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Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 23 November 2021

[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, for which our leader today is the Rev Raheel Arif, who is minister at Denny old parish church and Haggs parish church in Falkirk.

The Rev Raheel Arif (Denny Old Parish Church and Haggs Parish Church): On compassion:

“When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.”

Folks, compassion literally means “to feel with”. In the verse that I just read, we see that Jesus felt compassion for people because he had felt what they were feeling. Compassion for people is the most important thing that we can say about Jesus and about God, and it was one of the reasons why people followed him. In that compassion, he healed the sick, raised the dead and cast out demons.

Friends, today we live in a world that is full of fear and war. We are afraid of coronavirus. We are afraid for our economy. News coverage from around the world suggests that we are afraid of climate crisis, job losses, high energy bills, failing healthcare systems, disease, forest fires, drought, drugs and immigration. The list goes on.

In this time of fear, the Parliament and we, the church, are called to imitate our Lord and to find ways to break the cycle of fear and violence with words and acts of hope and assurance, and with words and acts of compassion and healing. Now, that is a mighty tall order, is it not? What can a Government or a little church do? What can a parliamentarian or a Christian do? In the face of all this hurt and pain, who am I?

Those must have been the sorts of questions that an Albanian nun, Mother Theresa, asked herself over 50 years ago when she found herself in Calcutta. She decided to do what Jesus did. She had compassion for the ones who were right in front of her. She dealt with the need that she was given, and did what she could.

Today, I would like to say to you, and to folks in church, that we are called to have compassion, teach compassion and live compassion.

God has called you to serve the people in Scotland. Today, I assure you that God is with you. Just do your best and leave the outcome in God’s hands. The better way to serve the people is to follow Jesus’ example and have compassion. I believe that when you look at people with compassion, you will be successful and will be able to take this country out of the pandemic and all other problems.

May God bless you all with compassionate hearts. Amen.

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 members as possible, I would prefer short and succinct questions, and answers to match.

National Health Service (Support)

1. Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what support it is giving to NHS boards that are under pressure. (S6T-00301)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Humza Yousaf): As members will be aware, the health and care system is under extreme pressure due to the pandemic, and all health boards are experiencing significant issues, including workforce challenges and high levels of delayed discharge.

As members will know, we have invested an additional £300 million in a package of measures to support health and social care services over the course of the winter. Over and above that, and to maximise capacity during winter, we have invested £10 million in two new specialist programmes that aim to provide alternatives to admission and to ensure that our processes are right to ensure timely discharge.

Stephen Kerr: I pay tribute to everyone who is working on the front line in our NHS. I was hoping that we might get more about the measures that the Government is taking to give immediate practical support to the health boards, our front-line NHS staff and care staff.

The winter plans should be about practical support, not press releases. How many people are waiting for a care package in order to be discharged from hospital, and what is the longest time that people have been waiting to be discharged?

Humza Yousaf: Forgive me. I do not know the exact figures off the top of my head, but I will get them to Stephen Kerr. He is right to focus on delayed discharge. As I think he knows, it is not just about press releases; we are taking practical action with £300 million of investment. The practical action involves, for example, recruiting 1,000 band 2 to band 4 staff, who will help with the people who are waiting for care at home. We hope to fund interim care home placements, so that individuals for whom discharge is clinically safe will be discharged.

I meet health boards regularly; I have meetings this afternoon and tomorrow afternoon with the

health boards that have the highest numbers of delayed discharges. I promise Stephen Kerr that such practical action is what, I hope, is making the difference. Although figures are nowhere near where we would like them to be, such action is maybe why we have, for the past three weeks, seen improvements in accident and emergency departments' performance.

Stephen Kerr: With the greatest of respect to the cabinet secretary, I say that the numbers should be at the front of his mind, because he is absolutely right to identify the issue as being a critical challenge that our NHS is facing. The fact that he does not know the numbers is deeply disappointing.

For weeks, the Government has been talking about the approaching crisis; we are listening now to the product of Scottish National Party neglect of our NHS and care system. It seems as though the cabinet secretary is asleep at the wheel, and he needs to get a grip.

Yesterday, the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow offered the cabinet secretary realistic solutions to workforce planning. Its president, Professor Jackie Taylor, said:

"It's no secret that Covid-19 has placed unrelenting pressures on an already fractured healthcare system. However, these challenges existed long before the pandemic—staff shortages and excessive workloads are nothing new. The workforce is in crisis and the urgency in the need to address this cannot be overstated."

Does the cabinet secretary disagree with Professor Taylor?

Humza Yousaf: I have a good relationship with Professor Taylor, and I look forward to meeting her again. I will continue to engage with the royal colleges.

I do not disagree that there were challenges pre-pandemic. It would be absurd or foolish to suggest—the First Minister, the Government and I have never suggested it—that there were not issues pre-pandemic. I suspect that it would be equally absurd for anybody to suggest that the biggest shock that our NHS has faced in its 73-year history does not have a bearing on the outcome that we are seeing today.

Stephen Kerr asked me for a specific figure. I know that there are 1,500 standard delays, but he asked me for a specific figure for people who are waiting to be assessed for a care home package. I will get the exact figure to him; if he wants the numbers broken down by health board, I will do my best to give him that detailed information, as well.

However, I do not accept his characterisation of the action that the Government is taking on the NHS. Under this Government, we have the highest

staffing numbers in the history of the NHS, nine years of consecutive growth, record investment, and the highest-ever single pay deal for NHS staff, who are the best-paid NHS staff in any part of the United Kingdom. Of course, I want the statistics to be higher, and we are working hard on that, but we still have the best performing A and E service, which has been the case for six years in a row.

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): I understand that various schemes have been put in place to provide support to NHS staff, who are working incredibly hard in the face of the pressure that has been caused by the pandemic. Does the cabinet secretary agree with NHS Lanarkshire staff that Covid is still with us, and that the best thing that we can all do to support our healthcare workers and protect the NHS is get vaccinated?

Humza Yousaf: Yes, I agree with that wholeheartedly. I pay tribute to NHS staff across the country for their incredible efforts during the pandemic, which have been nothing short of Herculean.

Collette Stevenson is absolutely right that the best thing that we can do to help and to protect our NHS is to get vaccinated. We know what protection the vaccine offers. We should also rigorously follow the baseline mitigation measures; that is, people should wear face coverings in appropriate settings—unless they are exempt from doing so—test themselves regularly and practise good hygiene.

All those measures can help us to get Covid more under control. As we know, the numbers of infections that we are dealing with are currently far too high. Taking all those measures can help to alleviate the pressure on, and help those who are working courageously and tirelessly in, our NHS.

Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): Last week, I asked the cabinet secretary about cancellation of surgery, in particularly cancer surgery, as NHS boards struggle under immense pressure. He pointed to the challenges of the pandemic, but we know that waiting lists have been growing for years. Elective surgery is also a concern and people are struggling in pain for long periods. What is he doing to support NHS boards to enable surgery to recommence? We want practical measures to be taken, such as increasing bed capacity. We also want the recommendations of the royal colleges to be listened to.

Humza Yousaf: Of course we will listen to the royal colleges.

On cancer performance, it is worth saying that, for the quarter ending June 2021, 97.9 per cent of cancer patients started treatment within 31 days of the decision to treat. The 31-day target was met, but we know that it is more challenging to meet the

62-day target. Consequently, a lot of our investment goes into diagnostics.

I am pleased that the Government has invested in three early cancer diagnostic centres in health boards around the country. We will evaluate the centres; if they are going well and give us the results that we expect, we will consider rolling them out further.

In terms of more practical support, I have already referenced the fact that we are recruiting more staff to the NHS and will continue to do so.

We have immediate pressures, but Paul O’Kane is right to mention that they are also long-term recovery pressures, and that is why we have a recovery plan that is backed by £1 billion of investment.

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): I have concerns about the booster vaccination roll-out in NHS Lanarkshire. Reportedly, there are nearly 5,000 housebound people in the health board area who are waiting for their boosters. I have been contacted by constituents who are housebound but have not been registered as such and have been given appointments at vaccination centres that they cannot possibly attend. Will the cabinet secretary look into the matter, and at whether further support can be provided to NHS Lanarkshire to help it to work through the backlog?

Humza Yousaf: Yes—I will, of course, look at any information and details that Gillian Mackay can provide about particular constituents.

I will address the general issue that she mentioned. Yesterday, I spoke to the chief executive and the chair of NHS Lanarkshire. We went into a fair bit of detail on the autumn-winter vaccination programme. They referred to the fact that the board is looking to increase the number of doses that will be administered during the festive period.

If there are specific constituency cases that the member wishes me to look at, I will, of course, do that.

Covid-19 (School Closures)

2. **Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government how many schools are currently shut due to staff shortages resulting from Covid-19 cases. (S6T-00296)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Shirley-Anne Somerville): We receive daily management information from local authorities that provides their intelligence on which schools in their area are closed or at risk of closure due to Covid reasons. For example, last week, local authorities informed us of a total of four schools across Scotland that were closed at some stage. As of yesterday, the reporting

indicated that one school was closed. However, the management information does not include a detailed breakdown of the reasons for a school closure, and the responsibility for such decisions sits with local authorities.

We know that all parts of the system have been stretched as they have responded to the pressures of the pandemic. We have already committed £240 million to supporting local authorities to recruit additional teachers and staff, and deploy more support to their schools, children and families. The investment has supported the appointment of an additional 2,200 teachers and more than 500 support staff in schools across Scotland.

Martin Whitfield: The cabinet secretary has confirmed that 2,200 new teachers have been recruited, but we are also in a period of teacher shortages, with cases rising as the normal winter illness rates are about to hit. That is causing schools to close year groups, and worse. How will the Scottish Government mitigate the number of absent teachers?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: We appreciate that there are operational challenges for many schools as they continue to deal with the challenges that Covid presents. Obviously, those are discussed at the Covid-19 education recovery group every time that it meets. The Government takes that very seriously.

Schools can decide to close a year group, for example, if that is, in their eyes, the right response to the operational challenges that they face. I should point out that the figures on new positive cases among pupils show that just under 50 per cent of schools have no cases reported between primary 1 and 7 and secondary 1 and 4, and 17 per cent of schools have only one case, for example. Very few schools have a multitude of cases, or what might be classed as an outbreak.

We look seriously at what needs to be done to support teachers. I discussed some of the national issues in my original answer. We keep closely up to date with local authorities and trade unions and, if anything more can be done, we are happy to do it.

Martin Whitfield: For more than a year, we in Scottish Labour have been highlighting the need for proper ventilation in schools, but the Scottish Government still does not know how many classrooms failed the inspection. This winter, children are again being advised to wear coats and gloves while windows are open. What will the Scottish Government do to improve the environment in pupils' classrooms, which are also places of work for teachers, classroom assistants and others?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The member will be aware that, in the early days of the pandemic, the Scottish Government provided £90 million to support schools with a variety of issues, including ventilation. That was followed by another £10 million to support schools and to ensure that all local authorities undertook monitoring of the teaching areas in their schools. That work is being completed, and local authorities are then responsible for dealing with any maintenance issues that have come to light. I stress that, in the main, the issues that have come to light have been quite minor.

Of course, we keep in close contact with local authorities to ensure that work has been undertaken and continues to be undertaken where necessary. Natural ventilation will play an important part in that, and it is not the Scottish Government that has decided that; it is very much based on considering the expert advice on ventilation. We will continue to keep a close eye on the issue and to support schools with the on-going monitoring that will be needed during the winter months.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): I share Martin Whitfield's concerns about the impact, albeit temporary, of recent classroom closures. I note the return of home-based learning at Ross high school in Tranent and for nine classes at Preston Tower primary school in East Lothian. Pupils in S4, S5 and S6 are set to sit crucial exams next year. Despite the heroic efforts of teachers, Scotland's young people have already had their learning negatively affected by lockdowns. Will the minister commit to tackling on-going teacher shortages? What will the Government do to support councils to assist schools such as Ross high, which might be subject to disruption or class closure due to Covid and the Scottish National Party's teacher shortages?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: In my original answer, I referred to the additional 2,200 teachers and 500 support staff for which the Scottish Government is providing financial support to local authorities. That will be paying dividends across the country. We absolutely recognise that there will still be challenges with pupil and teacher absences, which is exactly why, before the summer, the Scottish Qualifications Authority announced modifications to the national qualifications for 2022 and why it has investigated, and continues to investigate, the modifications that might have to be put in place if there was significantly more disruption than we saw last year, although we are not at that stage.

Clearly, those discussions do not just happen within the SQA or within Government; they happen with our stakeholders to ensure that they—young

people in particular, but also parents and teachers—are part of the process of ensuring that young people are reassured that they will have a credible qualifications process next year, and that the Government and the SQA will support them through that.

Covid-19

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is a statement by Nicola Sturgeon, giving a Covid-19 update.

14:20

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I will now give an update on the latest Covid situation and our best assessment of the current course of the pandemic.

Following on from last week's statement, I will also set out a proposed change to the current vaccination certification scheme and our rationale for all the decisions reached this morning in relation to the scheme.

First, however, I will set out today's statistics. There were 2,527 positive cases reported yesterday, which is 11.6 per cent of the tests carried out. There are currently 743 people in hospital with Covid, which is seven fewer than yesterday, and 60 people are receiving intensive care, which is one more than yesterday. Sadly, a further 17 deaths have been reported over the past 24 hours, which takes the total number of deaths registered under the daily definition to 9,495. Once again, I send my condolences to everyone who has lost a loved one.

More positively, the progress of the vaccination programme continues to be very good: 4,340,162 people have now had a first dose and 3,940,314 have had both doses. In total, 88 per cent of all those aged over 18 are double-vaccinated, and 77 per cent of 16 and 17-year-olds and 58 per cent of 12 to 15-year-olds have had a first dose. In line with updated advice from the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation, we are now preparing to offer second doses to 16 and 17-year-olds. I am pleased to say that, as of now, on first, second, third and booster doses, Scotland is still the most vaccinated part of the United Kingdom. I again record my thanks to everyone involved in organising and delivering the vaccine programme.

Looking across Europe, we can see clearly that the Covid situation is deteriorating again. As a result, Covid measures are being tightened or reintroduced in many countries—for example, Ireland, the Netherlands, Germany and Slovakia. At the most severe end of the spectrum, Austria is now back in full lockdown and is mandating compulsory vaccination.

All of that is a stark reminder that, unfortunately, the threat of the pandemic is not yet behind us. Covid is continuing to force Governments everywhere to take really difficult and invidious decisions. That is also true here, in Scotland.

While, thankfully, we are not at this stage experiencing the rapid rise in cases that others are experiencing, the situation remains precarious. Cases are on the rise, to a greater or lesser extent, in countries all around us, including in the UK, and we are entering a period when, understandably, people will be socialising and mixing more than normal. Even though our position now is relatively stable compared with those of some other countries, we must continue to take care, and we must not allow ourselves to be lulled into a false sense of security.

Let me give some more detail on the recent trends here. Last week, I noted that cases had increased gradually over the previous fortnight, from just over 2,500 new cases a day to just over 3,000. Since then, the situation appears to have stabilised again. In the past seven days, the average number of new cases being recorded each day has fallen from just over 3,000 to just under 3,000—a fall of around 3 per cent. However, there continues to be quite a marked variation between different age groups. In the over 60s, the number of cases fell by 19 per cent. That is, at least in part, likely to reflect the good progress of the booster programme. In the under-60s, there was only a very slight decline. There was a small fall in the number of cases among those aged under 25, which was almost balanced out by a very small increase in the other age bands under 60. In younger age groups, the number of cases has been broadly static over the past week.

That said, a number of different factors will be at play over the next few weeks, and the combination of those makes it difficult to be certain about the course that the pandemic will take over the festive period and into January. On the one hand, the booster programme will continue to gather pace and more people in the younger age groups will receive their primary vaccinations. We can expect the combined effects of vaccination to bear down on transmission and, we hope, to reduce the number of people who will become seriously unwell as a result of getting the virus. On the other hand, we can also expect more indoor mixing to take place as the weather gets colder and as we head towards the festive season. In addition, there is likely to be some waning of vaccine immunity, which is why booster jags matter so much.

Those latter factors will increase the risk of transmission and, although case numbers are broadly stable just now, infection rates remain too high and are higher than we would want them to be. All of that is putting significant and sustained pressure on the national health service. In the past week, the number of people in hospital with Covid has fallen only slightly, from 779 to 743, and the number of people in intensive care has risen slightly, from 57 to 60. The number of patients in hospital with Covid is still high. The NHS is also

dealing with a backlog of care created by the earlier phases of the pandemic, and the peak of the winter flu season, coupled with other winter pressures, possibly still lies ahead of us.

Taking all of that into account and adding the fact that the R number is hovering at or is slightly above 1, leads us to the conclusion that our situation is definitely more positive than we might have expected it to be at this point, but it is still precarious. We must get the R number back below 1. That means having in place a range of proportionate protections to keep the country as safe as possible while we continue living as freely as possible.

That is why the Cabinet decided this morning to retain for a further period all the remaining legal protections, such as the requirement to wear face coverings and—subject to a change that I will set out shortly—the vaccination certification scheme, while intensifying our public information campaign in the weeks ahead.

I will now set out and emphasise the range of protections that we judge to be essential—I stress that word—if we are to navigate this winter as safely as possible and, crucially, without the need to reintroduce more onerous restrictions. As we approach the festive season, I appeal afresh to everyone across the country to comply with all the protections with renewed care and commitment in order to keep ourselves safe and to show our solidarity with those around us.

The first protection is vaccination. It is the duty of Government to deliver the vaccination programme—especially, at this stage, booster vaccinations—as rapidly as possible. Right now, that is my Government's top priority.

More than 1.4 million people—just over 30 per cent of the total over-12 population—have, so far, had a booster vaccination or a third dose of vaccine. Within the most vulnerable groups, 87 per cent of over 70s and 76 per cent of those at the highest clinical risk already have the protection of a booster or a third dose. As I said, we are already seeing the positive impact of boosters on case numbers. The programme is going exceptionally well, but we are doing, and will continue to do, everything possible to speed it up further.

Delivering the programme as quickly as possible is the Government's responsibility, although we are reliant on and eternally grateful for the commitment of NHS workers in delivering it. The duty and responsibility of all of us, as citizens, is to get vaccinated as soon as we are able. If you have not yet had a vaccine dose that you are eligible for, please make arrangements to get it now.

That is even more vital if you are planning to socialise at all over the festive period. If you are meeting up with loved ones and you are not as

fully vaccinated as you could be, you are putting them at unnecessary risk. To be blunt, you could be putting their lives in danger. The most precious gift that we can give anyone this Christmas is being vaccinated—and being tested, which I will say more about shortly—before we meet, hug or spend time with them.

If you have not had a first or second dose yet, it is not too late; please get it now. Please also get your booster as soon as you are able. A booster jag reduces the risk of symptomatic infection by more than 80 per cent. I stress that the booster is not just a small top up: getting it is every bit as important as getting the initial vaccinations.

If you are aged over 50 or in one of the higher-risk groups and you are also more than 24 weeks from your second jag, you should book an appointment online via the NHS Inform website or via the helpline. The helpline number is 0800 030 8013. People who live in many parts of the Highland area or on one of the islands that does not use online booking will be contacted separately by their health board. Everyone else should use NHS Inform or should call the helpline. Please book the booster as soon as you are eligible, which is 24 weeks after your second dose. Do not wait until after the Christmas holiday period is over.

For those aged 40 to 49, who are next in line for boosters, and for 16 and 17-year-olds, who will now be offered a second dose, information on booking appointments will be available very soon.

Above all today, I want to reinforce this vital message to every person who is eligible for vaccination, including pregnant women, whether for a first, second, third or booster jag: please book an appointment without delay, and get your flu jag too, if you are eligible for that. Getting vaccinated remains the single most important thing that any of us can do to protect ourselves, our loved ones and our communities. You could well be saving your own life and the lives of your loved ones. You will be helping the NHS and you will be maximising our chances of getting through this winter without the need for further restrictions.

The vaccine programme is the bedrock of our fight against Covid, but other protections are vital, too. The Scottish Government will be intensifying our public awareness and information campaigns over the winter period to make sure that everyone knows what is being asked of us. When you see those ads, please take a moment to listen and remind yourself of the protections that will help to keep you and others safe.

What are those other protections? First, as well as vaccination, we are asking everyone to take regular lateral flow tests. We have been asking people to do that routinely twice a week. However,

over the festive period, we are asking for extra effort, so this next request is vitally important. On any occasion when you are socialising with others, whether that is going out for drinks or dinner, visiting someone at home or even going shopping somewhere that might be crowded, please take a lateral flow device test before you go, and if the result is positive, do not go. Instead, get a polymerase chain reaction—PCR—test and self-isolate while you wait for the result. In that way, you will minimise the risk of inadvertently passing the virus on even if you do not have symptoms.

Also, please continue to wear face coverings on public transport, in shops and when moving around in hospitality settings. That remains a legal requirement, but it is also a vital protection. A study that was published just last week suggests that face coverings may reduce the risk of transmission by over 50 per cent. Remember that good ventilation also reduces risks in indoor spaces, so please open windows if you have people round.

Lastly, please continue to work from home whenever possible. I know that that is not always easy for workers, nor is it always convenient for employers, but it makes a difference and it will help us to navigate our way through this difficult winter period. The average number of contacts that people are having in the workplace has doubled in recent weeks, and as we head deeper into winter, that will create an increased risk of transmission. The virus transmits, as we know, when people interact, and when people go to work they interact in a number of ways, including through travel, during lunch breaks and after work. Support for home working whenever possible remains one of the most effective protections that we have at our disposal just now.

I turn to the Covid certification scheme that the Cabinet also discussed this morning. I will set out the decisions that we reached and the rationale for them. For context, it is worth bearing in mind that Covid certification is far from unique to Scotland. Similar schemes are in place in many other parts of the world. In fact, in recent weeks, certification schemes have been announced, reintroduced or extended in Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Northern Ireland and elsewhere. Many cover a wider range of premises than Scotland's does. However, we must reach decisions based on our circumstances, and I confirm that the judgments that we arrived at this morning are as follows.

First, for at least a further three-week period, we will retain vaccination certification for the venues and events that are currently covered by the scheme—that is, late-night licensed premises with a designated area for dancing, unseated indoor events with 500 people or more, unseated outdoor events with 4,000 people or more, and any event

with 10,000 people or more. Given the current state of the pandemic, it is our judgment that it would not be appropriate at this stage to remove that protection against transmission.

Secondly, however, we have decided that, from 6 December, it will be possible to access venues or events that are covered by the scheme by showing either proof of vaccination, as now, or a recent negative lateral flow test result. When we launched the scheme, one of its primary objectives was to help to drive up vaccination rates. That is still important, obviously, but actual and projected uptake rates mean that we now judge it possible to include testing. Doing so will also ensure that the scheme remains proportionate and help our wider efforts to stem transmission through greater use of LFD tests more generally.

Finally, as I indicated last week, the Cabinet also considered the possible extension of the scheme to a much wider range of premises, including indoor theatres, cinemas and hospitality venues. I stress that this was a very finely balanced decision. However, I confirm that we have decided not to extend the scope of the scheme.

We have taken account of the fact that, although our situation is precarious, cases are currently stable and, indeed, slightly declining and, having also considered the inevitable impact that vaccination certification has on the operation of businesses, we have concluded that, at this stage, extension would not be proportionate. We were also mindful of the need over the coming weeks to get across the message that it is important to be vaccinated and tested ahead of socialising in any setting—including homes and shopping centres, for example—not just in those that might be covered by a certification scheme.

I said last week that we would take that decision with the utmost care and we have done that. However, it is important to stress that we must keep it under review, as we do all possible protections. If our situation deteriorates, it may be that extending Covid certification is a more proportionate alternative to the reintroduction of more onerous restrictions on, for example, hospitality. We will continue to liaise closely with businesses about that and about what they must do in the coming weeks to minimise that risk.

I am sure that it is an understatement to say that we are all sick and tired of the virus and the impact that, although less than in previous months, it is having on our lives. I understand that. Indeed, I share that sentiment. However, I am also deeply grateful for all the sacrifices that everyone has made and continues to make. Thanks to those sacrifices, we are in a much stronger position now than I would have dared hope just a few weeks ago. However, I cannot emphasise strongly

enough that our position is still precarious. The next few weeks pose risks. Cases are rising in countries around us and the festive period will bring more travel and more socialising.

Of course, that socialising is to be welcomed. We all desperately want a more normal Christmas than was possible last year, but all of us must take sensible, proportionate measures to reduce the risk of a new year hangover of surging cases, more pressure on the NHS and inevitably renewed restrictions. We can all play our part in avoiding that.

To everyone watching, I say that my request in a nutshell is as follows and I ask people to pass it on to their friends and family. This is what all of us—Government, businesses and individual citizens—must do together as part of a social compact to keep each other as safe as possible and allow us to live as freely as possible.

Over these next crucial weeks, please wear your face coverings and follow all advice on hygiene and ventilation. Wash your hands and surfaces and keep windows open when you have people round. If you have eased up on that recently, as I know that many of us will have, now is the time for all of us to tighten up again.

Work from home if you can. If you think that you could be working from home and are not, raise it with your employer. I ask employers to facilitate home working for a bit longer as far as possible.

I ask you all to get any and all vaccine doses that you are eligible for, including the flu vaccine. For my part, I will continue to make sure that the Government keeps rolling out the vaccination programme as quickly as possible.

Finally, on any occasion that you intend to socialise or mix with people from other households, whether that is in a pub, restaurant, house or shopping centre, do an LFD test first. If it is positive, do not go; self-isolate and get a PCR test instead. The Government has made sure that you can order tests free through the NHS Inform website or get them at a local test site or pharmacy. If you do not have them already, now is the time to order some, and keep your supply topped up over the next few weeks.

All those precautions matter. They are part of our social compact. They will help to protect us and all those around us and will help us to protect our NHS and all the people who are working hard on its front line right now.

I ask everybody throughout the country to stick with those protections so that we can, I hope, have a more normal Christmas without jeopardising our prospect of a much brighter new year as well.

The Presiding Officer: The First Minister will now take questions on the issues that have been

raised in her statement. I intend to allow around 40 minutes for questions.

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): I begin by encouraging absolutely everyone who can get their Covid jab to do so. The vaccine is our best protection against the virus, as we enter the most difficult Christmas period that Scotland's NHS has ever faced. We welcome the fact that the booster jab scheme has been expanded. I thank all the fantastic front-line staff who helped to make that roll-out a success.

However, even given the numbers that have already been vaccinated, we hear examples of people being forced to travel long distances to get the jab, or waiting long hours in the cold and rain. We have called for the reopening of mass vaccination centres to speed up the roll-out. The First Minister said that she would consider that. Today, will she finally back that call?

It is also welcome that the vaccination passport scheme is not being extended; however, the uncertainty that the Government has left hanging over businesses for the past two weeks has been unnecessary and unacceptable. The Scottish Government released its so-called evidence paper on Friday but, in almost 70 pages, it was unable to offer clear proof of the scheme's effectiveness. It seems more and more likely that the Government is making it up as it goes along.

Businesses are scunnered. Making them wait even longer to hear whether they will be facing extra costs and added burdens in the weeks before Christmas is a slap in the face. Those businesses are not crying wolf, as a Scottish National Party MSP has claimed; they are raising legitimate concerns.

The First Minister said in her statement:

"We will continue to liaise closely with businesses about that".

However, almost every business group, from the Scottish Chambers of Commerce to the Federation of Small Businesses to the Scottish Beer and Pub Association, has problems with the scheme. When is the First Minister actually going to listen to Scotland's businesses?

The Covid app south of the border has the capability of registering a booster jab. The Scottish Government decided to develop its own app, at an estimated cost as high as £4.5 million. When exactly will Scotland's app display booster vaccination status?

The First Minister: The member says that we are making it up as we go along. We are not doing that. We are trying to take the best, most balanced and most proportionate judgments as we go. We are not always getting it right. I have said all along that, in such a complex and unprecedented

situation, mistakes and errors of judgment will be made, and I will always be candid about that.

However, if we are making it up as we go along, that has taken us—I am not complacent—to a position of having the lowest infection rates and the highest vaccination rates in the UK. *[Interruption.]* A member is telling me, from a sedentary position, that we once had the highest rates. There have been a couple of periods in which we have had the highest rates but, overall throughout the pandemic, we have had a lower infection rate than any other part of the UK.

Everybody is grappling with a difficult situation. We are all taking difficult decisions; however, we are taking them in the interests of keeping the country as safe as possible.

I will briefly address points of detail. Our booster programme is going exceptionally well. We are looking every day at how to accelerate further the pace and progress of that. We are using the available workforce as effectively as possible and, at the moment, our judgment is that the programme is being delivered in the correct way.

Of course, we keep an open mind to other approaches. It is worth noting that mass vaccination clinics, albeit that they have played an enormously important part in previous phases of the programme, also had the highest do-not-attend rates of all settings in which we did vaccinations, if memory serves me correctly. We are progressing with the vaccination programme and will continue to take such judgments, based on best considerations.

The vaccination programme is the biggest and most complex ever conducted—that is true, I am sure, for all countries—so there will be issues and problems with it, and we will address those as far as we can and as quickly as we can, when they arise, to make sure that not only is it happening quickly but it is as accessible and convenient as possible for the people who are accessing it. I thank everybody who is delivering the programme and everybody who has so far come forward for vaccination.

On Covid certification, it is absolutely right that we have in place the system that we have right now. Equally, it is right, now that we have vaccination rates at a certain level, to move to its being open to testing as well as vaccination or as an alternative to vaccination. We were right to consider extending the system further, and we are right to keep that under review. In the face of the virus, the most foolish thing that any Government can do is to rule things out before we have the evidence. It is always difficult, with a virus, to draw lines between cause and effect, but sometimes we have to use common sense about what reduces

transmission and what has been proven to be successful in doing that.

On the Covid app, we are, as I think that I said last week, doing work right now to include boosters in the app. The reason we developed our own app was that we were told by the Department of Health and Social Care south of the border that to be part of the English app, which we initially explored doing, would take 12 months. Against this virus, we do not have 12 months, which is why we moved ahead to develop our own app. I think that that was the right thing to do.

Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): I send my condolences to all those who have lost a loved one. The virus has not gone away and we must redouble our efforts to make sure that we come through this pandemic together.

From the start of the pandemic, the World Health Organization and experts have been clear that the most effective way to reduce transmission of the virus is testing. However, when the Government lost control of the pandemic, it was determined to be seen to be doing something rather than doing the right thing, so it chose to pursue vaccination passports.

We know that the vaccine works. It reduces deaths, hospitalisations and incidence of long Covid. The First Minister talked about common sense, and that includes people knowing that even if they have had the vaccine, they can still get and spread the virus. The most important way to reduce transmission is to have a negative test.

With winter fast approaching, the First Minister says that we are in a precarious situation. We have spent months pursuing the incorrect priority. The Government's own evidence shows that there is no real evidence of an increase in uptake of the vaccine. At the same time, transmission has not fallen—in fact, transmission is up. We have wasted that time. I welcome the change to include a negative test from now on, but frankly we are in this position because the Government could not accept that it was wrong and move in the right direction, despite the warnings from the World Health Organization, medical professionals, businesses and public health experts, some of whom the First Minister likes to quote selectively.

Now that we have accepted that we have done the wrong thing, let us focus on testing but also look at where we are getting the biggest rises in transmission. The largest increase in cases is in zero to 18-year-olds—those who are not included in the Covid vaccination scheme—and within that, the largest increase is in five to 11-year-olds, which is because the virus is spreading in our schools. That is directly linked to a lack of adequate ventilation and virus protection. Asking schools to open windows is not in itself a way of

reducing transmission or creating adequate levels of ventilation, particularly as we head into the winter months. What urgent support will the First Minister give to schools so that they can have adequate ventilation?

We know that the effectiveness of the vaccine reduces six months after the second dose. More than 800,000 people have passed the six-month stage and have not yet received their booster. What urgent action are we taking to make sure that all those people have adequate levels of protection as we head into the winter months?

The First Minister: On vaccination certification, Anas Sarwar is fundamentally wrong. The error that he makes is to suggest that we can always pick one thing over another and not, at different stages, have a combination of things. In the early stages of the vaccination certification scheme, one of the primary objectives was to drive up vaccination rates—

Anas Sarwar: It did not work.

The First Minister: The member says that it did not work, but vaccination rates went up and we are now the most vaccinated part of the UK. Self-evidently, we have increased vaccination rates. Had we included testing as an alternative at an earlier stage, we would have undermined the central, primary objective of the scheme. As we have got vaccination rates up and as we move into a different phase, we are including testing.

Anas Sarwar oversimplifies things to such a point that, in my view, it would have been dangerous if we had followed the advice that he would have been giving us over the past number of weeks.

On his points about testing, we are testing extensively. We will continue to do that through PCR tests and, increasingly, I hope, through LFT testing.

Transmission has been falling from the latter of the two peaks that we experienced over the winter, which is a good thing. We now again have the lowest infection rates in the UK, although we are not complacent about that.

We must use all the tools and all the levers in as smart and nuanced a way as possible to bear down on transmission overall. Right now, the combination of things that we are doing is effective, but we must ask ourselves whether it will continue to be effective as the other risks accumulate over the winter. We must be vigilant about that.

As far as ventilation is concerned, if it was the case that all that we were doing was simply telling schools to open windows, Anas Sarwar might have a point, but we have invested with local authorities in carbon dioxide monitors and in

assessments of ventilation in schools, so that local authorities can take steps to improve ventilation. We are doing similar work with businesses. Last week, I confirmed the opening of a £25 million scheme to help businesses to improve ventilation.

We are doing and will continue to do all those things. I suspect that the one thing that will stay consistent is that the Opposition will continue to oppose all the things that we are doing to stem transmission.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): For two months, the Scottish Human Rights Commission has been asking for the scientific evidence base behind the assertion—which the Scottish Government made again today—that vaccination passports prevent transmission. We got that evidence paper on Friday, and it was mince.

We know that lateral flow tests have always been superior to vaccination certification, because they allow venues to understand who is sick and who is well. It is gratifying that the Government has finally realised that today, but it has done so only after weeks of uncertainty and panic have been caused to Scottish businesses.

We are in a situation in which one scheme that has been proven not to work is being combined with one that we know works well. We were told at the start that the fundamental reason for vaccination passports was to drive up vaccine uptake, because of their mandatory nature. Now that they are no longer mandatory, that reason falls away. Therefore, is it just embarrassment that is preventing the Scottish Government from accepting that it was wrong to begin with, abolishing vaccination passports altogether and building a scheme around lateral flow testing at large-scale events?

The First Minister: I suspect that Alex Cole-Hamilton lost the thread of his logic—if he ever had it—in that question. I am afraid that I certainly lost the thread of it.

There might be some force to the argument that the Scottish Government dreamed up a Covid vaccination certification scheme against all the evidence were it not for the fact that increasing numbers of countries across the UK—Northern Ireland and Wales—and across Europe and the world are doing likewise. Faced with a virus, it is very difficult to provide the hard evidence that intervention X leads to effect Y. Cause and effect is very difficult to prove absolutely.

However, we know that vaccines reduce transmission. They do not eradicate transmission—nothing completely eradicates it—but they reduce it, so if we ensure that everyone in a setting such as a nightclub is vaccinated, we reduce transmission. Over the past couple of

months, by insisting on it being vaccination, we have helped, among other things, to increase rates of vaccination, which is a good thing. Now that we are going into a winter period, when we want to keep transmission suppressed overall, and we are encouraging people—as I have done today—to use LFD tests more generally and more regularly, it makes sense to include testing.

Such decisions are not easy or straightforward, and they are never black and white, but if we had listened to and based our decisions on the oversimplified, oppositionist “We say black, they say white” approach of the Opposition, the country would be in an even more difficult situation with the virus than we already are.

Fiona Hyslop (Linlithgow) (SNP): In tackling the pandemic, it is essential that people take up vaccination, including the latest booster vaccination.

Is the First Minister aware that there is still a persistent problem with the national vaccination appointments system and how it operates in Lothian? I first contacted health authorities on 28 October to raise issues with the portal booking system and the national vaccination helpline. Both have difficulty in identifying local appointments for my constituents and fail to distinguish between EH postcodes, with West Lothian constituents being directed to East Lothian and Midlothian, which involves a journey of up to two hours by public transport.

Constituents are able to arrange new appointments easily through the local NHS Lothian Covid helpline, which has appointment slots available that are additional to those that are available through the national booking service, but it is not well publicised for vaccination booking purposes.

I am aware of the overhaul of the portal on Friday, which allows constituents to self-select venues, but the delay between the policy announcements that have rightly been made by ministers here in Parliament, and their actual implementation, needs better communication so that people who are willing, able and wanting to be vaccinated are not frustrated when they try to use the system. Will the First Minister instruct improvements to the system so that those who are keen to get vaccinated can do so in a straightforward and efficient manner?

The First Minister: Fiona Hyslop is right to identify that it has been acknowledged that some individuals in Lothian have suffered inconvenience in having to travel beyond their local area for their vaccination appointments. NHS Lothian is working to keep patients' appointments in the local area wherever possible, while also accelerating the number of boosters being administered.

If an appointment is unsuitable, it can be rescheduled through the NHS Inform website or the national Covid vaccination helpline. Lothian residents who face difficulty in attending an appointment due to mobility issues can contact the NHS Lothian flu and Covid inquiries line for help with arranging support. We are also currently exploring how and when it is best to begin offering second doses to 16 and 17-year-olds. We will continue to prioritise vaccinations for those who are most vulnerable.

There is always a tension—it has been the case since day 1 of the vaccination programme—between speed of delivery and local accessibility. We will work with health boards to try to ensure that that balance is the right one. Overall, the quicker that we get through the vaccination programme, the better protection that everyone will have.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): Every week, we come to the chamber with hope that the First Minister will instruct her Government to do the right thing. In the past few weeks I have raised flaws with the digital self-tracing form and issues about constituents obtaining vaccination certification, as well as flagging 7,000 outstanding incorrectly recorded vaccination records. Furthermore, my colleague, Sandesh Gulhane, has highlighted that the English app will record the booster scheme and that the Scottish one does not. This is a really frustrating place to work.

In light of those unresolved issues, does the First Minister not think that the best Christmas gift that she could give to the NHS and the people of Scotland is to sort out those issues here and now?

Nicola Sturgeon: We know that many Conservatives find Parliaments frustrating places to work in and possibly that is why so many of them have second jobs—in this Parliament, some have second and third jobs.

More seriously, on the issue of the incorporation of the booster vaccine, I have said that work is under way so that we can incorporate boosters in the Scottish Covid certification app. That is important and it is right that it happens. I am not sure what the Conservatives are suggesting. Are they saying that we should have waited 12 months in order to be part of an English app that does that? If we had done that we would not have any Covid certification right now.

We are doing such things properly and effectively. We are also addressing issues that arise—as they will in a scheme that is as large and complex as this one. Members whose constituents have raised issues with them should write to me or to the health secretary or the relevant minister and we will address them as we go along.

I do not wish in any way to underplay the importance of rectifying any issues, but I remind members and the public of one central fact: right now, Scotland is the most vaccinated part of the entire UK on first doses, second doses, third doses and booster doses. I am sure that issues will arise that we will need to address, but we should remember that the Scottish vaccination programme is going extremely well. Perhaps the Conservatives might want to acknowledge that.

Siobhian Brown (Ayr) (SNP): I thank the First Minister for the update this afternoon. Given that the general public are still being encouraged to do two lateral flow tests a week, and in light of this afternoon's announcement by the First Minister encouraging us to test before we go out, when someone tests positive for Covid and self-isolates for 10 days, and therefore has a certain immunity, when should they resume doing the lateral flow tests?

The First Minister: My answer is based on clinical advice. The clinical advice is that people who have had a positive PCR test within 90 days need not participate in twice weekly LFD testing. The clinical view is that in the 90-day window after a positive test, given the low rate of reinfection, it is significantly more likely that a positive LFD test would be a false positive result rather than someone being reinfected, which may cause people to isolate unnecessarily.

If someone recovers from Covid and later develops new symptoms, they must book a new PCR test at NHS Inform and follow the advice on self-isolation and household isolation. People should not use an LFD test if they have symptoms or are self-isolating, and anybody who wants further guidance on when to use an LFD test and when to use to a PCR test can find it on the NHS Inform website

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): The First Minister knows that the vaccine starts waning around 10 weeks after the second dose. Given that and the number of people who are still waiting for their booster dose, does she accept that testing is a safer option?

The First Minister: I really want to strongly emphasise this point. We should not be telling people that it is an either/or choice. People should get vaccinated and test themselves regularly. It is dangerous to start to pose that as a false choice. There are points at which we want to emphasise vaccination, which is what we have done to drive up rates in the early part of the certification scheme, but that does not mean that we have been telling people not to test with LFD tests—both are important.

On the issue of waning immunity, which is a serious point, I apologise as I omitted to answer

that part of Anas Sarwar's question. Waning immunity is not a cliff-edge situation; immunity begins to wane as the length of time since the second dose increases. Twenty-four weeks is the interpretation of the JCVI's six-months advice that we are working to. Many people were already past that when we got the JCVI advice, so we have always been playing catch-up.

We are getting through that catch-up quicker than other parts of the UK are, but we are seeking to accelerate that all the time. Immunity does not fall off a cliff edge at 24 weeks, but it is important that people get their booster vaccination as close to 24 weeks after their second dose as possible, because, as I said earlier, its impact is significant. An 80 per cent increase in immunity is not marginal, so the point about immunity is important. I am grateful for the question, because it gives me a chance to underline the importance of people getting the booster as soon as they can.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): A constituent of mine who contacted me commented that

"many disabled and vulnerable people in Scotland like me have been left unable to safely participate in society, with no end in sight"

and that they would feel safer if the vaccination certification scheme was extended.

Many of us are relieved that it has not been extended further, but we have to acknowledge that there are very worried vulnerable people out there who are our constituents. Does the First Minister agree that the least that we can do is follow the baseline measures that are in place to help reduce the spread and impact of Covid-19 and offer at least some degree of reassurance to those who remain at particular risk?

The First Minister: That is an important question, and I make it very clear that that consideration is always high up in the minds of the Cabinet when we are reaching those decisions. For those of us who are fit, healthy and relatively young, all the protections that are still in place are an inconvenience and we cannot wait to get rid of them. However, for people who are much more vulnerable, by dint of either their age or other clinical conditions, those protections are vital and without them people would be less able to enjoy the freedoms that we all are enjoying.

Often when we consider protections, we do so from the perspective of the most vulnerable, because we want everybody to be able to participate in normal life. Some people would prefer vaccination passports to be used in all settings, and I understand that. We must take proportionate and balanced decisions, and that is what we seek to do.

For those of us who are fit, healthy and relatively young, it is worth bearing in mind that we have to bear a bit more inconvenience for the sake of the more vulnerable, and we should all make sure that we comply with all the protections that we are asked to comply with, because it helps not only us but everybody else, particularly those who are most at risk.

The Presiding Officer: As members would expect, there is a great deal of interest in the statement, and I would be grateful if we could pick up the pace of questions and responses.

Dean Lockhart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Accident and emergency waiting times at Forth Valley royal hospital have been the worst in Scotland for the past 12 weeks running. Staff at the hospital are doing their best, but they face enormous Covid-related pressures, and they need urgent assistance now. We have seen the British Army offering valuable assistance to other health boards. Given the situation in Forth Valley, will the First Minister and her Government take any action to arrange additional support for NHS Forth Valley?

The First Minister: I record my thanks again to the military for the assistance that it has been giving to Scotland and, indeed, to health services in other parts of the UK. On whether to request military assistance, that would initially be a decision for the health board. As far as I am aware, there has not been such a request from Forth Valley. If a request is forthcoming, we will, obviously, consider that in the normal way and, should we consider it appropriate, we will submit it to the military for proper consideration.

More generally, we are taking steps through additional funding and other ways of supporting health boards to redesign access to urgent care and to help to ease the flow of patients through hospitals to release the pressure on accident and emergency services. That will continue throughout the winter period.

All our accident and emergency services are working under significant pressure. What we can all do to help is all the things that we know will help to get Covid cases down. Above all, that is what will ease the pressure on our NHS.

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): Although Scotland's vaccination programme is the most successful in the United Kingdom in respect of public uptake, 21 per cent of Scots aged between 18 and 29 remain unvaccinated. Has the Scottish Government collated any information on the reasons why those young people have not yet come forward? Is the First Minister considering any new initiatives to encourage more young people to get vaccinated?

The First Minister: Again, that is a really good and helpful question. We consider on an on-going basis how we can reach parts of the population in which uptake rates are not as high as they are overall. Young people are, of course, one of those groups.

There is a variety of reasons why people will not yet be vaccinated. Some people will have chosen not to be vaccinated. I urge them to think again. There will, of course, be some people who are not yet vaccinated because they have recently had Covid. As we know, if a person has had Covid, there will be a period of four weeks between having the virus and getting vaccinated. Some people, particularly in the younger age groups, will be facing that. However, we are continuing to take steps to say to people that, if they are not vaccinated yet with a first, second or booster dose and they are eligible, it is not too late, and they should come forward for that. I encourage MSPs across the chamber to do everything possible in their constituencies to reiterate and emphasise that message.

The Presiding Officer: I call Gillian Mackay, to be followed by Rona Mackay.

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): I welcome the First Minister's emphasis on testing and the addition of lateral flow device tests to the vaccination certification scheme. What is the Scottish Government doing to widen the range of venues and settings where packs of lateral flow device tests are available, to make it easier for more people to test themselves? Do we have a sufficient supply of tests to cope with any resulting surge in demand?

The First Minister: The short answer to the second part of the question is yes. We keep supplies under very close monitoring. Obviously, one of the things that we are keen to do, working with the other Governments across the UK, is keep the supply of LFD tests accessible and free of charge well into the new year. There are on-going discussions about that. I should say that there is no immediate prospect of that change and that we want to ensure that that is the case for as long as necessary.

As part of our discussion with businesses about how we can all work together to keep transmission rates under control, we will look at whether there are settings where we can more routinely make LFD tests available. They are, of course, very accessible already through NHS Inform. If a person orders them one day, they tend to come the next day, or people can go to a local pharmacy or a local test site to pick them up. The ability to get them should therefore not be a problem or a barrier to their use. However, we will consider whether there are other settings where we can

make larger numbers of tests available for people who turn up at those settings to use.

The Presiding Officer: I call Maurice Golden, to be followed by Kenneth Gibson.

Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con): Mass gatherings for adults are allowed now. Will the First Minister let children have fun this Christmas and lift the ban on school nativity plays and Christmas shows?

The First Minister: Notwithstanding the political divides and debates between us, which are all perfectly normal in a democracy, I really hope that none of us would suggest that the Government's motivation is to stop children having fun. All of us want children to have fun, but we want them, like adults, to have fun safely.

The school guidance is being kept under review. We do not want any restrictions in schools or early years settings to be in place for any longer than is necessary, and we take advice from our education advisory sub-group so that we base those decisions on the best available information.

I hope that children, like the rest of us, will have a much more normal Christmas than was the case last year. In fact, I hope that children, more than any of the rest of us, will have a more normal Christmas this year than they did last year.

The Presiding Officer: I apologise to Rona Mackay for not calling her earlier.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): Thank you, Presiding Officer. It might have been my fault for not having pressed my button.

My question, like Maurice Golden's, is about school pupils who will be taking part in Christmas events as the holidays approach. In the light of the continued threat that the virus poses to family members at home, what guidance is being provided to schools to ensure that such events can take place safely?

The First Minister: Guidance on seasonal events is already available to local authorities—if my memory is wrong about that, I will correct what I have said in writing to Rona Mackay. The current guidance advises that there should not be live audiences for Christmas concerts and nativity plays in schools, but I know that schools are using alternative means of ensuring that such events are available and accessible to parents. The guidance remains under review and will continue to be informed by the advisory sub-group on education.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): On 12 November, NHS Ayrshire and Arran advised that Cumbrae residents would receive their booster vaccine on Saturday 27 November in Millport. There was no indication that only folk aged 70 and over would be included. However, it

now transpires that islanders under 70, many of whom have disabilities, are expected to travel by bus or car to catch a ferry and then traverse Largs—possibly in the cold and dark—to obtain their job. Does the First Minister agree that the health board should think again, not least because providing boosters in Millport would obviously increase uptake among islanders?

The First Minister: All health boards, including NHS Ayrshire and Arran, should think very carefully about designing the scheme so that it is as accessible as possible. As I said, there will always be tensions between that and getting the programme done as quickly as possible. It would not be right for me to dictate how that should be done in every local circumstance, because local health boards know their local areas better.

There are, of course, particular considerations in island communities. NHS Ayrshire and Arran should certainly consider Kenny Gibson's point about Millport and ensure that it gives islanders the ability to be vaccinated without the additional inconvenience that going off the island would entail. I am sure that the health secretary would be happy to follow up that matter directly with NHS Ayrshire and Arran.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): We were too slow in introducing testing for key workers such as carers, we were too slow in introducing testing in our airports, and now we have been too slow in introducing testing as part of our vaccination passport scheme. It has not been a case of test, test, test; it has been slow, slow, slow.

Given that half the number of PCR tests that were being taken two months ago are now being taken and that the number of lateral flow tests that are being taken is still not high enough, is the First Minister really saying that we are doing enough to make what she called for earlier—routine twice-weekly testing—the norm rather than the exception? The Government is simply not following the policy of mass testing that we need to deliver a robust response to the pandemic.

The First Minister: With respect, I think that Colin Smyth is misrepresenting—inadvertently, I am sure—the point of testing in or outside a Covid vaccination certification scheme. The fact that, up until now, we have not included testing as one of the proofs that gets someone into a venue does not mean that we have not been encouraging people to use lateral flow tests—we have. Every time that I have stood here, I have repeatedly encouraged people to use lateral flow tests twice a week. We are now asking people to go beyond that by taking a lateral flow test whenever they are socialising in whatever setting. People are, of course, entitled to disagree with that, but it is not the case that we have not set out clearly the

rationale for the certification scheme, up until now, relying only on proof of vaccination. We have set that out clearly.

Alongside that, we have also encouraged people to take tests. The uptake of lateral flow tests is good, but we think that it can be higher. We need it to be higher if we are asking people to test more regularly than has been the case. Overall, the uptake of testing has been very strong, which is why we have been able to record as many positive cases in recent weeks.

We continue to work hard on all this. I never stand here and say that there is no more that we can do. However, I think that, occasionally, the Opposition should perhaps give a bit of credit for the work that has been done—not by us, but by people around the country—to deliver testing, vaccination and some of the excellent progress that we are seeing.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): The First Minister referred to the public information advertisements that are to go ahead in the coming weeks, on the importance of mandatory face coverings on public transport in Scotland and new recommendations on lateral flow tests. Will those ads run across all UK terrestrial channels? That is especially important, as more people will be crossing the border from England—including, I hope, one of my sons and his family—to visit relatives over the festive period, and many of them may not be aware of the differences, and the different statutory requirements, in Scotland.

The First Minister: We try to get all our adverts and campaigns circulated and seen as widely as possible. I cannot stand here and say exactly what channels the adverts will be shown on, but we will make sure that their circulation is as extensive as possible. We cannot always have Scottish Government adverts shown south of the border, but we try to ensure that people who travel into Scotland are absolutely clear on what the advice and guidance in Scotland is, and we will continue to do that to the best of our ability.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): In her statement, the First Minister commented on the situation of pregnant women and encouraged them to get vaccinated. I, too, encourage them to do so. What action is the Scottish Government taking to ensure that that message is being communicated across the country in order to protect pregnant women?

The First Minister: A range of actions have been taken, and it is really important that we do not let up on that. I know that the Royal College of Midwives has been active in that space, as has the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists. The Government, through our

clinical advisers, is trying to get the message across directly to pregnant women as often and as loudly as we can.

Again, I appeal to every member in the chamber to amplify that message in their constituency. It is vital that pregnant women come forward for the vaccination, which protects them and their unborn child. There has been some concern about vaccination in that group, and it is really important that we continue to use all methods to allay those fears and encourage the highest uptake possible.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): It is clear that the vaccination programme has been very successful. Last week, the British Society for Immunology reminded us that somebody who has not been vaccinated is 32 times more at risk of dying if they catch Covid. However, some people are still hesitant, and that is perhaps especially the case in poorer areas and among ethnic minorities. Has anything been done to help those people to get vaccinated?

The First Minister: We address that issue on an on-going basis, and we will continue to do so. As long as there are groups of people who are unvaccinated or not fully vaccinated, we will not let up on trying to persuade people to come forward.

With regard to minority ethnic communities, outreach work has been done in particular communities through different faith and voluntary organisations. We have deliberately sited some vaccination centres in places where they are more accessible—Glasgow central mosque is one obvious example. We will continue, in every way possible, whether through the location of vaccination centres or through messaging and the location of that messaging, to get the message across as widely as possible. To everybody out there, I say that, if you are not vaccinated yet, it is not too late to take the opportunity to make sure that you are.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): In order to get to the truth and to make the change that is needed, the Covid-19 inquiry must support those who have been hit hardest by the pandemic to be able to participate in it. The inquiry must ensure that duty bearers are held accountable, and it is essential that it is carried out in a way that does not discriminate and that its work seeks to determine whether the decisions and actions that have been taken this year have had a disproportionate impact on some groups of people. Can the First Minister confirm what the plans are to ensure that the inquiry is based on human rights and that it does those things?

The First Minister: We have already given a commitment to ensuring that the inquiry is fully based on, and informed by, human rights and equality principles, and I repeat that commitment

today. We are in the process of, and we will shortly confirm, the appointment of a chair for the inquiry, and we will identify the terms of reference and principles that will guide and drive it. We have given a commitment to having it established by the end of the current calendar year.

Once the inquiry is established, its conduct will be entirely the responsibility of the chair, and it will be important that ministers do not interfere with that. The work to establish the inquiry is well advanced, and we will set out details to Parliament shortly.

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): With just over a month to go until Christmas, can the First Minister confirm whether families should expect to be able to enjoy a more normal Christmas this year?

The First Minister: I certainly hope so. At this stage, I am very optimistic about that, and it would be my expectation. I am conscious that, last year, we ended up with an unexpected development in the virus. I really hope that that does not happen this year.

I am very hopeful that we will all have a much more normal Christmas. However, to make that possible, we need to comply with all the protections that are in place, and we must continue to do so through Christmas, so that we have not only a better, happier, more normal Christmas, but a brighter new year as well.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the First Minister's statement on a Covid-19 update. There will be a brief pause before we move on to the next item of business.

Urgent Question

15:21

Children Refugees

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to reports, following comments made by the Home Secretary in the House of Commons, that local authorities across the United Kingdom, including Scotland, will be obliged to accommodate the increasing number of unaccompanied children refugees crossing the English Channel.

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government (Shona Robison): The issue is of major concern to the Scottish Government, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and local authorities. In July, the Home Secretary wrote to all local authorities asking for more placements to be made available, and Scotland answered that call by creating a Scottish rota, which is supported by the vast majority of councils and COSLA. The rota has been in operation since October and is working well. It is ensuring that Scotland meets the targets that have been set by the Home Office, and does so in a manner that prioritises the welfare of children, supports their needs and provides them with the best possible chance to integrate into our society.

The proposals that have been set out by the UK Government are a retrograde step that will create needless bureaucracy and will do little to support the welfare and wellbeing of those highly vulnerable children. In a short call with the minister, I made my views known to the UK Government, which I will follow up in writing later today.

I have spoken to COSLA, which is as concerned as I am about the way in which the matter has been badly handled by the UK Government.

Paul Sweeney: I thank the cabinet secretary for her response. I record my absolute disgust at the way in which those vulnerable people, many of whom are fleeing war and persecution, have been treated by the Conservative Government simply for seeking a safe place in which to live.

We are talking about unaccompanied children, so it is important to be clear on the detail. Therefore, I have a number of questions that I would like the cabinet secretary to answer, if she can. Will she provide details of how many local authorities across Scotland meet the requirements that have been set out by the Home Office in today's announcement? How many children are likely to be coming to Scotland, and how long does the

Scottish Government envisage that they will be in Scotland?

What work is the Scottish Government doing to ensure that all local authorities have adequate provisions for the necessary safeguards for those children while they are in Scotland? What type of accommodation will they be living in? It surely cannot be the case that they will be put in hotels or unsupervised accommodation, so I would appreciate it if the cabinet secretary could at least explicitly rule that out.

Shona Robison: Paul Sweeney has raised a number of issues. One of the reasons for the rota was the recognition that some Scottish local authorities are very small and do not necessarily have the infrastructure to support unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, which would put at risk the support that such vulnerable children would have. Therefore, there are good reasons for having the rota, which was put together so that children arriving in Scotland go to the most appropriate place.

If the rota had been allowed to continue, 45 out of every 650 children arriving in the UK would have come to Scotland, which is one more than the UK Government is mandating Scotland to take. On my call yesterday, I was told that local authorities would be mandated to take 44 children. Therefore, we would already have been more than meeting the requirement, and doing so in a way that supports the children.

Since October, when participation by Scottish local authorities commenced, 19 placements have been made, which is in addition to the 22 children who arrived under the national transfer scheme between January and September. Furthermore, around 200 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are already cared for by Scottish local authorities.

The member asked about the type of accommodation that will be used, which is an important issue. The children will be here for a long time, so we want them to become settled and to be put in settled accommodation as quickly as possible. It is in no one's interests for people to stay in hotels—we recognise the challenges of that. The Scottish rota is so important because it is the best way of ensuring that appropriate accommodation is made available for the children who arrive here.

Paul Sweeney: I thank the cabinet secretary for that response—in particular, for the detail on the Scottish rota. I would appreciate it if additional information about that could be provided in writing.

It is right that Scottish local authorities are providing accommodation for the children. I sincerely hope that the Scottish Government will do everything that it can to ensure that, during

their time in Scotland, they are treated with the dignity, care and compassion that they so clearly need. After all, those children have seen unimaginable horror.

I want to ask about funding. Although it is right that all local authorities play their part through the rota system, they are cash strapped. To be frank, they do not have the money to top up the £143 that the UK Government is making available for each child per night. Will the cabinet secretary confirm that the Scottish Government will, regardless of the cost, provide any additional funding that local authorities require, on top of the specified £143? This is about making sure that the kids are safe, and we cannot put a price on that. I strongly urge the Scottish Government to show compassion and to make that commitment here and now, because it is certainly not something that we will see from the Conservatives.

Shona Robison: First of all, we share COSLA's and local government's concern that the national transfer scheme constitutes a new financial responsibility on local authorities, so the first call is on the UK Government to provide the additional funding that is required.

The higher daily rate of £143 for funding contributions to local authorities applies to children who are transferring through the national transfer scheme. That is a small step in acknowledging some of the costs. However, the money is available only once the child is in the care of a local authority, so it does not recognise the steps that a local authority requires to take in advance of providing a placement.

The Scottish Government has already provided half a million pounds to local authorities to help with care of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children who are arriving in Scotland. We will continue to speak with local authorities and COSLA about that. However, as I said, the first call is on the UK Government to step up and meet the full costs.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): I will take some supplementaries, the first of which will be from Miles Briggs.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): Some 7,900 children in Scotland are in temporary accommodation, which is a 9 per cent increase from 2019. Seven councils are saying that they are likely to breach the Scottish Government's unsuitable accommodation order. What support will the Government provide in that regard?

Also, I do not think that we heard an answer to Paul Sweeney's question about whether hotels will be part of the accommodation that is used for unaccompanied children.

Shona Robison: There have been a number of pressures on temporary accommodation, not least of which has been Covid, which has seen temporary accommodation usage increase, for understandable reasons. We are working with local authorities to address the unsuitable accommodation order issues, as the member is aware.

We want children to be in accommodation that is suitable for children. Perhaps the member's first port of call should be his colleagues in the UK Government, in order to tell them that we have in Scotland a system that is made for the needs of Scotland in receiving children who need to be supported because they are very vulnerable.

All that we are asking the Home Office is that it allow the Scottish rota to continue. We play our part, and we will take our share of those very vulnerable children, but I ask the Home Office, please, to let us do that in a managed and proper way, rather than in the way that it says it will do it, which in theory could mean children being passed from one local authority to another around Scotland. We do not want that to happen, so I hope that the member will support us in lobbying the Home Office to do the right thing.

Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): I was shocked to hear the comments of the Home Secretary, Priti Patel, that Scotland has not played its part in asylum dispersal, when this country has a proud record of welcoming refugees and asylum seekers. Does the cabinet secretary agree that the Home Secretary must apologise for that misleading claim? Does the cabinet secretary also believe that asylum dispersal involving both children and adults must be done in a humane and dignified way and with the proper funding from the Home Office to provide the vital support that people need?

Shona Robison: Yes, I agree. I am struggling to understand the Home Secretary's remarks yesterday, which are extremely disappointing. Over the years, we have constantly made that point to the UK Government, but it has fallen on deaf ears. Scotland has more than played its part. Of all authorities in the UK, Glasgow City Council takes the most asylum seekers as part of the dispersal programme. Therefore, the comments that the Home Secretary made are not correct and do a great disservice to local authorities and the efforts that they are making.

Most of all, the comments attempt to use asylum-seeking children, and asylum seekers more generally, as something of a political football, and to attack the Scottish Government. The issue is too important for that. We want to reach a sensible agreement with the UK Government and the Home Office. My plea to them is that they listen not just to what the Scottish Government is

saying but to what local authorities are saying. We want to give asylum-seeking children in particular the best support. I ask the UK Government to allow us, please, to provide support in a way that we know will work best for those children.

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I thank Paul Sweeney for raising this important issue, and for highlighting the human rights that are at stake and the appalling approach that the UK Government has taken. What, if any, role will the Scottish guardianship service have in the process? What can we do to support local authorities to work with the third sector, which has been working in the area for many years? What, if anything, can we do with our limited powers to ensure that children are not separated from their families in the first place?

Shona Robison: I will write to Maggie Chapman on the specific point about the Scottish guardianship service. The third sector more generally has always been important for asylum seekers and refugees. It is through the third sector that they receive most of their support; we are keen to support the third sector in that. Yesterday, in response to the Home Secretary's comments, some strong voices from the third sector portrayed the Home Secretary as not giving a proper account of the experience of asylum seekers who come to Scotland. The third sector is pretty clear in its views on the matter.

I will write to the member on the specifics of her question.

Covid-19 (International Development Support)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a statement by Jenny Gilruth on international development and Covid-19 support in relation to partner countries and humanitarian responses. The minister will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

15:34

The Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development (Jenny Gilruth): As we have just heard from the First Minister, the Covid pandemic is far from over, but the challenges that the virus continues to present for wealthy countries such as Scotland can in no way compare to those that the virus continues to present to some of the poorest countries in the world. It is therefore incumbent on wealthy nations such as ours to work together to ensure that those with the least are not failed by those with the most. As United Nations secretary general António Guterres noted in March of last year,

"This is, above all, a human crisis that calls for solidarity."

Covid-19 has tested humanity, whether in Blantyre, Malawi or in Blantyre, Scotland. The pandemic forced Governments globally to act swiftly in order to save lives.

Our international development partner countries, Malawi, Rwanda, Zambia and Pakistan, each have a different starting point on their recovery journey from the pandemic. To ensure that we do no harm and that we contribute impactfully, we must therefore listen to the needs of those in the global south and act on their ambitions for recovery. On behalf of the Scottish Government, I reiterate that we remain fully committed to playing our part in tackling shared global challenges and to international solidarity.

Our international development offer was first introduced under the previous Labour-Liberal Government and it has enjoyed cross-parliamentary support since that time. That legacy is an important one, as we build on and develop Scotland's offer further—and I very much look forward to working with Opposition members on how we do just that.

In September 2020, our programme for government committed us to carrying out a review of our approach to international development in light of the Covid-19 pandemic, so that we could focus our work where we can make the biggest difference in our partner countries against the new reality of Covid-19. I announced the results of the review to the Parliament in March this year.

Today, I will give a further update to the Parliament, focusing on the Scottish Government's response to Covid-19 in our partner countries.

Since the start of the pandemic, we have committed £3.5 million from the international development budget to provide overseas assistance on Covid-19-related support. Most of our international development-funded projects were able to continue throughout the pandemic, delivering vital work on the ground. At the very start of the pandemic, we sought to support existing partner organisations, where that was possible. That allowed projects to pivot their funds and adjust their programmes accordingly. For example, the MalDent project, which runs in conjunction with the University of Glasgow, was able to pivot £20,000 to support the purchase of tablets and data bundles for remote teaching at the Malawi Kamuzu University of Health Sciences. That teaching for trainee dentists was absolutely essential in a country of 19 million people that has fewer than 50 qualified dentists.

Perhaps one of the most important decisions that we took last year was to devote a fifth of the international development budget to one particular initiative. In November last year, following discussions with our partner countries, we partnered with UNICEF to support the Covid-19 response by providing £2 million, split equally across Malawi, Rwanda and Zambia. At our request, UNICEF targeted some of that funding to vaccine preparedness, helping to prepare health systems for distribution.

Listening to the voices of the people who live in our partner countries was vital to ensuring that we got our Covid response right. One of the key drivers of last year's review was the need to hear directly from those who live in our partner countries. The review therefore committed to establishing a global south panel, which will directly advise and challenge Government on our international development offer. I am pleased to announce today that the first two members of the panel that I will be appointing are UN Women Malawi's country director, Clara Anyangwe, and Professor Emmanuel Makasa of the University of Zambia. When speaking with representatives of our partner countries directly, it became clear that the particular challenges that they faced concerned a lack of oxygen supply, the energy infrastructure to support health centres and the delivery of education.

The way in which we have experienced Covid in Scotland is not the same as how our partner countries have experienced it, so we had to ensure that our offer met their needs. In March this year, I announced a further and final tranche of international development funding for the 2020-21 financial year, with more than £500,000 to support

vaccine roll-out, online learning and research to improve resilience on Covid. That funding provided support to Chitambo hospital in Zambia for installing an oxygen plant facility and an off-grid solar energy system in order to ensure reliable access to electricity. It also funded Kamuzu University of Health Sciences to implement genomic sequencing capacity work in Malawi, which will help to identify new variants of the virus and to improve disease resilience.

The funding also provides further support to the British Council for our existing Pakistan women and girls scholarships scheme, providing laptops to ensure information technology resilience and enable online learning. There is also funding for a surgical scholarship through Kids OR—the Kids Operating Room; a clinical officer training post in Rwanda; and for the Community Energy Malawi partnership so that it can install back-up solar power systems at health centres in Malawi. That latest Covid funding to our long-term renewable energy partners in Malawi—CEM and the University of Strathclyde—is targeted at health facilities and we have already seen the positive impact that the additional funding has realised in Malawi. Energy systems were designed by Community Energy Malawi to address specific and wider needs at each hospital, including at a clinic that is also an HIV treatment centre and at a tuberculosis isolation unit. The benefits of those back-up solar power systems, which were installed in response to Covid, are therefore wide-reaching and will have long-lasting benefits for the people of Malawi.

Most recently, in this financial year, we announced further support to our partner countries, including £270,000 allocated to Kids OR to send 300 oxygen concentrators to Malawi, Zambia and Rwanda; funding to transport 40 NHS Scotland ventilators, valued at £750,000, to those countries; and £250,000 to leverage the provision to our partner countries of £11.2 million-worth of personal protective equipment to aid the Covid response—our biggest-ever single donation.

I confirm to the Parliament that, this financial year, I am committing a further £1.5 million to be used specifically to target initiatives responding to Covid-19 in Malawi, Rwanda and Zambia. Our Covid investments, totalling £5 million to date, have also leveraged additional support worth at least £13 million, meaning that, by the end of this year, the Scottish Government's contribution to overseas support specifically to tackle Covid-19 will be worth in excess of £18 million. I am very proud that we have made the political choice to do that.

In addition to the outlined support for our partner countries, £240,000 of support from our humanitarian emergency fund went last year

towards Covid-19 response efforts for vulnerable communities in countries such as Syria, Yemen, Somalia, South Sudan, Afghanistan and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

As the global pandemic continues, now is not the time to turn our back on the global south. The United Kingdom Government took a deplorable decision, during the worst excesses of the pandemic last year, to cut international development spending. Although the recent shift indicated by Rishi Sunak to restore the 0.7 per cent official development assistance commitment is welcome, that will not be realised until at least 2024 or 2025. We also know that certain spend will be newly badged as ODA, further reducing the spend to those who need it most. That simply is not good enough. According to the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, Malawi will see a 51.5 per cent reduction in UK aid spending; for Zambia that will be 59 per cent, for Rwanda 42 per cent and for Pakistan 39 per cent.

Earlier this year, the UK Government announced an 85 per cent cut in its payments to the United Nations population fund, which provides reproductive health programmes globally. That will have devastating impacts for women and girls. McDonald Makwaka, the executive director of the Family Planning Association of Malawi has noted:

“Malawi has already witnessed a sharp increase in teenage pregnancies and child marriages during the Covid-19 pandemic; if the UK continues with its decision to reduce its resources that equip basic health infrastructure for women and girls to access family planning, more girls and women will die of unsafe abortions.”

We know that the pandemic has been gendered in its impacts, yet the UK Government has taken a political choice that harms women in developing countries at a time when they need our help most. It is also clear that the pandemic has been used as a political opportunity to slash funding for the world's poorest. If the Prime Minister is serious about global Britain he must take Britain's global responsibilities seriously. He could start by ensuring that the commitment to overseas aid is immediately reinstated at 0.7 per cent. The women and girls of Malawi cannot wait until 2025.

I was very pleased to meet the President and Foreign Minister of Malawi and the Vice President of Zambia during COP26—the 26th United Nations climate change conference of the parties. The need for equitable access to vaccines was high on both countries' agendas. Indeed, according to the World Health Organization, Africa has fully vaccinated 77 million people, which is only 6 per cent of its population. The President of Zambia recently highlighted the fact that only 3 per cent of Zambia's population has so far been vaccinated. It is therefore vital that we create the conditions for equitable access to Covid-19

vaccines. We in Scotland have an opportunity to share our knowledge to support our partner countries with their vaccination programmes. Although Scotland is not a member of the COVAX scheme, we will continue engaging with the UK Government on that matter.

Listening to our partner countries is also key to our response to the climate emergency. Members will be aware that, during COP26, the Scottish Government announced a ground-breaking commitment to loss and damage funding. We also plan to treble the climate justice fund to £36 million during the course of this parliamentary session.

COP26 remains fresh in our minds, as does the need for international solidarity. When I asked Malawi's Minister of Foreign Affairs how the Scottish Government can support Malawi in its recovery, he told me that we must ensure that we build back stronger in a way that is sustainable. When I reflect on what has been achieved in this past month, it clear that internationalism has never been more important. The world united at COP26; now we must unite in a truly global response to Covid-19.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The minister will now take questions on the issues that were raised in her statement. I intend to allow 20 minutes for questions. We will then move on to the next item of business.

Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I thank the minister for prior sight of her statement and the support that she has outlined. As she acknowledged, there has always been strong cross-party support for the international aid efforts of successive Scottish Governments, and we, on the Conservative benches, will certainly participate in any work that she undertakes with Opposition members when developing that.

The minister commented on the UK Government's approach to international aid. I, too, welcome the chancellor's recent commitment to restore the 0.7 per cent official development assistance figure and the firm date that has been given for that. The Scottish Conservatives have been calling for that for some time, and we are pleased that that has been acknowledged and acted on.

Much of the Scottish Government's support has been directed to international vaccine roll-out, and rightly so in the light of the pandemic. Will the minister say how many doses have been delivered to date and how many the Scottish Government anticipates will be delivered as a result of the new funding that has been announced today?

More generally, I note that Scotland has strong pre-existing ties with a number of partner countries and programmes, which rightly continue to benefit, but that there is less of a Scottish Government

presence in other parts of the world such as central and southern America and the Indo-Pacific region. What are the factors that play a part in deciding where Scottish Government aid funding is directed to?

Jenny Gilruth: I thank Donald Cameron for his questions. He raised a number of different points and I will try to respond to them all. First, he mentioned the importance of cross-party working in this Parliament on international development. That is well established, and I hope that we will hear further helpful suggestions from members this afternoon.

I know that Mr Cameron supported Rishi Sunak's announcement very strongly. I recall that he made that point in the debate on Afghanistan. I say to him, though, that a gap has been created because the UK Government is not moving quickly enough. The Independent Commission for Aid Impact said just last month that, because of the aid cuts,

"the ability of the UK aid programme to respond flexibly to the evolving pandemic has been reduced."

I think that £3.5 billion has been cut. Because of that, the UK Government cannot respond quickly to the pandemic. That is deeply regrettable, and I encourage Mr Cameron and his colleagues to call on their colleagues in the UK Government to move more quickly.

On the distribution of vaccines to poorer countries, we are not a member of the Covid-19 vaccines global access—COVAX—scheme, but the UK Government is. It was welcome that the UK Government pledged to send, I think, 100 million doses to poorer nations, but we know that, so far, it has delivered only about 9.6 million, which is less than 10 per cent of what was pledged. It is not just the UK Government that is struggling in that regard. Canada has delivered 3.2 million doses, which is about 8 per cent of what was pledged. The US has delivered the highest number of doses, at nearly 177 million, but that is still less than a fifth of the 1.1 billion jags that were originally promised.

The issue with the slowness of the roll-out of the vaccines programme in our partner countries is that, as Oxfam has commented, the only way to end the pandemic is to share the technology and the know-how with other qualified manufacturers so that everyone everywhere can have access to these life-saving vaccines.

On Mr Cameron's point about the Indo-Pacific area, Scotland has, as he will know, a historic relationship with Malawi, and our support has been focused on the partner countries that I have spoken about today, which include Malawi, Rwanda and Zambia. We also have a pretty bespoke offer in Pakistan, which focuses on

scholarships for girls. I would like us to have a much wider offer. Maybe when we are an independent country again we might just have that.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): I thank the minister for advance sight of her statement. I welcome her offer of cross-party work both in the chamber and through our cross-party groups. She is right to acknowledge the importance of practical support for our international development partner countries to come through and rebuild from the pandemic and to address the challenges of our climate emergency. However, I want to ask her about the follow-up work to the vaccine preparedness work and the support on oxygen supply, energy infrastructure and education.

To date, how many vaccine doses has Scotland donated to our partner countries—Malawi, Rwanda, Zambia and Pakistan? As she said, COP26 is still on our minds and we need to deliver climate justice. What is the Scottish Government's detailed commitment to loss and damage investment? How much funding will be allocated? How and when will it be delivered and invested in the adaptation and mitigation measures that are now urgently needed in our partner countries?

Jenny Gilruth: I thank Sarah Boyack for her recognition of the importance of cross-party working.

As I mentioned in my statement, the Scottish Government's direct support for our partner countries has been focused on PPE and not vaccines per se, because we are not part of the COVAX scheme. It is difficult for us to be in our partner countries, because we do not have a delivery model in operation on the ground. However, we have delivered the £2 million fund, which was decided upon last year, and I have given a bit more detail about the Covid efforts, which include vaccine preparedness.

The focus of last financial year's spend was on getting the health systems in our partner countries ready for vaccine roll-out. However, in July, we provided a further £270,000 to supply 300 oxygen concentrators to our partner countries. That was repeatedly raised with me in a number of the implementation events that we held with partner countries. In August, we also announced funding to transport 40 national health service ventilators to our partner countries. They are valued at £750,000. In September, we announced £11 million-worth of PPE, which is our largest contribution to date.

That work is focused on PPE and preparedness in our partner countries as opposed to the vaccine roll-out itself, because we are not a member of the COVAX scheme. However, we continue to work with health colleagues. We are also considering

what we might do to support vaccinations on the ground. As I mentioned in my statement, we have £1 million from the IDF that is, as yet unallocated. I am keen that we use that funding to get the vaccine to the people who need it most, which is hugely important.

Ms Boyack also touched on the climate justice fund, which was trebled during COP26. There was also a commitment from the Scottish Government on climate loss and climate justice. That fund sits with another minister, not me, but I can certainly provide her with more information from Ms McAllan, who has responsibility for it.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I ask for slightly more succinct questions and answers now that we have moved on from the front benchers.

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): I am pleased to see the Scottish Government's continued commitment to its international obligations. Of significant importance is the commitment to supporting women. It is an unfortunate truth that, around the world, women and girls are often disproportionately affected during a crisis. How is the Scottish Government ensuring the principle that women as a sex class are given equal treatment and that that treatment is embedded in its approach to international development during and after the pandemic?

Jenny Gilruth: It is really important to acknowledge the gendered impact of Covid-19, as Michelle Thomson has done. It has been illustrated by an upsurge in violence against women and girls throughout the world and an increase in inequalities.

As I mentioned, during the review last year, I met and listened to our global south partners, which included a range of voices from civil society, and we heard about some of the impacts that have been felt in our partner countries. Representatives from civil society continuously highlighted gender. The finding of UN Women that Covid-19 is deepening the pre-existing inequalities and exposing vulnerabilities in sociopolitical and economic systems was also damning.

That situation is recognised in our new international development principles, which we shared last year. That is why, following the discussions from last year's review, I announced in March that we would introduce a new cross-cutting equalities programme across all four of our partner countries, with a particular focus on promoting the equality and empowerment of women and girls.

Sharon Dowe (South Scotland) (Con): Last month, the First Minister told the Parliament that the Government was "absolutely focused" on providing critical help for the people of Afghanistan, with £250,000 being made available

from the humanitarian emergency fund. That is a welcome investment, but, according to the answer to a recent written question that I submitted, not a penny has been spent.

I am aware of the difficulties of operating in Afghanistan, but the situation is critical. What work has been done to get the £250,000 to Afghanistan? Why are the Scottish Government's partners unable to get funding to the people who need it most? If the funding is not delivered now, when will it be delivered?

Jenny Gilruth: Sharon Dowe might be aware that there were a number of difficulties in getting funding into Afghanistan safely. That has been the major hold-up with that work.

The humanitarian emergency fund is independent of the Scottish Government. However, I assure Ms Dowe that there will be a decision on the matter later in the week and I will ensure that her office gets sight of that prior to its being released to the public.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): I very much welcome the statement, especially the announcement of the extra £1.5 million. Will third sector organisations be involved in that work?

Jenny Gilruth: As I mentioned to Sharon Dowe, the humanitarian emergency fund panel is comprised of representatives from eight leading humanitarian aid organisations in Scotland. Those panel members, who are from non-governmental organisations, are allocated funding from our humanitarian emergency fund.

When it comes to the international development fund itself, we have provided funding via a number of third sector organisations so that they could partner with our partner countries in their Covid-19 responses. For example, we provided around £235,000 to First Aid Africa, with additional funding to install an oxygen plant that is capable of producing up to 8,400 litres of oxygen an hour. That plant is about providing oxygen not only to a hospital but to health facilities. The funding will also support the installation of off-grid solar power systems in at least five health centres in Zambia.

Foyso Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): I thank the minister for her statement. She will know that many nations in Africa are still way behind with vaccination. Some have vaccinated only 5 per cent of their population. Access remains a barrier and is proving to be of great difficulty in the speeding up of vaccinations. How much of Scotland's vaccine supply has been delivered to Malawi, and what plans are there for bolstering supplies?

Jenny Gilruth: Foyso Choudhury is right to say that, at the moment, there is an issue with the provision of the vaccine to poorer countries.

Judging by their current rates of vaccination, we will need an increase of around 6 billion doses by the end of this year. Speed of vaccination is really important, as we know when it comes to the roll-out of the booster programme in Scotland.

We also know that more than 80 per cent of the doses that have been administered so far have gone to people in high-income countries, and that only 1 per cent of people in low-income countries have been given at least one dose. There are clearly still huge challenges when it comes to vaccine equity.

I think that I responded to Sarah Boyack on the Scottish Government and the provision of vaccines. Thus far, our provision of Covid-19 support has been in the form of PPE. We are looking at other ways in which we might be able to assist with the roll-out of vaccination.

That is quite challenging, because we are not a member of the COVAX scheme. However, the UK Government is a member of the scheme. I have written to the UK Government about it on a number of occasions—most recently, to the new Minister for Africa, Vicky Ford, who was appointed in September. I am yet to hear back from her, but I very much look forward to working with the UK Government on this, because it is hugely important that Scotland's voice is heard and, equally, that the voice of our partner countries is reflected in the allocation of vaccine to poorer countries.

Fiona Hyslop (Linlithgow) (SNP): I am aware that the Scottish Government is in discussion with vaccine producer Valneva in West Lothian about business and export opportunities, and that Valneva has recently secured a 60-million dose order from the European Union, pending vaccine authorisations from the European Medicines Agency.

Given that the Valneva vaccine can be transported and stored at room temperature, which is important, could the discussions between Valneva and the Scottish Government lead to persuading the UK Government to use the Valneva product, once all medical approvals are in place? That would increase the UK Government's vaccine exports to countries that need humanitarian support, in order to meet its global responsibility under COVAX. The UK is behind other countries in exporting vaccines, as has been pointed out by the World Health Organization.

Jenny Gilruth: I thank Fiona Hyslop for that important question, and I recognise her understandable constituency interest. We very much welcome the positive results that Valneva has reported from the stage 3 clinical trials of its Covid-19 vaccine, and the news that it has secured a substantial order from Europe. As part

of our wider work of looking at the future delivery of all vaccination programmes in Scotland, we are keen to continue to engage with Valneva on vaccine development. At present, all Covid vaccines are procured on a four-nations basis by the UK vaccine task force. We would welcome activity that supported donation of those vaccines to lower-income countries.

As I mentioned, I think, in my response to another member, I had hoped to discuss the matter with the UK Government minister who has responsibility. I am yet to hear back from the current minister, but I very much hope to do so soon and, when I meet her, I will raise the issue directly with her.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): The minister is right to acknowledge that there is cross-party support on the issue. As John Mason did, I welcome the announcement of the further £1.5 million of support.

I appreciate that Covid has required speedy action. However, will the minister commit to ensuring that those who are helping to deliver projects in partner countries have early sight of the future funding objectives and access to proper application processes, with independent assessment and scoring of bids, so that we have the transparency that is the best means of ensuring that the funds that are allocated are put to the best possible use?

Jenny Gilruth: On transparency, I think that the way in which we have administered the support has been quite clear, but I am happy to share more information with Liam McArthur. He raised an issue about the funding application process. If he is aware of a specific issue regarding an organisation, I ask him to please raise that with me. I am happy to speak to officials about that and get him more information. He is absolutely correct that transparency is vital in international development.

Sometimes there is a challenge with this matter in the Parliament and in the devolved Government space, because we are not an independent country—as much as that might pain me—and therefore we do not have people on the ground in some of our dealings with our international development partner countries. It is difficult and challenging in that respect. However, we have had good partnership working with the Department for International Development and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

If Mr McArthur wants to raise with me a specific issue about governance or applications, I will be happy to look into that in more detail.

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I thank the minister for the advance sight of her statement. I am pleased to hear of the

progress of the global south panel and I look forward to hearing about its work in the coming months. I note the comments on loss and damage, and climate justice, and I, too, will be interested in the written response that Sarah Boyack will receive.

As the minister has outlined, the global south has experienced the pandemic in very different ways from how we have experienced it here in Scotland, with inequalities being exacerbated by the lack of health and other infrastructure. Can we consider supporting a permanent vaccination roll-out system in our partner countries and elsewhere, not just one for Covid vaccinations? Such a system would allow vaccination against other diseases in non-pandemic times and would be there, ready and waiting, and thus a vital part of preparedness, for when future pandemics hit.

Such a system would also be transformative, especially given the potential advances in mRNA vaccines, which offer to help to tackle a whole variety of diseases that are not currently susceptible to previous vaccine technology.

Jenny Gilruth: I welcome Maggie Chapman's comments about the importance of the global south panel. Throughout the review, it was hugely important that we were hearing from people in our partner countries—and broadly not from people in Scotland—about the issues that they were facing in the Covid-19 pandemic. I will share with Maggie Chapman further information regarding the climate justice fund, to which she alluded.

Maggie Chapman mentioned the potential permanent roll-out of our vaccines approach in our partner countries. I am happy to meet her to discuss that matter in more detail. It is not something that we have been considering at this time, but I am not ruling it out. It sounds as if it might be a positive way forward, but we probably need to speak to our partner countries about their needs on the ground. One thing that I said in my statement was that what we thought that our partner countries needed this time last year was not what they were looking for at all. Practical help with things such as oxygen containers and personal protective equipment was required on the ground.

I will take the matter away and meet Maggie Chapman to discuss it in more detail, and I will speak, of course, to the global south panel about how we take it forward.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): I will pick up on the question that Foysol Choudhury asked. Throughout the pandemic, there has been commentary on the unevenness in the way in which some developed countries and regions have procured stocks of vaccinations, PPE, ventilators and other vital

supplies. What assurance can the Scottish Government give that Scotland will play its part in ensuring equity of procurement of vital supplies for developing countries, while ensuring that our own population remains protected?

Jenny Gilruth: Audrey Nicoll raises a really important point. As I said, we know that access to PPE supply chains is important in our partner countries, particularly if they are to build back fairer and stronger from the pandemic. As I mentioned, we have provided large quantities of PPE and are delivering ventilators and oxygen equipment to our partner countries. The PPE and ventilators have been paid for but are no longer required in Scotland, so they are surplus. It is only right that we assist Malawi and our other partner countries in that regard.

I want to assure our own population that we have adequate stocks and supply chains in Scotland to meet our PPE demands. As I mentioned, we have made a large donation of PPE to our partner countries, which need those stocks now to keep their healthcare workers safe. We are stepping up to help. A total of 25.7 million PPE items have been shipped internationally, with a total value, as I said, of £11.2 million. They will go to front-line services in our three partner countries and directly help in their fight against Covid-19.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Funding for initiatives is always welcome, but it is also important that there is a clear due process for determining how grants are awarded. Can the minister confirm that any future international development moneys will get to those who need it most and will be subject to such due process, to ensure transparency, accountability and value for taxpayers?

Jenny Gilruth: Yes, I am happy to confirm that.

Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): Having met representatives from Malawi in Kelvin's Woodlands community garden during COP26, I was concerned to learn of the challenges that they face at the hands of climate change, which, in turn, have impacted on their ability to respond to Covid. Following on from the Scottish Government's £2 million commitment to UNICEF, will the minister provide an update on the Scottish Government's work to assist in the fight against Covid in Malawi and wider Africa?

Jenny Gilruth: As I mentioned in my statement, we have so far committed more than £3.5 million from the international development budget to the provision of overseas assistance in dealing with Covid-19 in our partner countries, which include Malawi. Today, I have announced a further £1.5 million for this financial year, which will specifically

target initiatives to respond to the pandemic in Malawi, Rwanda and Zambia.

In addition to the £2 million of funding that we have provided to UNICEF, which Kaukab Stewart mentioned, in March this year I announced a tranche of funding that is worth more than £500,000, from the international development fund, which will help to support vaccine roll-out, online learning, healthcare, renewable energy and research on disease resilience.

Scottish Attainment Challenge

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a statement by Shirley-Anne Somerville on closing the poverty-related attainment gap: the future of the Scottish attainment challenge. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

16:07

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Shirley-Anne Somerville): I am pleased to provide this statement to Parliament on our plans for the next phase of the Scottish attainment challenge. I thank leaders in local government for their support in developing and agreeing the plans that I will now set out.

The Scottish Government is unwavering in its commitment to tackling the impact of poverty on children and young people's lives. Since its launch in 2015, the attainment challenge has played a key role in our strategy to improve outcomes for young people. Building on that, and in the light of the pandemic, it is right that we take the opportunity to ensure that the challenge is designed to maximise progress.

Education continues to be absolutely central to how we can improve the life chances of our young people. That has not changed. We also recognise the disproportionate impact that Covid-19 has had on the most disadvantaged in our society. Schools, teachers and those who work in partnership with them all play a vital role in the wellbeing and life chances of our children and young people.

As we continue to navigate the challenges that have been presented by the pandemic, we learn more about its impact on children and young people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. In the primary school achievement of curriculum for excellence levels data that we will publish in December, I anticipate that we may see evidence of the impact of the pandemic on educational attainment. It is not for me to presume what that evidence will show, but given the evidence from our equity audit, we may well see the proportion of young people achieving the relevant level in numeracy and literacy reducing in comparison with previous years, as well as an impact on the poverty-related attainment gap.

I make it clear that we have a moral imperative to focus our resources on supporting the educational attainment and life chances of the children and young people who are most impacted by poverty. We are also determined to reduce the variability in the outcomes that children and young

people achieve in different parts of the country. We are rising to that challenge by increasing our investment in the attainment Scotland fund from £750 million during the previous parliamentary session to £1 billion of targeted funding over the current session to tackle the poverty-related attainment gap and support education recovery through the Scottish attainment challenge. Up to £200 million will be distributed in 2022-23. That has already begun through our delivery of our first 100 days target to issue the first instalment of that £1 billion commitment this year, alongside a £20 million pupil equity funding premium to further mitigate the impact of Covid-19.

Of course, children's lives are hugely influenced by what they experience in school, but it is not only school that affects their wellbeing, readiness to learn and educational outcomes. From next year, the refreshed Scottish attainment challenge will have a new mission: to use education to improve outcomes for children and young people impacted by poverty, with a focus on tackling the poverty-related attainment gap. That will embed SAC funding in our wider national mission to tackle child poverty.

We will of course maintain our focus on educational attainment. At the same time, taking account of the findings of the recent Audit Scotland and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development reports, we will look beyond those traditional metrics of success to take account of other skills and achievements.

I do not expect schools to do that alone. Indeed, teachers and education leaders have been clear with me that schools cannot do it alone. Schools and education services must reach out across services and sectors and into their communities to draw on the wealth of resources, assets and experience available across the country to achieve their aims and make their contribution to our targets to reduce child poverty. We know that many schools and authorities already do that well and support children and young people through, for example, family link workers. There is already lots of good practice to build on.

Although progress has been made in tackling the poverty-related attainment gap, I am clear that the pace of progress must recover from the disruption caused by the pandemic and must increase. We are working with partners across education to develop a framework for recovery and accelerated progress, which we will publish in the new year. That will see greater support and challenge for all who contribute to the mission.

I have no desire to see teachers and headteachers tied up in bureaucracy when they should be doing what they do best—teaching. Indeed, I wish to work with headteachers to reduce the burden that is placed upon them. That

is a key consideration as we work with colleagues to develop a framework for recovery and accelerated progress. Therefore, planning and reporting will be streamlined and will include the identification of local stretch aims for closing the gap, based on local knowledge and professional expertise. Those stretch aims will enable us to understand what schools and local authorities expect to achieve and by when. That approach is already being used effectively in some schools and local authorities. In Government, we will work with our local partners to develop the national picture in terms of pace of expected progress later in the year.

Alongside all that, Education Scotland will continue to provide a wealth of support to all local authorities via its senior regional advisers, attainment advisers, regional teams, national programmes of leadership and professional learning, and signposting of effective, evidence-based approaches to closing the gap via the national improvement hub and on-going development of the equity toolkit.

A key priority for Education Scotland will be sharing learning from what has worked in the Scottish attainment challenge to date, and working with schools and local authorities to accelerate progress. That work also remains a central theme within Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education inspection frameworks.

I am confident that our local authority partners, headteachers and teachers know their learners best. Since the introduction of pupil equity funding in 2017-18, we have invested more than £630 million, empowering headteachers to decide which approaches best support their pupils. I am delighted to announce that pupil equity funding will continue to be the central feature of the Scottish attainment challenge, providing headteachers directly with significant additional funding to reduce the poverty-related attainment gap in their school communities.

Building on existing good practice, we want to continue to encourage headteachers to extend their work with partner services to reduce the poverty-related attainment gap and increase support for children impacted by poverty. To enable that further, I will announce PEF allocations for the next four years, providing headteachers with the clarity that they need to plan their approaches and develop long-standing partnerships.

I will now set out some important changes to the funding distribution for local authorities. Following extensive consultation across the education system, I fully recognise the impact of the pandemic and poverty on pupils in every local authority area in Scotland—touching those impacted by poverty in urban and rural

communities alike. Therefore, all local authority areas—not just the nine challenge authorities funded under the challenge to date—will have an enhanced leadership and support role to play.

All local authorities will share an investment of £43 million to help tackle the poverty-related attainment gap and support education recovery. Allocations will be set out for the next four years and we will write to directors of education shortly to confirm those. That will further enable local authorities to set a strategic direction for using education to improve outcomes for children and young people who are impacted by poverty; work collaboratively with their schools and school leaders to ensure that approaches across the system are evidence based and impactful; and draw in broader local authority and other services to contribute to that work. I will also continue to provide targeted funding to local authorities to support care-experienced children and young people and contribute to efforts across all services to keep the promise.

Finally, a number of national programmes that are funded through the £1 billion attainment Scotland fund will be enhanced in order to strengthen work with third sector organisations with a stronger focus on youth work, community learning and development and family learning services.

The evidence of our own analysis and Audit Scotland's report earlier this year shows us that we have solid foundations to build on, but that we need to consolidate and accelerate the impact of the programme. Although we will build on those strengths through the refreshed Scottish attainment challenge, it will not be through that initiative alone that we make progress in tackling the poverty-related attainment gap and supporting education recovery.

The Scottish Government continues to demonstrate its commitment to excellence and equity in education through a raft of significant policy initiatives, which include investing almost £500 million in education recovery initiatives and investing in teachers. Ensuring that our schools have the highly skilled staff they need is a cornerstone of our recovery. That is why, over this parliamentary session, we will fund the recruitment of an additional 3,500 teachers and 500 classroom assistants and ensure that teachers have more time to plan high-quality learning and teaching by reducing their class contact by 1.5 hours per week.

We are also tackling the costs of the school day and ensuring that children have access to the same opportunities, including digital devices, school trips and school uniforms. We are making sure that no child is hungry in our classrooms by providing free breakfasts and lunches to every

pupil in Scotland's primary and state-funded special schools. We are providing 1,140 hours of early learning and childcare, which lays an excellent foundation for all children to progress in their school education, and we are committing to the young persons guarantee, to name but a few initiatives.

Let me be clear: nothing is more important than ensuring that every child and young person has the same opportunity to succeed in education, regardless of their background. We can and must deliver that for our children and young people, and the overall approach to the refreshed Scottish attainment challenge is designed to do just that. There will be a broader recognition of children and young people's positive outcomes, continued empowerment of school leaders through pupil equity funding, a clearer role for all local authorities, continued targeted resource to support care-experienced children and young people and a clear framework that sets out our expectations for recovery and accelerating progress, which will enable greater support, challenge and collaboration throughout the system.

I am confident that, taken together, all that will help us to make significant and faster progress in delivering the Government's vision of excellence and equity in education and closing the poverty-related attainment gap.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The cabinet secretary will now take questions on the issues that were raised in her statement. I intend to allow about 20 minutes for questions. Would members who wish to ask a question please press their request-to-speak buttons?

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): Nothing that the Scottish National Party does to rehash the same failing initiatives can rewrite history. Nicola Sturgeon has broken her promise from the previous parliamentary session to close the attainment gap, and nothing that the SNP has set out shows any ambition to do so in this session.

Teachers, pupils, their parents and carers all know that simply throwing money around the system while ignoring the real challenges that our schools face will never work. What is missing is a credible plan to restore standards in our education system that ensures that pupils in every school get the education that they deserve. Only by refocusing our attention on teaching and learning can we hope to help those who start at a disadvantage, close the attainment gap and give them a fighting chance. Continuing to lower our aspirations and plug the gap with well-meaning initiatives alone cannot deliver the equality of opportunity and social mobility that we all want. Every wasted day lets down those who need our education system most.

After 14 years, how can anyone trust the SNP Government to get things sorted, when the only solutions that it offers are to double down on the same failed strategies?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I fundamentally disagree with the premise of Oliver Mundell's question.

We have made progress in tackling the attainment gap. For example, across primary schools, the attainment gaps in literacy and numeracy were narrowing pre-pandemic. We have seen an improvement in positive destinations, and 90 per cent of headteachers have reported an improvement in closing the gap in respect of health and wellbeing.

I give as an example the discussions that I had with teachers this morning, when I visited the Citadel Youth Centre in Leith. They talked about the importance of pupil equity funding in allowing them to ensure that they are able, knowing what is right for their local community, to invest in it, and to work with children and their families to deliver results.

Of course we want the pace of the programme to increase and we want to ensure that we assist recovery from the pandemic. That is exactly why the money is increasing.

I am sorry that Oliver Mundell thinks that we are throwing money away when, actually, we are investing and empowering teachers. I am proud to be in a Government that is empowering teachers to use pupil equity funding in a way that results in better outcomes for children and young people. I hope and expect that that will pay dividends for our young people as they continue to go through a very difficult time, as we recover from the pandemic.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of her statement.

That the SNP is choosing this moment to make callous cuts to the education of the poorest children in our poorest communities is grotesque and intolerable, and it almost defies belief. The policy decimates education funding for the poorest children in the nine poorest local authority areas in Scotland. Those children have suffered most in the pandemic; they have seen their life chances being weakened, as is the case again today.

I will get to my questions, because we are short of time. That means that I am also short of time to talk about the shameful and humiliating position on the issue from the SNP's Green nationalist coalition partners.

I presume that the cabinet secretary is too ashamed to come to Parliament and set out the financial impact of the cuts. Will she tell us the

funding allocations now, or is she too embarrassed to do so?

This morning, I spoke to one council leader of the nine challenge authorities who now has no money to pay for 120 front-line education staff from attainment challenge funding. What will the cabinet secretary have to say to the many hundreds of teaching and front-line education staff in the poorest communities whose posts she has just cut?

This is a betrayal of our most vulnerable children. The SNP said that closing the attainment gap was a "sacred mission". It has just shown that nothing could be further from the truth.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As I made clear at the beginning of my statement, we have worked very closely with local government on education issues, in particular. The change that we are making in relation to local authorities is supported by the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, so I presume that all the criticism that Michael Marra has just directed towards me is also directed towards COSLA leaders.

I will, as an example, quote from a press release that came out today from COSLA's spokesperson for children and young people. It says:

"Councils are on the frontline of efforts to support children and young people in poverty every day. That's why we welcome the recognition that councils across Scotland will be pivotal in work to tackle the attainment gap".

That is the response from COSLA on what has happened.

We absolutely recognise, as our colleagues in local government do, that poverty exists in every local authority area in Scotland. That is exactly why we have taken the decision that we have taken. We also know that poverty has been exacerbated by the pandemic, which is also present in every local authority area in Scotland. The redistribution of funding will be over four years to ensure that local authorities—in particular, the nine challenge local authorities—can work through the redistribution. That, too, has been agreed by COSLA. It is very important that we do that in order to ensure equitable shares of overall investment, and to ensure that we recognise where the concentration of poverty is in local authority areas. I stress that that, too, is a decision that has been agreed by COSLA.

As I said in my statement, we will write to local authorities in the next few weeks about the distribution, and pupil equity funding should come out in the new year, as it usually does.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I encourage back benchers and, indeed, front benchers to listen to the cabinet secretary's responses. You might not necessarily agree with what she has to

say, but you should have the courtesy to listen to the responses.

Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): What progress has already been made in tackling the poverty-related attainment gap? What lessons have been learned from the first iteration of the Scottish attainment challenge?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Evidence shows that over the first five years of the Scottish attainment challenge almost all of our short-term and medium-term outcomes have been achieved. Across primary schools, the attainment gap in literacy and numeracy narrowed between 2016-17 and 2018-19. The number of university acceptances for people in the 20 per cent most-deprived areas in Scotland reached a record high, following the Scottish Qualifications Authority results day earlier this year. Importantly, 90 per cent of the headteachers who were surveyed in 2020 reported an improvement in closing the attainment gap and/or an improvement in health and wellbeing.

Kaukab Stewart is right that we need to learn lessons from what has worked and to know what we need to improve on. One thing that has worked is empowerment of headteachers through pupil equity funding, which remains a strong focus of what we are doing. We want to pick up the pace in tackling the attainment gap, which is why we are increasing support for teachers and local authorities to develop that work. That will ensure that we tackle the impacts of the pandemic, too.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): I draw members' attention to my entry in the register of members' interests; I am a serving councillor in North Lanarkshire Council.

Recent reports have outlined that the Scottish Government's pledge to revolutionise care of children in Scotland is under threat, as social work staff are struggling to deliver services because of understaffing, underfunding and a lack of resources. Although the cabinet secretary has reaffirmed the commitment

"to provide targeted funding to local authorities to support care-experienced children and young people",

the Scottish Government must do more to achieve the promise. Therefore, will the Government commit to providing additional funding for local government to tackle such issues?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Meghan Gallacher will forgive me; it is not my place to announce local government settlements for future years. I am sure that Kate Forbes will do that in the upcoming budget. I am sure that she also looks forward to having a productive relationship with the Scottish Conservatives, if they make costed promises that they would deliver if they were working in

partnership with the Scottish Government. We would be delighted to work in partnership.

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): I welcome the cabinet secretary's comments that planning and reporting will be streamlined, including the identification of local stretch aims for closing the poverty-related attainment gap. What reassurance can be provided that that will not add to workload and bureaucracy for our teachers?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: That is a very important issue, on which we are determined to work with schools, local authorities and teacher unions. Schools and local authorities already undertake improvement planning, and they use their local knowledge and expertise to help their ambitions.

The work that we are doing through the Scottish attainment challenge should not be an additional unnecessary burden. It needs to allow us to understand and accelerate improvement, which I am sure all headteachers wish to do. We are working with the system to learn from and build on the good practice that already exists. We are determined not to introduce new rafts of bureaucracy.

I take the health and wellbeing of our teachers exceptionally seriously. That is why, as we move forward with this part of the package, we will work with teachers to ensure that we are assisting them in supporting children and young people, rather than adding to workload and bureaucracy.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): In October, the Government shared with others the changes to the funding streams, which the paper that I am holding sets out. Those changes did not form part of today's statement and have not been published. More important, when will teachers, parents and children find out how their school will be affected by the changes? I can tell Ms Gallacher, in answer to her question, that the care-experienced children and young people fund will be reduced by £0.1 million in 2022-23.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The member is picking one aspect of what is happening through the Scottish attainment challenge and what he said absolutely does not relate to Meghan Gallacher's question, which was much wider and was about achieving the promise. We will certainly come back to the overall local government settlement, which is what I was asked about.

We have, of course, discussed our proposals in this area with local authorities for many months. Members on all sides of the chamber usually ask us—quite rightly—to work in partnership with our colleagues in local government. None of these decisions is easy, and there is no challenge on which we can simply move forward without

working with our local government colleagues so that we make the best possible decisions. Those colleagues have supported the work that is going on and they have worked with us. I thank them for the collaborative and constructive approach that they have taken on the issue, which proves that national and local Government can work together for the benefit of our children and young people.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): Pupil equity funding makes a substantial contribution to helping schools across Maryhill and Springburn to develop initiatives to tackle the poverty-related attainment gap. Will the multiyear funding that was announced today allow headteachers, together with local school communities, to now spend strategically to ensure that they can plan for the longer term, over a four-year period, rather than year to year, in order to best support young people in my constituency and across Scotland to reach their full potential?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: That ties in very much with Kaukab Stewart's question about the lessons learned. One of the lessons learned, which came across strongly from teachers and local authorities, involved their wish for a multiyear funding proposal so that they would know what to expect.

Last year, for the first time, we confirmed pupil equity funding allocations of more than £250 million for two years. However, knowing that schools know their learners best, and wishing to ensure that they have the ability to plan and make decisions in both the short term and the longer term, we want to develop that still further. The Government is responding to the consistent feedback from the system as part of its extensive stakeholder engagement, and I hope that the multiyear funding package will provide much reassurance to aid the development of the longer-term strategic plans that Bob Doris mentioned in his question.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): The statement just paves the way for bad news to come on the already yawning poverty-related attainment gap. Years ago, the SNP Government promised to close the gap completely, but it is now set to get even wider. The SNP Government has lost its way in transforming Scotland's education system, and fiddling around with the challenge fund is hardly the bold action that we need.

If the cabinet secretary believes that these measures will make a difference, can she tell me by which year the poverty-related attainment gap will be closed completely?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I will not rehearse the figures that I have given in previous answers with regard to the improvements that have been made in tackling the poverty-related attainment

gap, in particular pre-pandemic, but we know that there is more to do. We know that we need to increase the pace of change and assist recovery from the pandemic, which is exactly why we have increased the investment from £750 million to £1 billion over the current session of Parliament.

As I said in my statement, we are working with schools and local authorities to enable them to deliver their stretch aims so that we can see the pace of change at which they think they can deliver. We expect that the pandemic will have had an impact on children and young people; we saw that in our previous analysis. Again, that is exactly why we are increasing funding, and we will work with schools and local authorities so that they can respond with their own stretch aims, and we will deliver the funding to support them in that.

We have always said that tackling the poverty-related attainment gap is a long-term challenge. That has been recognised by the OECD and by the International Council of Education Advisers, and we know that we have to pick up the pace of change on that. It will be a challenge, but we are certainly determined to deliver on it.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): Unlike some other members, I welcome the recognition in the statement that there are children living in poverty in the 23 authorities that were not previously supported by the challenge fund, and that they are equally deserving of support. Has there been any survey work or consultation with teachers in schools, who have previously been supported by Education Scotland in how they deploy those funds, in order to ascertain whether that support and advice was in fact useful?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: That is something that I am very keen for Education Scotland to work on with teachers and school. We have made significant investment in Education Scotland with attainment advisers in every local authority and the regional teams that are there to assist them. However, we need to ensure that what Education Scotland is delivering is useful. In my statement, I spoke about some of the ways in which it is delivering support through the hub, with information about what teachers think has worked in the first phase of the Scottish attainment challenge. That is one example of what we are trying to do, but I am keen to hear directly from teachers to ensure that the support that they are getting from Education Scotland is what they need to deliver on the challenge that we all have with the poverty-related attainment gap. I am happy to hear from Mr Greer if he has any suggestions about how Education Scotland should improve its offer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We have three questions and two and a half minutes.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): In the development of the refreshed Scottish attainment challenge, what steps has the Scottish Government taken to tackle the poverty related-attainment gap in rural areas?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Emma Harper is leading by example.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Recognising that poverty exists in all parts of the country, including local authority areas that cover rural and remote areas, all local authorities will now receive funding for the first time. The distribution of that funding is based on the children in low-income families data, which directly measures household income and therefore provides a precise count of children who are impacted by poverty. That contrasts with the Scottish index of multiple deprivation, which does not always represent the needs of rural communities.

In addition, pupil equity funding continues to empower headteachers, with 97 per cent of schools receiving that funding this year. The programme will continue, so I hope that Emma Harper is reassured that we have adapted the policy to ensure that we are serving rural and remote Scotland well, through both the attainment funding and pupil equity funding.

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): In West Dunbartonshire in my region, 4,189 children are living in poverty, which is an increase of 504 children since 2014-15. The attainment challenge fund has had six years to make an impact in tackling the attainment gap. Does the cabinet secretary agree that diverting the attainment challenge fund away from the most deprived areas takes away vital funds from those that need it most?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: In my response to Emma Harper, I read out how the funding is being distributed. It is based on children in low-income families data, which directly measures household income and therefore provides a precise count of children who are impacted by poverty. That is the distribution of funding that has been agreed with local government, and that is what we will be moving forward with, because we recognise that there are children in poverty in urban, rural and remote areas. We also recognise that the pandemic has had an impact right across Scotland and we therefore have to support children right across Scotland. It is unfortunate that it would appear that neither the Tories nor Labour think that we should be doing so.

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): The cabinet secretary mentioned the cost of the school day. Does she agree that listening to parents and pupils has been at the heart of supporting families to deal with the cost of the

school day at a time when Westminster welfare cuts have been hitting hardest?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: It is important that we look not only at what happens in the classroom but at what is impacting poverty across society. That is why we have broadened out—*[Interruption.]* I am sorry that Mr Mundell is not interested in how we tackle poverty in Scotland.

Oliver Mundell: I am.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Perhaps if he listened to what was going on, rather than hectoring from the side, he might be interested.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Cabinet secretary and Oliver Mundell, we are already over time.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As a Government, we are determined to tackle child poverty in the round, not just in education. That is why have been carrying out work to protect young people from the costs of the school day, which is one of the many ways in which we will protect children across Scotland from poverty.

Michael Marra: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. It was remiss of me not to note that I am an elected councillor in Dundee, which is one of the council areas for which the cabinet secretary has just cut the budget.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That was not a point of order, but it is on the record. We will have a short break to allow those on the front benches to change over before the next item of business.

Report of the Citizens Assembly of Scotland (Government Response)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a statement by George Adam on the Scottish Government's response to the report of the Citizens Assembly of Scotland. The minister will take questions at the end of his statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

16:40

The Minister for Parliamentary Business (George Adam): Today, I am pleased to publish the Scottish Government's response to "Doing Politics Differently: The Report of the Citizens' Assembly of Scotland". That is a crucial step for the Citizens Assembly of Scotland and for any plans for future public participation in our democracy. The report will be of no value if the Government and this Parliament do not demonstrate that we have heard and acted on the views that the people of Scotland have expressed through that process.

Before I speak about our response, I want to acknowledge once again the commitment, enthusiasm and energy that members of the citizens assembly brought to their task. Their dedication can be clearly seen in the breadth and ambition of their vision and recommendations. I thank all the assembly members and the many people who supported their work.

The assembly worked through a unique period. It began its work in October 2019, with a series of face-to-face events, and it finally completed its work online in December 2020. The willingness of members to stick with the assembly through the challenges of the pandemic, to adapt to virtual working and to bring to the table their experiences of lockdown makes the vision and recommendations all the more important as we continue to live with restrictions and plan to build back better.

The assembly produced 10 vision statements and 60 wide-ranging recommendations directed to the Scottish Government and Parliament. Some of the recommendations call for detailed policy responses; others address more fundamental questions about how decisions are taken and how politicians and Government can be scrutinised and held to account.

The vision of the citizens assembly is long term—realising the scope of its ambition will require change beyond this session of Parliament. Although our response lays out our immediate

commitments, we also acknowledge the scale of the challenge that the assembly has set us all.

When the report of the citizens assembly was debated in Parliament, in February, the then Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, Europe and External Affairs explained that there was not enough time before the election to give the report and its ambitious recommendations the full and detailed consideration that they deserve. Since then, the recommendations have informed party manifestos, the agreement between the Government and the Scottish Green Party, the programme for government, the Covid recovery strategy and other important areas of policy.

In August, we published a consultation document on Scotland's first framework for tax, which set out the vision for tax that was put forward by the citizens assembly. The consultation responds to specific recommendations from the assembly, including the provision of more information, in accessible language, about taxes.

Building on manifesto commitments, and with the agreement of the Scottish Green Party, the programme for government sets out the Government's commitment to participative democracy, including the citizens assembly model. That is a long-term commitment to build on the real successes of the Citizens Assembly of Scotland and Scotland's Climate Assembly, whose report was laid in Parliament in June, in order to transform the way in which people are involved in decision making in Scotland. Our ambition, echoing the ambition of the Citizens Assembly of Scotland's recommendations, is that public participation processes will be a permanent addition to the democratic process in Scotland.

We have gathered together a group of experts in participative—that is not easy to say, Presiding Officer—democracy from Scotland, from the United Kingdom and from around the world. The group is considering the real and practical actions that we need to take to deliver our commitments, such as how to set the questions to be answered by a citizens assembly. The group's work is being informed by research into the experience of the Citizens Assembly of Scotland, so that we can capture and benefit from all the important development work and learning from the assembly.

The expert working group is due to report in the next few weeks, with recommendations on how to fulfil our commitments on future participation. That will feature not just citizens assemblies, but other forms of participation, including at a local level. Our plans for deliberative engagement on sources of local government funding already include plans for participative work at both a local and a national level. Deliberative engagement can start locally and can culminate—

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): Culminate.

George Adam: Yes, okay. It can culminate in the national citizens assembly.

Our other specific commitment is to a brand new citizens assembly for under-16s, which will ensure that the generation who will grow up with the consequences of the decisions that we take now can be involved in making them. It also echoes the assembly's concern with the issues that young people face today.

As well as the recommendations on entrenching participation in our system, the assembly raised fundamental questions about the scope and structure of democratic engagement in Scotland's formal governmental and parliamentary institutions. Not all of those questions make for comfortable reading for us, in the Parliament or in Government. Specific recommendations include those on the conduct and integrity of politicians, the responsibilities of MSPs to their constituents and the availability of accessible and comprehensive information.

Given recent events in the Westminster Parliament, the importance of integrity in our political representatives can hardly be overstated. Those challenges should be of concern to everyone in the Parliament and in Government. We will be working with the Parliament to address them, and we will seek cross-party involvement in that.

A further immediate impact of the assembly on engagement and participation by Government related to the experience of, and plans to recover from, the pandemic. The assembly report reflects its members' experiences of the spring of 2020. In our response, we set out the importance of public engagement to developing the Covid recovery strategy. The strategy highlights the work of the assembly in reflecting the concerns of its members, who are representatives of the wider public, as they considered the issues arising from Covid even as those were unfolding.

In my statement, I have highlighted the recommendations of the assembly on participation and the Government's plans to progress those. In many ways, those are at the heart of the assembly's report, and its work is the evidence of the potential and importance of greater systematic engagement with a representative selection of the people of Scotland.

However, the response that we are publishing today goes much further and wider than those recommendations. It sets out how the Government is acting in the range of specific policy areas that the assembly identified, building on the commitments that we made in our election manifesto earlier this year, as they are now set out

in the programme for government and the Covid recovery strategy, and elsewhere.

Not all of our plans are identical to the recommendations, but the themes that the assembly identified and many of the detailed recommendations are reflected in the Government's priorities for this session of Parliament. Some of the recommendations are beyond the current powers of the Scottish Government and Parliament, and the assembly has made specific proposals for additional responsibilities to allow us to fulfil its vision.

However, as I said, the response can be only the start of achieving the long-term vision that the assembly set out for transformative change to Scottish politics, which will go beyond the programme for government and even this session of Parliament. Embedding deliberative democracy in our decision-making processes, ensuring trust and transparency in our institutions, hearing the voices of the people of Scotland and demonstrating that we are acting on their views—those are all very important in this process.

Those are the legacy of the citizens assembly and its challenges to us all here today. I am optimistic that all of us in the Parliament can share something of the vision for a stronger and more inclusive democracy that shines through in the report of the citizens assembly. I hope that we can work together to act on the assembly's recommendations, that we aspire to fulfil the ambition and vision and that we look, in the words of the assembly, to do politics differently.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The minister will take questions on the issues raised in his statement. I intend to allow around 20 minutes for that. I invite members who wish to participate to press their request-to-speak button now or as soon as possible.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I thank the minister for advance sight of his statement. I also thank the assembly members for the power of work that they put in to the assembly and the report.

A key theme running through the report and the recommendations is that people want decisions to be taken as close to local communities and people as possible. There seems to be a disconnect in the Scottish Government on that and in relation to how we do politics differently. For example, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities has called the Scottish Government's plans for a national care service "an attack on localism" and potentially "the end for anything other than central control"

of services in Scotland. How does the minister match that with the statement that he has just given?

George Adam: We have taken on board absolutely everything that was put forward by the Citizens Assembly of Scotland. I mentioned in my statement that there would be a need for decision making at a local level. One of the most important things as we go through the process is to deliver the services that the people of Scotland and the assembly representatives want.

To put the member's mind at ease, I believe that, if we continue down that route and we find a way to work with people locally and at a national level, we can solve many of the issues that the member has raised.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): I thank the minister for advance sight of his statement and I commend the work of the citizens assembly and the many progressive ideas that it put forward for creating a

"fairer and more equal Scotland".

Its important proposals deserve to be acted upon. What would the minister regard as the biggest change in Government policy in response to the report? Can the minister confirm that in future there will be an annual report and statement on the work, to ensure that we can measure progress on it and that it does not go to waste?

The report calls for the capping of private sector rents, for example. When will the Government deliver on that? How will the Government use its existing procurement powers to extend the living wage?

One of the report's other recommendations was to increase the accountability of those who are elected. Would the minister agree that, if we are serious about doing politics differently and better, MSPs should be banned from having paid directorships and, going further, that with only fair and reasonable exemptions MSPs should be prohibited from having any second job?

George Adam: There were numerous questions there; I will try to answer as many of them as I possibly can. On doing things differently, and referring to the member's main question at the beginning, I would say that the main difference is the agreement between ourselves in the Scottish Government and the Scottish Green Party. What came across, and what comes across all the time when we are dealing with members of the public, is that they want the political parties to work together in order to create the greater good for everyone else in our society. I would say that that is probably the best example, on the whole.

As regards the many other issues, we obviously need to ensure that all the members of the citizens assembly are listened to, and that their ideas are included. As I think I made perfectly clear in my statement, we are willing to do that, noting the

differences that the assembly has made throughout Government. It is not just a case of how the assembly has changed a specific policy, for instance, or of whether it has created a different bill; it has found a different way for Government to ensure that we can deliver what the public have asked us to do. That may be through various other processes and other bills.

One of the issues that came up was how politicians act, how they engage with the world and what they do, and that was one of the uncomfortable things in the debate that the Citizens Assembly of Scotland had. We should all take that issue very seriously as we have debates in the future.

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): I add my voice of thanks to those who participated in the citizens assembly. I would be interested to hear how the Scottish Government plans to feed back on-going progress to them, after all their hard work.

I note with interest that 62 per cent of participants strongly agreed that the Scottish Parliament should legislate for an

"independent, specialist body that is responsible for finding evaders and avoiders of tax, with power to recover tax due."

That clearly demonstrates that people in Scotland share the pecuniary values for which Scotland is well known internationally. Can the minister advise us, however, whether the contributors were aware that it is Westminster that set and has perpetuated the regulatory environment where, regrettably, tax can be avoided in that way, and that such an initiative can apply only to the small percentage of tax that the Scottish Parliament controls?

George Adam: The Scottish Government believes that everyone should pay a fair share of tax and supports strong measures to tackle tax avoidance and evasion wherever we have the power to do so. That principle sits at the heart of our tax policy making. That is why the Scottish Government's principle of good tax policy making includes enforcement.

On the member's question about feeding back, we have been in touch with the convener and a network of members of the assembly to let them know about the response. I hope to meet members myself in the near future.

Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con): The final report details the cost to date of the citizens assembly. What is the budget for upcoming assemblies? How much does the Scottish Government plan to spend on assemblies throughout this parliamentary session?

George Adam: As I said in my statement, the question is how much it would cost us not to engage with the people of Scotland. That is the most important point.

I have established a participatory democracy working group that brings together experts from Scotland, the UK and international organisations to make recommendations about how we can make participation routine and effective. We already have an assembly in place. The original costs came about because we were setting up a new process. As time moves on, that will be easier for us to work with.

The working group will make recommendations about the governance of future citizens assemblies and how to deal with the questions that come from them. Decisions about the next citizens assembly will be made after the group has reported. The most important part of the process is to encourage the assembly to continue, so that we engage with the people of Scotland and continue down that route,

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): The citizens assembly recommends that in order to overcome the challenges of poverty the Scottish Government and the Parliament should raise the minimum wage for young people aged between 16 and 24 to the level of the national living wage. What work is being undertaken with the UK Government to ensure that the Scottish Government has the powers to raise the minimum wage for young people?

George Adam: At present, the national minimum wage, including the national minimum wage for apprentices, is a matter reserved to the UK Government. The wage rates are set out by the UK Government and the Scottish Government has no remit over those rates. We are fully committed to promoting fair work practices throughout Scotland and will continue to press the UK Government for full powers over employment law to allow us to fully deliver our fair work ambitions.

The Scottish Government has encouraged the abolition of the apprentice rate and a move towards the real living wage of £9.50 per hour for all workers.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): The citizens assembly makes excellent suggestions about young people, participation, apprenticeship pay and housing. How does the minister envisage the newly announced youth citizens assembly working with the Scottish Youth Parliament? The minister highlighted that apprenticeships are vital for young people. How will Scottish Government procurement and contracting powers be used to ensure that apprentices are paid a fair wage? Will the minister also answer Neil Bibby's question

about the Scottish Government's planned date for introducing private rent controls?

George Adam: I assume that we will ensure that there will be engagement between the youth citizens assembly and other youth organisations. Regarding how the youth assembly will work, we must ensure that we listen to the young people of Scotland. They are the ones who will live with many of the decisions that we make here.

I could get back to Mr Bibby and Ms Boyack at a later date regarding rent control.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): Will the minister expand on how the recommendations in the report relate to the work that the Scottish Government is already undertaking to reduce poverty?

George Adam: Members will appreciate that there is a complex range of issues that lead to poverty and that inform the policies that this Government puts in place to address that. The debate that took place within the citizens assembly shows how complex that issue is.

The programme for government and our Covid recovery strategy set out the range of measures that we are taking to address the issues identified by the assembly. Those measures include having a strong social security system that treats people with dignity and respect, a national mission to eradicate child poverty and a new ending homelessness together fund of £50 million in the course of this parliamentary session.

The Government welcomes the recommendations and strong support of the assembly to give help to those in society who need it most.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): I, too, warmly congratulate the citizens assembly and welcome its work. It is incumbent on all the parties in the chamber to reflect on the challenge to do politics differently. I wish the young people's assembly that is to come out of this well. I hope that it will be given a proper platform to do good work, unencumbered by constitutional skirmishes in the chamber.

Recommendation 33 of the citizens assembly calls for

"permanent mental health support liaison officers in every school".

I cannot see a response to that in the report that the cabinet secretary has introduced. Does the Government plan to introduce such officers?

George Adam: I thank the member for the promotion to cabinet secretary. I seem to have gone through the ranks quite quickly today. I have made one statement and I am a cabinet secretary already.

As I said in my statement, many of the recommendations have been taken on board and will be worked through with the Government. The particular recommendation that the member talked about will be looked at along with other recommendations to see how we should take them forward. I am happy to talk to the member at a later date about how we will take it forward.

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): I put on the record our thanks to all who participated in the citizens assembly.

One of the key weaknesses in participatory democracy is the lack of information about what will happen after the process, and there can be unclear assurances about how recommendations will be implemented. It is particularly important to retain the trust and enthusiasm of young people. Will the minister outline how we can ensure that people who participate in assemblies and other processes are clear about how their recommendations will be taken forward?

George Adam: Ms Mackay hits the nail on the head. How we take things forward is the important part. There would be no point in the Government going through the process and then not ensuring that the recommendations that were made by individuals in the citizens assembly were taken up. I assure her that we are committed to having further assemblies in the future and continuing to use the process so that we can develop policy and move forward in the knowledge that we are dealing with the issues that the public want us to deal with. I assure her that this is here to stay; it is not something that is going to go away.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): In addition to citizens assemblies, can the minister outline how the Scottish Government is creating space for genuine public involvement in decision making?

George Adam: The Government is committed to promoting not only citizens assemblies, but other forms of democracy and engagement, such as citizens juries, mini-publics and people's panels. Later this year, an expert group will report to ministers with recommendations on institutionalising inclusive participation and democracy across Scotland's democratic processes, including the future governance of and question setting for citizens assemblies.

As we have already spoken about, the working group will bring together experts from Scotland, England, the UK and international organisations to propose recommendations to make that routine and effective. It will identify methods of governance for delivering credible and trustworthy democratic processes.

Sharon Dowe (South Scotland) (Con): Last week was book week Scotland. The Scottish

Government's additional funding for libraries is welcome, but the money will have to be spent by the end of the financial year. Even after the funding, 16 libraries remain closed indefinitely after Covid, with library campaigners branding the move a short-term fix. What thoughts has the Scottish Government had about a long-term solution to the issue of library funding?

George Adam: I am a bit confused about how far that is specific to the issue that we are discussing—

Miles Briggs: It is one of the recommendations.

George Adam: One of the recommendations is on libraries but, at the end of the day, we need to ensure that local government still has the opportunity to make decisions locally. As a former councillor, I am only too aware of the difficulties and challenges that councillors face, particularly at this time of year. Unfortunately, however, on the budgets that go to local authorities, challenges are created as the Scottish Government budget is cut by Westminster. That gives us the problems that we have to deal with.

Some of the recommendations of the citizens assembly show that people want us to have more powers in this Parliament in order to create the better future that they want. Maybe that is part of the process, and maybe that is what we should be looking at with the Citizens Assembly of Scotland.

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): Does the minister support the recommendations that the Parliament should have the ability to create a fairer tax system for citizens, raise income from key industries such as tourism, food, drink and energy, and create our own immigration system that works for Scotland? Is it not time for the Tory Government to listen to the assembly's constructive, democratic report and do the right thing? Otherwise, even more people will realise that the best future for Scotland is as an independent country.

George Adam: My answer is a resounding yes to all of the above. It is unfortunate that the UK Government's current approach is to constrain and undermine devolution rather than enhance it. We have had that problem in recent times and this institution will, over the coming months, face the Westminster Government's aggressive attitude towards devolution in general. I regularly have that conversation with my Welsh counterpart, as they feel it, too.

We live in difficult times, and one of the things—*[Interruption.]* The member who is speaking from a sedentary position should listen to this. One of the things about "Doing Politics Differently" is the fact that the assembly questioned the morality and integrity of many of us in this Parliament and other legislatures. We should all take a long, hard look

at ourselves to see how we should take politics forward and do things differently.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): That concludes the ministerial statement on the Scottish Government's response to the report of the Citizens Assembly of Scotland.

Committee Announcement (Made Affirmative Procedure Inquiry)

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is a committee announcement by Stuart McMillan, convener of the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee, on an inquiry into the use of made affirmative procedure during the coronavirus pandemic.

17:06

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): Members will know that, for the past 20 months, many of the public health measures that have been used to try to protect the people of Scotland from the full impact of the coronavirus have been brought into law using secondary legislation, with many of them using the made affirmative procedure. That procedure allows the Scottish Government to bring changes into force immediately. Although the Parliament needs to approve the changes within 28 days for any regulations to stay in force, the law will often have been altered weeks earlier.

Prior to the pandemic, the use of the made affirmative procedure for laying Scottish statutory instruments was relatively rare—in single-digit figures per annum—but, since March 2020, we have considered its use on well over 100 occasions. The Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee has recognised the need to use the procedure during the pandemic—it has allowed the Government to respond quickly to the ever-changing challenges that the coronavirus presented. We have also said that substantial changes should be brought into force immediately and before any parliamentary scrutiny only when that is essential, and that it should not become standard practice, particularly when time allows the affirmative procedure to be used.

The committee is therefore holding a short inquiry to ensure that the made affirmative procedure continues to be used appropriately and only when necessary. We hope that that work might be of benefit to the Parliament, as we seek to inform members' consideration of the use of the made affirmative procedure in future legislation. We also want to ensure that there is an appropriate balance between flexibility for the Scottish Government in responding to an emergency, whatever that may be, and ensuring appropriate parliamentary scrutiny and oversight.

Our inquiry is due to conclude in early February, and we hope to have the opportunity to highlight our recommendations in the chamber then. In the meantime, if members—or, indeed, committees—wish to provide any comments on the use of the

procedure, we would welcome any input prior to the Christmas recess.

Decision Time

17:08

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):
There are no questions to be put as a result of today's business.

Linking Food and Climate Change

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-01310, in the name of Foysol Choudhury, on linking food and climate change at the 26th United Nations climate change conference of the parties—COP26. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament considers that COP26 is a key opportunity for placing food and local action at the heart of the response to the climate emergency; notes the Glasgow Food and Climate Declaration from the partners, Nourish Scotland and IPES-Food, which is a commitment by subnational governments to tackle the climate emergency through integrated food policies and a call on national governments to act; commends those local authorities in Scotland that have signed the Glasgow Declaration to date, including the City of Edinburgh Council; believes that a resilient food system approach would target all the sustainable development goals to accelerate climate action while delivering many co-benefits, including the promotion of biodiversity, ecosystem regeneration and resilience, circularity, equity, access to healthy and sustainable diets for all, and the creation of resilient livelihoods for farm and food workers; understands that global food systems account for one third of emissions and are at the heart of many major challenges today, including biodiversity loss and enduring hunger and malnutrition; celebrates the significant signatories from five continents that have already made their commitment to accelerating climate action via local food system transformation, and considers that the road from the Paris Agreement to COP26 has to go through the farm gate.

17:10

Foysol Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): The eyes of the world were on us here in Scotland recently, as COP26 took place in Glasgow. Parliamentarians, world leaders, campaigners, and civil society activists were all gathered together with a commitment to tackle climate change, and it was a privilege for me to be able to attend some of the events associated with COP26.

There is no doubt that everyone has a part to play in response to the climate emergency, and in this debate I hope to highlight some of the commitments in the Glasgow food and climate declaration. The declaration brings together local authorities of all types and sizes, from small and medium-sized towns to mega-cities, districts and regions, territories, federal states and provinces, to speak with one voice in renewing their commitments to develop sustainable food policies, promoting mechanisms for joined-up action and calling on national Governments to put food and farming at the heart of the global response to the climate emergency.

The declaration was developed by Nourish Scotland in partnership with the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems—IPES-Food, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the global network ICLEI—Local Governments for Sustainability, the under2 coalition, C40, the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact and many others. It was presented in Glasgow city chambers during COP26.

I commend City of Edinburgh Council and West Lothian Council as two of the Lothian region local authorities that have signed up to the declaration. On behalf of West Lothian Council, as one of the most recent signatories, Councillor Kirsteen Sullivan emphasised to me how the declaration builds on strong partnership work with the West Lothian Food Network, which is committed to removing the barriers to accessing food, as well as the recently agreed “West Lothian Food Growing Strategy 2020-2025”, which looks at how food is grown in local communities. Integrated food policies and strategies will be key tools in the fight against climate change, and I know that other members will be able to give accounts from their own regions of the steps that are being taken in that regard.

The Scottish Government is also to be commended for becoming the lead signatory to the Glasgow food and climate declaration. The Scottish Government, and a growing number of Scottish local authorities, are among around 100 current signatories to the declaration, alongside regions such as Coimbra in Portugal, Catalonia in Spain and Cross River State in Nigeria; cities such as Sao Paulo, London, Washington, Paris, Vienna, Milan, Quito and Vancouver; and, most recently, the Government of Honduras. I am pleased to be able to bring the declaration and all that it stands for, to the chamber.

Looking at the decisions taken at COP26, we should note that, although important progress was made in many areas, food systems were not on the presidency agenda, despite accounting for around 30 per cent of global emissions. The COP26 agreements included some commitments on farming: 45 countries pledged urgent action on making farming more sustainable, there were commitments on methane, and signatories promised to invest in green agricultural practices and protecting nature. The United Kingdom Government stated that it is aiming for 75 per cent of farmers to engage in low-carbon practices by 2030, while Germany promised to lower emissions from land use by 25 million tonnes by the same year. It would be helpful if the minister could indicate how the Scottish Government will support Scottish farming to achieve the goals set out by the UK Government.

There are many examples around Scotland of the efforts being made to tackle climate change. One of the award winners at the recent RSPB nature of Scotland awards has been brought to my attention, and I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate them. The winner of the food and farming award, which is sponsored by the James Hutton Institute, was Kinclune organic nature farm in Angus. The focus of the award is to demonstrate that it is in the power of Scottish farmers to farm their way out of the biodiversity crisis by placing environmental and biodiversity considerations at the heart of management decisions.

The food system is hugely complex, so joined-up food policies are essential to the delivery of many different goals: dignified access to good food for all, restoring nature on land and in the sea, improving health, tackling climate change, creating good jobs throughout the supply chain and building stronger communities. The Good Food Nation (Scotland) Bill that has been introduced to Parliament could lay the foundation for that joined-up food policy in Scotland, although it needs to be strengthened.

The cross-party support for the right to food bill, which was proposed by Elaine Smith MSP in the previous session and has been proposed again by my colleague Rhoda Grant, also shows the support for taking action now.

As the rest of the economy decarbonises, food systems will account for an increasing proportion of Scottish and global emissions, and we can expect food to be higher up the agenda at COP27. Given Scotland's leadership role in the under2 coalition of subnational governments, I would encourage the Scottish Government to promote the Glasgow food and climate declaration over the next 12 months of the UK presidency.

In the lead-up to COP27 in Egypt, let us match the global action with a strong rights-based Good Food Nation (Scotland) Bill at home. A national food plan can be effective only if local food plans are developed too, and I hope for an assurance that local authorities will be involved in developing any national food plan. Far more support needs to be provided for our local authorities to take the steps needed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from urban and regional food systems. I look forward to hearing from the minister about the steps that will be taken across Scotland to turn the commitments in the Glasgow food and climate declaration into a reality.

17:19

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate on linking food and climate change, and I

congratulate Foyso Choudhury on securing it. It is clear that the aims of the Paris agreement and the COP26 Glasgow declaration cannot be reached without addressing food systems.

Farmers are at the front line of climate change. They experience the effects of extreme and unpredictable weather. They can be—and are—a huge part of the solution to tackle the climate emergency and support food security.

Producing food and drink sustainably means rearing, growing and processing them in a way that helps preserve and protect the environment for future generations. During the Parliament's festival of politics this year, I chaired an event called "Will vegans really save the planet?", which explored sustainable food production and the role of our diet in tackling the climate emergency. It highlighted a University of Oxford report that concluded that the food system is globally responsible for a third of all greenhouse gases, and it also explored whether reducing the amount of meat and dairy consumed helped to reduce agriculture's environmental impact.

One of the conclusions from the event was that a vegan diet and the use of meat substitutes can involve intensive water use, can lead to a high number of air miles as a result of flying certain products such as avocados across the globe and can significantly contribute to deforestation. A key message for consumers was that procuring food sustainably means buying it from producers who minimise their impact on the environment—for example, by reducing their carbon emissions—and support the longevity of the industry. That is why it is so important to support schemes such as Scotland Loves Local and shop local, and local farmers markets such as those in Moffat, Dumfries, Kirkcudbright, Wigtown and the newly established market in Stranraer. I thank all those who support such initiatives. It was also clear from the event that a vegan diet is not the sole solution to tackling the climate emergency and that supporting our agriculture businesses to be sustainable is crucial, too.

I welcome the steps that are being taken by the Scottish Government to support our agricultural sector's transition to net zero. I am also aware that it is moving forward with a successor to the common agriculture policy that will guide farming, food production and land use for the future, and I would welcome comments or an update from the minister on timescales in that respect. I also want to mention the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Bill, which Foyso Choudhury referred to, which proposes local and sustainable food production, and the formation of the agricultural sustainability working group, led by the president of NFU Scotland, Martin Kennedy, both of which are

welcome steps in tackling the global climate emergency.

I briefly want to highlight local action by constituents: Chris Nicholson, chair of the Scottish Tenant Farmers Association; Colin Ferguson, the Dumfries and Galloway chair of the NFUS; Machars beef and sheep farmers Kenny Adams and William Moses; and film-makers Willeke Van Rijn and Julia Farrington. The group have created an informative short film to coincide with COP26 called "Talking With Farmers: Farming and Climate Change in the Machars", which can be found on YouTube. It highlights the importance of supporting and engaging with farmers to tackle the climate emergency, and it provides insight into and some solutions for the custodians of our land. I encourage members to watch it and commend all involved in making it, and I look forward to engaging with them to learn how we promote food sustainability and tackle the climate and biodiversity emergencies.

I was struck by William Moses's statement in the film that

"If we look after our soil, it will look after us."

I want to add to that comment by saying that we need to do that to ensure that we in Scotland can sustainably produce and provide what is recognised across the world as world-class food produced to the some of the best welfare standards, and to support an approach that helps to achieve the sustainable development goals.

17:23

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I, too, thank Foyso Choudhury for securing this debate and for once again giving me the opportunity to discuss the importance of food production, food processing and food procurement and the links with nutrition, health, education and climate change.

I have to say that this feels a wee bit like groundhog day. I have been talking about this particular topic for the past five years, and it is disappointing to see how little progress we have actually made in that time. I have long championed the local processing and procurement of food. We charge our farmers with producing the highest-quality food, give them custodianship of the countryside, charge them with paying the living wage and ensure that they have the highest animal welfare levels, but when it comes to public procurement, we fall down. We do not seem to recognise that a cost is associated with ensuring that our farmers produce high-quality food.

Early in the previous session, I did a study of where all the food in our councils and hospitals came from, and I discovered that, through the

Scottish Government's central Scotland Excel contract, only 16 per cent of that food came from Scotland. I am redoing that investigation to see whether anything has moved on in the past five years. We should highlight that that is completely possible. We all know, as we have talked about this before, that East Ayrshire Council is the gold standard on that. It procures along the lines of 75 per cent of its food for schools locally. It can even tell us which farm the eggs came from.

The reality is that we import far too much of our food. As Emma Harper said, the development of products such as soya, palm oil and almond products is hugely damaging to our climate and to biodiversity, because swathes of land have to be cleared for that.

Emma Harper: Does Brian Whittle agree that it takes around 136 litres of water to make 1 litre of almond milk?

Brian Whittle: I love it when Ms Harper pre-empted what I am about to say. That is exactly right. When land is cleared for the production of almond, it is so water intensive. That is one of the worst things for biodiversity that there can be. There are then the air miles to import the products into this country.

I also mentioned palm oil, which is a hugely contributory factor to obesity in Scotland.

Our farmers have been innovating towards net zero. NFU Scotland has a target ahead of the Scottish Government target of 2040 and it is doing some incredible work, which I have seen on the farms, on the journey towards that target. Farmers are reducing the amount of ploughing that they have to do. Ploughing releases carbon into the atmosphere. NFU Scotland is innovating ahead of the game. The best crop on 85 per cent of the farmland in Scotland is grass. Grass-fed livestock are the original circular economy. The sequestration of carbon in grass is much greater than it is in woodland, for example.

We have to be careful about allowing a noisy minority to lump all global farming practices together and talking down our farmers. We should be exporting knowledge about the way that our farmers produce food to other countries. That is how we will tackle climate change. When we talk about global meat production, that does not give us the whole picture. We have a farmer here in Parliament who will, I hope, back me up on that.

The practices in the United States, South America and the far east differ hugely from the ways in which our farmers produce food. That is how we need to be. Food can be produced in an environmentally friendly way. We need to champion our farmers and their efforts to drive towards net zero.

I realise that I have been speaking for four and a half minutes already, Presiding Officer. I will get there.

On food processing, we send too much food outside our borders to be packaged. Let us push local food production, support our farmers, and develop local processing. Public procurement should always take Scottish food wherever possible. There would then be a positive impact on climate change, the health of our nation, and the rural economy. What a breakthrough joined-up thinking would be.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Time flies indeed.

17:28

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to speak in this members' business debate. I thank my friend Foyso Choudhury for bringing the debate to Parliament and for tackling such an important problem—I am going to use that word—that Scotland faces. It is also a great pleasure to follow Brian Whittle, who made so much of what I was going to point out. I will merely echo some of the elements of what he said and, I hope, carry on to small parts that he missed out.

In talking about farming and food, Brian Whittle said that our farmers are the custodians of this country. That is fundamentally important and, unfortunately, it is frequently forgotten. I think back to my time as a primary school teacher, when I always looked forward to visiting our farmers and watching the faces of young people understanding, in some cases, where potatoes and carrots came from and the more excited faces of those who discovered that the jobs that sit in our farms are not all muddy, cold and wet ones; there are highly technical information technology jobs in which people look after the software that drives the tractors and the satellite navigation. In fact, I know two individuals who were so taken by their journey to a farm that they changed what they wanted to do to science, technology, engineering and mathematics—STEM—subjects. One of them has ended up working on a farm and thoroughly enjoys working not with a tractor or a spade but with a robotic flying device that plucks out the weeds in the farm.

I raise that because it is one end of farming. At the other end, there are still farmers who travel out every day and labour. However, farming has changed much in the past 20 years and it is good to see the NFUS, through its members, throwing itself fully behind a net zero future. Farmers do that not from hope, as people sometimes think, but because, from their knowledge and understanding

of the countryside, they know that they can achieve it.

I congratulate our farmers and urge the Government to listen, as it says it does, to the NFUS and its members. In particular, I urge it to listen to the individual voices from unique farms that need unique support to allow them to make the necessary changes.

I will offer a small tale from a few years ago that feeds into the concept of food processing. In East Lothian, there was a farm that grew Brussels sprouts—it still does. Just before Christmas, its Brussels sprouts travelled all the way to Poland to receive a cross in the bottom of them, get packaged up and then come all the way back to be sold in a well-known supermarket that overlooked the field in which they were grown. The farmer was stunned that, due to regulation and finance, that was the only way that he could make his crop make money.

That relates to the point that Brian Whittle raised about how we can localise not only the growth and distribution of our food but its purchase through our schools, hospitals and local authorities. We can start to make the same virtuous circle that our cows have achieved through 300,000 years of evolution.

I will mention a seafood-related group that is raised in respect of the topic of the debate: the Scottish Creel Fishermen's Federation, which supports low-impact and sustainable development of our local seas. I ask the minister to comment on whether there should be a protective circle around Scottish waters to stop trawling, which is damaging the creel fishermen's future.

17:32

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): I congratulate Foyso Choudhury on securing this vital debate.

At COP26, the Scottish Government joined the 50x30 coalition, recognising the necessity of cutting emissions by 50 per cent by 2030. Agriculture and food systems will play a crucial role in that effort. I commend the Government on signing up to the 4 per 1,000 initiative, which aims to boost carbon storage in agricultural soils and reduce the global carbon footprint.

Soil is where it all begins. Healthy agricultural soils have huge potential to store carbon. As 80 per cent of Scotland's land is used for agriculture, we should maximise that nature-based solution through better soil management.

Soils play a crucial role in storing water, which prevents flooding. That will become even more important as we feel the increased impact of climate change.

Healthy soils produce nutritious, flavoursome and filling food. That is why, when considering food and climate change, we need to start from the ground up. We must develop a holistic policy that shapes and supports the entire system from soil management to regenerative farming techniques, local food supply chains and access to good-quality food, all of which will benefit nature, the climate and wellbeing.

Here are some steps that Scotland should take, starting with improving soil health.

By developing a national nitrogen strategy, we can end the excessive use of inorganic fertiliser, reduce air and water pollution, improve soil health and slash greenhouse gases. We should set a bold target: 25 per cent by 2025 for organic public procurement would incentivise farmers to shift to organic production and help us to reach our target of at least doubling the area of land that is under organic management during this parliamentary session.

Moving from soil to wider land use, we need to find the right balance for how land is used for food production, carbon absorption, nature restoration, renewable energy infrastructure and housing. Agriculture and nature restoration do not always have to compete. The nature restoration fund should benefit farmers and crofters who contribute to nature corridors. Many farmers, crofters and growers, such as Phil and Laura from the Wildlife Croft on Skye, are starting to practice agroforestry, whereby trees and agriculture co-exist. However, they found that the current crofting grant system and agricultural payments do not support it, despite the co-benefits for food production, soil health and climate biodiversity.

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): Will the member take an intervention?

Ariane Burgess: Certainly, Finlay, I will take an intervention.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Full names, please. Finlay Carson.

Finlay Carson: Will you tell members how long it takes for a farmer to transition to becoming an organic farmer, and how the loss in production during that time would be compensated?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please speak through the chair, Finlay Carson.

Ariane Burgess: As we have heard in the Rural Affairs, Islands and Natural Environment Committee, it takes a considerable amount of time to transition. That is why we are only calling for the 1.8 per cent of land that is currently under organic production to be at least doubled. We want to go far; therefore, based on conversations that I have been having with people from the NFUS, I am

calling for incentivisation in order to point farmers in that direction.

We must change the incentives to support our food producers to adopt climate and nature-friendly practices, and we must start offering that support as soon as possible. The agriculture bill will be a once-in-a-multigeneration opportunity to reshape food production. The Government has said that 50 per cent of the new support payments will be conditional on providing environmental benefits. That is encouraging, but the percentage that is conditional could be increased. However, before that, we need greater investment in a just transition for agriculture to support those who produce the food that sustains us. I encourage the Government to establish an advisory service to provide training and advice, support pilot programmes and knowledge transfer, and scale up good practice.

The Good Food Nation (Scotland) Bill should spell out the vision for a good food nation and include outcomes that the plan should help to deliver, including food systems that promote ecological regeneration, alignment with climate targets and empowerment through food education and community food production.

In this parliamentary session, we can transform our food system. Let us place soil, land use and nutritious food at the heart of the response to our climate emergency.

17:38

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I congratulate Foysol Choudhury on bringing the debate to the chamber.

We have a great deal to be proud of in the way in which food production has evolved in Scotland, and we have a strong future to look forward to. The world wants our products—I know that from personal experience. In Scotland, we have always been innovative in that regard. As the world moves away from high-yield, low-quality meats to more environmentally friendly options, the long history of sustainability in the Scottish beef herd will put our products at the heart of a high-quality, low-yield, carbon-neutral farming future.

In Scotland, we also have a great history in aquaculture. Farmed fish makes up half of global fish consumption, and that proportion is projected to grow. We have expertise and an excellent product to sell to the world. Despite fearmongering, the sector still represents a huge part of Scotland's food exports. Therefore, what is the minister doing to encourage and support the aquaculture sector?

The same variety of issues come up when we look at the Scottish Government's attitude to the

use of gene-editing technology in crops. Recently, a gene that is responsible for drought resistance in barley crops was found. It is a defence against the effects of climate change. Last year, the European cereal crop was badly affected by a lack of water, and gene-editing technology offers a solution—yet we remain closed minded to gene-edited crops. That is a wholly mistaken attitude. When will the minister review that retrograde, anti-science policy? I already know the answer to that question because, just minutes before I stood up to speak, I received a written response from the minister to a question similar to this. She basically says, “When our masters in Brussels tell us we can do it.” That is pretty disappointing.

I have had a series of disappointments with parliamentary questions. It has emerged that the Scottish Government was not supporting any aquaponics projects. That is a type of food production that mixes fish farming and the growing of crops. It is efficient, as it recycles nutrients within a closed system. Similarly, the Scottish Government has not considered any recent projects on vertical farming, which is a way of growing food that reduces the need for low-paid seasonal workers in the food production sector and reduces land use. That will be essential as we move towards rewilding and more forestry in Scotland.

I know that those issues are subject to an on-going review, but what, in Scotland today, is not subject to on-going review? Sometimes, in government, you have to make decisions. Will the minister update us on the progress of the review and tell us what actions the Government plans to take to support innovation?

In a country where the average age of farmers is now 59, we know that there is a huge challenge ahead of us in producing enough food to feed a growing global population. We know that that challenge is made more difficult from the need to reduce carbon emissions. We know that land use will change fundamentally as a result of climate change. Therefore, innovation is key, in this area as in so many other areas, in response to the call for us to become net zero in terms of carbon emissions.

Farms need to diversify but, too often in Scotland, that has meant opening up a glamping pod or getting a grant to rewild the land. All of that is worthy, but how are we to feed ourselves when farms are turned over to custodianship? The Scottish Government must stand alongside Scotland’s farmers and must be open to innovation.

Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Stephen Kerr: I will. I was on my last three words but, if it is all right with you, Presiding Officer, I am happy to have Jim Fairlie intervene.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give you the time back. Jim Fairlie should be brief.

Jim Fairlie: I thank Mr Kerr for taking this intervention. I am confused: he is asking, if I understand him correctly, when the Scottish Government will give production priority. The United Kingdom Government has already said that its entire support system will be based around access to land and transferring to environmental uses, whereas the Scottish Government has already said that food production will be 50 per cent of the policy that it is developing. We are committed to producing food in this country; the UK Government is committed to going into the environmental side of things, which we have been doing for generations. I just do not understand Mr Kerr’s logic or where he went with that point.

Stephen Kerr: I am happy to have taken that intervention, but it would come a lot better from a member of the Scottish National Party if it came up with some proposals about the future of farm payments. At least the UK Government has produced something that has been debated and discussed, with a process that is on-going. In this Parliament, on the other hand, we have heard nothing. [*Interruption.*]

Would the member like to intervene?

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): Does Stephen Kerr agree that farmers cannot meet the climate change objectives with an SNP Government that cuts agri-environmental climate change funding?

Stephen Kerr: There is a world of difference between the rhetoric of the SNP Government and what it actually does and delivers in terms of outcomes. That is why I call on the minister to respond to my invitation to her and her colleagues to stand up, to stand alongside Scotland’s farmers, to be open to innovation and to embrace science. How about being pro-science and pro-free trade?

17:44

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): I, too, thank Foysoil Choudhury for bringing this important debate to the chamber.

The global food system is not only a victim of climate change; it is one of the world’s main polluters. WWF has said that

“Food production is one of the biggest threats to our planet”.

It has a point—food systems are responsible for 60 per cent of global nature loss and more than one third of total greenhouse gas emissions.

COP26 rightly focused on important topics such as deforestation and emissions, but I was disappointed that the impact of food systems on climate change was less prominent. Fortunately, food was on the menu during many of the roundtable discussions, and although food presents a threat with regard to climate change, it presents global opportunities, too. As Susan Aitken, leader of Glasgow City Council noted recently,

“Food is the point where climate change and health come together.”

That connection between food systems, climate change and inequality is why I will always champion Scotland becoming a good food nation.

Brian Whittle: Will the member take an intervention?

Stephanie Callaghan: Things were getting a bit heated, so I will not, at the moment.

For me, the Glasgow Food and Climate Declaration was a significant output from COP26, placing food and local action at the heart of our climate emergency response. Almost 90 subnational Governments have signed up to the declaration, which seeks to tackle the climate emergency through developing integrated food policies.

Scotland is one of the signatories to the Glasgow declaration, and I am delighted that South Lanarkshire Council is one of seven Scottish local authorities to sign up to it. That is great news for Uddingston and Bellshill residents across my constituency.

Beyond the Glasgow declaration, our Scottish Government has in train a series of interventions that provide opportunities to transform our food systems and respond to our environmental challenge. Central to the Government’s response is the overarching Good Food Nation (Scotland) Bill, which will see national and local government creating good food nation plans, which will deliver local responses that are underpinned by national policy imperatives. Although supporting the environment is key, there are broader benefits to health, social and economic wellbeing.

I share the anxiety of many climate activists that COP26 has been big on promises but less clear on delivery. It is vital that nations transparently report on progress as food systems are redesigned, and I welcome the Scottish Government’s intention to publish progress reports against our good food nation plan every two years. COP26 activists rightly highlighted that transparency is critical to accelerating responses to combat climate change.

By continuing to work collaboratively with our world-class farming sector—Scottish farming is rightly renowned for its sustainable approach—we

can co-produce solutions that provide us all with affordable access to local produce. With Scotland’s strong foundations, we can reimagine our food system. Harvesting more local, organic and plant-based produce is achievable. I trust that we can harness our collective will, and reputation for innovation, to make that happen.

School students from across Lanarkshire have already lobbied me about the lack of sustainable vegetarian and vegan options in school canteens. I hear them and I agree with them. We must work harder to increase balanced plant-based food options and to offer more local produce.

As discussed at COP26, the Scottish Government is delivering policies and interventions that place food at the heart of our responses to tackle inequalities. Extending free school meals and best start food grants confirms Scotland’s focus on improving peoples’ wellbeing, while reducing harmful emissions and nature loss. Our councils are already spending around £65 million a year on food supplies.

COP26 can either be a turning point for how our global food system works, or it can turn out to be nothing more than a two-week jamboree for world leaders and celebrities. We owe it to our grandchildren—and their children—that it is the former. I look forward to Scotland leading the global response as a good food nation.

17:48

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): It is a real pleasure to join the debate, and I congratulate my friend Foysol Choudhury from the Lothian region on securing a discussion on the issue at this apt moment.

I am very proud that Glasgow gives its name to the declaration, which is so vital for the survival of mankind. It is also a great opportunity for our collective economic potential. It is often overlooked that this is not about making a sacrifice but about realising entrepreneurial spirit and a potential opportunity for our cities and regions across the world.

Colleagues have already rehearsed many of the issues to do with waste. Although that is apparent in our society, when we realise the sheer scale of the problem, it is staggering: the UK alone produces 36 million of tonnes of greenhouse gasses from food waste out of a total of 1.3 billion tonnes that is produced globally each year. Waste also has financial and economic costs. In the UK, businesses, homes and food manufacturers throw away 9.5 million tonnes of food a year, which is worth £19 billion. What an amazing opportunity there is to address that and at the same time to contain emissions.

Brian Whittle: I am grateful to the member for taking an intervention, because I have been trying to get in for ages.

A third of the world's food is going to waste and food waste accounts for between 8 and 10 per cent of global emissions—if it were a country, it would be the third highest carbon emitter, after the USA and China. Does the member agree that it seems ridiculous that, at a time when we have such food poverty, we are not joining up the dots and reducing that kind of waste?

Paul Sweeney: Absolutely. It is a really striking method of describing the issue to say that, if food waste were a country, it would be the third highest emitter in the world. It is true that we have no global institutional capacity to recognise where surpluses and deficits are occurring and to address them. The international community must take that issue much more into cognisance.

It is sometimes hard to reconcile the macro or global level of this discussion and the effects with how we can meaningfully adjust matters more locally. It is important that the declaration was made in Glasgow, because practical steps are being taken in the city to address the issue. It is worth exploring those opportunities in more detail. It is often said that we have to think globally but act locally, and this issue is a very good example of where that applies.

During COP26, I joined Glasgow businesses that were launching the Plate up for Glasgow campaign, which was piloted by the Glasgow Chamber of Commerce through its Circular Glasgow initiative and funded by Experience Glasgow's food and drink regional group. The event was hosted and led by Giovanna Eusebi of Eusebi Deli, which is one of Glasgow's great restaurants. One of the amazing things that Eusebi's has been doing is to promote the tradition of southern Italy, where people would never throw things away and it would actually be seen as sacrilege to throw food away. Because of the poverty of some of the communities there and the scarcity of food, it is treated as precious. The abundance of food in our rich society has often led to our having a very wasteful attitude. It is important that we try to bring that culture of southern Italy into our behaviours. There is the idea of adjusting portion sizes.

The campaign is about Glasgow restaurants recognising that they are likely to throw away £10,000-worth of food a year. Businesses need to adjust and try to reuse as many ingredients as possible to minimise waste. At the launch, I had a great insight into how businesses can adjust, reduce their costs and improve their efficiency and competitiveness, as well as reduce waste.

There is also the idea of a circular economy. Glasgow's parks have had a budget cut of 70 per cent in the past 10 years. There is 5,115 acres of parkland in Glasgow. If we can start to cultivate that land—certainly not all of it, but a significantly larger share of it—we could grow more food locally and earn money commercially in the city by selling the product to local restaurants. That could help to create a sustainable model for the management of Glasgow's parks. That is another example of how, rather than having a dependency model in which we have to cut things and continually retrench, we can have a more entrepreneurial approach in which we manage public assets such as parkland so that we realise income from them and create a more sustainable circular economy in the city.

I commend Plate up for Glasgow for what it is trying to achieve in the city. I urge members to have a look at the website, which is plateupforglasgow.co.uk. It is really great to see how we can take that global impact and adjust it to local policies that can potentially make a big difference.

17:53

The Minister for Environment, Biodiversity and Land Reform (Màiri McAllan): It has been great to hear the debate. As others have done, I thank Foyso Choudhury for lodging this important motion, and I also thank all the members who have taken part.

Lots of good ideas have been shared. As is the nature of discussions that pertain to climate change and the environment, we have touched on many aspects of the economy and society, and so it should be. There has been some consensus, which is good. There has been a lot of posturing and faux outrage from members on the Tory benches, which is deeply ironic, given that it was their chums in Westminster who, in post-Brexit trade deals, have undercut, undermined and, crucially, ignored the calls—indeed, the pleas—from Scottish farmers. The Tories ought to be ashamed of themselves for that.

Finlay Carson: Will the minister take an intervention?

Màiri McAllan: I want to make progress but, if the member wants to come in later, I would be glad to take an intervention.

It is hard to overstate how important food systems are to us all. Food sustains us, through the nutrition and energy that it provides; it also connects us with our culture, our history and our land. It plays a crucial role in our economy and it will be a key theme in our journey to net zero, as members said.

Our having COP26 in Scotland was an immense opportunity for the country. We are not yet a state negotiator, but as a subnational host Government we were provided with a unique opportunity to showcase our world-leading action and, perhaps more important, to learn from others around the world about the action that they are taking, including on food systems.

The Glasgow food and climate declaration unites signatories around a pledge to accelerate the development of integrated food policies, and—this is crucial—calls on national authorities, which so often hold the tools and funding that is required in this context, to take action to ensure that food policy is aligned with credible and tangible change.

The Scottish Government has long valued the role of food in our national wellbeing, in our economy and in the very fabric of our society. That is why we were so proud to be the first Government to sign the Glasgow pledge and demonstrate our whole-hearted commitment to the joined-up approach for which it calls.

I take this opportunity to thank Nourish Scotland, which was one of the key partners—not the key partner—in drafting the Glasgow declaration. The fact that so many Governments have signed up to the pledge is a testament to its hard work.

We are proud that the project began in Scotland. I welcome the consensus across the Parliament and the support for the project, which the Scottish Government is pleased to get behind. Recognition of that is welcome and I again thank Foysoyl Choudhury for giving us the opportunity to discuss it.

Of course, it is not just for Governments to take action; the public sector alone could never take on this challenge. Business has an important part to play. During COP26, on 9 November, Scotland Food & Drink launched its net zero commitment and plan to unite industry. The partnership's plan consists of five long-term commitments, which are underpinned by practical interventions.

Finlay Carson: Gene editing techniques allow for the development of new crops more quickly, which is essential if we are to mitigate the challenges that are posed by climate change. The James Hutton Institute, which is often quoted in the Parliament and is part of the work that the Government is doing, has welcomed plans by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to pave the way for the enablement of gene editing technologies in England.

Gene editing can unlock benefits for nature and the environment and it can help farmers to develop crops that have enhanced resistance to pests, disease and the extreme weather conditions that we are likely to experience in the

future. Why does the minister oppose the approach? She is basing her decision not on scientific evidence but on an obsession with keeping pace with the European Union.

Will you tell us why you will not consider the Government's position, which will ultimately damage Scotland's ability to innovate and use facilities such as the James Hutton Institute, which is world leading and should be at the forefront of tackling the implications of climate change?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will not tell you anything, Mr Carson, but I will ask the minister to respond to your intervention.

Màiri McAllan: I am happy to respond. First, I assure the member that we do not take decisions in the absence of scientific advice. We take scientific advice all the time.

I am very clear about the progress on gene editing and about the judicial reasoning that is coming out of the EU on separation from gene modification. The subject is important and I am following it closely, but the Scottish Government's position on gene modification has not changed at this stage—

Finlay Carson: And will not, at least not until Brussels—

Màiri McAllan: We are talking about the leading body on environmental protection; I think that we would do well to follow the EU in that regard.

The motion rightly asserts that our journey to net zero must go through the farm gate. Scottish farmers and producers are central to driving that agenda. Our agriculture reform implementation oversight board, which is co-chaired by Martin Kennedy and the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands, Mairi Gougeon, is working hard to find out and plan how we can support farming and food production in Scotland to become a global leader in sustainable and regenerative agriculture.

Brian Whittle: Scotland is the unhealthiest nation in Europe, but we produce some of the highest-quality food in the world. An issue that drives me is that those two issues are not being joined together through the public procurement process, which has been the case for the past five years. What plans does the Government have to join up those dots?

Màiri McAllan: I am happy to explain. On procurement, I am sure that Brian Whittle is already aware of the figures, but I will provide them for the sake of others in the chamber. Scottish products are estimated to account for around 48 per cent of public sector spend. The figure was 34 per cent in 2007, so it is increasing, albeit that work has to be done.

I hope that the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Bill, which acknowledges that Scotland has an incredible natural larder, will tackle the problem that Brian Whittle describes—that too many people are not able to access the nutritious value of the food that is produced in Scotland.

I was talking about supporting farmers and crofters to meet more of our own food needs sustainably and to farm and croft with nature. Make no mistake: finding solutions to the problems that are posed by climate change will require action at all levels. We aim to learn from different communities, organisations and individuals who are already building local food systems through innovative approaches.

Having taken so many interventions, I am conscious of the time.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give you the time back, minister.

Màiri McAllan: Thank you very much.

In the vein of learning from others, we remain committed to increasing the sourcing of local produce in the public sector. Our support for the Soil Association's food for life programme, which I am sure that Brian Whittle is aware of, continues. It is now operating in school settings across 17—more than half of—local authorities, and it has already made a big difference to the lives of many young people across the country. The programme contributes to our goals of becoming a good food nation, reducing inequality and achieving net zero emissions by 2045, and we are in active discussions with the Soil Association on options to extend that programme into other public sector settings, which is an issue that was mentioned earlier. *[Interruption.]* I really must make progress; next time, hopefully.

In relation to reducing inequality, the Scottish Government is committed, in everything that we do, to driving social justice and ensuring that no one is left behind. On climate action, that means putting people at the heart of our efforts and enshrining the principles of just transition in law, which the Parliament did. *[Interruption.]* The response is the same as it was five seconds ago—I really must make progress.

The same ethos very much applies to food policy and underpins much of the action that we are already taking to become a good food nation by 2025. As has been mentioned, we recently introduced to Parliament the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Bill, which will enshrine our ambition to be a good food nation, where people from every walk of life take pride and pleasure in, and benefit from, the food that they produce, buy, cook, serve and eat every day.

The bill will underpin a whole lot of work that the Scottish Government is already undertaking and, as I said to Brian Whittle after his intervention, it is the foundation on which we will build a country where everyone can access Scotland's delicious and nutritious natural larder of meat, fish, dairy, oats, kale and much more. It will provide the overarching framework for clear, consistent and coherent future food policy that is in line with the aims of the Glasgow declaration.

I close by encouraging other Governments to follow where Scotland has led in embedding sustainable, fair and integrated food policy.

Meeting closed at 18:03.

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