain precautions and apply certain restrictions to make sure that we avoid the scenario that she paints.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): With Covid still severely affecting our NHS, will the first Deputy First Minister outline what additional funding is going to NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde to ease pressures over the winter months? My constituents and I are keen to see the full reinstatement of the GP out-of-hours service in my constituency, which would afford people a local service instead of their having to travel to Paisley or Glasgow.

John Swinney: So far this year, NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde has received additional funding of more than £130 million to meet Covid-related costs, and it will continue to receive all the necessary support throughout the pandemic.

Further support for NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde will come from the £300 million fund for winter funding pressures, which was announced by the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care some weeks ago. That support will be the subject of discussion with the health board and will be deployed in due course.

Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP): Given the genuine concern that has been shown by Mr Ross and Mr Johnson in their questions today, I am sure that they will welcome my question.

Major employers in my constituency of Perthshire South and Kinross-shire—Simon Howie Butchers Ltd, the Gleneagles hotel and Crieff Hydro Ltd—have been in contact to express their concern about the major shortages of staff from which they are all suffering. I have written to the Home Secretary to demand that she take immediate and urgent action to alleviate the problem. However, what more can the Scottish Government do under the current devolved settlement to help those businesses, and should not this Parliament be asserting powers that would allow it to manage our own immigration policy?

John Swinney: The issues that Jim Fairlie raises are connected to the points that I discussed with Rachael Hamilton a moment ago. We are facing acute challenges in availability of skills in a number of sectors. It is an issue not only in health and social care, but in hospitality, transportation, distribution and some parts of the rural economy, with which Jim Fairlie is familiar.

Through the retraining offer that we have in place, the Scottish Government is taking measures to ensure that we support individuals who have lost employment in one sector to gain access to employment in other sectors. We have measures including the young persons guarantee, which is designed to ensure that young people have access to employment, training or a college place when they require it, and we have the national transition training fund, which is designed to support individuals to make the transition from one sector to another.

Lastly, we are working with partners to try to ensure that people who are economically inactive are given all possible support to access the labour market where they might be able to contribute to the current skills requirements in the economy.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): Last Tuesday, along with thousands of other people, my family and I went to see “Beauty and the Beast” at the Playhouse. Unfortunately, in a few weeks’ time, parents, of whom there would be perhaps 100 at a show, will not be able to watch their children perform in a Christmas show. Will the Government urgently produce guidance to allow nurseries and primary schools to have in-person concerts? What is the difference between that and thousands of people going to the Playhouse?

John Swinney: Mr Balfour’s question relates to the point that I have just discussed with Pam Duncan-Glancy about measures that we would rather not take, but often have to take, in trying to protect the wider population.

Mr Balfour’s suggestion would involve a vast number of individuals entering school premises, when schools have worked hard to keep the environment as focused as possible on delivery of learning. That is the right thing for schools to do to ensure that young people have uninterrupted access to their learning.

The issue that Mr Balfour raises is the subject of local dialogue and discussion and will, I am sure, continue to be so. The Government will ensure that the issues are properly aired in the education recovery group in order to address the concerns that have been raised today.

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): What is the Deputy First Minister doing to encourage transport providers to reinforce measures that are aimed at reducing the spread of Covid-19, particularly when services originate in other countries that might have different guidance?

John Swinney: A lot of effort has been put in by officials, and reinforced by ministers, to discuss with individual transport providers the importance of properly applying the regulations in all transport

settings. That has been the subject of a great deal of dialogue with transport providers, and it has involved direct discussion with ministers.

Having been on public transport in Scotland in recent weeks, I have heard announcements being made. On Sunday, I happened to walk through Queen Street station in Glasgow, where the adherence to wearing face coverings was very high.

Emma Roddick’s point is valid—it is essential that that approach be taken. I assure her that ministers and officials are doing all that they can to ensure that that message is heard by transport providers.

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): In the past few days, I spoke to a nurse whose workload is now focused away from their normal duties and solely on providing flu vaccinations and Covid boosters. Although that is obviously extremely important work, as we have heard today, it takes members of staff away from other vital areas of our NHS and risks putting additional pressure on our already under-pressure nursing staff. How many existing NHS staff have been diverted to providing vaccinations and booster jags as their primary role? Given that Scotland already has a shortage of 3,400 nurses, what efforts are being made to recruit vaccinators from sources outside of existing NHS staff?

John Swinney: At the start of questions following my statement, Mr Ross gave a warm welcome to the steps that have been taken to deliver the vaccination programme. I thought that his comments were absolutely appropriate and valid. However, Mr Halcro Johnston is now complaining about the fact—[*Interruption.*] Well, he is complaining. To enable us to deliver the great performance that Mr Ross has complimented, we have to use some national health service staff. [*Interruption.*]

I do not know what discussion is going on between Ms Grahame and Mr Ross, but it is something to do with—[*Interruption.*]. I am trying to be helpful here. Mr Ross has welcomed the vaccination programme roll-out. How do we manage that? We manage it by ensuring that the priority is to give maximum protection to the population. However, when we do that, Mr Halcro Johnston comes along and moans about it. That just says it all about the Conservatives. [*Interruption.*]

Employment in the national health service is at a record high level. We have never had more nurses working in the NHS than we have today and that—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: I wish to ensure that every member in the chamber can hear what is being said. That is absolutely impossible, given

the current on-going interruptions. I would appreciate it if members would ensure that everyone can hear what is being said.

John Swinney: NHS staffing in Scotland is at a record high level and has increased by more than 25,000 under this Government. We have more staff working in the NHS and, according to Mr Ross, we have a successful and effective vaccination programme. I hope that that might give Mr Halcro Johnston some reassurance that the Scottish Government is doing everything that it can to roll out the vaccination programme as quickly and significantly as possible. The evidence demonstrates that that is the case.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): The Deputy First Minister confirmed that Scotland now recognises vaccination certificates from 130 countries. However, I am still being contacted by constituents who have had one vaccination in Scotland and another in either England or Wales but remain unable to get valid certificates. Will the Deputy First Minister update Parliament on when the on-going issues will be resolved? In the meantime, will he undertake to ensure that any such cases that are raised with the Government will be dealt with, so that individuals are not left to go from pillar to post?

John Swinney: I am aware that many such cases have been resolved. In a programme of around 10 million vaccinations, I think that we all accept that there will be challenges with absolute accuracy in all circumstances. I assure Mr McArthur that those issues are being resolved.

If members wish to contact ministers about any area where there is a need for further steps, we will do all that we can to resolve those issues as quickly as possible and to ensure that individuals are in no way disadvantaged by a lack of access to Covid certification.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): Last week, the United Kingdom became the first country in the world to license an antiviral drug, in the form of a pill, that clinical trials have found cuts by 50 per cent the risk of hospitalisation or death due to Covid. That is a game changer for the most vulnerable people.

Have Scottish ministers acted to secure a supply of the new treatment? When will vulnerable Scottish patients get the benefit of that? How will use of that new treatment be prioritised?

John Swinney: Such issues are discussed on a four-nations basis, as are all aspects of the vaccination programme. Those issues will also be the subject of clinical advice and intervention. The health secretary will be happy to update Parliament on the steps that are taken on the matter as a consequence of the four-nations discussions.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the statement on the Covid-19 update. There will be a brief pause.

Young Persons Guarantee and National Training Transition Fund

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

The next item of business is a debate without motion on skills and opportunities to support recovery—young persons guarantee and national training transition fund, one year on. Members who wish to speak in the debate should press their request-to-speak button now.

15:22

The Minister for Higher Education and Further Education, Youth Employment and Training (Jamie Hepburn): On 8 October 2020, the Scottish Government launched the national transition training fund and, in the following month, we set out to Parliament the ambitions for the young persons guarantee. I reiterate my gratitude, and that of the Government, to Sandy Begbie for the work that he has done in developing and leading on that guarantee. His passion and enthusiasm have been evident throughout and I am delighted that he continues to advance the guarantee and that he has taken on the role of national chair of Developing the Young Workforce, which emphasises his commitment to young people.

I am pleased to have the opportunity to highlight how we are delivering on our ambitions and are doing so through our partnership work with local government, our agencies, the third sector, teachers, lecturers, trainers, key workers and employers.

On this one-year anniversary of the young persons guarantee, I will outline the collaborative next steps that we are taking to deliver the skills and training opportunities that support our Covid recovery and the Government's wider efforts to bring about a fairer future.

Throughout the pandemic, we have sought to alleviate the harm that the virus has caused to our health, our economy and wider society. As we move forward with recovery, we must ensure that we build on the strong foundations that we have in our skills system and that we have the appropriate support to deliver training opportunities that will develop the skills that individuals and businesses need now and will need in future.

Last month, the Deputy First Minister launched the Scottish Government's Covid recovery strategy. It focused on the efforts that are needed to tackle inequality and disadvantage and the

actions that are required to ensure the recovery that people, communities and our economy want and need. The strategy recognises that many critical sectors across the Scottish economy are reporting issues with the supply of labour as a result of our exit from the European Union.

From the food and drink sector to hospitality and from transport to social care, we are working with business organisations to help employers to fill vacancies. Our employability programmes, upskilling and retraining interventions and fair work tools provide a package of support for employers and for workers who are interested in moving into those jobs.

We are also developing our new 10-year national strategy for economic transformation, which will focus on the economic future that we want to see, with a greener, fairer and more inclusive wellbeing economy. That approach will help us to meet our 2030 climate targets, restore the natural environment, stimulate innovation, create jobs, improve wellbeing for all and further embed fair work standards across the economy.

The delivery of economic transformation requires that the people of Scotland have the opportunity to acquire the right skills. Throughout the pandemic, we have sought to recognise and understand the challenges that individuals and businesses face in order to develop the right interventions to meet their skills needs. The national transition training fund, which was introduced as a specific response to Covid-19's effect on the labour market, is just one example of how we moved quickly to target our support to the individuals and sectors that were most in need.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): The minister states that everyone should be given the opportunity. The national transition training fund creates opportunities for about 40,000 people, but 120,000 people are unemployed. Indeed, there were 80,000 people on furlough when that scheme finished. Does he believe that the response is sufficient, or will more places need to be created?

Jamie Hepburn: I say to Mr Johnson that the national transition training fund is only one element of the entirety of the system that we have. That is why I made the point at the outset that the fund and the young persons guarantee build on the strong foundations that we have. I recognise and understand the point that he makes, which is entirely valid, but my response is that we do not rely only on the national transition training fund. We also have the flexible workforce development fund, individual training accounts and our wider tertiary education offer. The fund has to be placed in that context. I made that point when I said that it is just one example of how we target our support

to the individuals and sectors that are most in need.

Last year's funding from the national transition training fund had a number of different strands, including individual support for those aged 25 and over who were made unemployed or whose jobs were under threat because of Covid-19. We know that the training has been well received. For example, the feedback from the participants in the tourism and hospitality talent development programme was overwhelmingly positive.

As well as supporting individuals, the national transition training fund has helped sectors to enhance the skills of their existing labour force. Our partners have delivered a range of interventions that have positively supported a myriad of Scotland's most important and dynamic sectors from tourism and hospitality to green construction and from aerospace decommissioning to forestry.

Overall, in year 1, with some final figures still to be confirmed, up to 9,000 people have benefited from the training opportunities. A final year 1 report will be published early next year.

This year, we have given the national transition training fund a broader role in supporting Scotland's economic recovery, addressing the impact of EU exit and responding to demand for future skills transitions, including in the transition to net zero. We have sought to apply the lessons learned from the first year of delivery to ensure that the funding responds to economic needs, and we have committed up to £20 million in funding to support individuals and sectors, across more than 30 projects. That funding will support up to 20,000 individuals and it will offer specific assistance to sectors that are in need of support, such as aviation, social care and digital skills.

Recently, I visited West Lothian College to hear from staff and students about the gateway to health and social care course, which is a skills boost course that is funded by the national transition training fund and was developed by the college in collaboration with the Scottish Ambulance Service. It has provided a skills intervention for a number of participants who moved from different sectors to support our mobile testing centres and who now want to stay in the health sector. It is a fantastic initiative and a great example of how our colleges work in partnership to create courses that respond to the needs of sectors and individuals.

As with the national transition training fund, partnership working is critical to the ambitions of our young persons guarantee. As a Government, we are delivering on our commitment to young people by providing up to £130 million for the young persons guarantee, which builds on our

existing investment in education, skills and training. The funding will support 24,000 new and enhanced employment, training and education opportunities for young people, with a particular focus on supporting those who face additional challenges in participating in the labour market.

The young persons guarantee is youth focused and employer led. I am delighted to announce that more than 300 employers are now signed up to the guarantee, generating in excess of 6,000 additional opportunities. That movement of employers continues to grow, and I encourage all businesses and all sectors to get involved.

Employers are looking to their local communities as a source from which to recruit young workers and, alongside the Developing the Young Workforce network, are supporting the workforce of the future and our just transition towards our net zero targets.

Our national approach to the introduction of school co-ordinators for Developing the Young Workforce is creating increased work-based learning for pupils and is strengthening collaborative working with local employers. In recognition of the need for tailored support for some of our young people, we are providing additional funding to Enable and to Intercultural Youth Scotland in order to support disabled young people and young people from minority ethnic communities in schools.

Meanwhile, our local employability partnerships are working across Scotland to change the lives of young people in their communities—from Dumfries and Galloway's growing rural talent project to Orkney's work with Who Cares? Scotland to improve the lives of care-experienced young people. Those partnerships are also supporting young people who face challenges in entering the labour market into fair and sustainable employment, through employer recruitment incentives that we have put in place, which are delivered through local employability partnerships.

As part of a number of events that are taking place to mark the first anniversary of the young persons guarantee, I was in Inverness yesterday, where I had the pleasure of meeting Capgemini, one of the first employers to sign up to the guarantee. In collaboration with the local college, the company is growing itself with local talent, recognising the pathway progression from foundation apprenticeships to its modern apprenticeship programme. A core part of its involvement centres not only on a desire to be a good actor in supporting young people in its area but on the opportunity to identify talent to fill vacancies in the organisation.

That is a message that I would like to reaffirm to employers. The young persons guarantee and,

more generally, Developing the Young Workforce are certainly a way of giving back to young people, but they are also a massive recruitment opportunity. It is in employers' own enlightened self-interest to get involved.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab):

The minister might be aware that the first meeting took place last night of the Parliament's cross-party group on maritime and shipbuilding. Of particular concern to the industry were the significant skills gaps in bringing people through. Will the minister commit to engaging with that sector and making sure that we can deal with that issue?

Jamie Hepburn: I readily concede that I was unaware of the meeting of the cross-party group, but I would be very happy to engage with that sector, as I would with any sector that is willing to give young people opportunities to get into the world of work.

As well as meeting employers, I look forward to meeting next Wednesday, as part of Scotland's first careers week, a panel of young people at the employer conference for public sector and healthcare, and to discussing what the guarantee can do for them.

Strengthening careers advice and ensuring that every door remains open for every young person is an important part of the guarantee. The former general secretary of the Scottish Trades Union Congress and current board member of Skills Development Scotland Grahame Smith is leading a review of careers advice and information, as recommended by Sandy Begbie. Recommendations are due shortly.

As well as taking forward this range of actions, it is vital that we understand how the support that is delivered through the guarantee is achieving improved outcomes for young people. Our monitoring and evaluation framework, which is due for publication next month, will support our understanding of the impact of the guarantee across a range of economic, educational and equalities outcomes.

Albeit that they are only part of our efforts to support people to get the skills that they require in a changing economy and to respond to our societal need, the young persons guarantee and the national transition training fund sit alongside our wider tertiary education offer, individual training accounts and the flexible workforce development fund, as I mentioned a few moments ago to Daniel Johnson.

All too often, in the face of economic challenges, people have been left behind. Through our partnership working, I am determined not to have that happen, and that we work together to deliver a real and lasting impact.

14:34

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): I welcome the opportunity to debate such an important matter, particularly as we begin our job-focused recovery from the devastating effects of the pandemic.

Too often, apprenticeships are seen as being second best to higher education. That is wrong. If anything, I am grateful for having bypassed the traditional learning pathway in my own career. I am a great advocate of different pathways into work, because no one route suits all—I think that all members will agree on that.

As Confucius once said:

"I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand."

That quote is very relevant to the issue for debate today. Training and apprenticeships are more important than ever. People must be able to learn and to apply what they learn in the world of work. A fall in the unemployment rate is encouraging, but we face challenging times ahead, especially as we navigate through the new developments in our job market that have emerged in response to the pandemic and with our commitments to a greener economy and future.

As we build back, I am delighted that the national transition training fund is dedicated to helping people to develop skills or to retrain in the face of Covid-19 and move into growth sectors. However, 13 per cent of respondents to the survey that was conducted did not secure a job after training. We cannot simply forget about that 13 per cent. Will the minister explain what is being done to foster a connection between individuals who have undergone training and businesses that are experiencing a skills shortage?

I commend the aims of the national transition training fund. In its immediate aftermath, it is possible that we will see an increase in new hires as numbers go back to pre-pandemic levels. However, without offering training that is based on demand from businesses, we risk having significant gaps and overlaps. More concerning than that, in May 2021, figures released by the Scottish Government put the number of individuals who were being supported by the scheme at around 3,000 rather than 6,000. The lack of consideration of what businesses need could also be responsible for the Scottish National Party's broken promise to have 30,000 modern apprenticeships a year by 2020.

Jamie Hepburn: I hope that Pam Gosal recognises two things. First, there has been a year-on-year increase in the number of apprenticeships in Scotland as opposed to what has been happening south of the border, where there has been a year-on-year decrease over the

past few years. Secondly, I hope that she—being a fair-minded person—also recognises that the reason that that target was not achieved in the year that was set for it is that we were in the midst of a global pandemic and demand fell. It would otherwise have been achieved.

Pam Gosal: Every time that we come into this chamber, we look at the reason behind something, and the reason is always Covid. However, that fund was set up because we needed it during Covid, so it should have reached the targets that we had. The fact is that the Government had a target of reaching 6,000 individuals and it reached only 3,000. I see today that the Government has reached up to 7,500 individuals, but that still is not enough. There are 115,000 people facing long-term unemployment, and we need to do much more.

Jamie Hepburn: Will the member give way again?

Pam Gosal: I want to make some progress with my speech.

The minister excused the failure—this is quite relevant—under the cover of the coronavirus. The SNP Scottish Government seems to have been hiding behind the effects of the pandemic for a lot of its policy failures recently. Yes, the Covid-19 pandemic has had an adverse impact on young people in employment. However, even before the pandemic, the number of employers with science, technology, engineering and mathematics skills shortages was increasing, and the number of young people starting a modern apprenticeship had fallen for five years in a row.

A demand-led approach to apprenticeships could have increased both the number of modern apprenticeships and the success rate of people finding a job on completion of their training. And that is not to mention the many graduates who have dedicated years to building up their skills to enter the workforce but who have faced difficulty in securing a graduate apprenticeship, paid or otherwise.

I understand that, in an uncertain market, taking on an apprentice is a commitment that some businesses are unable to make. However, the national transition training fund was created for that reason. It was and still is an important time to do everything that we can to advance people's lives, businesses and the economy.

Jamie Hepburn: Will the member give way?

Pam Gosal: I will make progress.

Once again, it has fallen to the Opposition to do the numbers for the SNP. The First Minister announced a £15 million programme that would pay businesses £5,000 for each apprentice that they took on. However, if we divide that £15 million

by £5,000, the numbers reveal that only 3,000 young people will be supported by the apprenticeship programme. That is less than 6 per cent of unemployed young people. Does the minister agree that his £15 million apprenticeship programme is inadequate to address the larger issue of unemployment?

Businesses and organisations such as the Confederation of British Industry recommend a demand-led approach to apprenticeships. I ask the minister to commit to such an approach.

Jamie Hepburn: I am genuinely perplexed as to what the member means when she asks us to change to a demand-led process for apprenticeships. We have a demand-led process. It seems inconsistent of her to ask for a demand-led system on the one hand while, on the other, dismissing the point that I made, which is that the very reason for our facing a challenge in reaching the 30,000 target was that the demand was not there. How can she square that circle?

Pam Gosal: If the minister is saying that the fund and its delivery are demand led, I can only say that he has a problem with marketing the fund and making businesses aware of it, because 13 per cent fell through the gap—and those are real people, not just statistics. There must be an issue with the marketing. The minister has to look at that.

Our world is changing. New skills are needed and businesses are looking to the future. Can the Scottish Government keep up?

I will finish by making three key points. First, the training that is offered through the national transition training fund is not enough to enable individuals to secure jobs. Far more must be done—and fast. Secondly, a demand-led approach must be taken if we are to make apprenticeships more attractive to employers, especially during these unprecedented times. Lastly, Scotland's young people deserve every opportunity to prosper and thrive. They cannot become Covid's lost generation.

15:42

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): The pace of technological change is the fastest that it has ever been and the slowest that it will ever be. Economic change has been accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic, and climate change demands that, rather than search for the brake, we put our foot on the accelerator to effect further, deeper and more profound change.

The early days of this Government's response do not bode well. The measures that the Government has taken have been inadequate at

best. There is little surprise about that, given the 14-year track record of inadequate delivery.

It is difficult to find the right solution when the Government refuses to define the problem. There has been no robust analysis of the impact of young people's experience of education on attainment and skills. That is the case in relation to schools, tertiary education and apprenticeships and other skills-based learning.

Labour has raised issues such as the scale of lost learning, receding literacy and communication skills among the youngest pupils and the number of disengaged teenagers, and we have asked for a state-of-the-nation analysis of the area time and again. The Government appears to have no appetite for that or for facing the reality that front-line workers deal with every day. We do not know the impact of lost learning on aspirations and the knock-on effect on skills gaps in the economy. We do not know the full extent of skills gaps regionally and across different industries, because there have been numerous incomplete skills audits, as Skills Development Scotland has admitted in the Parliament in recent weeks.

That means that we have an education recovery plan that amounts to little more than a cut-and-paste of existing policies. People on the front line have pilloried it as utterly inadequate and detached from reality.

All those issues have been raised with the ministerial team, and all have yet to see action.

The unemployment rate for young people peaked at 10.1 per cent this year—more than double the national rate. There is little or no plan of substance for getting those young people into employment and equipping them with the skills that are needed for the future. Daniel Johnson pointed out the inadequate scale of current interventions. The national transition training fund and the young person's guarantee amount to 44,000 opportunities—about a third of the total that is required.

When we consider recovery and the realignment of the economy following Brexit and the pandemic, we need to acknowledge that our skills system was not functioning well before Brexit and the pandemic, so that we can design a system for the future. That system must be strategic in its purpose, it must consider the reality of how our economy is changing and where the opportunities will lie, and it must be centred on the individual. For the sake of those children, we cannot get bogged down in the constant grievances or constitutional bickering that we too often hear around the issue of skills shortages.

From the experience in my region, in the oil and gas industry, we know that the system often struggles to effectively upskill or reskill people into

the industries where they are needed. Bridging the gap between the current North Sea industry and the next will require significant Government support at scale. However, technology transitions throughout history show that labour follows opportunity rather than forecasts. In essence, people will retrain only when the jobs are there, so a proactive industrial strategy is absolutely vital. We have seen the SNP Government miss its own targets by some considerable distance when it comes to the creation of green jobs and within its flagship employment service, Fair Start Scotland.

A key focus must be on ensuring that our skills system aligns with the long-term needs and interests of the economy and the people of our country. There can be nothing more important than digital skills, which will be pervasive in all parts of our economy in the future, and Scotland is woefully equipped to embrace the jobs and growth of that future. When I speak to businesses in my home city of Dundee, I hear that there is a desperate need for software engineers, coders, developers and information technology support but no considerable skills base from which that need can be met. Literally hundreds of people in the city are missing out on those opportunities because this Government is not equipping them with the necessary skills.

Whether a business is hiring graduates, filling technical posts or recruiting PhDs, far too often, young Scots are not available. Yes, that issue is sometimes complex. As the Logan review—commissioned by this Government but, sadly, not particularly well enacted—touched on, that requires careful planning and multi-agency co-ordination. Let us start by ensuring that there is a higher computing class running in every secondary school, with a qualified teacher to teach it. I would ask whether that is beyond the wit of this Government.

I believe that the private sector has the ideas and will to engage on these issues—it is, after all, those firms that require the skills that we are talking about—but that sector often feels that it is left to engage by itself, on a basis forged more by opportunity than a cohesive structure. A fundamental appraisal by the Government is urgently needed to get the structures right. Surely that must inform the thinking when we consider the funds and the guarantees that we are assessing today.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): The member says that no support has been offered and that young people are doing this on their own. However, I have read that Dumfries and Galloway College, with support from the Scottish Government, is actively supporting young people to engage in digital courses. Is that not something that we should recognise?

Michael Marra: Whether we are training people in artificial intelligence and machine learning or training people to the highest degrees and making sure that we have software engineers and people who can work in industry in the future, the scale of such interventions is completely inadequate in relation to what is required for the future of our economy. The Government is taking some limited interventions but, as its own publication, under the Logan review, recognised, they are entirely inadequate. Far more needs to be done. The private sector is ready to engage in this, but more needs to be done to engage it in talking about the skills gaps and what is required.

There are many options and routes to ensuring a better, more responsive and more strategic skills sector, and Labour members are ready to make that a reality. What will not get us there, though, is this Government burying its head in the sand over the significant challenges that we face. We cannot afford more dither and delay.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am not trying to catch any particular person's eye, but I remind all members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak button now.

15:49

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): Liberal Democrats have long argued that we need a massive investment in education, skills and retraining. The ability to retrain and learn new skills at every stage of life is more important than ever—it was more important than ever even before the pandemic hit. Businesses need the tools to thrive and everyone should have access to good work. Problems such as the climate emergency and the pandemic-related jobs crisis can often feel insurmountable, but a just transition to a net zero economy can and should create opportunities and jobs. With investment and innovation backed up by retraining and upskilling opportunities, there is hope.

We have the opportunity to rebuild our economy and repurpose it towards climate-friendly industry by pursuing and encouraging new green investments. If we get it right, Scotland could have the most highly skilled and adaptable workforce in Europe.

In the Scottish budget deal last year, we secured £50 million in a special allocation for the north-east to pay for skills, training, upskilling and business support in a region that is particularly under pressure, given its reliance on fossil fuels. That is how important we regard the agenda as being. It is why we made the case for a Government-backed graduate internship programme especially for small and medium-sized enterprises to get new talent into such businesses

and to give that talent an important step on to the employment ladder. I am pleased that the Government is rolling that out. It is also why we welcome the young persons job guarantee. The scarring that we have seen in crises past must not be repeated this time. I, too, thank Sandy Begbie for his leadership.

It is also why we welcomed the national transition training fund, even though it had limited ambition. However, as is often the case with the Government, the rhetoric does not match the reality. The minister and I had a bit of an exchange earlier this year on the Government's failure to deliver on its targets for that fund. The target was to train 6,000 people, but only 3,000 places were delivered by the end of March. The minister blamed the pandemic and the furlough scheme, but that excuse does not wash, because the target was set last October—right in the middle of the pandemic. Only half of an already cautious target was met for the period that began in October last year.

Jamie Hepburn: I do not know whether Willie Rennie was listening when I made my opening speech. We are still waiting for the final figures, but the indication is that there were actually 9,000 starts in the national transition training fund last year. I thought that that might be helpful.

Willie Rennie: What happened with the deadlines and targets for the national transition training fund is curious, because they miraculously moved from March to July. That is an additional four months in which the minister could try to get his numbers up to the target that he set. In a dangerous sleight of hand, he can suddenly profess to have met his target. We should view that report with great suspicion.

Jamie Hepburn: I do not know whether Mr Rennie is aware, but a lot of that training was delivered through our tertiary education system. As he is aware, that operates to an academic year rather than a financial year. That is why the figures are as they are.

Willie Rennie: The minister knew that last October. He is suddenly changing every setting, criterion, target and number to suit his argument. The truth is that he failed to meet the target by March. That was revealed in an answer to a written question at the time. It is clear that he failed and, rather than squirming away and trying to come up with various excuses as to why he has failed, he should just confess. [*Interruption.*] He is squirming—he is holding his hands out. If that is not squirming, I have never seen it.

Daniel Johnson: Does Willie Rennie agree that quibbling about a thousand or two here or there is totally irrelevant compared with the more than 120,000 people who are currently unemployed or

the 80,000 people who were on furlough when that scheme finished?

Willie Rennie: Daniel Johnson makes a good point. It is the point that I made about the limited ambition of the national transition training fund. Even with that limited ambition, the minister still failed to meet the target that he set only last October. They are his conditions, and he has failed to meet them.

It is important that the Government be honest. We have massive challenges in meeting the skills shortages across a load of sectors, from forestry to health and from early years education to logistics, but the minister is fiddling around with small numbers and making small changes. That is why we have ended up with the skills crisis that we have.

If the minister is going to fulfil the ambition that is required of the country—the ambition of young people and, in fact, of people of all ages—he will have to step up to the mark and start to deliver for a change.

15:54

Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): I am grateful to have the chance to reflect on the success of the young persons guarantee and the national transition training fund, one year after their inception. As we steadily and conscientiously navigate our route out to recovery, it is crucial to remember that the social, educational and economic scars of the pandemic have disproportionately affected the lives of our young people in Scotland.

Research funded by the Scottish Government and carried out by Young Scot, the Scottish Youth Parliament and YouthLink Scotland over the past year gave young people aged 11 to 25 the opportunity to share their views in an open survey on the impact of Covid-19. Thousands of responses to the survey show that it was largely girls and young women, young people aged over 18, young people with a disability or long-term illness and young carers who reported lower physical and mental wellbeing, lower satisfaction with educational arrangements and lower levels of optimism about current and future employment prospects.

In the same month that the Covid impact survey closed, the Scottish Government launched the young persons guarantee—a commitment that every 16 to 24-year-old in Scotland will be given the chance to work, start an apprenticeship, attend further or higher education or gain experience through specific training programmes or volunteering.

With fair work remaining a key tenet of the SNP's economic plan, it is essential to create a labour market that values individual wellbeing and actively strives to remove the barriers that certain communities face to finding employment. Although more than 18,000 opportunities, including modern apprenticeships and graduate programmes, have been created through the young persons guarantee since 2020, I whole-heartedly welcome the additional £70 million that has been pledged by the Government, which will continue to support employers and providers to equip our young people with the skills that are needed for Scotland's future.

In addition, as part of building an inclusive and environmentally focused economy, enhancing the national transition training fund by a further £125 million will allow us to work towards our net zero ambitions and support those aged 25 and over to retrain and develop the skills required to move into areas with the greatest potential for future growth and job opportunities.

Given the thousands of people in Glasgow marching for climate action, it is fantastic that those employment initiatives will be strongly linked to the climate emergency skills action plan and the green jobs workforce academy, including aircraft decommissioning training for workers in the aerospace sector and upskilling and reskilling individuals in the construction industry, with a focus on energy efficiency. I have seen that at first hand at the City of Glasgow College in Kelvin. *[Interruption.]* I am just about to finish.

After the success of its first year, which helped more than 6,000 people enrol in a variety of training programmes, the national transition training fund will continue for a second year, providing 20,000 training opportunities in sectors that have been impacted by Covid-19, climate commitments and an unwanted EU exit.

Although progress has undoubtedly been made, there is no room for complacency. I am proud that the Government continues to act with future generations in mind, and to quote my colleague Fiona Hyslop when she launched the young persons guarantee, I say to Scotland's young people that I want you to know that we are marching with you and

“we want you to be successful and we will do everything we can to give you the opportunities you need.”

15:58

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): The pandemic is one of the biggest challenges faced by young people across our United Kingdom. Young people have been detrimentally impacted as lockdowns and restrictions have affected their ability to work, study and plan for

their futures. I understand the worry that the pandemic must have caused to many who have just left school and have no certainty about when life will return to normal.

As we continue to manoeuvre out of the pandemic, we must turn our attention to young people in Scotland. They are looking to us to ensure that we create jobs and provide opportunities to upskill. It is crucial that they have access to stable employment prospects once they have decided on their chosen career path.

Although the pandemic has added to the pressures on the job market, we know that the Scottish Government was under pressure to make improvements in looking at providing opportunities for our young people. From looking at the SNP Scottish Government's record, we know that it has not done enough to provide our young people with the best opportunities once they leave school, higher education or further education. For example, prior to the pandemic, the SNP broke its promise to achieve 30,000 modern apprenticeships per year by 2019. It has missed its target on employability fund starts, and the numbers of young people starting a modern apprenticeship have fallen for five years in a row.

The SNP has admitted that the youth unemployment rate could rise to as high as 20 per cent. Its plan would help only 4 per cent of our young people. That proves that the SNP does not have a grip on supporting young people or the ideas to create more opportunities for them.

When we look at the roll-out of the SNP's young persons guarantee and the national transition training fund, we see again that there is merit in the intention, as it aims to bring employers, partners and young people together, but the delivery has been poor. Although 4,000 people have had training funded through the national transition training fund, only 87 per cent of those who were surveyed after completing the programme had found a job. That is 13 per cent of those young people who will feel let down. Will the minister acknowledge in summing up that we need to do more to help that 13 per cent and ensure that that does not happen in future years as we continue with the programme?

I turn to the SNP's apprenticeship policy, which was announced at its party conference last year. The First Minister promised a £15 million programme that would pay businesses £5,000 for each apprenticeship that they took on. In principle, that is a good idea, as it supports young people into employment as well as supporting businesses—it has been difficult for them, too. However, if we do the maths—as my colleague Pam Gosal did in her speech—we see that only 3,000 young people will be supported by that scheme.

The topic of this debate is skills and opportunities to support recovery. The Scottish Conservatives have the ambition to help and support young people. Some of our ideas, such as unlimited demand-led apprenticeships, were outlined in our party's manifesto. We know that the pandemic and climate change have created demand in certain job sectors. We must take advantage of that by promoting those vacancies and helping young people to obtain work experience and jobs through apprenticeship programmes. It is simply not good enough to continue with the SNP's targets-based approach, which ignores employers' needs.

We would also look to support more women into apprenticeships. That area is often overlooked, but we know that there is a gender gap, particularly in STEM-related career paths. What could be better than to use the discussions that we have all had over the past week during the 26th United Nations climate change conference of the parties—COP26—to bring more women into those sectors through apprenticeships and upskilling?

To conclude, the SNP needs to get a grip on those issues to ensure that our young people are provided with opportunities. If it does not act now to deal with the real issues that our job sector faces, many young people will, sadly, miss out on life-changing opportunities that could have been offered by the Scottish Government.

16:03

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): The global Covid-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented impact, the full scale of which has still to emerge. In 2020, we saw the largest disruption to education and employment in recent history. School closures and more general disruption to learning have impacted greatly on education and the development and wellbeing of children and young people—in particular, those who are vulnerable and marginalised.

That said, I have been privileged to witness some truly astounding displays of resilience, determination and flexibility from young people in my constituency in the past 18 months. I am sure that colleagues have also seen such examples in their constituencies the length and breadth of this country.

The introduction of the national transition training fund, along with the young persons guarantee, by the Scottish Government in 2020 in response to the economic impact of the coronavirus pandemic, was an important commitment to the future of employer-workforce development and to those who most need our support. By bringing together employers, partners and young people, the aim of the young persons

guarantee is to connect 16 to 24-year-olds in Scotland to an opportunity, whether that be a job, an apprenticeship, further or higher education, a training programme or volunteering. That was ambitious, progressive and forward looking, so I am delighted that successful progression of that multifaceted programme has already created in excess of 18,000 opportunities for young people.

Alongside that, the national transition training fund seeks to tackle the rise in unemployment in adults aged 25-plus by offering short, sharp training opportunities for people to learn in-demand skills, and by providing adults with tailored support to identify relevant training and employment opportunities, followed by funded training to match their individual needs.

In Fife, I was pleased to see an initiative by Fife College in partnership with the Energy Skills Partnership being warmly received. The initiative is at the heart of delivering invaluable support. A series of fully funded training courses have been made available to individuals aged over 25 who have either faced redundancy or have been made redundant since last March, when the pandemic began.

Fifers who have been adversely affected by the pandemic can access a wide range of courses, including one on the most recent wiring regulation update, an upskilling qualification in electric vehicle charging that is aimed at qualified electricians, and training for tradespeople in the energy, engineering and construction sectors. Health and safety qualifications on offer include the National Examination Board in Occupational Safety and Health's general certificate, and the Institution of Occupational Safety and Health's managing safely course.

The purpose and design of the courses are to allow tradespeople to upskill and move into roles in sectors with better potential for future growth and job retention. The renewables industry in Scotland is growing and offers great employment prospects for those who have the required skills and knowledge.

As we promote and explore the potential of Scotland's renewable energy sources, and renewable energy's ability to meet our local and national heat, transport and electricity needs, it is clear that a highly skilled workforce will be fundamental to the success of our renewables industry.

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): Given that his party has been in government for more than 14 years, does the member not feel that we have missed the boat when it comes to taking advantage of the opportunities that the renewables sector offers?

David Torrance: I am slightly disappointed that renewables sector manufacturing jobs did not come to us. That is especially true for me because Burntisland Fabrications was in my constituency. The UK Government had a part to play in that.

The measures are also about training people for jobs around the globe. Several of my constituents work in maintenance in the renewables sector. They work in the international market, in places such as Turkey and Italy, and they bring back their income to spend in the local economy.

Opportunities such as those that are being delivered by Fife College, through the national transition training fund, are allowing tradesmen and tradeswomen to retrain in renewables technology installation and maintenance, and to develop the required skills for the transition into green jobs and a new future.

Although it is, of course, important to recognise that although progress has been made, work remains to be done. Efforts must, and will, continue to ensure that the ambition and early success of those programmes are improved on, with the addition of new and exciting opportunities.

The increased investment of £70 million will support local partnerships to provide training and employer recruitment incentives; colleges to deliver around 5,000 more short industry-focussed courses; the continued roll-out of new school co-ordinators through the developing the young workforce programme; a new graduate internship scheme; and increased volunteering capacity and third sector programmes. All those are extremely welcome. Also welcome is the £20 million that is being made available through the second phase of the national transition training fund in 2021-22.

We all know that our young people will have a key role to play as we deliver a better and fairer country and build on our ambition for Scotland. We must learn from what we have done so far and we must continue to work collaboratively to ensure that all young people can realise their full potential.

16:08

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): The pandemic has caused a shock to the ambitions of young people—a shock that we must urgently mitigate if we do not want to leave behind an entire generation.

The unemployment rate for young people is one in 10, which is more than double the rate for the rest the population. Almost two thirds of people who lost their jobs due to the pandemic were under 25. Young people have shouldered the burden of the pandemic disproportionately, when it comes to employment.

As I have mentioned previously, tens of thousands of young people shielded. They gave up opportunities in order to protect themselves and the rest of the country, but they were not singled out for any attention. That still disappoints me deeply.

As the Scottish Government's former adviser, Naomi Eisenstadt, pointed out a few years ago in her review "The life chances of young people in Scotland: report to the First Minister" on the life chances of young people aged 16 to 24,

"choices of career, further training, employment, and housing can be particularly problematic for young adults. Decisions at this stage can set the course for adulthood."

I have always believed that to be right.

Jamie Hepburn: The member is quite right to express her concerns, which I share, about the rate of youth unemployment. She said that there has been no response to that. Does she not recognise that the young persons guarantee might be felt to be a response to that reality?

Pauline McNeill: That is what I will go on to talk about. In principle, the young persons guarantee is the right response. However, as Michael Marra—I think—pointed out earlier, the issue is the approach that we take and its scale. I will address that in some detail, because I am trying to be constructive. I went through the website in some detail, as if I was a young person looking at it and I found it to be a very clunky website. I hope that, since the minister asked the question, he will take on board some of my points about it.

I want to acknowledge the work of Sandy Begbie and Grahame Smith. If I was in the minister's shoes, I would, given that we agree on the background to it, give those people leadership of the scheme because we do not have a lot of time to get it back on track. There are about 600,000 young adults in Scotland, which is a significant section of the working population. I welcome the principle of the scheme, but it lacks any serious attempt to directly engage with young people, as my example showed.

At the time when young people were shielding, I specifically called on the minister—the current minister—to directly engage with them, because they were struggling to use the website, as many of them still are. It is not good enough. When we click on "search for a job", we are presented with a keyword search that puts in some keywords, but it should suggest areas of employment. The way it works relies on the young person getting knowledge from somewhere else. It should flag up the sectors where there is growth. Where are those jobs and where should young people be looking? They do not know; they are 16, 17 and 18 years old.

The website also includes volunteering roles. Although I accept that volunteering is beneficial for young people, it is not a paid career and it is not necessarily a start on the career ladder. In addition, the vast majority of young people cannot afford to volunteer, so I find volunteering's inclusion strange, in the scheme of things.

I would also like to hear the minister guarantee that the young persons guarantee scheme will not deliver zero-hours contract positions and that there is an expectation that we will raise young people's living standards when they apply for jobs.

Last year, the report of the advisory group on economic recovery stated:

"The scheme should offer secure employment, for a period of at least two years, to 16-25 year olds, paid at the Living Wage, with access to training, apprenticeships and the possibility of progression."

However, despite the scheme's having been launched in November 2020, the Scottish Government has confirmed that it has still not set targets or key performance indicators, which means that there is no way to measure the success or impact of the scheme. It promised 130,000 green jobs by 2020, but we are significantly behind that number, with only 21,000 jobs having been confirmed.

The green jobs workforce academy was announced in August, but it is not clear how many jobs will be offered under that scheme. The link that is provided on the academy's web pages comes up with around 900 jobs, as I saw for myself this afternoon. It is about the scale of the response. I pretended to be a young person in Glasgow and only about 500 jobs were thrown up by the scheme, which is significantly below where we need it to be. I hope that we can make significant improvements to the scheme and that the minister has listened to what I have said.

16:13

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I am enjoying the debate and have changed what I was originally going to talk about. Instead, I call on my experience as an information technology professional to follow up on what my colleague Emma Harper said. Lots of really good work is going on in the IT sector, but we are in danger of forgetting that and not seeing how innovative Scotland is in responding to things such as the IT skills gap. We talk down the industry, which might be putting people off.

Michael Marra: Does the member accept that the Logan review, which was commissioned by the Government, recognised the huge skills gaps in the industry and the potential—indeed, the necessity—for growth? I speak to employers in my

constituency who tell me that software engineers are like hen's teeth.

Clare Adamson: Absolutely. I declare an interest as I am still a member of the British Computer Society. However, it is not just Scotland: everywhere there are shortages in IT. That is why we should be encouraging initiatives such as dressCode, which is a not-for-profit charity that was started by a computing teacher in Scotland and which encourages young women to take up computing in school. It promotes coding and all sorts of other areas, including games design and cybersecurity. I believe that it is running a competition for a poster that will encourage more women to take part in computing. *[Interruption.]* No—I have taken one intervention already.

Such initiatives are making a difference by encouraging people to come forward. If I get back to the speech that I had planned to give, I will talk about how our education establishments work with our communities and in partnership with people across Scotland to encourage people to take part in education.

The Open University's CodingSkills+ programme was a response to the Covid pandemic. Through the £1 million digital start fund, which Skills Development Scotland managed, the programme made 100 opportunities available. It took on people who had been furloughed or made redundant as a result of Covid and gave them 13 weeks of intense IT training so that they had the skills that they needed to take up productive and highly paid jobs of the kind that we want in Scotland. We must do such things.

ScotlandIS is doing an incredible amount of work to encourage people into IT. We have so much to be thankful for, such as the success of our games industry and of Abertay University and other universities that have taken up training for that industry and are teaching people to code. *[Interruption.]* I am sorry; I will not take another intervention.

I wanted to be here today because I want to talk about the great work that is being done in my constituency with foundation apprenticeships. A few years ago, I had the joy of visiting, with the Deputy First Minister, Braidhurst high school, which has embedded a partnership with New College Lanarkshire. That is an incredible college, and its success in WorldSkills competitions exemplifies that. Every year, the college has taken young people to competitions in Britain and the wider world in order to show all the training that it is doing to give young people skills. The college is an exemplar of how to encourage young people to take up apprenticeships, which are so important.

The young persons guarantee is such a great development. We cannot forget how important

initiatives have been in encouraging young people and giving them confidence to see that they do not need to go to college or university—although that is a brilliant way for them to go forward—and that there are opportunities through foundation apprenticeships and through gaining skills while working.

However, please can we have fair work? Please can we have no more age discrimination whereby young people are paid a lower minimum wage? Please can we also end unfair unpaid work trials for young people?

16:17

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): The challenges that our young people face as a result of the current public health crisis cannot be overstated and have implications for social, economic and health-related outcomes. Against that background, the ambition for the young persons guarantee was bold, and I, too, thank Sandy Begbie. The aim is that, within two years of its introduction, every 16 to 24-year-old will be in paid employment, on an apprenticeship or training programme, enrolled in education or engaged in formal volunteering.

Key to the guarantee's success is its design and the pace of implementation, but the think tank Our Scottish Future argues that job creation through the scheme is taking second place to several rounds of consultation and governance design. Overall, it identifies

“a disconnect between ambition, incentivisation and opportunity creation”.

We know that time is of the essence. Figures that were published in September show that there are about 8,300 more unemployed young people than there were pre-pandemic, which is a rise of 2.7 per cent. However, the minister confirmed earlier this year that the Scottish Government has not set targets—*[Interruption.]* The Government might come up with a figure of about 9,000, but it has not set targets for the guarantee. Meanwhile, the overarching key performance indicator is a return to pre-pandemic levels of unemployment by the end of this parliamentary session, which is five years from now. *[Interruption.]* I might take an intervention when the clunky website has been sorted out and something that is easier to navigate has been produced, but not now.

It is, of course, critically important that we assess the impact of Covid-19 on the opportunities that are available to young people. However, the absence of opportunities cannot be blamed on the pandemic alone. *[Interruption.]* No, I want to make progress.

Labour market statistics for Scotland show that the employment rate for 16 to 24-year-olds has

been decreasing since July 2018, which suggests that at least some of the underlying drivers are systemic.

Ensuring that Scotland's young people have the right training and skills is key to long-term attachment to the labour market. Apprenticeships, in particular, can help to provide the next generation of workers with the skills that our economy needs, yet modern apprenticeship starts for 16 to 19-year-olds have fallen every year since 2014. We know from the most recent Scottish employer skills survey that more than one fifth of all vacancies were skill-shortage vacancies. Employers could not fill them, because applicants simply did not have the skill set, knowledge or experience to do the role. That is the case not only with software engineers. Further, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's 2020 report on skills in Scotland emphasised that improvements could be made to increase the "responsiveness, quality and flexibility" of the apprenticeship system.

It is good to hear the minister say that he is heeding the calls from organisations such as Confederation of British Industry Scotland and the Scottish Conservatives, who have always advocated strongly for a demand-led approach that would enable businesses to create apprentice places based on their specific needs. That is the skills revolution that Scotland needs.

It is undoubtedly true that the past 18 months have been incredibly challenging, but there is scope to create a skilled workforce of young people that can meet the emerging needs of the economy as it recovers.

16:21

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): Only last week, I arranged a meeting with Skills Development Scotland, the Department for Work and Pensions and East Lothian works to consider our skills and employability strategy. At that meeting, we discussed the situation in East Lothian and the sectors that have been impacted by Brexit. In hospitality, many businesses are not working at full capacity; in farming, many fruit farmers are telling me that they will not be planting fruit next year as they have no one to pick the fruit; and in care, all our providers are struggling to recruit.

At that meeting, we heard that our area's unemployment rate is 5.8 per cent, which is higher than the national rate of 4.8 per cent, and that the unemployment rate for 16 to 24-year-olds is also higher than the national rate of 12.4 per cent. However, for context—I hope that our Tory colleagues are listening to this—the UK unemployment rate for 16 to 24-year-olds is 17 per

cent, so I will not take any lessons from Tories on the phenomenon.

Tess White: Will the member take an intervention?

Paul McLennan: No, I am sorry.

The claimant count in East Lothian in September was 2,435, which is 38 per cent higher than the pre-pandemic level in February 2021. Between 1 July and 26 October 2021, there were 2,421 job postings advertised across East Lothian. That means that there are high claimant counts and high job postings. The challenge is to marry those two statistics.

I want to focus on the young persons guarantee. We want to make it as easy as possible for young people to understand their learning and career choices at the earliest age, and providing long-term person-centred support for the young people who need that most is key.

I know that Skills Development Scotland is leading on a collaborative, system-wide review of careers information, advice and guidance—I note that careers week takes place next week—to bring together the views and experiences of young people, parents, employers, teachers and experts.

In addition, SDS has developed a series of mapping workshops with the DWP, local authorities and the third sector on behalf of the Scottish Government, looking at interaction points and handovers between the SDS, the DWP and local authorities, as well as, importantly, third sector employability provision for young people.

The review of the senior phase will help us better align education provision at all levels with the future economic strategy for Scotland and the needs of employers.

The implementation of the policy of having Developing the Young Workforce school co-ordinators in every secondary school in Scotland is key in relation to engagement with partners and will increase opportunities for work-based learning for pupils and support their access to education, work and training. Apprenticeships will play a crucial role in that, with pathway apprenticeships and, as the minister mentioned, confirmed funding for foundation and graduate apprenticeships. The Enterprise and Skills Strategic Board is important to that work, as are the Scottish Funding Council, Skills Development Scotland and enterprise agencies.

The Scottish Government, UK Government and local authorities all work together—which I have seen happen in East Lothian—to ensure alignment between the kickstart programme and the young persons guarantee. I am having quarterly meetings in East Lothian to ensure that we all

work closer together. Local, tailored approaches are key as we tackle the issue.

In supporting those who need it most, we need to gain a better understanding of the sectors that support groups of young people who can face barriers due to inequality, which we know has been exacerbated by the pandemic. Local partnerships, with additional funding for recruitment incentives to support young people into jobs and apprenticeships, are key.

Some of the hardest hit sectors are leisure, tourism, hospitality and care. Traditionally, it is in those sectors that young people, people from minority ethnic backgrounds and women have secured jobs. Opportunities and roles in the health and social care sector could be used to support young people into employment.

There are opportunities to develop local and sector-based initiatives, such as hospitality academies. In rural economies, the growing rural talent programme provides opportunities for young people, while still at school, to develop relevant skills and knowledge of the forestry and agriculture sectors as the start of a pathway to a range of opportunities post school.

A highly skilled, motivated young workforce is key to meeting the challenges of Brexit and Covid recovery. Let us all play our part in supporting that agenda, and develop our young people as best we can.

16:26

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): In the short time that I have, I will concentrate on the young persons guarantee.

The young persons guarantee

“is a commitment to bring together employers, partners and young people. It aims to connect every 16 to 24 year old in Scotland to an opportunity.”

What is that opportunity? It could be a job, apprenticeship, further or higher education, training programme, or, from the scant evidence available, more likely a volunteering opportunity.

As we emerge from the pandemic, there is a real and present danger that the Covid generation of 18 to 25-year-olds who are coming through the crisis are set at a permanent disadvantage compared with their elder peers. We have a group of young people with a lost 18 months—a lost 18 months of developing with experiences, extending the friendship circles that are so important going forward and growing up with the support that existed for those who went before. They are our Covid generation—a generation that was promised that it would have an opportunity.

Despite the scheme being launched in November 2020, the Scottish Government has confirmed that it has still set no targets or key performance indicators for its young persons guarantee, meaning that there is no way to measure the success or impact of the scheme.

In June this year, responding to a written question—

Jamie Hepburn: I am sure that the member would not want to mislead Parliament. KPIs have been published, and I am happy to send them to him.

Martin Whitfield: I am grateful for the minister's intervention, because in June this year, in a written response, the minister said:

“we have not set targets for the Guarantee.”—[*Written Answers*, 11 June 2021; S6W-00331.]

In July 2021, the Government published an implementation progress report, which states:

“Work continues to develop the Measurement and Evaluation Framework, which will underpin our understanding of how the Young Person's Guarantee is working for young people.”

The same report highlights the key risks and mitigations. I will give one example. A potential risk is that

“Colleges and universities may be unable to deliver additional training and opportunities due to possible lack of resource.”

The mitigation is stated as

“1) Regular engagement with further and higher education partners”

and

“2) Regular engagement with students and their representative organisations.”

I humbly suggest that if additional training and opportunities are undeliverable due to resources, the answer is probably not engagement, but better resources.

The minister's written answer went on to say:

“As part of this process we are developing a set of Key Performance Indicators that will help us understand the cumulative impact of the Guarantee. These are due to be finalised in Summer 2021.”—[*Written Answers*, 11 June 2021; S6W-00331.]

It is a scheme that shows more hope than delivery. The report provides updates on progress made against the initial recommendations for the guarantee. Out of the 28 initial recommendations, a third are tracked as

“work commenced with further development required”.

With so many young people unemployed, and the scheme having been in place for more than a year, I note that we can and should do more. The unemployment figures from June to August 2021

show that the unemployment rate for young people was as high as 10.1 per cent, which is more than double the national rate of 4.4 per cent. Again, we can and should do more.

Is there an assurance that zero-hour contracts will not be the “opportunity” in the young persons guarantee, and that fair work will lie at the heart of the opportunity? I am quite happy to give my final 10 seconds to the minister if he would like to respond to that.

Jamie Hepburn: Martin Whitfield will know that we have high aspirations for fair work. We will always seek to advance fair work. If we had powers on employment law, we could do more.

Martin Whitfield: High aspirations can be measured only if we know what we will measure them against.

16:30

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. I welcome the speeches that we have heard so far, and I thank Michael Marra for taking my intervention, which I forgot to say at the time.

The financial, social, physical and mental health challenges that people across Scotland have faced during the Covid-19 pandemic have been extremely difficult. Scotland’s young people have felt the effects of the pandemic particularly hard. The pandemic has had a negative impact on people in sectors such as hospitality and tourism, which are hugely important in Dumfries and Galloway and the Scottish Borders.

To alleviate the pandemic’s impact, the Scottish Government has benefited young people looking to enter the workforce across Scotland through its investment of £70 million in the young persons guarantee, which offers every 16 to 24-year-old in Scotland the opportunity of a job or apprenticeship, further or higher education, or a training programme or volunteering opportunity. Since it was officially launched in November 2020, funding has been committed to create up to 18,000 training, job and apprenticeship opportunities for young people.

The funding includes £45 million for local partnerships to provide training and employer recruitment incentives, and £13.5 million for colleges, universities and the Scottish Funding Council to provide industry-focused courses, supporting up to 5,000 young people and providing employment support for 500 recent graduates.

The funding has allowed employers in Dumfries and Galloway such as Jas P Wilson, BSW Timber, Alpha Solway and DuPont Teijin Films to increase their numbers of modern apprenticeship places. I

have visited all those employers, and I thank them for all the work that they do and for supporting our next generation workforce.

However, I have been contacted by local manufacturers, including Alpha Solway, which I visited two weeks ago, who feel that more work could be carried out to promote manufacturing as a positive career destination. Therefore, I ask the minister to ensure that Skills Development Scotland and Scottish Government officials work with manufacturing firms to ensure that young people are aware of the benefits of a career in Scottish manufacturing. That would also help to improve the resilience of our local manufacturing supply chains.

I welcome the £25 million national transition training fund, which has already helped 10,000 people, including 312 young folks across Dumfries and Galloway, to develop the skills that are required to move into sectors with the greatest potential for future growth.

I have recently been contacted by NFU Scotland, which has highlighted the need for rural skills to be a focus of the fund, as well as for agriculture and rural skills to be highlighted as positive destinations for people of all ages and, in particular, our young people. NFU Scotland believes that schools and career advisers do not promote the farming and food production sectors, which are often perceived as a last resort for less able or academic young people.

The farming sector requires an efficient, effective and user-friendly education and skills system that is responsive to the sector’s current and future needs. That is particularly important because agriculture will play a huge part in tackling the climate emergency. I therefore support all initiatives to ensure that we have a professional rural workforce that is equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge.

Previously, I met George Jamieson, who is a policy manager for NFU Scotland, to talk about NFUS’s report and its recommendations on how to improve the rural workforce, which, increasingly, is an ageing workforce. I have written to the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands about how those recommendations could be taken forward, but I would be grateful if the minister would agree to meet George Jamieson and me to discuss the matter further.

Again, I welcome the debate and the steps that the Scottish Government has taken to support those who have suffered most during the pandemic. I highlight my asks for manufacturing and rural skills.

Paul McLennan: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I mentioned a meeting that I had with the DWP and East Lothian works. Although I met

them in my capacity as an MSP, I am a serving councillor in East Lothian, which is recorded in my entry in the register of members' interests. I mention that for clarity.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That will be on the record, Mr McLennan.

We move to the closing speeches in the debate.

16:35

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): This afternoon, we have been trying to address two fundamental issues. That is quite complicated to do, especially in only 90 minutes.

The first issue is whether our skills and apprenticeships system is up to the job of addressing the problems that have been thrown up by Covid. The second is whether the system adequately meets the needs of Scotland's future. Addressing those issues is complicated and we do not have the luxury of picking them off one by one.

I have been frustrated by what I have heard from both the Government and from SNP back benchers. They have argued that because we have the young persons guarantee and the national transition training fund, no further questions should be asked. However, it is relevant and important to question whether those schemes are up to the job because of the urgency of the task at hand and the scale of the problem. That is the argument that my colleague Pauline McNeill set out. We are not saying that those schemes do not work; we are asking whether they do enough work.

The second issue, which was outlined well by my colleague Michael Marra, is the question whether the skills system is delivering fundamental skills, such as the digital and zero-carbon skills that our economy will not only need, but rely on in future. My frustration can be summed up by the exchange between Michael Marra and Clare Adamson. There are of course some great things going on to help young people get into coding, but the fundamental point is that, since 2008, the number of computing science teachers in our schools has dropped by a quarter. We cannot deliver the digital skills that we need if we cannot guarantee what Michael Marra called for, which is a higher computing science class in every secondary school. Young people cannot get the skills that they need if those subjects are not being delivered in schools.

Clare Adamson: Mr Johnson and I were colleagues on the previous session's Education and Skills Committee when we carried out our STEM inquiry. He will understand that many people who are trained to teach computing science go on to take up jobs in that sector. That

is one reason why it is difficult to recruit computing teachers.

Does Mr Johnson also recognise that partnerships with colleges provide an opportunity for that element of the curriculum to be delivered in colleges or through foundation apprenticeships? That is what the Developing the Young Workforce programme is about.

Daniel Johnson: Acknowledging the problem will not make it go away and it has taken until this point in the debate to hear an SNP member acknowledge that fundamental problem. I am not saying that people are not finding jobs in that area, or that there are not good schemes, but the Government is putting its head in the sand about the lack of teachers.

If we look at the urgent and pressing problems caused by Covid, we find ourselves in a different situation to the one that we expected. Many of us thought that we would be facing an unemployment crisis. That has not occurred, but there are labour shortages. There were 80,000 people on furlough when that scheme ended. Are the responses to Covid up to the job of reskilling those who need that? It is possible to have both labour shortages and people who are unable to go into those jobs because they cannot reskill.

The simple maths is that, between the young persons guarantee and the national training transition fund, only 44,000 opportunities will even be aimed at, let alone achieved. There was a rather odd quibble between Willie Rennie and the minister as to whether the national transition training fund number is 3,000, 7,000 or 9,000. That is irrelevant. The relevant point is whether the response is up to the scale of the challenge, which is measured not in thousands of opportunities or places, but in the hundreds of thousands of people who are currently unemployed. We need to tackle that.

Willie Rennie: Of course the member is right. The scale of the challenge needs to be met, but surely we have to measure the Government's performance against the targets that it has set if we are going to trust its overall strategy and objectives.

Daniel Johnson: Perhaps I should have been clearer. I was not questioning what was said by my colleague who sits behind me; I was questioning the quibbling that came from the Government benches. Willie Rennie is absolutely right. The precise number is irrelevant, but we need to ask whether the strategic targets are right and whether the scale of the intervention is appropriate given the scale of the challenge. In that regard, the numbers give us a much gloomier picture than the minister, perhaps, wanted to paint.

Ultimately, we need urgency and flexibility. We must not have long-drawn-out engagement processes and be met with a lack of resource to deliver, as my colleague Martin Whitfield said. To put it simply, the Government's approach has been found wanting.

By the same token, however, there were some fair challenges from the SNP benches. We cannot simply paint a picture of doom and gloom, as there are real strengths in the apprenticeship system. We have seen a system developed that has the confidence of much of industry. In contrast with other parts of the United Kingdom, we have a system that is grounded in work and jobs, and to that extent I share the questions about what the Conservatives mean by a demand-led system. Fundamentally, we have a system that is driven by work.

Where there is criticism to be made, and where we should focus our critique, is on the flexibility of that system. Too many employers talk to me about the fact that they have to take the modern apprenticeship frameworks as they stand. People cannot take a more piecemeal approach, and the system is inflexible in relation to short-term needs. Likewise, many employers, including most notably employers in the retail industry, point out to me that the level of benefit that they get simply does not match what they are charged through the apprenticeship levy. Only 2 per cent of modern apprenticeships are retail and we have seen a 44 per cent reduction in retail apprenticeships.

The Government must address those issues. That is not to say that the system is completely flawed, but if we are going to improve the system, we have to recognise the flaws.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Johnson, I have been generous.

Daniel Johnson: I will close, Presiding Officer. We need flexibility and urgency and a response that matches the scale of the issue.

16:42

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): This has been a wide-ranging and important debate, but I cannot help but feel that this is a topic in relation to which we are good at talking, but not doing. My colleague Pam Gosal quoted Confucius at the start of the debate, and although I am not normally into deep words of wisdom, I think that he is right: it is almost always what we do that matters.

After 14 years under SNP rule, it is not entirely clear what progress has been made. I cannot see any evidence of the parity of esteem for skills-based education that is so often mentioned. In an SNP Scotland, school and university-based

education is the automatic default for many. In direct contrast, we now find that, in an SNP Scotland, it is a struggle for people to access training for real jobs and opportunities where identified shortages exist. That is not an accident; it has come about as a direct result of choices taken in ministerial corridors.

We do not have a well-balanced system, nor one that is working well. Behind that inconvenient truth, as we heard time and time again in our debate today, we find a lack of ambition. To be fair, many nice-sounding initiatives have been announced, but it is not entirely clear that they will meet the scale of the challenge that we face. Many members covered why some of the schemes are not delivering what was promised and why they are not as good in reality as they sounded when they were announced in the chamber. I do not wish to go back over those points, but they serve to reinforce my view that the Government is falling short.

The pandemic and the shocks that it has sent through our society and economy should be the wake-up call that we need to change our approach to skills and training. Of course, our task in building back better would have been easier if we were in a better position before the pandemic. However, there has been no real drive or sense of purpose in this area for more than a decade.

To understand how little priority has been given to skills and training, we have only to look at how our college sector has been funded and supported. In a country that was serious about vocational education, ministers would look to expand access to college places, to turbocharge the whole sector financially and to enable colleges to provide many more modular courses. Instead, colleges continue to be the poor relation—undervalued and underutilised.

We need to create a system that is dynamic and nimble and adapts to the changing needs of our economy. What is most important is that we need skills training and apprenticeship opportunities that work for people and are available when they need them. That is why Conservative members support a demand-led approach to apprenticeships. We believe that that will make them more attractive to employers and will therefore create more opportunities for employees. That is not about setting arbitrary targets; it is about reaching out to businesses, business groups and business representatives and opening up the opportunity to create as many new apprenticeships as possible. A number of my colleagues touched on that idea; I, too, would be keen to hear the minister's view on it.

The fact that the SNP is missing its own targets does not mean that there is no capacity to create more apprenticeships, nor that employers are not

willing to do more. Daniel Johnson was right to look at some of the processes for taking on and training apprentices, because they are often too complicated, particularly for smaller businesses. Emma Harper mentioned the farming sector. I, too, met George Jamieson recently. There is concern in the rural sectors, which are often under a lot of pressure, that people do not have the time and resource to support apprenticeships, even though they would like to do so. It is worth looking at what we do about that.

As I said, we need a change in approach. However, all that we have in the face of the urgent challenge that lies before us is an SNP Government that talks big on skills but delivers little; that believes that making announcements is the same thing as delivering change; that is out of big ideas and focuses instead on lots of small schemes and small pots of money; and that hopes that no one will notice that there is no real strategy underpinning its direction.

Rather than patting themselves on the back, ministers urgently need to wake up to the scale of the challenge that is faced by our economy, our society and individuals across Scotland. The harsh reality is that many of the stubborn skills shortages that have been highlighted today have been created here in Scotland by action, or lack of action, in the Parliament and at the heart of the Scottish Government. Although the pandemic has exposed many weaknesses and has increased the scale of the challenge, we cannot and should not accept that those things were not a problem before Covid-19.

However, all is not lost. We have everything that we need in order to succeed. Our education sector, workforce and employers are all ready to go. The only question is whether the Government is ready to move from words to action and to recognise, for the first time, the scale of the challenge that the people of Scotland face.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I call Jamie Hepburn to wind up. Minister, you have until 5 pm.

16:48

Jamie Hepburn: I begin by thanking those who have contributed to the debate. What we have heard today—albeit that it may not always have been apparent in some of the rhetoric that has been deployed—is a great degree of agreement about the approach that we need to take in gearing our skills system towards better supporting people towards the opportunities as they lie. The young persons guarantee and national transition training fund—

Oliver Mundell: Will the minister take an intervention?

Jamie Hepburn: I have been speaking for less than a minute, but why not?

Oliver Mundell: The minister has said that there is a wide degree of consensus. Did he hear the consensus across the chamber that none of the actions that the Scottish Government is taking goes far enough or fast enough to meet the challenge?

Jamie Hepburn: Well, I certainly heard Oliver Mundell say that, but whether that represents consensus is another matter.

I will develop the point that I was going on to make. I recognise of course that there is not complete agreement when it comes to the approach that has been taken. However, although Daniel Johnson seemed to suggest that there is no recognition that more has to be done or that different things need to be deployed, I recognise that that has to be the case. Although I am perhaps paraphrasing it, the fundamental question that he posed is whether our skills system is up to the challenge that I just posed.

The first thing that I will reflect on—again, here is some consensus for Mr Mundell—is that I very much agree with his point about the strong foundations of our education system. I also agree with Mr Johnson about the strengths of our modern apprenticeship system. However, we must of course be ever more responsive to the challenges that we face. We must ensure that our skills system is ever better geared towards the ends that we need to see and that it supports people to where the opportunities lie. That is the direction that I want our skills system to move in, which is laid out in our future skills action plan. There is probably more agreement in what we have discussed today than might have been felt to be the case.

Daniel Johnson: I was in fact questioning the skills system a little less fundamentally than that. I was saying that there has been a lack of analysis from the Government of what in the response, the national transition training fund and the jobs guarantee has worked and, critically, what has not worked. What does the minister think has worked and, critically, what does he think has not worked and should be improved on?

Jamie Hepburn: I agree with Mr Johnson that we must always be willing to prosecute the schemes that we put in place to see what worked. We are committed to doing that, so there will be an assessment of the young persons guarantee and the national transition training fund, which will be available for Parliament to assess.

I will turn to some of the points that were made during the debate. I will start with Mr Rennie's contribution. He thought that I was squirming—to put that in its full context, I say that he rather

overestimates the impact that his words and rhetoric have on me. I agreed—again, here is some more agreement—with the point that he made about the need to focus on sectors where we have skills needs through the national transition training fund. I would argue that that is very much what we are geared towards across the range of the more than 30 programmes that we have this year.

Michael Marra mentioned the requirement to have a concerted focus on the digital. This year—year 2 of the national transition training fund—we have our digital start fund, which will support those who are unemployed or on low incomes to gain advanced digital skills. There is also our digital reskilling pipeline and our digital skills catalyst fund, code your future. Looking at other sectors, we see that there is a taster programme in early learning and childcare, the tourism and hospitality talent development programme, an introduction to adult social care and the Open University adult social care skills boost. In aerospace, there is support for diversification, aircraft decommissioning and aviation work, and there is support for the construction, forestry and screen sectors, among others. I hope that that is an indication that we have a programme that is geared towards the very end that Mr Rennie talked about.

Michael Marra: On the need to enhance digital skills, does the minister believe that higher computing should be available and taught by a qualified teacher in every high school in Scotland?

Jamie Hepburn: That goes back to the crux of the challenge that we face. Digital skills shortages and challenges affect every single sector, and there is a rising demand for people with digital skills. Unfortunately, the teaching profession has been subject to that challenge as well. However, we put in additional support to support career changers from the digital sector into STEM subjects, which I would encourage people to avail themselves of.

I will talk about apprenticeships and the comments of Conservative members in particular. As far as I am concerned, Pam Gosal was not so much Confucius as confused on those matters—as, indeed, was Megan Gallacher, who referred to us missing our 2019 target of 30,000 apprenticeships. However, our 2019 target was for 27,000 apprenticeships and we delivered 27,270.

Tess White's suggestion that the numbers have been falling year on year is fundamentally flawed. In 2016-17, there were 26,262 starts. In 2017-18, there were 27,145 starts. In 2018-19, there were 27,270 starts. In 2019-20, there were 27,875 starts. Tess White might have been confusing the experience here with the experience south of the border, under her party's Government, where,

over the same period, there was a decline of 172,400 in apprenticeship starts—a 35 per cent decline, compared with a 6 per cent increase in Scotland.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): I hoped that, in his closing speech, the minister would address rural skills, which Emma Harper asked about. I recently asked the Government how many female butchers there are in Scotland, and the answer was 15 to 20. How does that demonstrate that the Scottish Government is addressing the gender skills gap as well as the overall skills gap?

Jamie Hepburn: I recognise that there is gender segregation across a range of apprenticeship frameworks, which is not acceptable. That is why Skills Development Scotland has a programme to ensure that there is improvement in that regard, and not just in the area that Rachael Hamilton mentioned.

Ms Hamilton mentioned Emma Harper's comments, so let me also say that I would be delighted to meet Ms Harper to discuss how we address the issues that she raised about the rural workforce. We have a rural skills action plan, which is working to that end.

On apprenticeships more widely, I am genuinely perplexed by the Conservatives' claim that last year's figures were anything other than demonstrative of the reality of the impact of Covid-19. I have just set out the figures for the previous years; the one factor that was different last year was Covid-19. There is a further, vivid demonstration of that reality: the figures that are out this morning—they are hot off the press—show that, by the end of quarter 2 this year, there were 11,104 modern apprenticeship starts, which is an increase of 7,471 on the figure for that period last year. That is a clear demonstration of the impact of Covid-19.

Pauline McNeill asked me to listen to what she said, including her practical remarks about the website. I will be happy to take away her point; I cannot promise to fix the issue myself, but I will certainly see whether the people who can do so can have a look at it.

Ms McNeill also said that leadership should continue to be invested in people such as Sandy Begbie. I am happy to tell her that Sandy Begbie remains the chair of the implementation group for the young persons guarantee and is chair of the Developing the Young Workforce employers group. He is very much involved and very much leading on the matter.

Mr Whitfield's remarks were a bit confusing. He seemed very concerned about an answer that I provided previously. He talked about the need to establish KPIs and to support the tertiary sector. I

respectfully suggest to him that the answer that I gave at a particular time does not represent the end of the story and that there have been subsequent developments. I have said that KPIs will be published.

On Mr Whitfield's remarks about the need for support for the tertiary education sector in the context of the young persons guarantee, I am happy to say that this year we invested a further £10 million to create 5,000 additional opportunities in the college sector. One example in that regard is the partnership between Edinburgh College and NHS Lothian to boost healthcare skills. Edinburgh College covers part of the area that Mr Whitfield represents, so I would have thought that he would know about the programme and about the investment that we have made. We have also allocated £3.5 million for a graduate talent internship programme.

Martin Whitfield: On the young persons guarantee, what will success look like for any young person with a disability?

Jamie Hepburn: At its core, it will be participation in the young persons guarantee. It is about ensuring that such a young person gets to take part in the programme, just as any other young person can. That is the simple and straightforward answer to the member's simple and straightforward question.

I welcome the debate. I say again that, despite the rhetoric that was deployed, there is more agreement among us than anyone who is watching might conclude that there is.

I make the point again that I want a skills system that is responsive to economic and societal need. It has to be responsive to the process of technological change that Michael Marra spoke about, and the challenges in securing labour as a result of our withdrawal from the EU. We need a skills system that is responsive to sectoral changes resulting from the imperative of reacting to the environmental crisis. We must ensure that the skills system is geared towards that and that no one is left behind. The young persons guarantee and the national transition training fund are geared towards that end. I am committed to delivering that type of skills system. That is what I will focus on and it is what this Government will focus on.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of a Parliamentary Bureau motion. I ask George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move motion S6M-02048, on approval of a Scottish statutory instrument.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Requirements) (Scotland) Amendment (No. 2) Regulations 2021 (SSI 2021/349) be approved.—
[George Adam]

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I wish to oppose SSI 2021/349, on the introduction of vaccine passports. The issue is being considered by this Parliament nearly six weeks after the instrument became law. On this side of the chamber, we have consistently opposed compulsory vaccine passports and the manner in which they have been introduced by the Scottish Government, and nothing that has happened in the past six weeks has persuaded us that our position should change. It is a policy for which no evidence base has ever existed or been presented to us.

As we heard earlier, at the COVID-19 Recovery Committee last week, the Deputy First Minister had to accept that evidence that the policy was working does not exist, and yet the Scottish Government is today talking about extending it still further.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): Does Mr Fraser accept that some of the Deputy First Minister's words have been twisted somewhat? It is impossible to link any action, including hand washing, to an exact result.

Murdo Fraser: If we are being asked to introduce a policy that puts substantial restrictions on the behaviour of individuals and is having a substantial negative impact on businesses, there should be an evidence base to support it. Such an evidence base has not been presented.

We have heard from the Scottish Government that one of the purposes of the policy is to try to drive up vaccination rates among unvaccinated groups, but there is no evidence that that has been successful. Indeed, the COVID-19 Recovery Committee has heard evidence from scientists that compulsory vaccine passports could actually increase opposition to vaccination uptake among the vaccine hesitant, which would have the opposite effect to that intended. There has been no response from the Scottish Government to that

particular concern, which has been expressed by Professor Stephen Reicher and others.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): I absolutely share the member's opposition to the introduction of vaccine passports, which are Covid identification cards in all but name. Does he share my concern that the Deputy First Minister's statement this afternoon represents the gradual mission creep of the policy, and that there is no evidential base that vaccine passports stop transmission? In fact, it is far to the contrary. Did the member see the article in *The Lancet* last week that said that, although vaccines are excellent at preventing harm from Covid, they are ineffective at preventing transmission?

Murdo Fraser: I agree with Mr Cole-Hamilton's concerns about the policy being introduced without any evidence base.

The COVID-19 Recovery Committee also heard from the Scottish Human Rights Commission and other organisations involved in the human rights space about the very serious concerns that they have about the human rights implications of the policy. Again, there has been no response from the Scottish Government to those concerns.

We have heard from those involved in hospitality about a loss in trade of up to 40 per cent following the introduction of the policy, and about growing levels of abuse of door staff, some of whom have had to walk off the job as a result. We have even seen nightclubs putting chairs on their dance floors to get around the rules, so disastrous has the policy been for their business. We have seen an app being launched that did not work and, even now, will not allow for the status of boosters to be added. There are also major issues over security and reliability.

Scotland is the only country in Europe that does not allow a negative Covid test as an alternative to vaccination certification as the price of entry to certain premises.

The Presiding Officer: Mr Fraser, I must ask you to wind up now, please.

Murdo Fraser: Even Wales, the only other part of the United Kingdom that has introduced such a policy, allows that alternative, but the Scottish Government is standing firm. We are alone on the issue and not handling it well. The policy is failing and is increasingly shambolic. There is no evidence to support it and the Parliament should dismiss it.

17:05

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery (John Swinney): In all honesty, Mr Fraser does neither himself nor his arguments any credit with the overblown

hyperbole that he brings to the Parliament about the question.

Mr Fraser said that we had provided no evidence that the application of the scheme had driven up vaccination rates. I put on the record at committee, in response to a question from him, the fact that, on 1 September, 53 per cent of 18 to 29-year-olds had been vaccinated; by 1 October, that was 64 per cent and, by 1 November, it was 68 per cent. That is a sizeable increase in the vaccination rates in the target population in which we were interested.

The Scottish Government has proposed a mandatory domestic certification scheme that is proportionate and appropriate at this point in the pandemic. Recent data is a stark reminder of the challenges that the nation continues to face. We have a strategic intent in relation to the management of Covid to suppress the virus to a level that is consistent with alleviating its harms while we recover and rebuild for a better future.

The scheme is limited. It continues to contribute to meeting the aims of reducing the risk of transmission, reducing the risk of serious illness and death and, in doing so, alleviating pressure on the healthcare system. It also continues to contribute to allowing high-risk settings to operate as an alternative to closure or more restrictive measures and to increasing vaccine uptake.

Earlier today, members of the Parliament pressed me about the pressure on our national health service. That is a real pressure and we have to take measures, however uncomfortable, and however reluctant we are to take them, to ensure that we do all we can to suppress the increase in pressure on our national health service.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: The Deputy First Minister talked about the pressure on our NHS as if the Covid ID cards are somehow the answer, whereas, as *The Lancet* told us, they do not stop transmission of the virus. If the transmission of the virus is principally responsible for a lot of the pressure on our NHS, the scheme is not the answer.

John Swinney: As Mr Cole-Hamilton knows, the scheme is one of a number of measures that the Government is taking to try to suppress transmission of the virus and increase vaccine uptake rates. Of course, if we have higher vaccine uptake rates, it means that people who are double vaccinated are at less risk of becoming seriously ill, which reduces the potential pressure on the national health service.

The scheme is a proportionate measure, applied to a limited number of premises, that the Government is taking to address the serious situation that we face. Alongside other baseline

measures, we keep it under review. Covid vaccination certification could be extended to other sectors, as I set out to Parliament earlier, or could have no role to play in our measures. That will be dependent on our judgment about proportionality, which is the legal duty that we must fulfil.

The COVID-19 Recovery Committee agreed by four votes to two to recommend approval of the Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Requirements) (Scotland) Amendment (No 2) Regulations 2021 to provide for the Covid vaccination certification scheme. I invite Parliament to support the motion to ensure that the regulations can come into law so that we have the necessary protections in place. Under the difficult circumstances that we still face, I ask members to approve the regulations. I offer my assurance that the measure will continue to be under review and will remain in place only for as long as is necessary, but it is necessary today to give us an effective means of suppressing the virus and to protect the public.

I invite Parliament to support the regulations.

The Presiding Officer: The question on the motion will be put at decision time.

The next item of business is consideration of three Parliamentary Bureau motions. I ask George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move motions S6M-02049 to S6M-02051, on approval of Scottish statutory instruments.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Scottish Local Government Elections Amendment Order 2021 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Representation of the People (Postal Voting for Local Government Elections) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2021 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the First-tier Tribunal for Scotland (Chambers) Amendment Regulations 2021 [draft] be approved.—[George Adam]

The Presiding Officer: The questions on the motions will be put at decision time.

Decision Time

17:10

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The first question to be put as a result of today's business is, that motion S6M-02048, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on approval of a Scottish statutory instrument, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

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

17:10

Meeting suspended.

17:14

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We come to the division on motion S6M-02048, in the name of George Adam, on approval of an SSI. Members should cast their votes now.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)

Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

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

Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 60, Against 49, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Requirements) (Scotland) Amendment (No. 2) Regulations 2021 (SSI 2021/349) be approved.

The Presiding Officer: I propose to ask a single question on three Parliamentary Bureau motions unless any member objects.

As no member has objected, the question is, that motions S6M-02049 to S6M-02051, in the name of George Adam, on approval of SSIs, be agreed to.

Motions agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Scottish Local Government Elections Amendment Order 2021 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Representation of the People (Postal Voting for Local Government Elections) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2021 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the First-tier Tribunal for Scotland (Chambers) Amendment Regulations 2021 [draft] be approved.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Long Covid

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

The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-01861, in the name of Alex Cole-Hamilton, on long Covid as a condition of concern. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament considers that long COVID is a condition of serious concern; understands that figures published by the Office for National Statistics estimate that 79,000 people in Scotland, including individuals in the Edinburgh Western constituency, have already self-reported long COVID; notes that symptoms of long COVID include chronic fatigue, muscle spasms, breathing problems, sleep problems and cognitive impairment; understands that, of those who have self-reported, 61,000 have been experiencing symptoms for more than 12 weeks, and 31,000 have been experiencing symptoms for a year; considers that the omission of long COVID from the NHS Recovery Plan was a disappointment to many who currently have the condition; notes the view that the support currently available to people with long COVID does not sufficiently address their needs, and that more measures, including specialist clinics, a care pathway and community nurses who are able to visit people at home where necessary, must be introduced, and further notes the calls for long COVID to be prioritised in future Scottish Government decisions.

17:19

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): It gives me great pleasure to rise to speak to the motion in my name. I am dismayed, however, that we are already 18 or 19 months into the pandemic, and it is at least 12 months since the first sufferers of the condition that we now know as long Covid had that condition identified. It is disappointing, therefore, that it has taken Opposition time, in a members' business debate, to lead, for the first time, on this important subject in the chamber.

I know that this will not be the last debate, and that the matter will occupy our attention—rightly so—for many years to come, because long Covid is accelerating. In October alone, 13,000 new patients were identified with that terrible and debilitating condition. Every member in the chamber, and everyone in our communities, knows somebody who has had Covid and is still suffering from it many months later.

The effects can be brutal—in fact, long Covid has been described as potentially the largest mass disabling event since the first world war. It is not overly dramatic to say that. The Government's

response to long Covid in this country has been so poor that sufferers in my constituency—and in your constituency, Presiding Officer—would be better off if they moved to England, given the care pathway that is available to sufferers of long Covid south of the border.

That is why my motion calls on the Government to act in a meaningful way, beyond the long Covid service and the small amounts of money that have already been dedicated to the condition in Scotland, by bringing in long Covid clinics in every health board in the country and delineating a care pathway for sufferers to follow, from the moment that they are identified, into a range of interventions, whether that is aquatherapy and other forms of physiotherapy or other types of support.

The motion also refers to the need for dedicated nurses. Before Covid, I did a lot of work with myalgic encephalomyelitis sufferers, and I was horrified to find that there was only one peripatetic ME nurse on the whole eastern seaboard in Scotland. Many long Covid sufferers are too ill to leave their homes for long periods, and it is incumbent on us to ensure that the resources are there to offer them care in their homes.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): Does Alex Cole-Hamilton agree that, although the nature of long Covid means that there is an increasing field of various symptoms that individuals suffer, if we had a pathway in Scotland, we could start to collate the evidence, and thereby reduce long-term need for the services that our constituents require?

Alex Cole-Hamilton: Martin Whitfield is absolutely right—we are behind the curve in how we respond to long Covid. It is a basket of conditions; I will come to that in a moment. People who suffer from long Covid experience a vast range—there are hundreds—of symptoms. They do not all occur together, and they may present very differently. They include, but are not limited to, breathing difficulties, to the point of asphyxiation; chest pain; numbness; fatigue; tachycardia; diarrhoea; and neurological conditions. Symptoms are often experienced in a relapsing and remitting pattern, and the impact on people's activities, daily lives and ability to work is huge.

Aside from physical side effects, long-term Covid sufferers are faced with issues ranging from trauma to serious discrimination, which I will come to shortly. They report major difficulties in accessing primary and secondary care, and issues with healthcare practitioners who, despite being sympathetic, are unsure or unable to help as a result—as we have just discussed—of the lack of treatment pathways.

Long Covid Scotland has reported cases in which long Covid patients have been wrongly prescribed medical interventions, such as graded exercise therapy, that could exacerbate their condition. Graded exercise therapy was recently removed from the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines for conditions that are reported to have symptoms that are similar to those of long Covid, and yet it is still being prescribed as a therapy for long Covid sufferers.

We should make no mistake about it—the current situation is not the fault of the healthcare profession or of healthcare professionals. If the Scottish Government refuses to acknowledge long Covid or the serious debilitating nature of the condition, how can healthcare professionals be expected to offer sufferers the care that they deserve without the resources to do so? Long Covid patients are stuck in limbo, where researching and advocating for themselves or their loved ones is their only lifeline, and their only source of hope, in the face of this awful condition.

As I said, the physical symptoms are legion, but they are only half the story. Long Covid patients also have to deal with a range of other issues. General practitioners and charities are doing their best, but the size of the phenomenon is on a different scale, and Government web pages are not much use to someone with air hunger who feels as if they are suffocating and literally gasping for breath. Specialist Covid clinics should exist in every health board, peripatetic nurses should be available and there should be a dedicated care pathway.

Many people who suffer from long Covid end up experiencing significant financial challenges, either because they are unable to work or because they are having to shell out money for treatments and investigations. With regard to financial support, the benefits system has not yet responded to this debilitating condition, and there is real concern that, when it does, support will not be made available to everyone.

There is a particular inequality even among long Covid sufferers themselves. I ask members to cast their minds back to March 2020, when our testing capacity was considerably limited; testing was available only to healthcare staff and a very small group of other key workers. Many of the “first wavers”—as they refer to themselves—were, therefore, never diagnosed with Covid-19, and it exists nowhere in their medical records. As such, it makes reaching a definitive diagnosis all the more difficult.

Many may never receive an official diagnosis, or the attendant sick leave or benefits to which they may become entitled. Most will be subjected to disbelief or accusations of malingering. Those who have caring responsibilities are at particularly high

risk in that regard, and the threat of financial difficulties may mean that they end up pushing themselves beyond the limit and reducing their quality of life still further. People with long Covid are further discriminated against as a result of their lack of positive test and their not having been hospitalised, and because of pre-existing inequities relating to their socioeconomic status, race or gender.

I understand that I am coming to the end of my time, Presiding Officer, but there is so much more that we need to say about the condition. We do not know how many of our citizens caught Covid-19 in the first wave, nor do we know how many are nursing it now or how many will contract it in the future. We are told that we may have to live around Covid-19 indefinitely. There is no vaccine for long Covid, and we still do not know how long it lasts, if it ever stops at all. The condition will occupy the attention and the business of the Parliament for many years to come, and it should not have taken an Opposition debate, in members' time, to bring it to the chamber for the first time. Nevertheless, I am proud to have brought the debate to the chamber this evening.

17:27

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): I thank Alex Cole-Hamilton for bringing this important topic to the chamber. The numbers of people with long Covid are high, and that is a major public health matter. More than 75,000 people in Scotland are currently estimated to be suffering from long Covid and, as the pandemic continues, the numbers will only grow.

One of my constituents, Suzanne, who is suffering from long Covid, contacted me to try to help me understand the impact that it is having on her life. She told me:

“Having contracted Covid in October 2020, I have been unable to return to a normal life. I struggle daily with fatigue and a number of other symptoms that vary on a day-to-day basis. I have gone from being a full-time working mum who studied part-time and went to the gym three times a week to somebody that I no longer recognise. I barely leave the house now as I need to prioritise what little energy I have to take care of my two young daughters.”

Although the physical health impact of long Covid has been severe on Suzanne, the story does not end there, and there are many like her. The life-changing impact of Covid also impacts on the mental health of both the sufferer and their family.

For those who are unable to work, long Covid is causing financial distress too. Long Covid sufferers, often for the first time in their lives, face the daunting prospect of navigating the cruel complexities of the United Kingdom's social

security system, which is unlikely to prove flexible enough to respond to their needs.

While there is still much that we do not know about long Covid, we know that doing nothing is not an option, and that we must act. That is why I warmly welcome the Scottish Government's £10 million long Covid support fund for national health service boards. The fund is an excellent start to help NHS boards to develop flexible models of care that can respond to patients' changing and varying symptoms. Those flexible care responses are essential. People who are suffering from long Covid make it clear that there is a need for primary care to be strengthened, and to embed healthcare staff and allied health staff locally to provide the necessary support, including rehabilitation services.

It is also important to ensure that long Covid knowledge hubs have the latest up-to-date information, so that those suffering from long Covid can better self-manage their changing and variable symptoms.

Alongside front-line investment in services, research into long Covid is vital. The Scottish Government's £2.5 million of funding to support nine research projects will be a rich source of data that can help to improve services in the future. It is that dual track of immediate strengthened service response and medium-term scientific research that will improve the long-term lives of so many Scots who are suffering from the life-changing effects of long Covid.

Let us not forget our children and young people. While young people are statistically less likely to suffer severe Covid symptoms, there can be serious long-term impacts on their health, too. On a personal level, I know two teenagers who were infected with Covid way back at the beginning of the pandemic. One of them now has immune system issues, and the other has heart complications. Both of those are long term. I thank goodness that our young people in Scotland are receiving vaccines, too.

Before I close, I will highlight the growing evidence that younger working-age women are more likely to suffer from long Covid. We cannot allow long Covid to further embed gender inequalities. Today's debate is an important opportunity to hear the voices of people with lived experience of long Covid, and I hope to hear more from other members. It is only by hearing their stories and listening to their asks that we can truly embark on improving their lives. We must listen now, and we must keep on listening.

17:31

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): I thank Alex Cole-Hamilton, my co-convener of the cross-

party group on long Covid—along with Jackie Baillie—for securing the debate. Around 4 per cent of Scotland's workforce suffers from long Covid. For economists looking at the macro impact on the labour market or for those resourcing the delivery of healthcare services, long Covid is indeed a condition of concern. This Tuesday evening, for many of the 100,000 Scots who are struggling with fatigue, dizziness, brain fog, pain in their joints and poor mental health, long Covid is much more than a concern. It is debilitating. With slurred speech, indescribable headaches, a fluctuating heart rate, numbness and tummy issues, thousands of people in our country can barely function tonight.

According to the latest statistics from the Office for National Statistics, more than 90,000 people in Scotland have experienced long Covid for four weeks, 70,000 for 12 weeks and 29,000 for 12 months. Let us consider this. There has been a 16 per cent increase in the number of long Covid patients since October's data was published. That is 16 per cent in one month.

Long Covid is not just a condition of concern; it is now a crisis in the making. In my maiden speech on 27 May, I underscored the problem of long Covid from my experience as a GP. On 1 June we debated the national health service recovery plan, and I called on the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care to commit to establishing specialist long Covid clinics.

What are we actually doing on long Covid here in the Scottish Parliament? After meeting the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care and his advisers to discuss the creation of a long Covid network based on my suggestions, the cabinet secretary announced a £10 million long Covid support fund on 9 September to help health boards respond to the condition. Three weeks later, on 30 September, the cabinet secretary provided more details, stating:

"The fund will support local services to develop and deliver the best models of care appropriate for their populations, which could include strengthening and improving the co-ordination of existing services, or establishing dedicated services".

I am pleased that the Government acted on my call and made the £10 million commitment. That said, we really need to step up a gear and sort out the details. Tackling long Covid is not simply a box-ticking exercise on a spreadsheet. As we sit here in Parliament, in our privileged positions, I cannot help but think of two people who are suffering. One is a young mum who used to run 5 to 10km but who can now barely make it to the toilet and has now moved in with her mum so that she can help look after her kids. Another is a teenager, of school age. She said:

"Mummy, how long is this going to last? I can't go on like this."

To tackle long Covid, the Government urgently needs to address some of the systemic bureaucratic barriers that are hindering the delivery of an integrated long Covid service. I urge the minister, in closing the debate, to try to get to the heart of that problem.

Long Covid requires a multidisciplinary approach. The care pathways should reflect that, and patients should be provided with a personalised care plan. Money has been allocated. There is a broad-brush plan that leaves many of the decisions to the health boards, but the Parliament is yet to see the details. We need to know what the health boards are doing right now. What is happening this week, this month and next month? We need a timescale and a plan. We need to know where our suffering constituents can go for specialist treatment that is not just available in England.

The absence of a long Covid action plan—that is a condition of real concern.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Jackie Baillie, who is joining us remotely.

17:35

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I congratulate Alex Cole-Hamilton on securing the debate and the content of his speech. I apologise for not being with other members in the chamber.

I am delighted that the Parliament has formally recognised the establishment of the cross-party group on long Covid. I am also delighted to be speaking in the debate along with Alex Cole-Hamilton and Sandesh Gulhane, who are my co-conveners.

Everybody in the chamber will have a constituent who is suffering from long Covid. After all, according to statistics from the ONS, almost 80,000 people are affected. They are all ages, come from all walks of life, and experience many different problems, such as chronic fatigue, brain fog, cardiac problems and breathing difficulties.

The cross-party group has heard many extraordinary, and sometimes harrowing, accounts of how long Covid affects people. We heard from a mother whose young daughter is unrecognisable. Before Covid, she was energetic and cheerful. She has missed out on so much school and so many friendships that she is not so outgoing anymore. Then there is the woman who had spent a lifetime dedicated to the voluntary sector and was in paid work. Currently, she is unable to work, and her employer is not willing to adapt to her condition.

One of my constituents is a nurse in the NHS. One would think that the NHS would understand, be flexible and want to retain her precious skills in

the service. However, she was feeling so harassed that she actually quit her job, and her skills have been lost to the NHS. She is not alone—many employers are behaving in the same way.

There are many more stories involving people of different ages and backgrounds, but I will focus on what the Scottish Government is doing. I genuinely think that the Scottish Government has been far too slow to act. At a time when there were specialist clinics and substantial sums of money going into the NHS in England to allow people to be treated alongside research, and defined clinical pathways in Wales—again, with money behind them—nothing was available in Scotland. I had people going to their GP surgery, trying to get support, being—[Inaudible.]—who then referred them back to the GP. It was a revolving door, with little support at the end of the process.

Let me try to find consensus this evening, because the issue is far too important to do otherwise. The cabinet secretary has put £10 million on the table, which is extraordinarily welcome. However, I do not think that it has yet been distributed to health boards, or that there is a plan as to what will happen. I share my colleagues' frustration at the lack of detail, not only for us as politicians, but for long Covid sufferers and the GPs who are trying to refer them into the system. Undoubtedly, there is a postcode lottery out there.

I urge the minister and the cabinet secretary to get a move on, take action quickly and get the money into services where it is needed. I ask the minister to convey to the cabinet secretary the urgency of his having a one-to-one, direct meeting with Long Covid Scotland, so that the views and life experience of those who suffer from the condition can help to shape the proposals.

I will briefly mention the gendered nature of Covid. We need to recognise long Covid as both a disability and an industrial injury. Women's exposure to the virus has been greater due to the gendered patterns of work. The majority of front-line workers in health, social care and education are women. They have been on the front line during the pandemic, and are more likely to catch Covid than anyone else. Health and Safety Executive figures bear that out. In the six months from April to September 2020, 75 per cent of the Covid employer reports that were made in Scotland related to women. Women in the 50 to 60 age group are at greatest risk of long Covid. For all those reasons, I hope that members will support Mark Griffin's proposed Scottish employment injuries advisory council bill, which would address many issues to do with industrial injury.

It is time to get serious about long Covid. I beg the Scottish Government to take action on services, to listen to people with lived experience and to—please—get a move on.

17:40

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate and I thank Alex Cole-Hamilton for securing it.

As the Covid-19 pandemic continues, the need to understand and respond to long Covid is increasingly pressing. We have heard from members about the reported symptoms, such as persistent fatigue, breathlessness and depression, which can be debilitating for many people, and there are many other physical and psychological side effects.

The term “long Covid” is commonly used to describe signs and symptoms that continue or develop after Covid-19. Most evidence is limited and based on small cohorts with short follow-up. I read about research that was published in *The Lancet* by Dr Lixue Huang and colleagues, who reported 12-month outcomes from the largest cohort of hospitalised adult survivors of Covid-19 so far. They reported that, at one year, Covid-19 survivors

“had more mobility problems, pain or discomfort, and anxiety or depression than control participants ... Fatigue or muscle weakness was the most frequently reported symptom at both 6 months and 12 months, while almost half of patients reported having at least one symptom, such as sleep difficulties, palpitations, joint pain, or chest pain, at 12 months. The study shows that for many patients, full recovery from COVID-19 will take more than 1 year, and raises important issues for health services and research.”

I agree with the contention in the motion that long Covid is a condition of concern.

I was interested to hear about the impact of paediatric long Covid and the work of Dr Binita Kane and Elisa Perego in that regard. There is emerging scientific evidence that a not-insignificant percentage of children develop long-term symptoms following exposure to the SARS-CoV-2 virus. I was going to go into more detail about the paediatric research. It is interesting that acute kidney disease, immune dysfunction, lung perfusion defects and on-going inflammatory lung conditions have been reported up to 60 days into the post viral-infection period.

More than 1.1 million people are suffering from long Covid. This morning, I received an email from a constituent, who does not want me to give his name. He said that he is thankful that there is emerging research that will improve understanding of the illness, and he thought that it would be helpful to provide some explanation so that, in this debate, I could talk about the emerging evidence base. He said that cardiopulmonary exercise

testing has demonstrated that patients with long Covid suffer from impaired systemic oxygen extraction. Basically, he said that long Covid is not a psychological illness; patients with long Covid cannot get oxygen from their blood to their cells. That results in multi-organ oxygen starvation, which explains their widespread symptoms.

A summary of acute Covid-19 effects includes blood clots and micro blood clots. There is laboratory equipment in Scotland that can test for the thrombogenic coagulation disorders that seem to be appearing in patients who are suffering from long Covid.

I support the approach that Scottish Government is putting in place. Research is still in its initial stages, but we need to take action as soon as possible.

17:44

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): I thank my colleague Alex Cole-Hamilton for bringing the debate to the chamber.

We have heard about fatigue, breathlessness, muscle aches, memory loss and persistent coughs. Those are all symptoms to be concerned about on their own, but, for some people, they come all together or in a combination.

Long Covid symptoms have led people in Shetland and many others throughout the country to change their way of life radically. In the summer, I urged sufferers to contact me and NHS Shetland to gain an understanding of local demand for long Covid support. Only with an accurate understanding of how many people are still recuperating from Covid can we provide the care and assistance that patients need.

After my call, I received the following comments from a constituent, who asked that I add their name to the list of people who have long Covid. They said:

“Like many others in Shetland, I caught Covid last year just as they stopped testing and told us to stay at home and not bother the NHS. I did phone 111 during a very scary 48 hour period.”

In a call-back, they received a verbal diagnosis that they had Covid and a secondary infection of the lungs. The doctor put them on a course of antibiotics.

My constituent went on to say:

“Thankfully I managed to get through it without having to go to hospital but I so wish I had had the opportunity to get oxygen during the worst part ... I believe I have been living with Long Covid, since overcoming the initial and secondary infections, for well over a year now and I am currently battling a ‘bout’. I am lucky in that respect—I only get bad bouts of it rather than suffer badly from it all the time. I feel like I have aged a decade in a year, my mind does not work at all well now and I have less than half the

'energy' I used to but I can still function 'normally' until a random bout hits me and the various debilitating symptoms have me take to bed for ... 3 to 4 days. I have spoken a couple of times to a GP at my local Health Centre and have been met with 'but you haven't had a positive test result'.

Other members have made the point about test results and sufferers not being believed. That sounds similar to the management that many ME and chronic fatigue syndrome sufferers have experienced for many years. I wonder whether we have learned anything from those conditions.

In the summer, I was invited to hear directly from long Covid sufferers who had set up a support group in a church hall. I arrived but no one else turned up and it transpired that all the usual attendees were simply too poorly to come along. Those people would previously not have thought twice about going to work for eight hours, taking a walk or showing up for a meeting, but now, after having had Covid, they could not physically make it to the meeting, as they were too unwell.

In England, 60 long Covid clinics have been available since December last year but, nearly a year later, Scotland has no comparable clinics. From answers to written questions to the Government, I understand that support for long Covid sufferers in terms of assessment, diagnosis, care and rehabilitation should be in a setting that is close to their home. That is an important point, especially for island, rural and remote communities.

All that is being done is welcome but, as my colleague Alex Cole-Hamilton outlined, the Scottish Liberal Democrats would go further and provide specialist long Covid clinics in every health board area, train long Covid community nurses to offer in-home support and provide country-wide access to long Covid physiotherapy and multidisciplinary rehab. [*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member is just about to conclude.

Beatrice Wishart: We would also introduce a policy of no financial detriment for workers who are absent for long periods due to long Covid.

In September, I called for a new-build hospital fit for the 21st century to replace Shetland's current ageing building. A new build would support medical professionals to deliver modernised NHS services with the equipment, space and provisions that they need. Indeed, because the long-term impact of long Covid is not known, we might rely on our hospitals and medical professionals differently as the pandemic continues to challenge our knowledge.

Covid has had a large impact on many of our lives. For some individuals, every day is now a struggle after contracting it. We cannot leave those people to suffer in silence.

17:49

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): It is a privilege to speak in the debate. I echo colleagues in thanking Alex Cole-Hamilton for bringing such an important issue to the chamber.

With 75,000 people in Scotland thought to be living with the lasting effects of Covid-19 and that number only rising, the urgency of recognising and talking about long Covid, and establishing how we can support people who have it, is great and becoming greater.

Long Covid Scotland's briefing for MSPs ahead of the debate includes the phrase

"Nothing about us without us".

I and many others in the disability movement know that phrase well, and it is where I will start today. In simple terms, it means that decisions about long Covid must be taken with people who have long Covid. As someone who has spent years campaigning in the disability movement, I know from first-hand experience how important it is to have a seat at the table. I also know through experience that, until that happens, people with long Covid will face an uphill battle to make sure that what needs to happen to protect their rights does happen. Therefore, I ask the Government to directly and urgently engage with people with long Covid, especially those involved in Long Covid Scotland, and ensure that they are involved in policy design, development and implementation at every step of the way.

The condition is a new one, and we do not yet properly understand it. Therefore, it is not just good practice, it is in fact imperative that people who are living with long Covid are front and centre of what we do to support them, because only they can tell us exactly how it is impacting on their lives. The Scottish Government must listen to their experiences and their solutions and then respond with concrete actions that will address their health, social care and financial needs.

In my time as an MSP so far, I have had the pleasure of meeting hundreds of organisations across the third sector, and I have heard directly from them about the impact that the condition is having. Where the Government has not been there, third sector organisations, including charities such as Asthma UK, the British Lung Foundation and Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland have stepped up, as they always do. They were already breaking their backs and their budgets to cope with the increased demand of the pandemic and they were stretched to capacity before it, underfunded and underresourced. They now have to support people with long Covid, which has been added to the long list of things that they do. They all say the same thing: that tens of thousands of people with the condition continue to live unwell,

unheard and unsupported, and that the Scottish Government is at best offering piecemeal support and is not taking enough action to address their needs.

I encourage the Government to support the third sector to do its work with people with long Covid through adequate multiyear funding and support to recover from the past 20 months. I place on record my thanks to the third sector. In particular, I thank Glasgow Disability Alliance, which operates in the region that I represent, for what it does and in particular for what it has done in this year.

There can be no doubt that long Covid is having a huge impact. According to United Kingdom-wide research, 71 per cent of people with long Covid said that it affects their family life; 80 per cent said that it affects their ability to work; more than half have had to reduce their hours; more than one in five have been left unable to work at all; and more than a third said that it has impacted their finances. Those numbers show the desperate need to provide appropriate support to people, and to do so quickly. More than that, the figures show that this group of people are experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage and are disabled by most recognised definitions. To that end, I ask the Government to recognise long Covid as an impairment for all equalities and rights purposes, workers' rights purposes and for the purposes of social security. Not doing so will exacerbate the inequality that is already deep rooted in our society, particularly among women.

My colleague Mark Griffin's member's bill to establish a Scottish employment injuries advisory council would allow us to address that. It would correct the process by which something is defined as an employment injury. It would lay the framework for a new independent statutory public body with the authority to reshape and remodel the related benefit, which we hope would enable Covid-19 to be recognised as an industrial disease. Recent figures have shown that 75 per cent of employer Covid-19 disease reports that have been made in Scotland were about women employees. Given that 98 per cent of workers who were earning poverty wages during the pandemic were women, the bill could create a safety net to prevent them from falling into poverty as a result of developing the long-lasting effects of Covid-19.

I believe that we must see long Covid as a disabling condition and that we must recognise and realise people's rights. We urgently need a national strategic plan to do that, and it must be developed in collaboration with those who have experience of long Covid. The Scottish Government must act now to do that and to protect and promote the equality and human rights of everyone who is living with long Covid.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Willie Coffey is our final speaker before I ask the minister to respond to the debate. Mr Coffey joins us remotely.

17:53

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): I thank Alex Cole-Hamilton for bringing the debate to the chamber. It is good to hear at least a few members welcoming the £10 million investment by the Scottish Government to help long Covid sufferers. When the pandemic started, we all began hearing stories from our constituents who did not appear to be shaking off the effects of the virus. No one was sure—[*Inaudible.*]—and why the symptoms persisted. We now know that to be long Covid although, even now, it is still reasonable to say that we do not know enough about it and why it persists in some and not in others.

It is important to hear the voices of our constituents who are suffering from long Covid. I am indebted to my constituent Eileen, who contacted me yesterday to ask me to highlight what has happened to her.

Eileen is a front-line health visitor in Ayrshire with 36 years' experience. She was previously fit and healthy with no underlying health conditions. If her illness persists, she might never be able to work again. She managed the initial stages of her illness at home, but experienced many symptoms that required visits to Crosshouse hospital. After about 13 weeks of being very unwell, she was admitted to hospital having developed neurological symptoms, and she was an in-patient for three weeks. Paid-for private neurology advice led to more investigations but, alas, no treatment. The best advice was drug management for some of the symptoms and to wait and see how they developed. Occupational therapy and some physiotherapy followed, and Eileen continues to be supported at home by staff from the Douglas Grant rehabilitation centre.

I will mention just a few of the impacts that Eileen has to cope with at home. She has to sit on a stool in her kitchen to do simple food preparation and to empty her dishwasher, because she does not have the energy to do those things without that—and sometimes she cannot even do that. She has to use a seat in her shower. Even going upstairs in her house is a major task for her, as it gives her heart palpitations and breathlessness. She cannot put her washing outside, and she has to use a walking stick in the house at all times. She is bed-bound more often than not.

Eileen has gone from being a relatively fit and healthy individual to being a shadow of her former self, and there is no sign of things letting up. The

crushing fatigue that she experiences and the isolation at home are having a wider impact on her mental health.

I have shared that story with Eileen's permission, of course. It will resonate with many other members' accounts and, I am sure, with many other people who are watching this debate. At this moment, her future and the future of many long Covid sufferers are, at best, uncertain. Her ability to do almost everything for herself has been replaced by an inability to do anything. There has been a huge transformation in her health and quality of life.

In one of Eileen's messages to me, she said:

"I feel like a pinball machine with Covid having hit every cell in my body at some time over the past 19 months; I am single with a mortgage and I'm so worried for my future."

Eileen's story is not unique, but it is heart breaking, and the situation is becoming urgent.

I hope that, when the minister sums up, we will hear some more about the research funding and on-going support for long Covid sufferers, and perhaps also about potential beneficial treatments that we read about—for example, hyperbaric treatment appears to be having a positive impact. Most of all, I hope that we can hear that long Covid sufferers are very much in the minds of both Governments, to ensure that they will continue to be supported in respect of their employment and financial obligations and that the recovery from the physical and mental health trauma that they suffer will be a top priority as they continue to endure an incredibly debilitating condition.

17:58

The Minister for Public Health, Women's Health and Sport (Maree Todd): I thank all members who have taken part in discussing what is an important issue.

I assure members that the Government recognises the negative impact that long Covid can have on the physical and mental wellbeing of people who are affected, and that we are committed to making sure that people with long Covid receive the best possible care and support in a setting that is appropriate and as close to their home as possible. That is a key point to note in our approach.

Our response to long Covid is built on a range of well-integrated support that is already being delivered across Scotland by our NHS, social care and third sector partners. Support is available through local primary care teams, community-based rehabilitation services and referrals to secondary care for further investigation and advice, where necessary. I stress that the

approach that is taken depends on what is right for the individual.

Given the wide spectrum of needs that people who are affected by long Covid can have, we know that the full range of skills and knowledge of our multidisciplinary teams is required. That is why we are investing £155 million through our primary care improvement fund to support development of those teams. That includes, for example, recruitment of more community nurses to assist with diagnostic tests and chronic-disease management, physiotherapists in the community to treat musculoskeletal issues, as well as pharmacists to help with repeat prescriptions and medicine reviews.

In this year's programme for government, we committed to publishing a paper setting out our approach to care and support for people with long Covid. We delivered on that commitment on 30 September. Our paper sets out the support that people with long Covid can expect, and it outlines 16 commitments to deliver a range of improvements.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: The minister seems to be very confident in the Scottish Government's offer to sufferers of long Covid. She has rightly outlined the strategy paper and the money and action points that the Government has identified. However, the long Covid community has reported being devastated by that and feels that it was far too little, far too late. Is she telling Parliament and the long Covid community that that is the full extent of the offer to long Covid sufferers, or is there more to come?

Maree Todd: I am not saying that that is the full offer. I will look to other countries in the United Kingdom. During my speech, I will talk about some of the things that we are looking to deliver for individuals who are experiencing long Covid.

I will set out some of the initiatives on which we have already delivered. Giving people access to clear information is a key part of supporting them to feel more in control of their condition. Last month, we launched, on the NHS Inform website, a new long Covid information platform that is specifically designed to help people with their recovery. We have invested £40,000 in a public awareness campaign, with information being displayed in community pharmacies across Scotland on how people can access further advice and support in relation to their symptoms.

We are supporting clinicians to access evidence-based information and advice on long Covid. We are actively supporting application of the UK-wide clinical guideline, and we have worked with specialists to develop a long Covid implementation support note that gives clinicians across Scotland practical help on the appropriate

assessments, investigations and referrals for their patients.

We recognise the vital work of third sector organisations across the country in supporting people and communities. We have provided £460,000 to Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland to enable it to deliver its long Covid support service. Through that service, people can speak to nurses who are trained in managing some of the most common long Covid symptoms, such as breathlessness and fatigue.

The real-life experiences of people who are living with long Covid will continue to be vital in informing our approach. This month, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care will meet a range of organisations that represent and support people with long Covid, which will be really helpful in informing our evolving understanding of the condition and people's needs.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Can the minister confirm whether the organisations that the cabinet secretary will meet will include Long Covid Scotland?

Maree Todd: Yes—my understanding is that that will be the case.

We have backed up delivery of the commitments that are outlined in our approach paper with a £10 million long Covid support fund. It will provide NHS boards with further resource so that they can respond in a flexible and tailored manner to the needs of people with long Covid, and provide appropriate training and education of staff. In recognition of Scotland's unique geography and population distribution, the fund will support local services to develop and deliver the best models of care that are appropriate for local populations. That could include strengthening and improving co-ordination of existing services, or establishing dedicated long Covid assessment clinics, if a health board identifies that as an appropriate response to meet local needs.

Mr Cole-Hamilton made unhelpful comparisons with England; it might be helpful for him to reflect on the reality of patients' experiences of accessing services there. Just last week, Francesca Steele wrote in *The Times* of her experience of referral to an NHS England long Covid clinic. Her story is one of lengthy waiting lists and no follow-up. Ultimately, in her own words,

“the clinic was not the solution”

that she had hoped for.

Sandesh Gulhane: Since my maiden speech, I have been talking about a Covid clinic in Hertfordshire. It is the best clinic that I have heard of, and I would like to bring that model to Scotland. The clinic, which has received fantastic patient feedback, has a GP and a dedicated team to look

after patients. Is that model of best practice not the one to talk about?

Maree Todd: We are certainly willing to look at what is taking place around the UK. We are working with The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, the Royal College of General Practitioners and the Scottish Intercollegiate Guidelines Network to develop clinical guidelines. There is absolutely no reason why we would not look at areas of best practice in England.

However, Ms Steele's experience is not unique, but is reflected in the findings of a survey that was conducted by Long Covid Support, which found that only 26 per cent of respondents were satisfied with their experience of NHS England's long Covid clinics, and that 58 per cent were dissatisfied.

We do not want to make this a political fight—we want to concentrate on supporting people in Scotland in the best way possible for their needs. Since the beginning of the pandemic, we have learned a lot about Covid-19, but there is still a lot more that we need to understand, particularly in relation to its longer-term effects.

Emma Harper: Will the minister take one final intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You will have to do so very briefly, minister, because you are running out of time.

Emma Harper: I appreciate your taking many interventions, minister. I know that we already have diagnostic tests that use fluorescence microscopy and thromboelastography platelet mapping. Is that part of the Government's work on taking forward management of long Covid?

Maree Todd: I assure Emma Harper that the clinical community in Scotland is looking at all the evidence that is being produced. Indeed, the clinical community across the UK works together to produce guidance very quickly when responding to a new disease. The community is updating the guidance, which is due soon, so it is certainly looking at the evidence base. There is also funding for—

Alex Cole-Hamilton: Will the minister—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The minister should really be bringing her remarks to a close, Mr Cole-Hamilton. I think that she has been fairly generous in taking members' interventions.

Maree Todd: The Government has committed funding of £2.5 million to nine research projects, which cover a wide range of approaches. The research will address many of the questions about, and greatly increase the clinical knowledge base on, long Covid.

I welcome the opportunity that the debate has given me to set out some of the actions that the

Government is taking to ensure that people with long Covid can get the right support that is evidence based, effective, safe and person centred. There is not a one-size-fits-all approach, but one that provides wraparound support to individuals and enables them to access the right care in the right place at the right time.

Meeting closed at 18:07.

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