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Thursday 21 November 2019

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Scottish Parliament

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

Point of Order

Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I know that you are aware that there are 10 questions for the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body this afternoon, because I have been in correspondence with you about the matter. Under standing order 13.9.3, it is permitted for only 15 minutes to be allocated for SPCB questions, and it is quite clear that we will not manage to get all the questions asked today.

My personal interest is that I have question 10, which draws the attention of members to a very serious matter, which is that there is no scheme in Parliament for people who are employed by MSPs who retire on the grounds of ill health. I can raise that matter on another occasion, but I want to ask whether any thought has been given under similar circumstances to having two sessions of SPCB questions. That would appear—imaginatively—to be within the rules but, equally, it may be time that the rules are revisited. I would be interested to hear your views on the matter.

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): Thank you, Mr Stevenson. Thank you also for your note this morning, to which I have replied—I hope that you have received my reply. There is no procedure for what you ask. Standing orders make it very clear that SPCB question time will last 15 minutes, and to extend it at short notice would disrupt every other item of business this afternoon, which I do not think would be fair to other members.

Your point about whether there should be two question sessions is for the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee to consider. I highlight that, although there are 10 questions this week, that is a very rare occurrence. We usually struggle for questions at SPCB question time, rather than having too many. However, that is a trend that we will encourage and see whether it develops.

I thank the member for raising that point of order. I highlight, as I did in my letter, that he will receive a written response to his SPCB question, which he has taken the opportunity to highlight now.

General Question Time

11:42

Benefit Eligibility (Scottish Child Payment)

1. **David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking in response to reports that around 58,000 children will not be eligible for the Scottish child payment benefit when they turn six. (S5O-03797)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Security and Older People (Shirley-Anne Somerville): When the Scottish child payment was first announced, we were clear that, although the payment would be fully introduced by the end of 2022, early, stand-alone payments would be made for children under six. Those early payments will benefit up to 140,000 families, with investment of up to £70 million. Of all children living in poverty, almost 60 per cent are in a household in which the youngest child is aged six or under.

In order to introduce this game-changing new payment early—two years ahead of the timetable in the tackling child poverty delivery plan—we have had to work within certain technical parameters. We do not have the data for the over-sixes from the Department for Work and Pensions that would allow us to keep making payments, and we need it to agree to a timetable for giving that to us. We have asked the DWP for early delivery of the data, but we are reliant on it to make that happen.

David Stewart: Of course Scottish Labour supports a significant investment in reducing child poverty in Scotland. However, a number of concerns have been raised by third sector organisations. One is that children fall out of eligibility from the age of six, and another is that parents have to reapply because of the chaotic fluctuations that are caused by universal credit. What progress have the cabinet secretary's officials made to resolve those underlying issues?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As I said very clearly in my original answer, we have to have the data in order to verify that a client is entitled to that benefit, and that relies on data from Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs and the DWP. I hope that Scottish Labour will work with us to encourage the DWP to let us have early sight of that, so that we can find a solution to the problem. We are obviously also very concerned about the workings of universal credit and the fact that they may have implications for people. We are determined to do everything that we can, within the limitations of the constitutional set-up, to ensure that we have maximum flexibility.

As I have often said, I am very happy to work with stakeholders, as we do regularly, and with other political parties to find out what we can do within the powers that we have to unpick the problems and challenges, so that the Scottish child payment works as successfully as possible, which is what we all want.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Will the cabinet secretary remind the chamber how many children will benefit from the Scottish child payment? Does she share my disappointment with the somewhat curmudgeonly approach of Labour, which last year, as I recall, asked for only £5 per child? Rather than welcoming such a positive initiative, which has been called a “game changer” by the Child Poverty Action Group, Labour chooses to carp from the sidelines.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Once it is rolled out fully, the Scottish child payment will benefit up to 410,000 children in low-income families and will lift 30,000 children out of poverty. We are introducing early payments at a speed that is unprecedented not just at a Scottish but at a United Kingdom level. The speed with which we have gone from the discussions on the new benefit to its introduction is unprecedented.

It is disappointing that the Labour Party is not fully supportive of what we are doing with the Scottish child payment. That was seen again yesterday during the debate on universal credit. However, it is very important that we work together as much as possible to ensure that this game-changing payment—as it has been described by leading charities—works well and produces the results that the Government would like to see.

Transport Connections (Remote and Rural Areas)

2. Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to improve transport connections in remote and rural areas. (S5O-03798)

The Minister for Energy, Connectivity and the Islands (Paul Wheelhouse): The Scottish Government is already investing to support strategic transport connections to, through and within remote and rural areas. That includes our ambitious £376 million programme of enhancing passenger experience and cutting journey times on the Highland main line and Aberdeen to Inverness rail routes; our commitment to road improvements such as the dualling of the A9 between Perth and Inverness; support for regional air routes to island and rural airports; support for bus services; and investment of £1.9 billion in lifeline ferry services since 2007. Our draft national transport strategy recognises the challenges that

remote and rural communities face and sets out our vision for Scotland’s transport system over the next 20 years.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: The minister mentions bus routes, but he will be aware that the financial pressure on a lot of Scottish local authorities has led to the number of services on some bus routes being reduced and to some services being lost entirely. In my Highlands and Islands region, more and more communities are without viable bus routes. For example, in Elgin, the 340 service faces the axe after funding ran dry. In the light of recent Government announcements, will the minister confirm whether support will be made available for such routes in rural areas, or is a decline in services simply to be expected?

Paul Wheelhouse: The member raises important points. I recognise the challenges in sustaining public transport in rural areas. The Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity is very supportive of efforts by rural local authorities to maintain and enhance bus services. Although, ostensibly, it might look as though the £500 million investment in the bus partnership fund, which was recently announced in the programme for government, is predominantly about relieving congestion, that could benefit bus passengers on rural routes, particularly as they access urban areas, by relieving congestion at the end of their journeys and improving the reliability of their journey times.

We recognise that the erosion of bus services is a challenge for rural authorities, and I am sure that Mr Matheson will be keen to engage with Jamie Halcro Johnston on the particular issues that he has raised. I highlight that the Scottish Government continues to provide more than £250 million of support for bus services through the bus service operators grant and the national concessionary travel scheme. We continue to support services in rural areas, but I recognise the challenges that have been raised.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): Following a notice from the Maritime and Coastguard Agency, the MV Eynhallow has been prevented from carrying high-sided vehicles to Rousay, Egilsay and Wyre, which has created serious and wide-ranging problems for all three communities. Will the minister ask his officials to provide whatever support to Orkney Ferries is necessary to address the MCA’s concerns? Does he accept that the situation further illustrates the urgent need for the Scottish Government and Orkney Islands Council to agree on a way forward on the funding of replacement vessels for our lifeline internal fleet?

Paul Wheelhouse: On his latter point, I reassure Mr McArthur that we are engaging with Orkney Islands Council and—for the benefit of

other members in the chamber—Shetland Islands Council and Argyll and Bute Council on the future of their internal ferry services. I take entirely the point that we need to work together closely on that.

The specific issue that the member has raised has not yet come in front of me. I undertake to investigate whether we can give any help either by offering advice to Orkney Islands Council to alleviate the issue or by engaging with the MCA. I will come back to Mr McArthur on that with anything that it has been suggested would be helpful.

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): Question 3 has not been lodged.

Public Works Loan Board (Interest Rate)

4. Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what the impact will be on Scotland's local authorities of the increase in the interest rate charged by the Public Works Loan Board. (S5O-03800)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Economy and Fair Work (Derek Mackay): Any increase in the interest rates charged by the Public Works Loan Board will impact local authority plans if those plans are to be financed by borrowing. The scale of the increase—1 per cent—may affect the affordability of local authority plans and could lead to investment being scaled back or delayed in key areas such as housing or transport infrastructure. That may well include local roads.

Keith Brown: Was the cabinet secretary given any notice of the increase by the United Kingdom Government? Does he agree that the increase could put at risk the delivery of crucial infrastructure projects across our communities, such as affordable housing, schools and roads, and that, in effect, it is nothing more than an additional Tory tax on local councils?

Derek Mackay: I am not aware of there being any notice from the Treasury to the Scottish Government—or any local authorities, for that matter. Keith Brown is absolutely right to say that the increase will have an unfortunate impact on the investment propositions of local authorities that will affect quality of life and local authorities' plans to boost productivity and invest in local infrastructure. It is an unwelcome increase and it is indeed a Tory tax on local councils. It is unfair on Scottish local authorities. It is not in line with prevailing interest rates, it will lead to councils scaling back some of their investment plans, at a time when the Scottish Government has increased capital support to Scotland's local authorities, and it shows that the Tory party cannot be trusted with local investment.

Fuel Poverty (Remote and Rural Areas)

5. Gail Ross (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what support it gives to organisations and public sector bodies to mitigate the effects of fuel poverty in remote and rural areas. (S5O-03801)

The Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government (Aileen Campbell): Since 2013, we have provided £373 million in grant funding to councils to deliver area-based energy efficiency schemes targeting fuel-poor households. That includes more than £91 million to councils serving remote and rural areas. Households in those areas also benefit from an uplift in funding to reflect higher costs of delivery. Our investment in area-based and national schemes, such as warmer homes Scotland, has helped more than 135,000 households make their homes warmer and reduce their energy bills.

Gail Ross: My constituency of Caithness, Sutherland and Ross has the highest fuel poverty rates recorded in Scotland, and many areas are classed as "remote rural". Does the cabinet secretary agree that any new Government in Westminster must urgently consider its policies and practices in relation to remote rural poverty? Will she assure my constituents that she will work with the UK Government to highlight and resolve the crippling effects of fuel poverty in remote rural Scotland?

Aileen Campbell: I give that commitment to Gail Ross and I understand fully the points that she has raised. As a representative of a rural constituency—although it is not as remote as the one that Gail Ross represents—I understand the challenges that are faced by rural communities. We want to put an end to fuel poverty in every part of Scotland and we will do all that we can to do so.

The Fuel Poverty (Targets, Definition and Strategy) (Scotland) Act 2019 was passed unanimously by Parliament. Wherever people live, it is unacceptable that they cannot afford to heat their homes and cook their dinner.

Let us not forget that all poverty, including fuel poverty, is down to a lack of adequate income. It is important to remember that we are continuing to fight all poverty with one hand tied behind our backs, following the cruel and callous welfare cuts and reforms made by the UK Government. We will continue to press the UK Government to follow our example by investing in practical solutions to improve energy efficiency and reduce fuel poverty, as recommended by the independent UK Committee on Climate Change. The previous UK Government chose neither to listen to the advice nor to devolve to Scotland the powers necessary to allow us to take further action.

City Region Deal Projects (Climate Change)

6. Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government how it ensures that city region deal projects tackle climate change. (S5O-03802)

The Minister for Energy, Connectivity and the Islands (Paul Wheelhouse): The Scottish Government is committed to its target of net zero emissions of all greenhouse gases by 2045—five years ahead of the United Kingdom. Our support for city region and growth deals aims to drive inclusive and sustainable economic growth at the regional level in line with Scotland's economic strategy, which has a clear focus on supporting our net zero ambitions. Many of our city deals include projects that will contribute to advancing Scotland's transition to a carbon-neutral economy, including provision for new energy-efficient housing, and a range of low-carbon and active travel interventions.

Graham Simpson: New road projects clearly have the potential to make climate change worse, and any that are proposed under city deals should be backed by robust evidence. Unfortunately, such evidence has not been provided by South Lanarkshire Council for its proposed road widening in order to dual Stewartfield Way in East Kilbride. Trees will be uprooted and green space next to the popular James Hamilton heritage loch will be built on, although there is no obvious traffic problem there to be solved. The council is now consulting the public, but its online questionnaire does not even provide people with the option to say whether they are for or against the project. It is a sham.

Will the minister agree to discuss the plans with South Lanarkshire Council, and can he confirm that, if the plans are changed, East Kilbride will not lose out on the £62 million investment?

Paul Wheelhouse: I hope that Graham Simpson will accept my apology for not promising on behalf of Michael Matheson to meet South Lanarkshire Council, but I will raise the issue with Michael Matheson when he is available.

The important point is that the city deals are about empowering regions to make their own decisions—they are about localism—and we believe that our regional partners are best placed to know what is needed to drive regional economies. However, decisions that relate to the infrastructure investment fund are in the remit of the Glasgow city region cabinet, and we expect the cabinet to take decisions that are in the best interests of the regional economy.

We have made it clear that we expect the cabinet to have a continued focus on testing the infrastructure investment programme for quality impact and continued appropriateness in the light

of changing economic circumstances, both at an individual project level and as an aggregate programme. The climate emergency qualifies as a change to economic circumstances, so it is open to local authorities to come together to decide if they want to change a project.

Linda Fabiani (East Kilbride) (SNP): Does the minister agree that, in light of both the Scottish Government and South Lanarkshire Council making climate emergency declarations, it is appropriate to reconsider long-standing projects under the city deal, and to use that opportunity to properly consider innovation in public transport solutions?

Paul Wheelhouse: I absolutely agree with Linda Fabiani. I will give more detail on what I started to outline in my response to Graham Simpson. The city region deals are about empowering the local partners to make their own decisions. If a governing body said that it wanted to change what was included in its deal, perhaps in the light of the climate emergency, which Linda Fabiani referred to, we would be open to having a conversation with that body. Nothing is future proof, and it is reasonable to allow some flexibility in the deals.

The deals that we have in place are long term—they span between 10 and 20 years—so we recognise that there is a need to be flexible and responsive to changes in the economy and in the wider context, which includes responding to the climate emergency. Michael Matheson would be happy to engage with the partners on that.

Pension Credit (Mixed-age Couples)

7. Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government, in light of the potential impact on households in Scotland, what discussions it has had with the United Kingdom Government regarding reinstating pension credit for mixed-age couples. (S5O-03803)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Security and Older People (Shirley-Anne Somerville): I remain deeply concerned about the UK Government's decision to change entitlement to pension credit. The Scottish Government estimates that the change could lead to an annual loss of as much as £7,000 per household, and by 2023-24, it could affect as many as 5,600 households in Scotland.

After the announcement, I wrote to the UK Government on 15 May, to make my opposition clear and to outline the impact that the change will have on the people of Scotland. The response that I received did not address the concerns about the increased risks of pensioner poverty or the loss of passported support.

The Scottish Government will continue to urge the UK Government to reinstate pension credit for mixed-aged couples.

Bob Doris: Given the significant concerns about the impact of UK Government cuts to pension credit, I was worried to hear that the UK Government also intends to incorporate housing benefit in pension credit from 2023. Changes can be used as a cover for UK cuts and trust is at an all-time low. Does the Scottish Government know how many pensioners might be impacted by the changes, and will the cabinet secretary urgently seek an absolute assurance that no pensioner will be worse off due to those UK changes?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Our most recent figures are from August of this year and show that there are 123,000 households in Scotland that claim housing benefit and could be impacted by the change. I will continue to raise many issues with the UK Government after the general election, and I can reassure Bob Doris that I am happy to follow up on the issue that he has raised.

Broadband (Reaching 100 per cent Programme)

8. Mike Rumbles (North East Scotland) (LD):

To ask the Scottish Government whether it plans to announce any further delays to the R100 programme before the end of the current parliamentary session. (S5O-03804)

The Minister for Energy, Connectivity and the Islands (Paul Wheelhouse): I can confirm that, following detailed evaluation, moderation and governance procedures, BT plc has been selected as the preferred bidder for the north lot of the R100 procurement, and that, subject to due diligence and further governance, we intend to proceed to contract with BT as soon as possible. This is further to my announcement on 10 October, in which I outlined that BT plc was the sole bidder for the central and south lots of the R100 procurement.

Mike Rumbles: The minister will be aware that Aberdeenshire is still the second-worst area on the mainland for broadband connectivity, with 18 per cent of homes still unable to access high-speed internet. Will the minister reassure me that the first priority of the R100 programme will now be to bring rural areas in Aberdeenshire to the same proportion of access that is seen elsewhere in mainland Scotland?

Paul Wheelhouse: On the principle of Mr Rumbles's question, the R100 programme is setting out to deliver superfast access to 100 per cent of communities in Scotland. I assure him that Aberdeenshire is very much part of our plans for R100.

I highlight that, in Aberdeenshire, the digital Scotland superfast broadband programme has been particularly successful. Between its start in January 2014 and September 2019, we increased the proportion of premises with access to superfast services in Aberdeenshire by 65.8 per cent. I accept that there is still 18 per cent to go, but I reassure Mr Rumbles that dealing with that is what we intend to do with R100.

First Minister's Question Time

12:01

Queen Elizabeth University Hospital

1. Jackson Carlaw (Eastwood) (Con): This past weekend, we learned about the tragic death of another child—a three-year-old boy—at the Queen Elizabeth university hospital campus in Glasgow. That is in addition to the death of 10-year-old Milly Main. On Monday, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport was asked directly on BBC Radio Scotland whether she knew about the boy's death and the subsequent investigation. The health secretary replied claiming that she did not know, but yesterday in Parliament she said that she did. How does the First Minister reconcile that?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Before I answer that question, I will take the opportunity to do in the chamber what I have done in media interviews over the past few days, and express my deepest condolences to the families of the children to whom Jackson Carlaw referred. It is impossible for any of us to imagine what a parent goes through when they lose a child in any circumstances. That pain is, of course, compounded when they lose a child in circumstances such as those that we are talking about.

I also take the opportunity to reiterate the health secretary's apology of yesterday—particularly in the light of the families' feeling that they have not had, from the health board, answers to the questions to which they want answers, and that they have not been given the information that they have been seeking.

The Scottish Government is determined that they will get answers to their questions, and a range of work is on-going to ensure that that is the case. That work involves Health Protection Scotland, the independent review that is currently under way and, of course, the public inquiry that was announced by the health secretary, the chair of which we hope will be announced before Christmas.

On the specific question that Jackson Carlaw asked me—which is on a point that the health secretary covered in the chamber yesterday—when the health secretary answered “No” on the radio, she was referring to the investigation. It was a two-part question, in which the latter part was about the investigation. There was no notification of the investigation to the Scottish Government by the board or, indeed, of the referral to the Scottish fatalities investigation unit. However, the cabinet secretary had previously been in correspondence

with the family and their representative about the loss.

Let me be absolutely clear: the Scottish Government is determined that we will, on behalf of the families concerned, get to the bottom of all their questions. We will leave no stone unturned in our efforts to do so.

Jackson Carlaw: I endorse the First Minister's opening comments. However, on the substance of the question, I think that many people will find it extraordinary that the First Minister is endeavouring to back up the current version of events.

Let me refer to the exchange from Monday's “Good Morning Scotland”. The presenter specifically asked:

“Did you also know about the death of this three-year-old and the subsequent investigation?”

The health secretary replied: “No, I didn't”. There was nothing else—just “No, I didn't”. Would not every person listening understand from that exchange that the health secretary was saying that she did not know about that child's death? Is the First Minister seriously trying to tell us that that is not the case, nor would it be a reasonable conclusion?

The First Minister: I say to Jackson Carlaw in all sincerity that I am sure that we have all been in situations in which we have answered a question in an interview, and have gone back to look at the text, when we thought we had answered the question honestly.

I do not want to minimise in any way the seriousness of the issues. The health secretary corresponded with the family of the child, so I simply ask Jackson Carlaw to reflect on why she would then have sought to say that she did not know about the matter. There is correspondence in existence that shows that she did.

The important thing is that the health secretary has all along acted to make sure that the right actions are being taken to ensure that the services at the Queen Elizabeth university hospital are safe, that remedial action is taken in the wards in question, and that there is full and transparent investigation of all the issues involved.

Health Protection Scotland has been involved for some time, there is an independent review under way, which we expect to report next spring, and there will be a full public inquiry. That is because we are determined that all the questions be addressed, and that families feel that they have the answers that they want and the information that they require. As First Minister, I am serious about our determination to achieve that.

Questions were asked yesterday about escalation of oversight of the board, and the health secretary set out the process that is under way to address that. There is a strong case for such escalation, and the Scottish Government's health and social care management board will meet tomorrow to consider the matter. I expect those processes to be completed as speedily as possible.

Jackson Carlaw: Have we been in a position, as politicians, where we think we have been asked a different question? Yes. However, the specific question was:

"Did you also know about the death of this three-year-old and the subsequent investigation?"

I do not understand where the ambiguity lies in that question.

We know now that, in this case, the health secretary received correspondence from the family and from local MSPs in November last year advising her of the child's death. Last week, when she was pressed on her handling of the scandal, she asked us to judge her on her actions. In that case, what actions did she take after learning last year of the tragic death of that three-year-old boy? What has been done in the 12 months since she was first told about it? There is one very specific action that could have been taken. As soon as the health secretary learned about it, should not she have demanded that a report be delivered to her desk by the end of that week? Is not that the very least that should have been done?

The First Minister: In my view, the health secretary took appropriate action. When correspondence of that nature is received, proper investigation and discussion with the health board take place. As we have discussed in the chamber before, and as the health secretary has set out in some detail, a range of remedial actions have been taken to address the underlying issues at the Queen Elizabeth university hospital. When we reached the point at which there was no confidence that the remedial actions had been sufficiently effective, the wards in question were closed, and remain closed. Health Protection Scotland has been actively involved with the health board: actions have been taken to ensure that the issues are addressed.

People generally and—very understandably—the parents have a number of questions, which is why we have also set in train the independent review and the public inquiry. I hope that they will be up and running as soon as possible. We are determined that there will be full transparency, discussion and interrogation of all the issues, because the parents deserve nothing less. The public more generally, who rely on our national health service, in particular in respect of care and

treatment of children, also deserve nothing less. As I said earlier, the Scottish Government, including the health secretary—especially the health secretary—is determined to leave no stone unturned to get the answers.

Jackson Carlaw: At the heart of the matter is the death of young children, but it is increasingly about trust. As more details of the scandal grudgingly emerge, the Scottish National Party Government is leaking trust by the minute. Ministers go on the radio to say that they do not know about deaths that have taken place, but it is only when MSPs bring evidence to the chamber that ministers suddenly admit that actually they did know, and give frankly ludicrous explanations for the change of position.

Last night, Charmaine Lacock, the mother of a child who has received treatment for cancer at the Queen Elizabeth university hospital said:

"We have no trust in the health board, we have no trust in any of the information coming out of the hospital and we have very little trust that she"—

the health secretary—

"is actually listening to us."

Given that the health secretary's story about what she did and did not know keeps changing, is not Ms Lacock right to say that?

The First Minister: That last characterisation of the health secretary is not the case. The health secretary is determined that the parents get the answers that they deserve and understandably have asked for.

After the health secretary met the parents, she appointed Professor Craig White to be a direct point of contact, because there was a very clear lack of trust in the information that was coming from the health board. Professor White has been tasked with ensuring that every question that comes from the parents is properly addressed. We will continue with that process. Following the initial meeting, a large number of questions were recorded and worked through in relation to getting answers to the parents.

There will, of course, be issues that we cannot address until we have the independent review's report and the report of the investigation by the public inquiry. However, we are determined that every question that has been raised here will be answered. They will be answered for the parents concerned and for the sake of the wider public, who have a right to expect that the services that a hospital provides are safe and of high quality.

National Health Service (Use of Private Sector)

2. Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): Yesterday, the Minister for Public Health, Sport and Wellbeing told Parliament:

“This Government is absolutely committed to a publicly owned, operated and commissioned NHS in Scotland.”— [Official Report, 20 November 2019; c 70.]

Does the First Minister agree with her minister?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Yes.

Richard Leonard: The uncomfortable truth is that private firms are being brought in by this Government to carry out routine operations at the heart of our public health service. Last night, I spoke to a national health service clinician. He had contacted us to raise his concerns about a plan to contract out to a private healthcare provider knee and hip operations at Gartnavel hospital in Glasgow. He told me that the hospital's own clinicians have been cut out of the planning of that, that the health board has presented it as a “fait accompli” and that it was “directed from Edinburgh”.

There is anger among NHS clinicians and local NHS staff who work at Gartnavel. They are concerned that they have not been involved in the setting of clinical priorities or in carrying out those procedures. However, if there are complications, they will be expected to step in. Continuity of care is critical. No wonder the clinician to whom I spoke said to me last night that he was “deeply uneasy” about this. Is the First Minister at all uneasy about this?

The First Minister: I will point out some facts to Richard Leonard. First, we listen to the concerns of clinicians whenever they express them and we act on those concerns. However, I will address the issue of spend on the use of the private sector in NHS Scotland. In Scotland, that spend represents right now 0.6 per cent of the front-line health budget; in England, the corresponding figure is 7.3 per cent. The independent private sector is used in Scotland at the very margins; that is fully set out transparently in our waiting times improvement plan.

It was the case, if memory serves me correctly—I am happy to stand corrected if I am wrong about this—that the independent private sector was used in NHS Scotland to a greater extent under the previous Labour Administration. Further, I heard Jeremy Corbyn and the shadow health secretary of United Kingdom Labour say that they would continue to have that kind of approach in NHS England. How do I know about the record of the previous Labour Administration in Scotland? That, of course, is because I was the health minister who nationalised Stracathro hospital, which had been earmarked for use by the independent sector by a Labour health minister in the previous Administration.

I will take no lectures from Labour on those issues, particularly after last night. Richard Leonard wants to talk about what happened in the

chamber yesterday, so I point out that, last night in the chamber, Labour voted with the Conservatives against an NHS protection bill that would safeguard our NHS from trade deals with Donald Trump. Shame on Labour for that.

Richard Leonard: The First Minister said that she would use the so-called independent sector in a structured way based on clinical priorities. How can she do that without the involvement of the clinicians in the hospital where the procedures are being carried out?

That is not the only example of a private company being brought in regularly to carry out clinical procedures at Gartnavel hospital. Medinet, which is a business that is funded by venture capitalists, is also used to carry out operations there. The First Minister must take responsibility, because that is a result of failures in resource and workforce planning. It is nobody else's legacy—it is the First Minister's legacy. It is a legacy that has led to private not public provision.

It is a matter of record that NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde has been allocated £34 million of Scottish Government funds to bail out the Government's waiting time failures. For the record, will the First Minister today tell us how much of the £34 million for the NHS is being hived off to private sector providers, their profit margins and their shareholder dividend payments?

The First Minister: In my answer to Richard Leonard's previous question, I said that total spend on the use of the private sector in NHS Scotland is 0.6 per cent of the budget. If that answer is not good enough for him, here is another piece of information: in 2018-19, the most recent year of data, the number of procedures undertaken by non-NHS providers represented less than 0.3 per cent of all recorded NHS Scotland procedures.

Will I take responsibility for the fact that, in Scotland—in sharp contrast to England under the Tories and the previous Labour UK Government—less than 1 per cent of the spend goes to the private sector, and less than 0.5 per cent of procedures are done by the private sector? Yes, I will take responsibility for that, because I am committed to a publicly owned, publicly delivered health service, and Scotland now has one of those far more than when Labour was in office in Scotland or the UK. I am proud of that, and Richard Leonard still has to explain why he voted with the Tories against an NHS protection bill.

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): There are some constituency supplementary questions.

Queen Elizabeth University Hospital (Admissions Closure)

Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): One of my constituents recently raised the case of Sam, a 13-year-old who, tragically, has been diagnosed with leukaemia. Due to the children's ward admissions closure at Glasgow's Queen Elizabeth university hospital, Sam was transferred to Edinburgh's Royal hospital for sick children. His parents were told that he got the last bed and that if he had not, he would have been transferred to a hospital in Aberdeen or even Newcastle.

How many children are in that situation? Are parents now having to cross the border to get urgent cancer care?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I convey my best wishes to Sam and his family.

The wards are closed at Queen Elizabeth university hospital because of the issues that Jackson Carlaw and I just spoke about. Those wards will be reopened only when it is safe to do so. In the meantime, children will be given the best care in the hospitals that they go to. Of course we want those hospitals to be as close to their homes as possible, which is why all the work that I spoke about earlier is under way to open the wards at Queen Elizabeth university hospital as quickly as possible. We will continue to take forward that work, which is led by clinicians, infection control staff and the greater Glasgow health board.

Homelessness Services (Glasgow)

James Kelly (Glasgow) (Lab): The First Minister will be aware of the tragic death of a homeless man in Glasgow at the weekend. He was found dead in a car park in freezing conditions. That was reported on the day that Shelter Scotland took out a full-page advert on the front of the *Herald* newspaper, highlighting the deaths of 47 homeless people in Glasgow over the past year. This is a scandal that shames Scotland and shames Scotland's largest city.

Shelter Scotland is taking court action against Glasgow City Council because it is ignoring its legal requirement to find accommodation for homeless people. As a Glasgow MSP, does the First Minister support Shelter Scotland in its action to ensure that Glasgow City Council does not ignore homeless people and leave them to sleep on the streets of Glasgow, which is a scandal?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): For reasons that I know that James Kelly will understand, I will not comment on on-going legal action, but I will say that I expect all local authorities, including Glasgow City Council, to meet their legal requirements.

The Scottish Government is absolutely determined to ensure, working with local authorities, that no person has to sleep rough on the streets. We are investing heavily in improving and expanding homelessness services. That includes the provision of support for rapid rehousing and the housing first approach.

With regard to the tragic death of the individual James Kelly spoke about, although this in no way takes away from the tragedy of that death, my initial information is that that person was not homeless. However, a police investigation is under way that will require to establish the circumstances fully.

Since that incident, my officials have been in touch with stakeholders locally to look at what more we can do. We have offered to increase Glasgow City Mission's funding so that the winter night shelter can be opened earlier. Those discussions are on-going. We have also provided funding for more outreach services.

The Scottish Government is determined to work with local authorities to tackle the issue. I make no bones about this: in Scotland or any other country, as long as one person is homeless or sleeping rough on our streets, we have more work to do to make sure that we have the services in place to ensure that that is not necessary. We will continue that work.

Concessionary Tram Fares (Edinburgh)

Gordon Lindhurst (Lothian) (Con): Does the First Minister agree with the removal of concessionary tram fares for over-60s and disabled people, which is being considered by the City of Edinburgh Council?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): As far as I am aware, that is a matter for the City of Edinburgh Council. I am happy to look into it more and to correspond with the member when I have more information about it.

Paediatric Intensive Care Unit (Capacity)

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): Because of the ban on new admissions to the children's cancer wards in Glasgow, it is true that there is not enough paediatric intensive care unit provision in Scotland. I know that because of one family who have let me hear about their experience. They have a very ill child who is in a hospital in England and has been there for more than a month because there is not enough safe in-patient care here in Scotland.

That is an absolute disgrace. Were the First Minister and the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport aware of that situation? What are they doing to increase PICU capacity here in Scotland?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): With any sick child, the most important thing is that they get the best-quality clinical care. We want that to be provided close to home, which is why the health board is working so hard to get to a position in which the affected wards—not just wards 2A and 2B, but ward 6A, which was the ward that was used when those wards closed but which is currently closed to readmissions—can be reopened. Work is under way as we speak to get those wards reopened as quickly as possible, but I hope that all members would agree and accept that the clinical safety of those wards is absolutely paramount.

Aberdeenshire Voluntary Action (Budget)

Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West) (Con): Aberdeenshire Voluntary Action, a charity in my constituency and the wider north-east region, does an incredible amount of work to support the third sector. It says that the Scottish Government has frozen its budget for 10 years, and now it is facing cuts. Why is that necessary when the Scottish Government's budget is increasing?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I wish that we were not in a position in which we had to freeze budgets, to use the member's term. We have sought to protect funding for third sector organisations, and we will continue to do so.

However, because, over the lifetime of the Conservative Government, the resources available to the Scottish Government have been reduced as a result of Tory austerity, unfortunately difficult decisions require to be taken. Perhaps the member would like to direct at least some of his comments to his party colleagues and express his disappointment to them about the austerity that they have inflicted on Scotland over the past number of years and urge them, as I do today, to bring an end to austerity once and for all. That might be a helpful thing for a Tory member to do.

My final point, which I know that the Tories hate hearing, is that, if we had followed their advice and opted to give tax cuts to the richest in our society, as the Tories urged us to do, there would be £500 million—or, probably, more than that—less in our budget, so Aberdeenshire Voluntary Action would perhaps be facing not a freeze in its budget but something much worse, because of the Tory policies.

Hunting Wild Animals

3. Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green): Two years ago, the First Minister told us:

"I have always been an opponent of fox hunting and I remain so."—[*Official Report*, 18 May 2017; c 19.]

We have had plenty of talk, but hunting continues in Scotland, 17 years after it was meant to have been banned. Unbelievably, the Tories now appear to have a stronger position on this issue than the Scottish National Party does, as they have dropped their opposition to the Hunting Act 2004 in England, which put in place a ban that is slightly less flawed than Scotland's.

I have consulted on a bill that would deliver a real ban, and almost 10,000 people have responded. That shows the enormous public interest in the issue. Can the First Minister give me a clear assurance that a real fox hunting ban will be introduced by the end of this parliamentary session?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Of course, our proposals to further reform the law were set out in the chamber by the Minister for Rural Affairs and the Natural Environment in January. When she did so, those proposals were welcomed by Alison Johnstone, who said that she welcomed the minister's intention to improve the Protection of Wild Animals (Scotland) Act 2002 and looked forward to working with her to deliver what she described then and describes today as a "real ban".

We intend to introduce legislation. As Alison Johnstone said, she has consulted on a member's bill, and we want to fully analyse the consultation responses to that and reflect that analysis in the legislation that we introduce. All those matters will be fully considered by the Government and Parliament will be able to fully scrutinise the legislation when we publish it.

Alison Johnstone: That announcement was made 11 months ago. It did not even merit a mention in the programme for government. Therefore, I am delighted to hear the First Minister's words today. However, the SNP has been in government for 12 years, and what it is doing is at odds with what it is saying. Instead of action, we have endless reviews and delays, which have become a hallmark of this Government's approach to wildlife protection and more. More than a year and a half ago, in this chamber, I raised the issue of the mass killing of mountain hares on Scotland's grouse moors. The First Minister agreed that that was unacceptable. However, more than 40,000 hares will have been killed since the First Minister pledged to take action.

The blood sports lobby will be jumping for joy at the endless delay, but the overwhelming majority of people in Scotland want an end to that indiscriminate slaughter. Is the First Minister too timid to stand up to those vested interests?

The First Minister: No. To complete the point on fox hunting, I would have hoped that Alison

Johnstone would have welcomed the fact that, in the legislation that we have made a commitment to introduce, we want to take fully into account the consultation responses to her member's bill. We look forward to continuing to work with members across the chamber who have an interest in these matters.

On the issue of grouse moor management, of course, we established the Werritty review. We received its report on Monday, and we hope to publish it before the end of the year, and also to set out our response to it and how we will take forward its recommendations.

There is absolutely no justification for the large-scale culling of mountain hares that threatens their conservation status. Of course, Scotland has already taken action that has not yet been taken in the rest of the United Kingdom. For example, we are the only country in the UK to already have a close season for brown hares and mountain hares.

We will continue to take the right steps to protect wildlife, and will do that without fear or favour with regard to any vested interests or other interests.

Nuclear Weapons

Jenny Gilruth (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP): I will ask the First Minister the same question that Jo Swinson answered so disgracefully this week. Would she ever be prepared to use nuclear weapons?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): No, I would not. I think that, whenever that question is asked, it should be pointed out that anybody who used nuclear weapons would be doing something that would potentially lead to the death of millions or perhaps tens of millions of people. I think that nuclear weapons are immoral, ineffective and a waste of money, and I would not countenance their use. I look forward to the day when not only Scotland is free of nuclear weapons but the world is, too.

Student Accommodation (Fire Safety)

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): The First Minister will be well aware of the horrific fire that occurred this past weekend in student accommodation in Bolton. Students across Scotland are now deeply concerned regarding the safety of their accommodation, particularly those in the unregulated privately owned and purpose-built student accommodation sector. The National Union of Students Scotland and students across the country have called on the Scottish Government to lead on a review of the regulation of such accommodation. Will the First Minister commit her Government to that review to ensure

that there is no room for complacency when it comes to the safety of our students?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Yes, I think that I can. Certainly, there is absolutely no complacency and no room for complacency. In the light of the dreadful tragedy at Grenfell, we set up a task force, and since then we have been working on many of the issues, such as cladding and regulations. Of course, the dreadful incident that happened last week is a further reminder that we cannot be complacent. If there is a feeling that a further review of regulations is needed, I am happy to give the undertaking that the Government is open to doing that.

Poverty

Angela Constance (Almond Valley) (SNP): Priti Patel, the Home Secretary, has claimed that the Government is not responsible for poverty. Does the First Minister agree that every Government, including hers, has a responsibility and duty to end poverty? Will she outline our responsibilities and the action that the Scottish Government is taking to address poverty here in Scotland?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Yes, I think that every Government, including the Scottish Government, has a responsibility to tackle poverty. The Scottish Government takes that responsibility seriously. For example, we are spending more than £100 million a year to mitigate the worst impacts of Tory welfare cuts and taking a range of actions to get money into the pockets of the lowest paid and the poorest in our society. Most recently, we have announced plans for the Scottish child payment. We have set up the new social security system, which is putting more money into the pockets of carers and low-income families and which has dignity at its heart. Of course, Angela Constance is to be credited for a great deal of work that led to that.

On the current United Kingdom Government, the point is not just that it has a responsibility to help tackle poverty; it has a responsibility to acknowledge that it is responsible for an increase in poverty in this country because of its austerity and welfare cuts. Everybody should reflect seriously on that. I think that most people will be wondering what on earth Priti Patel was talking about when she made that ridiculous and completely outrageous comment.

NHS Lothian (Nursing Agency Use)

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): NHS Lothian is predicting a £90 million budget deficit, yet it is paying up to £1,700 a shift to a private nursing agency to cover staff absence. Why?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): We encourage health boards to use nursing banks when they need temporary staff cover, and national health service boards indeed do that. Obviously, where there are short-term issues of staff absences or recruitment, the priority is to ensure that wards are properly staffed. However, we have a long-standing determination to ensure that we minimise the amount of money that is spent on agencies as opposed to nursing banks, and, with health boards, we will continue to prioritise that action.

Scots Language

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): As this is Scottish book week, does the First Minister agree that Scots is a living language? For example, my favourite Scots word is “boorach”, as in “Brexid boorach”. In that vein, what is her favourite Scots word?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Och, Ah can’t—I will have to get back to Christine Grahame on that, because I am scared that I will accidentally use a word that might be a bit rude. I like “boorach” as well, because it sums up a lot of what the current UK Government has been presiding over in the past wee while.

I agree with Christine Grahame on the importance of the Scots language and its living nature. I will take this opportunity to promote Scottish book week. As a book lover and a lover of reading, I think that we should all take the opportunity to encourage people, particularly young people, to read more in whatever language they choose. That is why I am so proud of the First Minister’s reading challenge, which tries to do that in schools across the country.

Carers’ Rights Day

4. Tom Arthur (Renfrewshire South) (SNP): To ask the First Minister how the Scottish Government is recognising this year’s carers’ rights day. (S5F-03741)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Carers’ rights day is an opportunity for us to recognise the importance of carers across the country and the huge contribution that they make to our communities and our society, day in and day out. It is also an opportunity to help carers to understand their rights and access the support to which they are entitled.

Today, the Minister for Public Health, Sport and Wellbeing marked carers’ rights day at the launch of the triangle of care toolkit in Glasgow. That provides a helpful framework for mental health professionals to involve carers in decisions about the care and treatment of their loved ones. The

Cabinet Secretary for Social Security and Older People also announced today that the next payment of the carers’ allowance supplement will be paid to Scotland’s carers before Christmas, and, through that supplement, carers in Scotland get £452 more a year than those outwith Scotland.

Tom Arthur: Each day, thousands of people across Scotland and the wider United Kingdom become carers. Few will have been able to plan for that. Whether they need to talk to health and social care providers, negotiate with their employers, or deal with the intricacies of the benefit system, it is no wonder that caring can feel overwhelming and stressful. Can the First Minister set out how her Government is supporting Scotland’s nearly 800,000 carers—including 44,000 who are under the age of 18—to feel empowered and how it is ensuring that they are treated with the dignity, fairness and respect that they deserve.

The First Minister: I thank Tom Arthur for raising this issue. First, I take the opportunity to thank everybody who undertakes caring responsibilities across our country. We can never repay them in full, but we have an obligation to provide them with the help and support that they need.

Alongside the action that I have already mentioned, we are focusing on embedding carers’ rights under the Carers (Scotland) Act 2016, and developing a national marketing campaign to raise awareness of rights. We continue to fund and promote the carer positive employer accreditation scheme. Over 400,000 people across Scotland now work for organisations that are committed to helping staff who are juggling work and caring responsibilities. We are also consulting on our carers strategic policy statement, which maps out how those and other policies contribute to improving the way that carers are listened to and supported.

Finally, I am proud that Scotland is the first place in the UK where young carers are able to get financial support, through our young carer grant, which is a £300 annual payment for carers aged 16 to 18.

Shipbuilding

5. Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the First Minister how the Scottish Government is supporting shipbuilding in Fife and across Scotland. (S5F-03732)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Scotland has a rich shipbuilding heritage. It is an industry that continues to demonstrate its expertise, which was recognised last week with the award of the contract for the first five type 31 frigates to Babcock, and I am delighted that that

announcement will bring security to the skilled workforce at Rosyth. We look forward to working with Babcock to maximise the benefits for Scotland, for Rosyth and for our supply chain. We also continue to support shipbuilding more generally across Scotland, and will continue to do so.

Murdo Fraser: The First Minister referenced the award to Babcock in Rosyth of the £1.25 billion contract to build five new frigates for the Royal Navy, securing hundreds of jobs in Fife and elsewhere in Scotland for many years to come. In addition to the two recently completed aircraft carriers, that brings the total number of British navy vessels that are being built in Scotland to 18, including 13 frigates. The whole chamber should welcome that news, but can the First Minister tell us how many frigates would there be in the navy of an independent Scotland?

The First Minister: The flaw in Murdo Fraser's supposedly really clever attack is that we only have to look at many small independent countries across the world to find that they have shipbuilding industries that flourish even more than any in the UK.

Scotland, as an independent country, will support our shipbuilding industry and will do so because of the expertise here. Nobody needs to do our shipbuilding industry any favours. It wins contracts because it is the best at what it does, and that will continue to be the case—whatever Scotland's constitutional future.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): The 15-year delay in decommissioning the nuclear submarines at Rosyth dockyard has cost the taxpayer billions of pounds. What more can the Scottish Government do to free up the yard for low-carbon shipbuilding, while removing those weapons from Jo Swinson's reach?

The First Minister: The first issue raised by Mark Ruskell is unfortunately not a matter for the Scottish Government, but for the UK Government and the Ministry of Defence, although we want to see Rosyth flourish. In addition to the issues that I talked about in response to Murdo Fraser, there is great potential in low-carbon work in the future.

On nuclear weapons, I have made my view clear. I want to see Faslane, for example, be a conventional naval base. I do not want to see it continue to host weapons of mass destruction, because I think that all of us should be determined to see a nuclear-free Scotland playing its full contribution in a nuclear-free world.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): Does the First Minister agree that it is a bit rich for the Tories to come to this chamber and claim credit for the shipbuilding industry after the devastation that they have wrought on many

shipbuilding communities across Scotland, including my own in Greenock and Inverclyde, and that it was the decisive actions of the Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Economy and Fair Work, Derek Mackay, in saving Ferguson Marine in Port Glasgow, that saved jobs and provided a future for the yard?

The First Minister: I could not agree more with Stuart McMillan. There are, of course, remaining challenges at Ferguson's, but it would no longer be open right now were it not for the action that this Government has taken. Before the boundaries changed, I used to represent Govan shipyard in this Parliament—that honour now lies with Humza Yousaf—so I have seen over the years the broken Westminster promises to our shipbuilding industry, time and time again. Westminster Governments—not just Tories, but of all colours—have not treated our shipbuilding industry in the way that they should have. I look forward to a thriving shipbuilding industry in Scotland because the people who work in our shipyards are the best at what they do. They deserve to flourish.

Food Bank Use (Household Incomes)

6. Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what action the Scottish Government is taking in response to reports that one in 20 households that use food banks has an unstable income due to self-employment or being on a zero-hours contract. (S5F-03736)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): No one should go hungry or have to rely on food banks in Scotland. The Scottish Government is taking action to tackle insecure work as part of our fair work agenda. Through fair work first, we are extending fair work criteria to as many funding streams as we can by the end of this parliamentary session. Those criteria include no inappropriate use of zero-hours contracts and payment of the real living wage. Of course, legislation related to zero-hours contracts is reserved to the United Kingdom Parliament, and we have made very clear our opposition to the inappropriate use of those and other types of employment that offer workers no job security. In the three years to June 2019, the proportion of people in employment on a zero-hours contract in Scotland fell from 3 per cent to 2.6 per cent, but we want to see further progress in the months and years to come.

Rhoda Grant: We have seen a 10 per cent rise in the number of people employed on zero-hours contracts, and that is now 70,000 people. It is simply not enough to promote fair work; the Government must act on it. Public procurement is one of the opportunities that the Government has to end insecure work in Scotland. Will the First

Minister act now and outlaw zero-hours contracts when she is procuring services from the public sector?

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Economy and Fair Work (Derek Mackay): “Outlaw”, she says.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): In procurement.

The Presiding Officer: Order, please.

Rhoda Grant: If the First Minister is really serious about tackling poverty, that is something that she can do right now.

The First Minister: First, let me point out, as I did in my original answer, that the proportion of people in employment on a zero-hours contract has fallen. I want to see it fall further. The fair work first approach is important and we will take that forward in relation to procurement and Government funding streams more generally. Rhoda Grant says that that is not enough and, on a point of consensus, I agree with her. I would much prefer to be in a position in which we can legislate to do what she said and ban inappropriate use of zero-hours contracts. There is one slight problem with that: legislation on employment matters is reserved to Westminster and, time and time again, Labour has opposed the devolution of employment law to this Parliament. If Rhoda Grant is signalling a change of heart on that, I am delighted. I have made this kind of offer to Richard Leonard before in the chamber: I will sign a letter to the UK Government with him this afternoon, demanding the immediate devolution of employment law and then we can get on with doing exactly what Rhoda Grant is asking us to. The offer is open.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes First Minister’s question time. Before we move on to the next item of business, we will have a short suspension to allow some visitors to come into the gallery and members to change seats.

12:44

Meeting suspended.

12:46

On resuming—

World Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease Day

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): I ask members of the public who are leaving the gallery to do so quietly—Parliament is in session.

The next item of business is a members’ business debate on motion S5M-18735, in the name of Annie Wells, on world chronic obstructive pulmonary disease day. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament recognises World Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) Day on 20 November 2019; notes that this year’s theme is All Together to End COPD; notes that COPD is a group of conditions, including bronchitis and emphysema, that make it difficult to empty air out of the lungs because the airways become narrowed; understands that COPD is a progressive and long-term lung condition without a cure, which currently affects a recorded 141,140 people in Scotland, with many more people who are undiagnosed; believes that up to two-thirds of people with COPD remain undiagnosed and, without optimal treatment, progressive lung disease reduces their quality of life; recognises the need for early diagnosis and screening to ensure that those affected by COPD receive the treatment that they need; notes that, with the right support, it is possible to live well and self-manage the condition, and commends the British Lung Foundation for the work that it does to raise awareness of COPD and help to ensure that people across Scotland get the treatment and support that they deserve.

12:47

Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): I thank members from across the chamber for signing my motion, which has allowed us to debate an important issue.

Today marks the 18th annual world COPD day. Its main goal is to raise awareness of COPD worldwide. This year’s theme, “All Together to End COPD”, highlights the fact that many people are involved in the fight to end the disease.

At every stage, and at any age, there is an opportunity to prevent or treat COPD. From care providers and patients, to family members and employers, everyone can make an impact. That is vital because there are 300 million cases of COPD in the world, and the disease is the third-biggest cause of death globally. Closer to home, records show that COPD affects 141,110 Scots, with many more still undiagnosed.

Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease—to use its formal name—is a progressive long-term lung condition without a cure. Patients suffer from conditions such as bronchitis and emphysema,

which make it difficult to empty air from the lungs because the airways have narrowed. Exposure to tobacco smoke and other inhaled toxic particles and gases is the main risk factor in respect of COPD.

Treatments for COPD include inhalers, tablets and, for a small number of people, surgery or a lung transplant. Unfortunately, it is estimated that up to two thirds of people with COPD remain undiagnosed. I cannot emphasise enough the importance of early diagnosis and screening in order to ensure that people who are affected by COPD receive the treatment that they need.

Last year, Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland published a report that showed the variable levels of support and treatment that are available to people who are living with chest conditions such as COPD. The report focused on pulmonary rehabilitation. That treatment helps to improve people's physical and mental health, and saves the national health service money by reducing hospital admissions and halving the time that is spent in hospital.

CHSS found that an estimated 69,000 people would benefit from pulmonary rehabilitation, but that provision of the service is a "postcode lottery". We supported CHSS's "Right to pulmonary rehab" campaign, which called on the Government to ensure that people across Scotland get the treatment and support that they deserve.

I will also tell members about a group that is often unseen in the patient community—bear with me while I get the name right. They are people with alpha-1 antitrypsin deficiency, which is more commonly known as alpha-1. We will go with that.

Alpha-1 is a rare inherited condition that makes people susceptible to developing COPD. It is thought that about 25,000 people in the United Kingdom suffer from it. People with alpha-1 lack a particular protective enzyme, which makes them more vulnerable to the effects of inhaling smoke or toxic materials including dust, fumes and chemicals. Patients are often misdiagnosed and receive treatment for other respiratory conditions, such as asthma. Around a third of patients experience a delay in diagnosis of more than seven years after the onset of their symptoms.

In 2012, the alpha-1 community established the Alpha-1 Alliance, which is a group of patients and doctors from across the UK. It works to raise awareness of the unmet medical needs of alpha-1 patients, and it campaigns for better healthcare services. We should all work towards ensuring that those patients receive adequate healthcare.

On a personal note, I understand too well the effects that COPD can have on a person's life and on their family. About 15 years ago, my dad was diagnosed with COPD. We did not know what it

was, so I googled it. At the time, it seemed to be all doom and gloom. It was not until I had researched it more that I understood that he, his general practitioner and my family could do things to help him. Eventually, my dad had to be on oxygen for 24 hours a day, but that did not stop us doing family things together—trips to the shops and going into town or to family events. My dad is no longer with us, but I want to make sure that, during my time in Parliament, I do all that I can to highlight how to prevent and manage the condition.

I commend the British Lung Foundation in Scotland for its work to raise awareness of COPD and to help to ensure that people across Scotland get the treatment and support that they deserve. In recent years, it has had many achievements and has championed many causes, including smoking bans in public places, better oxygen services for patients and greater provision of pulmonary rehab.

Efforts to reduce the burden of COPD are also taking place worldwide. Although there is currently no cure for COPD, in many types of settings and at any stage of the disease, a variety of people take actions, including in smoking cessation programmes and fighting against indoor and outdoor air pollution.

In my area, I have visited groups that encourage people to go to singing classes and to do minimal exercise. I sang a lot with my dad when he was not well. I do not have a great voice, but he did.

Again, I emphasise the need for early diagnosis. There are treatments to help patients to breathe more easily and to have an active life. In order to access them, it is vital that people get early diagnosis.

World COPD day gives us a chance to highlight a condition that affects too many patients and families like mine. We should evoke this year's world COPD day theme and work together to help patients to get the recognition, support and treatment that they deserve.

12:53

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): Yesterday—20 November—was world COPD day. I am pleased to speak in this chronic obstructive pulmonary disease debate, and I congratulate Annie Wells—the Parliament's COPD champion—on lodging the motion.

As convener of the cross-party group on lung health and still a registered nurse, I am passionate about policy on raising awareness of and promoting respiratory health. My big sister, Phyllis Murphie, who is a nurse consultant in respiratory medicine, suggested that a cross-party group on lung health should be created. Who is going to

argue with their big sister? Since the CPG's inception, she has been an active, supportive and crucial member. Much of her professional work is with people who have COPD.

I thank the organisations and individuals who have provided briefings for the debate. I also thank Kathryn Byrne from Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland and the BLF's Frank Toner for excellent CPG support. He has been invaluable; the BLF has promoted lung health champions: we now have 10 MSP champions in Parliament.

COPD is a progressive and long-term lung condition with no cure. The umbrella term "COPD" is used to describe several lung conditions, including emphysema and chronic bronchitis. Cigarette smoking is recognised as a primary cause. The condition affects 141,000 people in Scotland, with many more not yet diagnosed.

One way to describe how COPD feels is that it is like trying to breathe through a straw. Inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale—it is hard work to breathe efficiently through a wee straw, and that is how folk with COPD feel. The increased work to move air in obstructed lungs causes breathlessness, tiredness, coughing and, often, other symptoms including depression and social isolation.

During my first year as an MSP, I led a debate on world COPD day in November 2016. I started with the words of Sir Michael Marmot, who was at the forefront of the research that was behind the British Lung Foundation's "The Battle for Breath—the impact of lung disease in the UK" report. He said:

"Breathing is something we all do, day in, day out, every day of our lives. It is so innate that most of us rarely stop to think about it."

In the debate in 2016, several asks were made of the Scottish Government to take seriously the recommendations of clinicians and patients.

I am pleased that, since that debate, the Scottish Government has been delivering. Better lung health for people in Scotland is high on the health agenda, and it is worth noting the steps that have been taken since the 2016 debate.

One of the CPG asks was for a respiratory quality improvement plan. In 2017, the Government announced a lung health task force, to be led by NHS Tayside consultant Dr Tom Fardon. I acknowledge the work of Dr Ian Small and Phyllis Murphie ahead of the announcement. Dr Fardon engaged with NHS expert clinicians, patients and stakeholders. I am aware that a Scottish respiratory care action plan will be presented imminently. I am looking forward to seeing the plan's contents, including recommendations for people with COPD. I will welcome Dr Fardon to the next meeting of the cross-party group on lung health, which should

happen around February next year. I encourage the Parliament's lung health champions to join us.

South-west Scotland has one of the highest rates of COPD in the country. In 2017, I had the privilege of launching BREATH—the borders and regions airways training hub project—which is led by Dr John Lockhart and Dr Lochlan McGarvey. BREATH is an ambitious collaborative research partnership between the Dundalk Institute of Technology, the University of the West of Scotland, Queen's University Belfast, NHS Dumfries and Galloway and NHS Ayrshire and Arran. The cross-border project has secured €7.7 million Interreg European funding, and has a mission to investigate causes other than smoking, and treatment and prevention of COPD. I am due to accompany Dr Lockhart to a primary school in February so that we can teach young folk the best ways to prevent lung ill health in the first place.

I welcome today's motion by Annie Wells. I was going to touch on pulmonary rehab, but time is running short. I thank the Scottish Government for taking forward the respiratory action plan and I look forward to its content and delivery.

12:58

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am delighted to take part in this members' business debate and I congratulate Annie Wells on bringing it to the chamber. As we have heard, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, or COPD, consists of a number of conditions, including bronchitis and emphysema, that make it difficult for individuals to breathe. The condition is unfortunately progressive, long term and without a cure.

We have heard that more than 140,000 individuals in Scotland have it. However, those figures could be even higher, because many people do not know that they have it—they are undiagnosed. Without optimal treatment, progressive lung disease reduces the quality of life for those individuals.

I am honoured to have been recently nominated by the British Lung Foundation as smoking cessation champion at the Scottish Parliament. Although it is widely accepted that not everybody who is living with more than one COPD condition has been a smoker, if someone has been a smoker, that has a massive impact on their condition.

I am delighted to be co-convenor, along with Emma Harper, of the cross-party group on lung health, which is a progressive group that has done a huge amount of work in the Parliament over the past year or two, and that work continues. I have met many individuals and members of

organisations who have come to the group's meetings.

I pay tribute to the fantastic work of Linda McLeod, who got her British Empire medal for her involvement with breathe easy Clackmannanshire, which is a support group in my region. I also pay tribute to the people who are involved with breathe easy groups in Perth, Fife and Tayside, which do tremendous work in supporting individuals who have breathing conditions and their family members. It was fantastic to find out that breathe easy Clackmannanshire has been nominated for a Queen's award for volunteering, and I wish the group all the best as its nomination progresses. The breathe easy Clackmannanshire group has done so much to involve people and to get them to participate.

Recently, the group and I joined the British Lung Foundation in its call for NHS Forth Valley to guarantee the future of pulmonary rehabilitation services in Clackmannanshire.

Rachael Hamilton (Etrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): I want to bring up a really important point. My constituent Jock Shiells, who is from Eyemouth, lives with COPD and has set up a fantastic exercise and social group at the Eyemouth community pool. I mention him because he has done such good work and is doing so much for hundreds of people across the Borders who suffer from COPD.

Alexander Stewart: I concur with what Rachael Hamilton said. As we all know, many individuals across our constituencies and regions go the extra mile to ensure that support is available. As I said, breathe easy Clackmannanshire is a group that offers such support.

It was with great sadness that we learned that the pulmonary rehabilitation unit at Forth Valley royal hospital was to be relocated. That has caused real issues for individuals who live with the disease across Clackmannanshire. The relocation of the unit has meant that the videoconference service is no longer available, which has led to some difficulties. It is estimated that more than 3,000 people in the Forth Valley area could have benefited from the pulmonary rehabilitation service.

Pulmonary rehabilitation is cost effective for the NHS, because it reduces the risk of hospital admissions. On average, pulmonary rehab costs about £130 per patient, whereas a person being hospitalised costs in excess of £2,600. I am deeply concerned about the relocation of the unit, and I pay tribute to Linda McLeod and others who fought valiantly to try to ensure that that did not happen.

Last year, 6 per cent of deaths in Scotland were attributed to chronic lung diseases, and

individuals' quality of life has been impaired, so it is crucial that pulmonary rehabilitation centres are used to give people opportunities.

I very much welcome this year's theme: "All Together to End COPD". It is vital that healthcare providers, families, patients, policy makers, employers and employees work together to make a positive impact on patient outcomes, so that we end COPD for good.

13:03

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): I am really pleased that Annie Wells has secured so much support for her motion; about 40 MSPs have signed it, which gives me a lot of heart. This year's theme for world COPD day is "All Together to End COPD", and I hope that that strength in numbers is a sign that we are committed and that we will remain united even after today's debate is finished.

I know that Annie Wells has a close personal interest in the subject. It was lovely to hear her talk about her dad, and I am sure that he is very proud of her—even if she cannot sing. We have not heard her singing yet, but maybe we will at another time.

COPD is a chronic condition that narrows the airways, and there is no cure. People who live with the condition often feel very excluded and find it difficult to hold down a job and enjoy leisure time with friends and family. I was concerned to learn from Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland that the number of people who are living with COPD in Scotland has increased by a staggering 26 per cent since 2011. That increase could partly be down to better diagnosis. However, almost 140,000 people are living with COPD in Scotland, which is a big number.

We know that current treatment is focused on controlling symptoms through exercise and inhalers, which can provide temporary relief from the worst symptoms. However, I am also pleased that the British Lung Foundation continues to do excellent work to understand more about the disease. Its current research is looking at how to prevent the advance of COPD. I was pleased to sponsor an event for the British Lung Foundation in Scotland a few months ago.

Emma Harper said that there are 10 lung health champions in the Scottish Parliament; I am proud to be one of them. The cross-party group on lung health is doing great work. Again, I thank Emma Harper for bringing her expertise and her passion on the issue to the Parliament.

Members have already talked about the benefits of pulmonary rehab, which consists of a combination of exercise, education, advice and

support. We know that it helps people in a clinical sense and that it is cost effective, because it helps to reduce hospital admissions. We need to really get behind that and ensure equal access to it across Scotland.

Emma Harper: Monica Lennon mentioned pulmonary rehab. Does she agree that singing or joining a choir is also a great way to improve lung health? Two lung-health choirs have performed in the Parliament in the past couple of years.

Monica Lennon: Absolutely. It is important that people know what options are available in their communities, as they will be easy for them to get to. It is great to hear of those examples.

In Lanarkshire, more than 9,000 people live with COPD. They would benefit from pulmonary rehab, but it is not available—I stress that point to the minister. We agree with Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland that the upcoming respiratory care action plan should make that commitment.

Lots of points have been well made, so I will move on. There are about four times as many hospital admissions for COPD among Scots from the most deprived areas as there are among those from the wealthiest areas. It is a huge issue of inequality and the NHS needs more investment to deal with it.

I finish by agreeing with Jane-Claire Judson, the chief executive of Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland, who said:

“We need to see urgent reform to help people breathe better and really live life to the full with COPD.”

13:07

The Minister for Public Health, Sport and Wellbeing (Joe FitzPatrick): I am delighted to respond to this important debate on behalf of the Government. I thank Annie Wells for lodging the motion and all those who signed it, which enabled us to secure time to debate the topic in the chamber. I also thank the members who spoke in the debate, particularly those who shared their personal experiences.

As we have heard, the debate allows us to recognise world COPD day, which took place yesterday. This year’s theme, “All Together to End COPD”, emphasises the fact that so many people are involved in the fight to end COPD. I am delighted that we have joined across the Parliament today to raise awareness of COPD.

At every stage and at any age, there is an opportunity to prevent or treat COPD. Everyone can make an impact, including care providers, families and patients, politicians, policy makers and the third sector. In particular, I commend the work of charities, such as the British Lung Foundation, Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland and

others, for the important work that they do to support people with COPD, their families and friends.

We all recognise that prevention and early intervention are key to minimising the prevalence and incidence of respiratory conditions, including COPD. Since I was appointed as the minister responsible for public health, I have learned a great deal from speaking to health professionals and patients with COPD about the challenges that patients and their families face. I have also learned a great deal about the underlying causes of COPD.

My approach is to make public health, and the health of the nation, relevant and essential to all parts of the Government’s work.

Monica Lennon: I want to raise with the minister briefly the issue of people who live with COPD but who also have an alcohol or drug addiction, or both. Sometimes, we do not see a whole person-centred approach, and that was a factor in my father’s death. Is the Government doing any work around that?

Joe FitzPatrick: Monica Lennon raises a very important point: very often, people have a range of co-morbidities, so when they come in for one condition, it is important that we look at all their conditions and support them fully. That is how they will make a full recovery, or get the best results if full recovery is not possible.

It is important that we look at all the underlying causes of COPD. Emma Harper mentioned the British Lung Foundation’s report, “The battle for breath”, which highlights the strong links between lung disease, deprivation and health inequalities. The report also outlines the main environmental drivers of lung disease—smoking, air pollution and occupational hazards—and explains how socio-economic status affects exposure and outcomes.

We know that the vast majority of COPD cases are smoking related. Our tobacco control action plan, “Raising Scotland’s Tobacco-free Generation”, which was published in June 2018, sets out our five-year plan to address the on-going harm that smoking causes in Scotland. We are determined to tackle the inequalities of smoking, prevent the uptake of smoking among young people and provide the best possible support for people who want to give up.

We have introduced a 2034 tobacco-free target. Our aim is to reduce smoking rates to 5 per cent or below by 2034, thereby creating a generation of young people who do not want to smoke and who are protected from the harms of smoking. I am pleased that we are making real progress in that regard: fewer than one in five adults now smoke. Over time, we expect the reduction to have an impact on the prevalence of COPD.

As Annie Wells said, it is important that we do not forget that there are other causes of COPD. Alpha-1 antitrypsin deficiency is one such cause—I think that we discussed the research in that area in the other debate that has been mentioned. The research will provide us with a better understanding of why some people are more likely to develop conditions such as COPD. We know that COPD may develop due to long-term breathing in of harmful substances, such as fumes or dust, but the research will give us a better understanding of the condition.

Absolutely everybody who spoke in the debate—Annie Wells, Emma Harper, Alexander Stewart and Monica Lennon—mentioned pulmonary rehabilitation. In the past six months, we have had three debates on respiratory conditions, and pulmonary rehab has been central to them all. We have discussed raising awareness of the conditions, diagnosis, education, e-learning resource, data, special nurses, research and much more.

In all our discussions, improved pulmonary rehabilitation is the one issue that has come across as a priority. I have said many times that we recognise the importance of pulmonary rehabilitation in helping to support self-management. It is already a key recommendation in national clinical guidelines, but we want boards to increase patients' access to that important programme, and we need to understand where there are gaps across the country as part of that. We also want to identify examples of best practice and test them in areas where improvement is required. We will do that through the implementation of Scotland's first-ever respiratory care action plan.

As promised, the draft plan will be published for consultation before the end of this year. We know that true change will happen only through working with others: hearing from their experiences, good and bad, and learning about what we could do differently and what we must do better to make the difference that people need. That is why I encourage as many people as possible, once the draft plan is launched, to respond to the consultation.

The draft plan has been developed in collaboration with clinicians and others who work in the area, including in the third sector. It is already in good shape, but it is really important that we hear people's thoughts directly about whether we have got the plan right. It is a genuine consultation and my huge gratitude goes to everyone who has already offered invaluable contributions to developing the draft plan, and everyone who I hope will give us their input during the consultation. I am sure that that will include the

cross-party group—it will be able to discuss the draft plan in February.

I reassure everyone in the chamber and the cross-party group that it is a genuine consultation and that we will listen to all views and input as we take the plan forward to final publication. For now, I thank everyone for their contributions to this very important debate.

13:15

Meeting suspended.

14:30

On resuming—

Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body Question Time

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): The next item of business is Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body question time. I will try to get as many members in as possible, but we have a lot of questions.

Wi-fi Service (Access)

1. Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body what steps it is taking to ensure that there is access to the wi-fi service across all of the estate. (S5O-03813)

David Stewart (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body): The Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body supports the growing requirement for wi-fi in Holyrood and is constantly looking to improve the coverage, capacity, security and performance of our wi-fi network across the campus.

We have recently implemented a widely available Scottish Parliament corporate wi-fi network, which will allow us to prioritise the wi-fi traffic of members and staff and improve security and speed. Next year, we will look at refreshing the wi-fi infrastructure around the building. That will involve replacing the 169 access points that are currently used to deliver wi-fi, as well as conducting a survey to identify and address areas of the building where there might be gaps in wi-fi coverage or a weak signal.

Due to the layout of the building and the high proportion of concrete, it has always been a challenge to ensure good coverage everywhere. In the meantime, if members come across any area where they believe that there is limited coverage, they should please let the IT helpdesk know so that the issue can be investigated and resolved.

Mary Fee: Given the steps that have been taken to improve wi-fi coverage across the parliamentary estate, will any work be done to improve mobile phone coverage?

David Stewart: Because of the poor mobile signal that is available within the Holyrood building, additional infrastructure has been installed to enhance mobile coverage for the Parliament's mobile network provider, EE. Although that set-up does not provide blanket coverage, it enhances the mobile signal in key areas, such as the garden lobby, members' offices, the ground-floor meeting rooms and the car park. In addition, improved wi-fi coverage within the building will limit the impact of the

reduced mobile signal, as Parliament-provided phones, as well as phones from many other network providers, support wi-fi calling, which allows calls and other data services that have traditionally used mobile networks to instead use wi-fi networks.

Remote Voting and Videoconferencing

2. Gail Ross (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body what consideration it has given to introducing remote voting and videoconferencing options for members. (S5O-03810)

Andy Wightman (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body): Those are two distinct but connected issues. On voting, chapter 11 of the Parliament's standing orders sets out arrangements for voting in the chamber and in committees. Any proposal to change those arrangements is a matter for the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee to consider in the first instance.

Videoconferencing is used by the Parliament's committees to allow witnesses to participate in meetings remotely, and facilities are available in committee room 1. In addition, a variety of other options are available to individual members, ranging from room-based options at Holyrood to applications on mobile devices.

If the member has particular technical requests, the business information technology office would be happy to discuss the best options to meet her specific concerns.

Gail Ross: We pride ourselves on being a family-friendly Parliament. In reality, it is only family friendly if a member lives close enough to go home after decision time.

During the summer recess, I was asked by a constituent why I have to spend so long in Edinburgh during the week—sometimes, as with this week, from Monday to Friday—and I was unable to give her a satisfactory answer.

Will the members of the corporate body agree to explore options for how members can spend more time in their constituencies, representing people in the manner that they rightly expect?

Andy Wightman: We certainly understand the challenges that face members who live a long way from Edinburgh.

I reiterate that participation in parliamentary business in committees and the chamber is covered in chapter 11 of standing orders, so issues in that regard would be more appropriately addressed by the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments committee. However, the corporate body stands ready to assist in any way

that it can in providing resources to support members to participate in parliamentary business.

I acknowledge what the member says. There might be ways—for example, by approaching committee conveners—of making particular arrangements for members to contribute remotely. However, that is a matter for committees. Wider matters relating to parliamentary business are for standing orders.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There is a short supplementary from Jenny Marra.

Jenny Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): The House of Commons has put in a system for proxy voting. I am thinking of the votes that I and a member of the corporate body lost while we were on maternity leave. All being well, I have another of those periods of leave coming up. Will the corporate body consider a proxy voting system for the Scottish Parliament?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That was not directly related to the question, but Mr Wightman may give a very short answer.

Andy Wightman: Again, that is related to voting, which is a matter for the Parliament's standing orders and, as such, not for the corporate body.

Parliamentary-funded Publications (Rules)

3. **Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, with reference to its policy that does not permit parliamentary-funded publications to be issued within three months of a United Kingdom parliamentary general election or referendum, and, in light of the frequency of such events since 2015, whether it plans to revise its rules in this regard. (S5O-03807)

Liam McArthur (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body): The corporate body has considered its policy twice during this session of Parliament in relation to UK general elections and the issuing of publications, most recently prior to issuing the current guidance to members in relation to the use of resources during a UK election. The corporate body does not currently have any plans to further review its rules in that regard.

Christine Grahame: That is a disappointing answer. In 2015, we had a general election; in 2016, we had a Scottish Parliament election and the European Union referendum; in 2017, we had a UK election and local elections; and, in 2019, we have had a European Parliament election, and now we have a general election. If I multiply four times three, that is 15—sorry, 12; I beg your pardon—months. Strike that from the record. I will

never live this down. If I multiply four times three, that makes 12 months in purdah. It is only six weeks in Westminster, so why do we not make it six weeks here and be sensible?

Liam McArthur: I confirm that I share Christine Grahame's sense of exasperation at the number of elections and referenda that we have gone through in recent times. It is such that it has knocked her off kilter in terms of her mental arithmetic. *[Laughter.]*

The corporate body recognises that it is important for constituency and regional members to be able to communicate with their constituents. There are a wide variety of ways in which members can do that.

Concerns have been raised about complaints being made about MSPs and their use of parliamentary resources during election periods. However, it is important to point out that members are still able to issue to a defined list of constituents specific communications of local interest on urgent or time-sensitive matters that are not part of any wider political campaign.

It would probably be sensible to avoid making too many direct comparisons between the arrangements at Westminster and those at this Parliament, because this Parliament has a very good track record in supporting and, indeed, funding communications that MSPs send out to their constituents.

Cross-party Groups (Support)

4. **Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body what arrangements are in place to allow cross-party groups to access support such as British Sign Language interpreters or translation services for meetings. (S5O-03812)

Ruth Davidson (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body): The SPCB is committed to providing support for people requiring BSL or other language interpreters or translation services for parliamentary business. However, cross-party groups, despite their importance, are not a formal part of parliamentary business, and the SPCB's responsibilities to ensure the provision of resources for parliamentary purposes do not currently extend to CPGs.

Section 6 of the "Code of Conduct for Members of the Scottish Parliament" makes it clear that CPGs may use the Parliament's facilities only where those

"are available for public use".

It also says that

"Groups may not draw on the resources of the Parliamentary staff to service meetings other than to book meeting rooms".

If approached, the public information office can provide guidance and advice for members or the groups themselves on how to contact potential providers, including advice on points to note when arranging translation or interpretation.

Claire Baker: My office has sought advice from the Parliament a number of times on the issue, and I accept that the Parliament does not provide support for cross-party groups and that I cannot use the members' allowance scheme. However, one of the cross-party groups that I convene required the services of a BSL interpreter and we had difficulty in securing support for that, meaning that a member of the group was potentially excluded from attending the meeting. Will the corporate body consider whether that is appropriate for an open and inclusive Parliament? Will it perhaps reflect on and consider the provision of services that support access and whether to allow extending them in exceptional circumstances to cross-party groups?

Ruth Davidson: I agree with the member that CPGs do excellent work. We seek to have the widest possible inclusion in those groups, but to change how they are staffed and provisioned would require a change to the code of conduct. Any changes to the code of conduct are a matter for the whole Parliament, subject to a report and a recommendation by the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee.

If the member wants to pursue that route, she should take the matter up with the convener of the SPPA Committee in the first instance. She may wish to note that, during the previous session, the SPPA Committee considered the issue of resources for CPGs and consulted the SPCB—albeit in a different iteration from the one that sits before members now. The SPPA Committee then agreed that it did not wish to extend the provision of services to groups.

Flu Vaccinations (Contractor Staff)

5. Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body what plans it has to make provision in future years to offer the flu vaccination to its contractor staff. (S5O-03772)

Liam McArthur (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body): As part of the initiative to promote a healthier workplace, the SPCB offers staff and MSPs' staff the opportunity to be vaccinated against seasonal flu, free of charge. The service is provided through our contract with the Parliament's occupational health provider, and is in line with good employment practices adopted by many public and private organisations. The service is also offered to MSPs, for which there is a charge.

Although the SPCB can encourage good employment practices by its contractors through its procurement frameworks, it is not for the SPCB to determine those or to interfere in the employment relationship that contractors have with their staff. Accordingly, there is no plan to offer flu vaccination to contractor staff based in the Parliament.

Miles Briggs: Dave Stewart, as a member of the Health and Sport Committee, will know the importance of herd coverage when it comes to flu vaccinations. Many people working in the Parliament are contractor staff. In order to progress the issue, is there the potential to undertake a review, to look at whether they can access the service in the future?

Liam McArthur: Miles Briggs makes a reasonable point about herd immunity, and it is in everyone's interest that we work in a healthy environment. I think that I can offer to undertake that we will have discussions with contractors, but I do not think that we can move away from the responsibility of employers towards their staff; I also think that there would be strict limitations in the terms of our procurement contract.

I certainly give an undertaking to explore the issue further, to ensure that we have the best possible working environment.

Two-factor Authentication System (Disabled People)

6. Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body what provisions have been made for disabled people who are unable to use the fingerprint scanners that have been installed as part of the two-factor authentication service at the entrances to the complex. (S5O-03811)

Andy Wightman (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body): The two-factor authentication system involves users presenting an authorised identification card and matching it to an encrypted finger template—not a fingerprint—that is held on the card.

On accessibility, the security and maturity programme team consulted ParliAble, the Parliament's disability staff network, as part of the project to introduce the two-factor authentication system. The network assisted by raising awareness of potential adjustments that were required prior to roll-out. Those adjustments were accepted and acted on before the system was fully installed. The team also carried out an equality impact assessment.

As new groups of passholders have been rolled on to the system, the programme team continues its approach of asking any staff or any members who have accessibility issues to be early adopters.

Once issues have been identified, the team will work with individuals to establish what reasonable adjustments can be made to facilitate their entry into the building, while, of course, maintaining the security of the building perimeter.

Jeremy Balfour: I give credit to the programme team for the consultations that it has had with me. Does Andy Wightman agree that the policy should be to have an entrance available for disabled people who cannot go through that process? Perhaps the Canongate entrance is the most obvious one to use—where no reasonable adjustments can be made—as we do not want to discourage people with certain disabilities from joining this Parliament for whatever reason.

Andy Wightman: I welcome the fact that the member has had very constructive engagement with parliamentary staff. The member is correct. The Canongate accessible entrance is available to anyone with accessibility issues. It was recently modernised. It is open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. It is always there.

However, I stress that, on future proofing the two-factor authentication system, reasonable adjustments have to be made in the context of the individual needs of members and staff, and that will be the principal focus. As a fall-back, members for whom a reasonable adjustment cannot be made will continue to be able to use the existing system to get into the building. That is always available as an option for members, where reasonable adjustments cannot be made.

Two-factor Authentication System (Use by Members)

7. John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body how many members have had their fingerprints taken for the two-factor authentication system for access to the complex. (S5O-03808)

Andy Wightman (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body): First, the members have had their fingerprints taken for the two-factor authentication system, but the fingerprints are not stored on the card. A template is used, and a low-resolution aspect of that is stored on the card. It is important that those fingerprints are not stored by Parliament or anywhere else.

In answer to John Mason's question, I confirm that, as of 19 November, 52 members have had their finger templates taken and been enrolled in two-factor authentication. A further six members are booked to enrol.

John Mason: I thank the member for that answer. Can he assure us that members will be treated as strictly as staff? If staff are expected to fit in with the system, members should be, too.

Andy Wightman: Yes, I can give him that confirmation. At a recent corporate body meeting, it was agreed that Easter recess in 2020 will be the cut-off date for building users to enrol in two-factor authentication. Subject to what I said to Jeremy Balfour about particular circumstances, after that date, single-factor entry to the Parliament building via the external turnstiles will not be permitted. All staff and members will be treated equally and will require to use the two-factor authentication. If any member or staff member chooses not to, they will have to use the public entrance.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I cannot call any more questions, but Ruth Maguire could ask a supplementary question, which relates to John Mason's question—the question that Ms Maguire was going to ask could be seen as a supplementary question to the question that we have just had.

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): Okay. I will give it a bash, Presiding Officer.

My question related to accessibility and people participating in parliamentary processes. Recently, at a committee meeting, I had difficulty in obtaining an electronic note taker for a witness. I was fortunate that a clerk was able to step in. Will the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body consider what more can be done to make sure that we do not exclude potential witnesses from our Parliament?

Andy Wightman: I thank Ruth Maguire for that supplementary question.

The corporate body is committed to meeting the needs of all its users and has access to a range of communication support, such as British Sign Language interpreters. For example, if someone is required to give evidence to a committee, we will ask in advance whether they have additional communication needs, because we want to make it easy for everyone to engage in this Parliament. We continue to work hard to improve accessibility.

We are constrained by the fact that there is a finite skills pool of BSL interpreters, palantypists and electronic note takers. It is not always possible to secure them, particularly at short notice. The Parliament wants to fulfil its duties to make sure that everyone can communicate effectively with it. In the instance that the member talked about, a member of staff stepped in as a replacement for a professional note taker. Although that was not ideal, I hope that it was a useful effort.

Portfolio Question Time

Health and Sport

14:49

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): We move on to portfolio question time. In order to fit in as many members as possible, I ask for succinct questions and answers, please. Question 1 is from Maurice Corry.

Flu Vaccine (Supply)

1. Maurice Corry (West Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government, in light of reports of shortages, what action it is taking to ensure that there will be ample supply of the flu vaccine over the winter to meet demand. (S5O-03789)

The Minister for Public Health, Sport and Wellbeing (Joe FitzPatrick): I hope that the Presiding Officer will accept that this answer will be slightly longer than the rest, given the public interest.

I am aware that there have been process issues within Movianto UK—the supplier that has been contracted to store and distribute the flu vaccine—that have resulted in some national health service boards experiencing a delay to their delivery of adjuvanted trivalent influenza vaccine, or aTIV, which is one of the flu vaccines for over-65s. We are assured that there is ample supply of flu vaccine within the system, that the majority of delays have been resolved and that the remaining delays will be resolved by the end of this week. We are also aware that for all areas of the United Kingdom there will be a delay for a proportion of the children's flu vaccine Fluenz Tetra.

We are working closely with Public Health England, who purchase the children's flu vaccine on behalf of all areas of the UK, to understand the impact of those delays. In the meantime, we are working with Health Protection Scotland, NHS boards and other relevant partners on plans to ensure that all eligible children get their flu vaccine as soon as possible. I reassure parents and families that we are doing everything possible to minimise any disruption caused by the delay and we anticipate that the full allocation of Fluenz Tetra for Scotland will be received over the course of the season. The delay is completely outwith our control, but we would continue to urge eligible people to be vaccinated, as we know that that is the best protection against the flu.

Maurice Corry: We are now one month into a flu vaccination programme that is experiencing disruption to the provision of vaccinations for primary school-aged children. A number of health boards including NHS Greater Glasgow and

Clyde, which is based in the region that I represent, have reported delays due to supply issues. Last year there were supply issues with vaccines for the over-65s, and this year there are issues with vaccines for primary school children. What reassurances can the minister give the chamber that those issues will not become an annual occurrence?

Joe FitzPatrick: I think that I answered the member's question, specifically about the child flu vaccine. It is a UK-wide problem. The vaccine is purchased by Public Health England for the whole of the UK and, as I said, we expect the vaccine to be distributed across the UK during the course of the flu season.

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): The most recent uptake figures show that only 2.5 per cent of pre-school children have received a flu vaccine compared to 18.6 per cent at the same point last year. What assessment has the Government made of the possible impact that that could have over winter and what advice is the Government giving to parents who have not yet had their child vaccinated?

Joe FitzPatrick: We are absolutely determined to do everything that we can to make sure that the flu vaccine is available for children across Scotland. I encourage everyone who is entitled to the flu vaccine, whether a child or an adult, to please go and get vaccinated, because it is the best protection against the flu.

National Health Service (Ageing Workforce)

2. Peter Chapman (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what steps it is taking given the warnings from NHS Grampian about its ageing workforce. (S5O-03790)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Jeane Freeman): In NHS Grampian, there have been increases in whole-time equivalent staff numbers of people who are aged 50 and over, but those are partially offset by increases in the younger age bands, from 20 to 29. Of the three key care providing staff groups that are featured, only nursing and midwifery has a profile of notable increases in older age bands. We are increasing the number of training places for medics, nurses and midwives in the north-east. The 2019-20 intake of nursing students at the Robert Gordon University and the University of the Highlands and Islands was increased by 9.7 per cent. All of that means that we will be progressively growing more of our talent in the north-east. Recent media coverage has highlighted the positive working partnership between NHS Grampian and developing the young workforce Moray, including an event that took place on 8 November to

encourage young people to consider a career in NHS Grampian.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before I call Mr Chapman again, I point out that quite a few people have pressed their buttons. I remind members who have pressed their buttons that their supplementary question should be about NHS Grampian.

Peter Chapman: Given that Dr Gray's hospital has already experienced downgrades in women's and children's services due to a shortage of doctors, what assurances can the cabinet secretary give to patients that that will not happen to other services at hospitals in NHS Grampian?

Jeane Freeman: The issue at Dr Gray's hospital is slightly more complex than Mr Chapman has said. I am very happy to write to him in detail about that, bearing in mind the Presiding Officer's wish for short answers.

Work has been undertaken at Dr Gray's in phase 1 of the plan to return services to their full capacity. Phase 2, which I have signed off, is also on track, but there has been an additional complication in relation to guidance on anaesthetics, which means that the board is undertaking more work at Dr Gray's.

I noticed that NHS Grampian has undertaken a very important initiative with colleagues in the housing sector and in other public services. Housing provision is being looked at in order to encourage the workforce to stay in NHS Grampian, particularly around the Moray and Elgin areas, and to attract new members of the workforce who might, for limited periods of their career, want to experience the significant services that Dr Gray's offers. That is a good thing, and it is much better to get young talent to come to NHS Grampian in that way. If housing is part of the barrier, all credit to NHS Grampian, the local authority and others for taking forward that initiative.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): We debated our NHS workforce on Tuesday, and I understand that Mr Briggs will raise the issue in a later question. Does the cabinet secretary agree that Conservative plans to cut immigration and end freedom of movement could send Scotland's working-age population into decline, which might cause staffing shortages in NHS Grampian and other boards in the future?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That question was loosely related to the topic. I ask for a very quick answer, please, cabinet secretary.

Jeane Freeman: I will be very brief, Presiding Officer.

I agree with Emma Harper. It is important for our NHS, as well as for the rest of our public services

in Scotland, that we have full control over immigration powers, so that we can tailor policies and practices to meet Scotland's needs.

David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): The cabinet secretary will be well aware that allied health professionals are a key group in NHS Grampian and beyond, but the Scottish Government has no direct involvement in their training. Will the Scottish Government re-examine that area in relation to workforce planning?

Jeane Freeman: We have a creative group of MSPs in the chamber, Presiding Officer.

I absolutely agree that allied health professionals are key, particularly but not exclusively to primary care. They also have a big role to play in secondary care and in social care. We have had discussions with the representative bodies, and I am sure that David Stewart knows that we have recently appointed, at Government level, a professional lead for allied health professionals, who is working in the chief nursing officer's directorate. That is an important step forward for us and an important indication that we want to look at what we can do to ensure that we train and upskill all our allied health professionals, including those who are currently in post.

Breastfeeding

3. Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what it is doing to encourage and support new mothers to breastfeed. (S5O-03791)

The Minister for Public Health, Sport and Wellbeing (Joe FitzPatrick): Since 2011, we have provided more than £18.1 million directly to national health service boards for the implementation of the maternal and infant nutrition framework, of which breastfeeding support is a key component. More recently, we have provided an additional £3.7 million to NHS boards, the third sector and other partners for breastfeeding projects.

This year, we launched the breastfeeding friendly Scotland national campaign to positively influence attitudes to breastfeeding. Scotland was the first country in the United Kingdom to achieve 100 per cent accreditation in maternity and community services by UNICEF UK's baby friendly initiative.

Gillian Martin: I thank the minister for outlining the Government's desire to encourage as many new mums to breastfeed as possible. However, I want to flag up some issues in the north-east, where the number of mothers who breastfeed compared with the number of those who use formula is not ideal. I raise the issue particularly because a constituent who wished to breastfeed her baby, but whose milk was not coming in

quickly, told me at a recent advice surgery that she felt pressured into using formula in a maternity ward in Aberdeen, despite her desire to persevere with breastfeeding. There are demands on maternity nurses' time, and breastfeeding support can be resource intensive. Will the minister agree to look into the breastfeeding rates in the area and to investigate the reasons behind them, so that they can be addressed?

Joe FitzPatrick: It is important that mothers do not feel pressured in any way; they should feel supported. Breastfeeding rates across Scotland are rising steadily. The latest statistics show that, in the NHS Grampian area, a higher percentage of babies—45.7 per cent—are being exclusively breastfed at the first health visitor visit than the Scottish average of 37.4 per cent. As I mentioned, we are also getting close to the point of having 100 per cent accreditation by the UNICEF UK baby friendly initiative. However, we need to continue to do everything that we can to ensure that mothers feel supported throughout the period that they are breastfeeding.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): Will the Scottish Government give an update on training existing national health service staff to perform procedures for tongue-tie in order to improve the capacity of services to breastfeeding mothers?

Joe FitzPatrick: We expect health boards to ensure that their staff are appropriately trained and developed for their roles, as per the staff governance standard. That standard complements the training expectation that is set out in individual, professional and regulatory regimes.

Cancer Care (Diagnostic Workforce)

4. **Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the cross-party group on cancer recent report on the priorities for the future of cancer care, which highlighted concerns regarding gaps in the diagnostic workforce. (S5O-03792)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Jeane Freeman): As I did earlier this week, I put on record my thanks to the cross-party group on cancer for its helpful report and recommendations, which set out the key challenges that we face and the work that we need to do.

As part of the waiting times improvement plan, more than £8.2 million has been made available to date for cancer diagnostics for the financial year 2019-20. That funding supports radiology and endoscopy services, enabling health boards to create additional capacity through the provision of additional sessions, increased reporting and workforce expansion. That will ensure that those who are on the urgent suspected cancer pathway

receive key tests to rule cancer in or out as quickly as possible.

Miles Briggs: Last year, more than 32,000 Scots were diagnosed with cancer. Projections show that, by 2035, the number of people who are diagnosed with cancer is expected to increase to more than 40,000. Will the Scottish Government take the necessary steps to adapt and trial a model of long-term national planning for our national health service, in anticipation of projected patient need for the diagnostic workforce?

Jeane Freeman: I am happy to say that that is part of our integrated workforce plan—members will be able to judge that when the plan is published before the Christmas recess. Work is under way to consider longer-term projections of 10 to 15 years to try to understand not only expected demand, but how the successful integration of health and social care impacts that and produces additional demand in the community-based setting. All of that is factored into a question that will be answered later, which relates to a redesign of the cancer treatment pathway to ensure that we can bring more of that closer to home than is currently the case, by taking advantage of new technologies.

Cancer Treatment (NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde)

5. **Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde initiative, moving forward together, which includes a review of how certain types of cancer treatment will be administered. (S5O-03793)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Jeane Freeman): NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde's plans for cancer services are being taken forward as part of a regional approach for the west of Scotland, which involves a tiered approach to care, from specialist cancer provision at the Beatson to local outreach centres such as that proposed at the new Stobhill hospital. That reflects significant changes in service requirements and delivery, coupled with the introduction of new diagnostic and treatment technologies that have been developed over recent years.

Rona Mackay: My constituent from Lenzie, Tom Herbert, has been campaigning for treatment for certain types of cancer to be brought closer to home, specifically in Stobhill hospital, for more than a decade, following the passing of his wife. Does the cabinet secretary agree that the plan will mean that patients can avoid a tiring journey to receive treatment and that Greater Glasgow and Clyde NHS Board should be congratulated on that forward-thinking initiative?

Jeane Freeman: I agree. Mr Herbert, who has campaigned assiduously on this important issue over several years and has made strong representations to several health secretaries, should be congratulated on and thanked for the work that he has done on that. I hope that he feels that his hard work has been responded to effectively.

That is not only happening at Stobhill—I am very pleased to say that the Vale of Leven hospital will also be part of the network. It is just the kind of service development that we have always wholeheartedly supported: patients can be treated safely, effectively and timeously in their local community, closer to their homes—as they should be—so as to avoid some of the additional stress relating to journey times and travel.

Post-Brexit Trade Agreements (Drugs)

6. **Gil Paterson (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government, in light of the potential impact on NHS Scotland, what its response is to concerns that the United Kingdom might reach trade agreements following Brexit that could lead to an increase in the price of drugs. (S5O-03794)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Jeane Freeman): It should be deeply concerning to every member in the chamber, as it is to us in Government, that a future trade deal by the UK Government with either the USA or anyone else could increase drug prices in Scotland. Research by Dr Andrew Hill of the University of Liverpool has observed that, if we had to pay for medicines at the same per capita rate as the USA, medicines prices could more than double.

Given the damage that could be done by the dilution of arrangements to manage medicines costs in the national health service by future trade deals, it is very disappointing that Labour and Conservatives members voted yesterday against the protection of the NHS through an NHS protection bill. The next Westminster Parliament needs to pass the protection bill as a matter of urgency—unfortunately, the powers to do so still reside with it—and all parties need to support the bill and stop working across their unionist ideologies in order to prevent it.

Gil Paterson: We know that Brexit is by far the biggest threat to our NHS and that the Tory-Trump trade deal risks opening it up to unprecedented levels of private involvement. Does the cabinet secretary agree that, if parties are really genuine in their commitment to keep the NHS out of trade deals, no party should be unable to back an NHS protection bill that is put forward in the UK Parliament, which would give the parties in this Parliament a second bite at the cherry?

Jeane Freeman: I absolutely agree with Gil Paterson. NHS protection legislation is self-evidently the right thing to do, and it is genuinely beyond my understanding that those who constantly thank our NHS staff and tell us that they will protect the NHS are not willing to offer their support for something so straightforward, which would protect our NHS from trade deals that could undoubtedly damage that national service.

This Government and this party, which I am proud to belong to, will always support our NHS, and we will do everything that we can to protect it. We will continue to press hard for that legislative protection, and I really hope that other members in the chamber will reconsider their positions and join us.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 7 has been withdrawn.

Neurological Conditions (National Action Plan)

8. **Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government when it will publish the national action plan on neurological conditions, which was first announced on 14 September 2017. (S5O-03796)

The Minister for Public Health, Sport and Wellbeing (Joe FitzPatrick): Over the past two years, we have engaged extensively with the neurological community to identify its needs, wishes and priorities. That has enabled us to develop commitments that aim to ensure that everyone in Scotland with a neurological condition can access the care and support that they need to live well on their own terms. By the end of this year, we will publish a five-year framework for action, setting out those ambitious commitments for the future of neurological care and support in Scotland.

Brian Whittle: Is the minister confident that, as a result of the plan, people with neurological conditions such as multiple sclerosis and motor neurone disease, especially those who are under the age of 65, will no longer be placed in older people's care homes or spend long periods of time in hospital unnecessarily? Will they instead have proper specialist care in their own home, or in a specialist residential centre if they can no longer live at home?

Joe FitzPatrick: The plan will look at a range of ways in which we can support people with all forms of neurological conditions. I look forward to publishing the plan before the end of this year, to show how we can take forward the actions and priorities by working across a range of policy areas, such as mental health, dementia and strokes.

Television Licences (Over-75s)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): The next item of business is a debate on motion S5M-19967, in the name of Fiona Hyslop, on television licences for the over-75s.

15:10

The Cabinet Secretary for Culture, Tourism and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop): In 2015, during the funding negotiations that took place as part of the BBC charter renewal, the United Kingdom Government, in a callous and irresponsible act, transferred responsibility to support older people by shifting the responsibility for funding the cost of providing free TV licences for people over 75 directly on to the BBC's shoulders. That move was about the UK Government cutting its funding to the BBC and finding a means for the latter to take the blame for those cuts.

In June this year, the BBC announced that it would scrap free TV licences for over-75s, except for those households with one person in receipt of pension credit. Means testing eligibility for the concession will result in 3.7 million older people having to pay for their TV licences from June 2020.

Access to free television programming for the over-75s through free TV licences was a welcome announcement by the then Labour Government in 1999. Continued by successive Governments, such free licences were seen as an important welfare action. They enabled older people, who frequently spend more time at home, to be kept informed and entertained and to be treated with empathy and understanding.

The UK Government is playing games with welfare and public service broadcasting. On 26 August this year, Prime Minister Boris Johnson said:

"The BBC received a settlement that was conditional upon their paying for TV licences for the over-75s. They should cough up."

Now that a general election looms, Boris Johnson has changed his mind. The Prime Minister is quoted in *The Sun* of 4 November, which said that

"he was working hard to thrash out a solution so that no elderly viewers had to pay."

On numerous occasions, the UK Government has stated its disappointment with the BBC's decision, saying that it clearly wants and expects the BBC to continue the concession—one that the UK Government used to fund from the Department for Work and Pensions grant.

Where does the UK Government actually stand on the issue? The Conservative Party manifesto for 2017 said:

"We will maintain all other pensioner benefits, including free bus passes, eye tests, prescriptions and TV licences, for the duration of this parliament."

In 2015, the UK Government did not want to continue to pay for free TV licences; in 2017, it said that it would continue to pay for them. In 2019, the Prime Minister said that the BBC should "cough up" for TV licences. The Conservatives are all over the place on the issue and cannot be trusted by pensioners, who deserve better. The UK Government should never have foisted responsibility for funding this welfare initiative on to the BBC in the first place.

The Scottish Government has repeatedly made its views known on the issue. In July 2015, following the decision, I wrote to the then UK Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, John Whittingdale, expressing my disappointment that the decision was made with no consultation with the Scottish Government. As the Deputy Presiding Officer will be aware, that is a clear breach of the Smith commission agreement on the BBC. As recently as 13 June, my colleague the Minister for Older People and Equalities, Christina McKelvie, wrote to the UK Government urgently requesting that the decision be reconsidered.

The UK Government has shamelessly pushed welfare policy on to the BBC, with scant regard to the consequences. Of course, this is not the first failure of the UK Government to consider the welfare of people across the UK and in Scotland. This year, the Scottish Government has continued to invest more than £100 million to mitigate the worst impacts of UK Government welfare reforms. That is part of the £1.4 billion that we have spent to support low-income households in 2018-19.

I fundamentally disagree with the UK Government's refusal to support people who are over 75 to have free TV licences and its refusal to shoulder its responsibility. I am not alone in that view: recent reports from committees in the House of Commons and the House of Lords state that welfare policy is not the responsibility of the BBC. There have been two petitions upholding that view. The UK Parliament debated the issue on 15 July after a petition reached almost 172,000 signatures, but the UK Government did not alter its position and continues to blame the BBC. On 1 August, Age UK handed a petition to 10 Downing Street in which more than 630,000 people voiced their disapproval of the policy.

It is interesting that the Office for Budget Responsibility has also raised concerns about the policy. In July, it published its annual "Fiscal risks report", in which it said:

“shifting the burden of a welfare benefit ... to the BBC to reduce the deficit appears likely to have fiscally costly unintended consequences”.

The fiscal risks report highlights that pension credit claims increased in the four weeks immediately following the BBC’s announcement. The Scottish Government wants older people to claim what they are entitled to, having worked all their lives, but it is not the BBC’s role to become involved in welfare policy and encourage people to sign up for the pension credit to which they are entitled.

The UK Government’s actions to evade its welfare responsibility will result in greater costs to the public purse. Linking the free TV licence to pension credit might actually increase the uptake of that benefit. We want eligible people to take up their benefits, but I point out, as the OBR pointed out, that if even 250,000 out of the 1.3 million people claim pension credit who did not previously do so, it will cost the Treasury an estimated £745 million. There is, therefore, not just a moral case but a strong financial case for reversing the policy.

Pension credit uptake is further impacted by the changes that the UK Government implemented on 15 May, which affect mixed-age couples where one partner is of pension age and the other is of working age. Pensioners will no longer be able to apply for pension credit if their partner is of working age. Instead, they will need to apply for the now notorious universal credit until the partner reaches state pension age. Our Scottish Government analysis has shown that that could lead to an annual loss of as much as £7,000 for affected couples, because pension credit entitlements are typically higher than universal credit. Our estimates indicate that in 2023-24 around 5,600 Scottish households could be affected by the policy.

Of course, women have been affected by other changes made by the UK Government. More than 2 million WASPI women—women against state pension inequality—paid their national insurance contributions in the full expectation that they would receive their state pension at a certain age, only for the goalposts to be moved by the UK Government. They will now be forced to work longer and they will be doubly affected by the changes for mixed-age couples.

Ultimately, all those welfare changes impact on people’s lives: those aged over 75 will now have the automatic benefit of a free TV licence ripped away. Some might be able to afford to fill the gap every month, but many thousands will be worrying about the choices that they will have to make when it comes to their monthly outgoings if they have to pay the licence fee. Forcing people to make difficult choices about what they can and cannot afford is not right.

For many people, TV is a lifeline. We know that older people in our society are at greater risk of social isolation and loneliness, as the Labour Party amendment, which we will support, points out. They might not be able to get out and about as much. TV provides a link to what is going on in the world. It offers people the chance to be entertained and to escape. Viewing figures from Ofcom show that people over 54 watch the most TV of any age group in Scotland—around five and a half hours a day on average. Access to television allows older people to enjoy educational documentaries, listen to news and current affairs, hear stories and see images of countries that they have never visited. TV can expand people’s knowledge and horizons. It can provide shared experiences, connection and entertainment for people to talk about with their families. There is a need for companionship, friendship and connection and older people need that as much as anybody else.

Destructive policies such as the one that was proposed and is being implemented by the UK Government will cause only harm to people who are trying to enjoy their retirement after a long working life.

In Scotland, the largest increase in population over the past few years has been in the over-75 age group, and the numbers are projected to further increase. It is inexcusable to allow or support policies that disadvantage our older people, who have already contributed so much and continue to contribute.

The Scottish Government supports our older people, yet our ambitions are negatively impacted by Westminster, time and time again. The UK Government’s social policies should be funded by the UK Government. Licence fee funds should be devoted to delivering the BBC’s public purposes, including the purpose to

“help people understand and engage with the world around them”,

which is vital for older people.

Public service broadcasting should be universally accessible, and older people should not be denied their part in that. Let me be absolutely clear—in the 2015 BBC charter renewal settlement, the UK Government gave the BBC a Trojan horse, paving the way for public service broadcasting to be undermined by creating conditions that weaken the public broadcasting model.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): Does the cabinet secretary agree that when that agreement was made between the BBC and the Government, the BBC accepted it without complaint?

Fiona Hyslop: The BBC has made many complaints about the Government's policy, which was about tying the BBC's hands behind its back and telling the BBC to take it or leave it.

At a time when the BBC faces unprecedented competition in a rapidly changing communications environment, it is important that the public service model is properly funded so that it can be healthy and competitive.

I think that the UK Government knew exactly what it was doing when it made sure that the BBC would carry the can for its unpopular policy. It is difficult to comprehend the UK Government's position. We should be celebrating our older people. We should be thankful that people are living longer, healthier lives and we should be allowing them to enjoy the third age. The UK Government's policy is a colossal failure in social policy making. The issue is rightly being debated in the Scottish Parliament. We must stand up for the over-75s and demand that the UK Government pay for the free licences once again.

I move,

That the Parliament believes that the UK Government's decision to stop funding free TV licences for people over 75 was wrong; considers that the BBC should not be expected to use the licence fee to fund a welfare policy and calls for the UK Government to fully fund free TV licences for all over 75s; notes that the decision to shift this cost to the BBC was taken in secret discussions by the UK Government on the setting of the licence fee; believes that the licence fee should be set independently of the UK Government to decouple the setting of the fee from any undue influence that links it to wider funding of initiatives that should be the responsibility of government; commends the importance of universal access to publicly-funded public service broadcasting, and deplores the impact that this decision could have on older people's lives.

15:22

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): I will set some background first. Television has the wonderful ability to transport us from our sitting room to anywhere around the world. It has the power to inspire people to see things differently and to question the norm. Let us face it: for £154.50, the BBC does offer good value and every service that it provides is valued by someone across our society. Television also has the ability to shape public opinion: consider how influential the vivid and resplendent images of David Attenborough's "Blue Planet" have been. They have enacted societal change in how we view our planet and plastic pollution. That a TV series has achieved such a large shift in public opinion on an issue is colossal.

For most of us, television is an important connection with the outside world that informs and entertains. It is not just a medium for keeping abreast of the latest developments across the UK

and the world but an important social tool. That is why we have some sympathy, and empathy, with Claire Baker's amendment for Labour. We know that television can tackle social isolation, as Fiona Hyslop, the cabinet secretary, said, especially for those who cannot socialise outside the home due to mobility issues. Some 100,000 Scots experience social isolation, so a TV licence is very important in their day-to-day lives. Those people enjoy watching the energetic dancing in "Strictly Come Dancing" on a Saturday or the roaring engines in "Top Gear" and such programmes not only provide entertainment but help tackle social isolation.

Fundamentally, television should be accessible to all. That is why we Conservatives are frustrated at the decision to remove the free television licence, as we expected the BBC to continue that important concession. Lord Hall said in July 2015 that the deal would give the BBC "financial stability". He said, to counter criticisms of the deal, that it had to be seen as an entire package: the modernisation of the licence fee, the removal of part of the top slicing and a commitment to the licence fee going up alongside inflation. He said that those things and one or two other things meant that the BBC could plan with a sense of "financial stability."

There is consensus across the chamber that the UK Government should get round the table with the BBC to find an appropriate solution.

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): Does Rachael Hamilton accept that the cost to the BBC's budget of the over-75s licence fee was estimated to be £745 million, and for the BBC to continue with that policy would mean a huge drop in the income that it must use to deliver for everyone?

Rachael Hamilton: I accept that. I also accept that the financial stability that Lord Hall talks about equates to approximately £700 million. We support the position that the BBC must find a way through that with the package that it was given in the BBC charter renewal.

Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): Will Rachael Hamilton take an intervention?

Rachael Hamilton: Not just now.

From the off, let us get the facts straight on where the responsibility lies for TV licences for the over-75s.

To better understand the crux of the matter, we must go back to July 2015. A funding deal was agreed between the Government and the BBC as part of the charter renewal, the key element of which was that the BBC would take over funding of free TV licences for the over-75s in return for certain concessions. For example, the

Government agreed to close the iPlayer loophole—the cause of significant income loss for the BBC—and said that legislation to that effect would be brought before Parliament in the near future.

The BBC agreed in 2015 to take on the cost of funding the over-75s licence fee and, at that time, Lord Hall said that it was the “right deal”.

However, the BBC should have communicated earlier the likelihood that it would not be able to carry on the concession from 2020. The UK Government has guaranteed that the level of the licence fee will increase with inflation until 2022, which will ensure that the BBC continues to deliver high-quality, distinctive content for all audiences. None of us disagrees with that.

Under the BBC’s current plans, the poorest pensioners will continue to be helped, as the BBC stated that those who are eligible for pension credit would still receive a free TV licence. We are unhappy that the BBC’s decision does not cover all over-75s, and it concerns me that 12,000 over-75s in my constituency will be affected by the loss of the exemption.

Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): Does Rachael Hamilton feel that it is right for a UK Government—in this instance, a Tory UK Government—to hand responsibility for administering part of the benefit system to a non-Government body, which, in this case, is the BBC?

Rachael Hamilton: I have already cited Lord Hall’s quote on financial stability. The BBC agreed to the package at the time of the renewal of its charter.

Members will be aware that the BBC is operationally independent. Taxpayers want the independent public service broadcaster to use its substantial licence fee income appropriately to ensure that it delivers for UK audiences. In 2018, the BBC received more than £3.8 billion in licence fee income—the highest ever amount—and it receives more than £1 billion a year from commercial work, such as selling content abroad. That income must be reinvested appropriately. As I said, people want the BBC to use its substantial licence fee income in an appropriate way to ensure that it delivers for UK audiences, which includes showing restraint on salaries for senior staff.

Although the BBC has a responsibility to ensure that it manages its budget appropriately, it announced the most narrowly defined option for reform of the over-75s concession. It is important to note that that was the BBC’s decision and not that of the Government, because Parliament legislated to give the BBC full responsibility for that from 2020. I understand that there are members who do not agree with it, but perhaps I did not

agree with them on the occasions that they did not support institutions with the word “British” in them.

My UK Government colleagues, including the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, have already pressed the BBC to consider what further help it can provide in the light of the decision. We want the secretary of state to continue to push the BBC to continue to support free licences. My colleague Jackson Carlaw was explicit in his opposition to the BBC’s decision when he met the Prime Minister a few months ago.

I reiterate my dismay and the dismay of other Conservative members at the BBC’s decision. Television is important to many people, but especially older people. The TV not only offers light entertainment; it can also be used to tackle social isolation.

In the motion lodged by the cabinet secretary, it is clear that the SNP would rather blame the UK Government instead of working constructively. That motion just kicks the can down the road when it comes to finding a resolution for those over-75s who must have a free TV licence.

The SNP’s announcement is simply a rehash of Jeremy Corbyn’s policy. Last year, the Labour leader announced plans for an independent body to set the licence fee. I believe that he has made such a commitment in his manifesto, which was published today. When it comes to its separatist agenda, the SNP has failed to explain what would happen to the BBC in Scotland. Only Conservative members will continue to work with our colleagues and ensure that we see real action, by getting the BBC to find a viable solution.

The ball is firmly in the BBC’s court in relation to responsibility; the BBC director general made that clear in 2015, when he said:

“the cost of the over-75s on us has been more than matched by the deal coming back for the BBC.”

We want the BBC to honour that, and we join the call by the UK Government for the BBC to find and support a resolution to the matter, in order to keep licences for over-75s free.

I move amendment S5M-19967.2, to leave out from “UK Government’s decision to stop” to end and insert:

“decision of the BBC to cease funding free TV licences for people aged over 75 is regrettable; recognises that, in 2015, a new funding deal was agreed between the UK Government and the BBC, which the BBC Director General, Tony Hall, acknowledged as a ‘strong deal for the BBC’; recognises that a key element of the deal was that the BBC would take over funding of free TV licences for people aged over 75 in return for certain concessions; acknowledges that, as an independent public service broadcaster, it is the responsibility of the BBC to ensure that its substantial licence fee income is used effectively to ensure that it fully delivers for UK audiences; believes that

taxpayers want to see the BBC using its licence fee income in an appropriate way; notes that disadvantaged older people will continue to be helped, as Pension Credit recipients will receive a free TV licence; believes that television is an important educational and entertainment medium for all age cohorts, and, while repeating calls from the UK Government for the BBC to support free TV licences for people aged over 75, calls on the UK Government to find and support a resolution on the matter.”

15:31

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): Free TV licences for the over-75s were introduced by a Labour Government under Gordon Brown as Chancellor of the Exchequer in 1999, with the cost being covered via general taxation. The move, which was part of action to help reduce poverty among pensioners, involved the BBC being paid directly by the Government to replace the income that was being lost from licences. The concession was broadly understood as a top-up entitlement for the over-75s that sought to deliver improvements via universal benefits for older people.

The introduction of the free TV licence came alongside expanded social care access. It was part of a balance between means-tested benefits such as pension credits and universal benefits, all of which sought to prevent older people from experiencing poverty. It was introduced as a social benefit.

When the Conservative Government said that it would no longer fund the scheme and that support would be phased out by 2020, leaving the BBC to take on the cost of £745 million a year, that went completely against the basis of the funding of free licences as a welfare policy. Labour was and is completely opposed to that decision and firmly of the belief that the Conservative Government was wrong to outsource social policy in that way.

The deal that was struck in 2015 between the then Chancellor, George Osborne, and the BBC was arrived at behind closed doors and in a very short timescale. Such discussions should not be backroom deals and they should not be forced at short notice by the Government, with no attempt at transparency or consultation.

Setting the licence fee should not be the sole responsibility of Government. The process must be transparent, and there needs to be clear accountability for the decisions that are taken. The viewers’ voice must be heard. Negotiations should no longer take place behind closed doors, with little input from the BBC and none from viewers.

The BBC is going through an exciting time. Here in Scotland, we have the new channel, there has been an overhaul of the iPlayer and there are more co-productions and international collaborations, but it is also a challenging time, as

there is an increasingly varied and competitive market. There is a lot of public support for the BBC and its role as a public sector broadcaster, but the viewer needs to feel greater ownership of the BBC and must be able to express that value. The setting of the licence fee must be free from Government social policy and must be done in the interests of the viewer and the listener.

While today’s debate is focused on the licence fee for the over-75s, the Tory Government has previous form in this area. In 2013, it was announced that the funding for the BBC’s valued World Service would transfer from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to the BBC licence fee. At the time, Peter Horrocks, the director of the World Service, said that the service was

“determined that this unexpected cut should not damage existing services to audiences”,

and that although the BBC would protect and continue the service, it would

“not be able to invest in new programmes and platforms as planned.”

Again, there was no consultation and no dialogue. That funding had existed for decades, and although the service had changed significantly, the Government had given no indication that it expected it to end; it simply withdrew its support.

The BBC’s announcement that, from June 2020, only people over 75 who were in receipt of pension credit would be entitled to have their licence fee paid for by the BBC was a direct result of the Conservative Government’s decision. The fact that the Conservatives sought to frame it as some fault of the BBC—they continue to do that this afternoon—rather than accept it as their responsibility is disgraceful. The BBC is responsible for the decision only in so far as the Conservative Government forced it to make it. That the Conservative amendment continues to insist on calling it a BBC decision, with no context, is at best disingenuous and at worst shameless.

The subsequent position that was taken by the BBC followed a consultation that closed earlier this year and involved research with stakeholders and members of the public. What emerged from that consultation was the difficulty of the choices facing the BBC in taking the decision with regard to balancing the impact on older people against its responsibility to delivery programmes and services for everyone.

To fully fund the continuation of the full exemption would cost the BBC £745 million of its budget—around a fifth. According to the BBC’s annual report and accounts for 2018, that equates to the amount that is spent on all of BBC Two, BBC Three, BBC Four, the BBC News channel, CBBC and CBeebies. To put it another way, it equates to the amount that is spent on all its sport,

drama, entertainment and comedy programmes. That would represent a dramatic change in the BBC's income, and I find it difficult to understand why the Conservatives have dismissed the importance of that figure this afternoon and have not recognised the impact that fully funding what was previously a social policy would have on the BBC.

In Scotland, the number of households that are expected to lose their free TV licence next year approaches 250,000. I welcome the briefing that Age Scotland provided for this debate. It highlights research showing that half of over-75s say that their main form of company is the TV or a pet, and that 100,000 older people in Scotland feel lonely all or most of the time. The risk of isolation and loneliness is compounded for many who are already taking difficult decisions on which bills they can afford. A petition by Age UK to save free TV licences for everyone over 75 attracted more than 630,000 signatures, all demanding that the Government take back responsibility for the funding of free TV licences. Research that Age UK carried out found that more than 40 per cent of over-75s in the UK would not be able to afford a TV licence without cutting back on essentials such as heating or food.

The decision to change entitlement to free TV licences means that pensioners will be required to prove receipt of pension credit in order to get the exemption. It is estimated that around two fifths of those eligible for pension credit are not currently claiming it, some because they do not know that they can claim or how to claim and some because of the stigma that is attached to it. In Scotland, it is estimated that more than 122,000 entitled households are currently not receiving pension credit, and, as the cabinet secretary highlighted, there are further issues around the rules for mixed-age couples and for those who are marginally above the threshold for the benefit.

On wider impacts, there is the potential for increased strain on public services if vulnerable people become more isolated or have mental health issues as a result of a loss of the companionship that TV can provide. There are also particular concerns regarding older people with dementia and how they will be affected. Although some will receive pension credit and thus be eligible for a free licence, an estimated 553,000 older people with dementia in the UK are expected to lose their free licence, including more than 140,000 who are aged over 90.

The Labour amendment seeks to highlight the impacts that the decision will have on older people, many of whom already live in relative poverty. The additional economic and social pressures that they will face as a result of the Conservative Government's action should be

recognised. A Labour Government would restore free TV licences for all over-75s, and I hope that we can reach a consensus this afternoon that that matter is the responsibility of Government, and that free TV licences should be restored. Universal access to publicly funded public service broadcasting has many benefits, particularly for older people, and must be maintained.

I move amendment S5M-19967.1, to insert after "public service broadcasting":

"; recognises research from Age Scotland that 100,000 older people in Scotland feel lonely all or most of the time and that, for around half of over 75s, TV or a pet is their main form of company; highlights the additional financial strain that this decision places on older people, including those already living in relative poverty".

15:38

Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green): For some time now, we have been promised the end of austerity by the UK Government yet, this summer, another cut was announced, this time to TV licences for the over-75s—[*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): I am sorry to say this but, because it is a quiet chamber today, I can hear everything that the members at the back of the chamber are saying, even though they are having quiet conversations, and I am sure that they do not want me to.

Alison Johnstone: As we have heard, that cut had been explicitly ruled out by the UK Government in its 2017 election manifesto, but it was passed on to the BBC, and the BBC had to make that difficult announcement.

Older people will be forced to pay an additional £154 a year for their TV licences. That may not be much to some people but, for the poorest households, it is a significant proportion of their income. The BBC's analysis suggests that, for the poorest 10 per cent of households, it is as much as 2 per cent of annual income. In looking at that fact, we should not forget that, as Age Scotland tells us in its briefing,

"The UK has the lowest State Pension of all the most advanced economies in the world."

That is woeful and not something that we should be proud of, and this further cut beggars belief.

We also know for a fact that poverty among older people is rising, not falling. Since 2014, relative poverty among pensioners in Scotland has jumped by 3 per cent, so the last thing that they need is to have to pay for their TV licence. It is no wonder that a survey conducted by Age UK has found that, if the concession is scrapped, more than 40 per cent of people aged over 75 either will not be able to afford a TV licence or will have to

cut back on essentials to pay for it. Of those who said that they would have to cut back, a quarter plan to reduce spending on heating and a fifth plan to reduce spending on food.

As we have discussed, the latest figures show that, across the UK, 60 per cent of those who are eligible for pension credit receive it, and the figure is as low as 50 per cent among couples. According to estimates by the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, around 130,000 Scots would be eligible for but would not receive the TV licence under the proposed scheme. In a system that is based on pension credit passporting, 600,000 UK households that are eligible for but not claiming pension credit would not get the free licence.

The plans are based on 75 per cent take-up of pension credit, which would be a considerable improvement, but there is not a sufficiently robust plan to achieve that. The BBC has said that it will contact all older people who are impacted by the change to advise them to apply for pension credit. However, as a member of the Social Security Committee, which is midway through an investigation into benefit take-up, I know that it is a very complex area and that older people in particular can be extremely reluctant to claim benefits even when they are entitled to them. It simply makes no sense to put that work on to the BBC. It requires skill sets that a public service broadcaster might not have, and why should it have them?

We have heard that the change will be particularly unfair for older people with younger partners, who can no longer claim pension credit as a result of further changes that the UK Government introduced this year. A couple with one person over 75 and one under 65 would lose £7,000 as a result of being forced to claim universal credit and an additional £154 as a result of having to pay for a TV licence.

The point has been well made that TV is a vital lifeline for many older Scots. According to Age Scotland, half of over-75s say that their main form of company is the television or a pet. That is sad and, as a Parliament and a nation, we should strive to address it. One good thing about this debate is that it is raising that issue. We know that 100,000 older people in Scotland feel lonely all or most of the time and that 200,000 can go half a week without a visit or call from anyone. The proposal will mean that many older Scots who cannot afford to pay will lose what is, sadly, their only source of company for large parts of the week.

Annabelle Ewing raised the issue of accountability. The free TV licence for the over-75s is in essence a social security benefit, albeit in kind. The UK Government introduced that benefit

and should remain responsible for it. However, the Government has outsourced responsibility for that benefit to the BBC. That sets a worrying precedent, as it is Governments that should make and be accountable for social security policy, rather than a public body that is not elected and is not directly accountable to the public. Frankly, that is a bizarre move, and I have to ask: whatever next?

Rachael Hamilton began by speaking for more than a minute about the importance of TV. Frankly, I find it baffling that there is not more of a concerted effort among the Scottish Conservatives to get the UK Government to change its policy, which is simply wrong-headed. I will close by reiterating the fact that

“The UK has the lowest State Pension of all the most advanced economies in the world”,

so the proposed change to the TV licence is the last thing that our over-75s need.

15:45

Mike Rumbles (North East Scotland) (LD): For almost 20 years, individuals who are aged over 75 have been entitled to free TV licences. The UK has one of the lowest state pensions in any of the advanced western economies. When free TV licences were introduced, they were widely seen as a means of increasing pensioners' benefits without having to increase the state pension. Other benefits such as the winter fuel allowance have been introduced and have been seen in the same light. I trust that the UK Government has no plans to end that benefit, too, but, knowing what it has done with TV licences, I am a little worried about that.

We all know that broadcasting and TV licences are reserved matters for the UK Parliament, but that does not mean that we in the Scottish Parliament cannot take a view on decisions that have been made by the UK Government and Parliament that affect the people of Scotland.

The BBC said that any pensioner who is in receipt of pension credit will not have to pay for their TV licence, but about 300,000 over-75s will lose out on a having a free licence and will have to pay the almost £155 fee themselves. No doubt many pensioners will be able to afford the fee—maybe that is what the Conservatives are thinking—but there is also no doubt that many over-75s whose income is just above the pension credit level cannot. There will also be many who do not even claim pension credit.

Almost every member who has spoken has referred to Age Scotland's briefing, and I make no apology for reiterating what we have heard from it, as it bears repeating. According to that extremely important and effective briefing, 60 per cent of

those pensioners who are eligible to claim pension credit do not—122,000 households. It is the welfare of those individuals that must concern us, and that is why it is appropriate for us to debate this welfare issue.

Age Scotland also tells us that 100,000 older people in Scotland feel lonely all or most of the time, and the Greens beat me to saying that over half of over-75s say that their main form of company is the TV or a pet. I agree with Age Scotland that having free TV licences for the over-75s is a welfare policy—it clearly is—and that it was wrong for the BBC to be given the responsibility of withdrawing free licences by the UK Government.

The Liberal Democrats believe that the independence of the BBC needs to be protected, and that the UK Government therefore needs to set up a BBC licence fee commission to do just that. We support the Scottish Government's motion because it reflects what we believe to be right. The licence fee needs to be set independently of the UK Government to decouple the setting of the fee from any undue influence that links it to wider funding of initiatives that should rightly be the responsibility of our UK Government.

We also whole-heartedly support Labour's amendment highlighting the points that I have already made. However, we will not support the Conservative amendment, which tries to shift the blame on this withdrawal of free TV licences for the over-75s to the BBC itself. I heard Rachael Hamilton's argument that the BBC had agreed to do this, which reminds me of a certain phrase used by Don Corleone in "The Godfather"—"We're going to make them an offer they can't refuse."

I find the Conservative amendment disappointing, to say the least. The sad bit is that it completely ignores the estimated 122,000 households in which pensioners could claim pension credit but do not. Where is the reference to those people on the very lowest incomes in the Conservative amendment? They are not there; they are completely ignored.

Universal benefits such as free TV licences for the over-75s and the winter fuel allowance have been successful in helping the lowest income pensioners particularly because they are not means tested. I do not believe for one minute that the Conservatives do not understand that; they are very intelligent people. Rachael Hamilton is a very intelligent person. *[Interruption.]* No, they are, which compounds the problem. In my view it can only mean that they are not interested in those people who fall through the pension credit safety net; otherwise they would not have lodged the amendment in the form that it is in. We will not be supporting that amendment at decision time.

15:50

Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): I am pleased to speak in this important Scottish Government debate on TV licences for the over-75s. As has already been said, the background is that back in 2015, in what can only be termed a shady deal with the BBC, the UK Tory Government proposed that the BBC should take over the funding of TV licences for the over-75s from June 2020 in exchange, it would appear, for a promise of increases in the TV licence fee. Those discussions were far from transparent and, indeed, were described as being conducted in "a hasty and secretive manner"

in the House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee's report that was published on 11 October 2019.

The next, all-too-predictable development was the BBC announcement in June this year to the effect that free TV licences for the over-75s would no longer be of universal application but would be restricted from June 2020 to those households in receipt of pension credit, thereby removing some 3.75 million households from entitlement to a free TV licence. At the same time, the UK Tory Government sneaked out, by way of a written statement in May, the bombshell announcement that pension credit could no longer be claimed by households in which a couple included an individual of working age. Rather, mixed-age couples would be forced to go down the route of claiming universal credit—a move that was likely to cost households up to £7,000 per annum.

As if that was not bad enough for hard-pressed pensioners in Scotland and the rest of the UK, we are all too well aware of the consistently low take-up rate for pension credit. That has been a perennial problem from the outset, since pension credit was introduced in the early 2000s. I recall raising the issue when I served as the MP for Perth in the House of Commons. I asked Labour ministers what estimate had been made of the likely take-up and, unsurprisingly, I did not receive any credible answers at that time.

In fact, the take-up of pension credit has been flat-lining at around 64 per cent under successive Labour, Tory-Liberal and Tory UK Governments. It is of considerable concern that a House of Commons library paper of 19 July records that in 2016-17,

"Up to 1.3 million families who were entitled to receive Pension Credit did not claim",

and that

"Up to £3.5 billion of available Pension Credit"

went unspent. What a cynical approach on the part of successive Westminster Governments to state pension provision in the United Kingdom,

notwithstanding that, as has been mentioned, pensions are an entitlement based on a social contract on the part of the individual with the state. The cynical approach to state pension provision on the part of the UK Government is evident in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and European Union league tables of pension provision, where we see that the UK is consistently among the lowest.

That is simply not good enough because, as we have heard, loneliness and isolation are significant problems for far too many pensioners, and the TV is their companion. We know that many pensioners across Scotland and the UK are very much up against it financially, with the paltry state pension on offer exacerbated by Tory-Liberal and Tory austerity years. We know, too, that the entitlement to pension credit has been slashed by the Tory Government and, as I have said, take-up on the part of those who will remain entitled is still far too low. In that context, the restriction of the free TV licence for over-75s to those people in receipt of pension credit is a very cynical ploy indeed.

Let us be clear that it is not, at heart, the fault of the BBC. The UK Tory Government's attempts to deflect blame, which we have also heard from the Tory front bench today, will simply not work. The BBC is a public broadcaster. Its founding charter does not provide for it to be an arm of the Department for Work and Pensions in administering the benefits system. It is not a Government public body. The responsibility for the administration of the benefits system is totally the responsibility of Government and it comes as no surprise to anyone that Boris Johnson is trying to abdicate his responsibility.

That is just not good enough. Pensioners in my Cowdenbeath constituency, across Scotland, and indeed across the United Kingdom, deserve so much better. The UK Tory Government must reinstate the free TV licence for the over-75s. It must take responsibility for that and, as a matter of principle, it must not farm out the administration of state benefits to unaccountable non-governmental bodies.

I call on the UK Tory Government to reverse the cuts to pension credit and to explain what it will do to increase the take-up of pension credit. I also call on the UK Government to start treating pensioners with dignity and respect. I am thinking of issues such as the UK Government's treatment of the WASPI women, whom it continues to ignore, Iain Duncan Smith's ridiculous proposal to put the retirement age back to 75—a proposal that has not been ruled out by any UK or Scottish Parliament Tory politician, as far as I am aware—and its track record of providing one of the lowest state pensions in the OECD countries.

The UK Tory Government has failed pensioners. Tory politicians, both MPs and MSPs, have failed pensioners. I am sure that pensioners will reflect on those matters in the weeks immediately ahead.

15:56

Maurice Corry (West Scotland) (Con): I welcome the opportunity today to speak on the subject of TV licences for the over-75s. Many such individuals rely on their television daily. It is far more than just a colourful screen in the corner. It provides not only entertainment in the quiet, lonely hours, but a window to and a connection with a larger outside world to which someone may no longer have access. In some situations, television may be someone's only consistent form of interaction and connection. It fulfils the role of a necessary lifeline to those individuals in a variety of ways. The concession scheme made it possible for all pensioners—no matter their financial status—to have access to the lifeline, thereby providing them with an essential part of their overall wellbeing.

As we all know, in July, the BBC announced its policy change on TV licences for the over-75s, which will take effect next year. The policy is, without doubt, unsatisfactory and disappointing, as it leaves millions of pensioners without guaranteed access to that integral lifeline. In my West Scotland region, more than 62,000 individuals will be directly impacted by the change.

I am grateful that the final decision does not include discarding the concession scheme in its entirety. Those over 75 who receive pension credit are the poorest pensioners and certainly in need of support during this period of their lives. I appreciate that the BBC recognises that and included it in its decision-making process, but it is not enough, and I repeat the calls for the BBC to support free TV licences for people over 75.

Mike Rumbles: Does Maurice Corry believe that Government or other bodies should be responsible for welfare policy?

Maurice Corry: In the case of the charter renewal, the BBC needed to ensure that there was a lot of involvement, so that it could to understand its market and who uses its services. Therefore, quite rightly, there was a shift of responsibility in relation to the new charter as part of the deal.

Those individuals who qualify for pension credit are not the only group that is especially disadvantaged by the removal of free licences. I am an armed forces' veteran, and it is well known that I am a strong advocate of supporting our veterans. They deserve our utmost respect and support in return for the brave and essential services that they provide to our country.

In the same year that the Government implemented the TV licences scheme, the armed forces covenant was introduced to the public. The covenant clearly states that we as a nation will not allow our servicemen and servicewomen to become disadvantaged as a result of their service to us and that we will sustain and reward them for their services.

I mention the covenant as a reminder of our obligations to our veterans. Many veterans, no matter how they serve, come home with injuries, disabilities and other health concerns that continue to impact them physically, psychologically and financially into their pensioner years. The additional care that those conditions require adds costs to many veterans' pensions and makes it more difficult, if not impossible, to pay for a television licence, which can result in that group losing its much-needed access to the BBC's services.

Removing the assistance of free licences from our veterans takes away a service that is essential for warding off the loneliness that many of them experience. Like many of their peers, veterans can suffer from the loneliness that comes from growing older. That age-related loneliness is often heightened by the loneliness and isolation that is related to serving in the forces. Studies have shown that veterans are more likely to experience loneliness than the general population, especially those who experienced trauma while serving. Television can and does play a vital role in mitigating the loneliness that they experience. To remove access to that tool risks going against the armed forces covenant. It means that our veterans could be further disadvantaged by a direct consequence of military service. To ensure that they do not lose access to television, an exemption to the fee must be included for them.

I recognise that veterans are not the only group that faces specific challenges. It would be naive to have such a view, and this conversation should not revolve around only those who are most disadvantaged by the policy change or those who are most in need of television. The policy impacts all pensioners and they should all be included. Television plays a different role for each individual pensioner, but it is important for the overall wellbeing and standard of living of all of them. As such, the scheme should be considered and treated as a social care concern that necessitates careful consideration by the BBC.

With that in mind, in order to create a policy that better addresses the issue at hand, I would welcome discussions between the BBC and the UK Government. I hope that, where possible, the Scottish Government will be open to making constructive contributions to those conversations. No matter the course taken, it is important that the

independence of the BBC from any Government is maintained. That independence allows the BBC to provide the public with high-quality news services and programmes.

Fiona Hyslop: The member makes a valid point that the BBC should be independent. How can the BBC be independent if it is carrying out a Government social welfare policy of funding for over-75s?

Maurice Corry: As I said to Mike Rumbles earlier, that was part of the negotiated deal. We need to grow up and accept that that is what happens when we negotiate. The new deal came in for the new age and, therefore, the BBC needed to take responsibilities. A company, as well as a Government, has social responsibilities.

As work is done on improving the policy, the excellent level of the BBC's services and the trust that the UK public has in them should not be jeopardised.

I would welcome continued conversations to revise and reverse the disappointing over-75s licence fee policy that the BBC put forward. Although it is positive that those on pension credit will continue to receive a free TV licence fee, it does not address the many serious drawbacks that groups such as veterans over the age of 75 will face as a result of the removal of their exemption.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I appreciate why you made that speech and I am not saying that you have done the wrong thing but, as a huge part of it was to do with special provision for welfare, it would have been useful if that had been in the Conservative amendment. The point of an amendment is to give notice to the chamber about what your arguments will be.

16:03

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Page 66 of "Forward Together", the Conservative Party's 2017 election manifesto, said:

"We will maintain all other pensioner benefits, including free bus passes, eye tests, prescriptions and TV licences, for the duration of this parliament."

That reads as a clear promise to pensioners that their free TV licences would remain intact. Nevertheless, in June of this year, the UK Tory Government announced that it would scrap the free television licence for 3.7 million over-75s across the UK, a plan that will come into effect in June 2020. It will impact on 328,000 Scottish pensioners, who will now have to pay £154.50 a year or face a £1,000 fine.

Although its manifesto promised to maintain the free licence, the UK Tory Government outsourced

the responsibility for television licence support for over-75s to the BBC, which deliberated and decided to provide free TV licences only to those who can prove that they are in receipt of pension credit, a means-tested benefit that is designed to help pensioners who are struggling to make ends meet. Will the Tories tell us how they means test for loneliness and social exclusion? What about those who are just above the threshold for claiming pension credit, whom the yearly fee could push below the poverty line? Nearly one third of over-75s across the UK live on or below that poverty line and, according to Age Scotland, 122,000 pensioners in Scotland—around 40 per cent of those who are eligible—do not claim pension credit. Perhaps that is because they do not know that they are eligible, they would struggle to apply or they are simply embarrassed about needing extra help. Calling the helpline is not the answer because no one ever answers, which can only be deliberate.

The added yearly cost of TV licences will cause serious distress and anxiety among Scotland's poorest, oldest and most vulnerable pensioners. Age Scotland's research shows that almost six in 10 single pensioners and four in 10 older couples already find it hard to pay their heating bills, and that 38 per cent of older people feel "financially squeezed". No one should have to choose between heating, eating and something that is as important to older people as television is. The average BBC viewer these days is 62 years old; 1.8 million over-75s live alone and many count on the TV for company. Many are widowed or housebound or live far from their families, so TV is one of their only connections to society.

The founder of the National Pensioners Convention, Jack Jones, once pointed out that one in five of the over-70s never sees anyone from one week to the next. Clearly, television is more than only entertainment for some of our most vulnerable older citizens.

Let us think about it in another way. Pensioners who cannot afford the licence fee might choose to go without. That could lead to even further isolation and loneliness, ultimately placing more strain on the NHS. Some argue that the rise of cheap online streaming services means that we have a greater choice of programming today than we ever did, but for the thousands of elderly people who may not be tech literate or confident with such subscription services they are not an option.

Last month, Age UK warned of a rise in fraud, with scammers posing as representatives from TV Licensing. Last month alone, more than 16,000 people who signed the "Switched Off: Save Free TV for Older People" petition were targeted by fraudsters who claimed that there was a problem

with the recipient's licence payment and that they should pay up right away. Imagine being an unlucky pensioner who is forced by the Tories to pay the extra fee and then getting a letter through the door asking for the fee to be paid again, or worse, the £1,000 fine that comes with not paying it. What a kick in the teeth that would be for Scottish pensioners who have worked hard all their lives and yet cannot seem to catch a break under the Tories.

Not only will this cruel plan affect pensioners; it will affect our society in a different way. With streaming services such as Netflix on the rise, traditional broadcasting channels have to compete by putting on more and more compelling programmes. The BBC is no different. The cost of having to subsidise free licences to eligible pensioners, combined with the loss of revenue from younger people who increasingly choose the £7.99 Netflix fee over the yearly licence, will be significant.

In evidence to the Culture, Tourism, Europe and External Affairs Committee a fortnight ago, the BBC said that paying the licence fees of over-75s would cost BBC Scotland £38 million out of a £249 million budget, or almost 16 per cent of the total. That can only have an adverse impact on the broadcaster's ability to produce the high-quality drama that we all expect and appreciate. The BBC is a creative employer that produces some of the finest programmes in the world, but if it has to pay for TV licences for the elderly the unprecedented cuts to programming budgets will make it increasingly difficult to hire as many creatives or to compete with other TV providers.

When will this relentless attack by the Tories on pensioners end? For too long, the Conservative Government has treated pensioners badly—the women against state pension inequality, or WASPI, women are a perfect example—and the scrapping of the free TV licence is yet another indication of that. The reality is that television is a lifeline for the elderly.

The Tories want to scrap the licences without taking any responsibility and it simply will not wash. In their fig-leaf-like speeches today, Tory members have referred to a deal in 2015, so one wonders why they said in their 2017 manifesto that they were going to continue to pay the licences. Where is the truth in that? I expect them to say something about that when they wind up. The pitiful defence by Tory MSPs of the indefensible is embarrassing, to be frank, and further evidence of their dog-like devotion to whatever nonsensical UK Government policies are imposed, no matter how reprehensible.

The BBC is a broadcaster, not a division of the Department for Work and Pensions, and that is

how it should stay. The UK Government must restore TV licence payments to the over-75s.

16:09

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): The timing of the debate is impeccable, given that an election campaign is in full flow and that, as other members have mentioned, it is 20 years since pensioners found out that they were set to benefit from a UK Labour Government. A Labour commitment at its universal best, the free TV licence went hand in hand with the winter fuel payment, followed a minimum income guarantee and was a core part of social security for pensioners. As the social exclusion unit put it, the policy was one part of a package that was designed to close the terrible

“gap between the poorest and richest pensioners”,

which

“had grown wider than at any time in the last 30 years.”

We know the impact of those measures. More than 100,000 pensioners in Scotland were removed from poverty. Instead of one in three of our older people being in poverty, after a Labour Government had been in power across the UK just over one in 10 remained in poverty. However, that trend is reversing as a result of successive Tory Governments—the figure is up by a quarter since the start of the decade.

Removing free TV licences will have a real impact on pensioners. They are on fixed incomes, and the money that would have been available before the cut will have to be found from somewhere. Every month, £13 will need to be taken out of budgets for food, for the few activities that they can afford to do to get out of the house, or even for the energy bills that power the TV.

Previous speakers have cited Age Scotland findings that, along with a pet, the TV is the main form of company for half our older pensioners. That is a devastating indictment of our society as a whole, but it demonstrates just how wrong-headed the Tories are for pursuing the cut.

In January, when members debated the Government’s strategy on tackling social isolation, we heard that local services for over-60s were falling away in the face of Government cuts. Free swimming, Christmas lunches, library services, tea dances and lifeline bus routes were all gone. Is it any surprise therefore that, in the first half of 2019, loneliness was a key theme in one third of calls to Silver Line Scotland? Free TV licences are not a burden on Government budgets. They are a lifeline to hundreds of thousands of older people across the country and, in part, they have been an insurance policy for a society and a Government that are increasingly failing older people.

Faced with a bill of £745 million, the BBC has looked to peg entitlement to pension credit. However, as Independent Age rightly points out, pension credit is not a good enough proxy for low incomes, because take-up is so poor. Because of Tory cuts, gone is the role of DWP staff in actively working on increasing pension credit uptake. Today, more than one third of pensioners—120,000 people—do not claim for reasons including lack of awareness, stigma or simply the complexity of the system, which is not helped by the lack of service. The change will not help the over-75s who are on pension credit, because they are simply not the poorest pensioners; the poorest pensioners are the 120,000 people who are not claiming pension credit. The changes to the rules for mixed-age couples add to the burden and to the confusion that is discouraging more than 100,000 people from applying for the much-needed entitlement.

That is why the Government’s proposal for fees and, I presume, entitlement to be set independently from Government—by experts—is interesting. Like Age Scotland, many members have rightly questioned whether the BBC should ever have been responsible for decisions about free TV licences, which, as I have said, are now a fundamental part of the social security system. Whether or not the BBC agrees to a forced deal, the Tories have repeatedly failed to answer whether they think that it is right for a social security entitlement to be administered by the BBC, not by central Government.

I wonder whether the same approach was considered as part of the recent consultation on disability assistance. When I asked, I was told that there would not be consultation on the rates of benefits and that the Government had decided that the rates would not change. It would be interesting to know whether the Government will consider establishing an independent expert body to set entitlements for the devolved benefits over which we now have control.

The Tory amendment does little more than attempt to justify the Tories’ decision to cut TV licences, which is a decision that they have forced on to the BBC. Even after the contortions of their 2017 campaign, the Tories will not put their hands in their pockets, which demonstrates yet again that the things that they do not value are fair game to cut. Worse still, they now use the licence fee as a device for pitching pensioners against an organisation that the country trusts and cherishes. Their leader says that he will “put the screws” on our public service broadcaster and tells it to “cough up”. Such bravado and confrontation are not what pensioners need. They need security, support and promises kept. They need their free TV licences to be retained—in full—and that is what a Labour Government will deliver.

16:15

Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP):

The shameful decision to abdicate responsibility for free TV licences for over-75s is entirely symptomatic of the way in which the Tory-led UK Government has taken older people for granted. The backroom outsourcing of something that is part of welfare policy is simply unconscionable, but it is very deliberate.

In Aberdeenshire, it is estimated that 12,230 over-75s will be forced to pay an extra £154.50 in household bills because their free TV licences are due to be axed. After years of Tory austerity, the last thing that our older people need is more money being taken out of their pockets. The extra burden of that £154.50 in their household bills could have a serious impact on their welfare.

In addition, most of the population in my constituency live in rural towns and villages, where loneliness and social isolation can have a huge impact on older people. I welcome the work of the Scottish Government as it prepares to lead internationally, through the implementation of a national strategy to address social isolation and loneliness. I welcome the news that the strategy is being backed by £1 million of funding over the next two years to support and expand innovative approaches that bring people together.

However, pensioners are continually targeted by the UK Tory Government. This is just the latest raid on their meagre finances. We have heard that the UK pension is already one of the lowest in Europe. Mixed-age couples are losing their pensioner partner's entitlement to pension credit and the WASPI women have been robbed of their pension entitlement. Now they are coming for their telly. What is next?

Access to television should not be understated or trivialised, especially as we enter the winter months, when many elderly people struggle to leave the house on cold days and dark nights. Access to television is not a luxury—it is a lifeline. Elderly people who cannot afford a TV licence will now be under greater pressure and feel more anxiety as they face the risk of breaking the law if they struggle to find the cash.

The UK Government may not be able to means test loneliness or social isolation, but there is a risk that the negative consequences of scrapping free TV licences—and putting the blame for that on the BBC, which Conservative members have bravely struggled to avoid this afternoon—will affect mental wellbeing and hamper the Scottish Government's moves to tackle loneliness.

Access to TV is already an issue for the elderly in my area. People who go into hospital in my area have to pay exorbitant fees to access television—they are charged up to £56 a week for bedside

telly services run by Hospedia in NHS Grampian. The elderly in my area face a double whammy—paying for TV in their homes and paying for TV when they are ill and vulnerable in hospital. I urge the UK Government to take responsibility and restore free TV licences to over-75s. That is the very least that our older people, who have worked hard and paid their taxes all their lives, deserve.

The newsflash is that real people out in the real world, who are not interested in political rhetoric, are struggling to make ends meet because of Conservative austerity measures. Blaming the BBC, as Rachael Hamilton and others have done, for stopping free TV licences for the over-75s is a smokescreen for the Conservative Party's betrayal of the elderly and vulnerable. Providing free TV licences to over-75s should be the very minimum that the UK Government is doing to support our older people.

As the cabinet secretary said, the decision is also an attempt to further undermine public service broadcasting, which successive UK Tory Governments have been quite happy to see being dismantled, like so many other public institutions in the UK.

The decision has put additional pressure on a public service that is the envy of the world. People around the world are always going on about how well respected the BBC is, and now the UK Government is putting an additional pressure on its survival.

As Alison Johnstone said, the BBC is not set up to administer a social security service, and nor should it have to do so. Transferring what should be a welfare policy to the BBC is a shameful abdication of duty by the UK Government. The next Prime Minister must do the right thing, and restore that responsibility and restore the entitlement to a free licence to everyone aged over 75. Older people should be asking all candidates who are putting themselves forward for that job what they would do and vote accordingly on 12 December.

16:20

Claire Baker: This has been an interesting debate, which has recognised the importance of the BBC and largely accepted the case for having the benefit of a free TV licence for the over-75s.

Some might argue that the older population has changed, but setting the policy for over-75s directs support to a more vulnerable group of adults. As has been recognised, that group spends more time at home and the TV provides a link to the outside world. It is informative and entertaining, it provides connection and topics of conversation and has a valuable social benefit, which many members highlighted.

Alison Johnstone described the impact on older people who are living on limited incomes and are vulnerable to loneliness and Mike Rumbles talked about the benefit of the universality of such a policy. Other members reflected on the challenges of using pension credit as the passport to the benefit, which would inevitably mean that a group of people who are entitled to the free licence, but who are not applying for universal credit, will not be able to receive it.

Annabelle Ewing and Mark Griffin both talked about the low uptake of pensioner credit. A number of other members talked about the change to pension credit for mixed-age couples, which means that it is based on the younger partner. It made me think about how the over-75s licence policy took the opposite approach—any household with a person who was over 75 would receive the benefit. It was a more generous benefit that recognised the importance of the person who was over 75 and gave them what they were entitled to, regardless of who else was in the household.

Kenneth Gibson raised the issue of loneliness. He highlighted that over-75s can often be widowed or bereaved and often live further away from their families and he mentioned the importance of the connection to society that the television gives them.

While we have all talked about the £750 million impact on the BBC, in Scotland, the impact would be £38 million out of a £249 million budget. As Kenneth Gibson highlighted, that is 16 per cent of BBC Scotland's budget. At a time when the BBC is expanding and investing in Scotland, that would be a huge impact.

Mark Griffin talked about the increasing levels of pensioner poverty and isolation and linked that point to the recent debate on the social isolation strategy that we had in Parliament. He also made the point that the TV licence policy was not a burden on Government budgets—it was a lifeline for many and therefore it was a policy from which the Government actually got returns. It helped older people to stay positive and interested in life and it gave them support at home.

Gillian Martin was quite right to talk about not trivialising the importance of TV and about recognising the real negative consequences for older people if they have difficulty in finding the money to pay for their licence. They could face the choice of not paying for the licence and being criminalised, which is not something that people at that stage of life would expect to be affected by.

We should acknowledge that the BBC is envied around the world and is recognised as the gold standard of public broadcasting. Although there are many other channels calling for our attention,

its viewing figures remain strong and it is a British institution that is part of our collective experience.

The Conservatives are in a difficult position this afternoon, as the UK Government has shifted its position on the issue so many times and it is hard to keep on message. It is unfortunate that the Conservative amendment again attempts to blame the BBC for the situation and calls the decision “regrettable”. However, I would say that the decision was inevitable after the ultimatum that the BBC was given by the UK Government. George Osborne used this popular social policy as a lever: the Government held all the cards. This afternoon, the Conservatives have argued that the BBC accepted the deal. However, today's papers mention the recent conference at which Sir David Clementi, who is the chairman of the BBC, reflected on that time. He said:

“I think the deal needs to be seen in the context of the time, 2015. The Conservatives had just won the last election. For the first time they got to form a majority government rather than a coalition ... I don't think Lord Hall was given any option.”

Let us be realistic about what happened in those negotiations. It is quite clear, given the position in which the BBC was placed, that it did not have any choice. Members have used the word “accountability” and have talked about the Government taking responsibility; they recognise the importance of those things.

Alison Johnstone was right to raise concerns. That the Government should make a negative decision and try to shift the blame on to someone else—misrepresenting the decision and trying to avoid responsibility—sets a worrying precedent.

It is clear that the policy of a free licence for over-75s was a social benefit that was introduced by a Government, and it is the Government's responsibility to fund it. The policy was not introduced by the BBC and any change to it should have been the Government's responsibility.

George Osborne knew exactly what he was doing by passing the decision to the BBC with no funding to deliver it. The consequences of continuing with the policy, with no additional budget, would have been damaging to the BBC's offer.

We are now seeing welcome investment to address the issues of regional representation, greater diversity and support for the creative sector. That agenda could not be taken forward if the BBC had to meet the full cost of the Government's policy.

As Kenneth Gibson said, after announcing that the benefit would end, the Conservatives promised in their 2017 manifesto that the free licence would be protected—a promise that was then broken. At the time, they even tried to frame it as a mistake—

a copy-and-paste error in the manifesto. We have seen similar reports that Boris Johnson will save the free licence and include it in the manifesto for the upcoming election. However, as Mark Griffin said, the Prime Minister also said that he was going to

“put the screws on the BBC”

and tell it to “cough up”.

Rachael Hamilton insisted that the BBC should fund the licence fee. If that is the solution, it is not a very good one, and it is not one that will deliver for either the viewer or for the BBC. The Conservatives have shown no shame in deciding to make a cut as significant as this in a welfare policy but take no responsibility for it. It is frankly appalling. Let us look at some of the comments from Tory MPs, such as Esther McVey. I do not know why I am quoting her, but she ran for the leadership in June—we had to go through that then and we are now facing another election—and said at that time that she was

“ashamed of the BBC’s decision”,

which is an appalling thing for a member of the very Government that put the BBC in that position to say.

We then had a host of Conservative politicians saying how ashamed they were of the BBC—it was terrible. Those who believe in restoring the free licence for over-75s should take responsibility and join us this afternoon in demanding that the UK Government restore the funding for it.

16:27

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): I agree with the many members who have said that this is an important debate. Although different people will vote different ways, there has been quite a lot of consensus among all parties in the debate. Everyone in the chamber agrees on how important television, the TV licence and the BBC are to older people. I know that from personal experience, having two parents who are over the age of 75; indeed, they are both over the age of 80. They may even be watching this debate on the BBC Parliament channel. We can all agree that TV is vital for older people.

We can also all agree that, particularly for older people who struggle to get out of their house for different reasons, television is a connection with what is going on in the world and a form of entertainment, and it can be seen as a friend and as someone who can give them company when they do not have it from other people. That raises in our minds lots of other questions about loneliness, which many speakers picked up on.

There is also agreement that we need to protect the poorest in society, particularly the poorest

pensioners. That is why those who are on pension credit will get an exemption. We had some degree of conflation in the debate from Mark Griffin and others with regard to why there is such a low take-up of pension credit. That is an important issue to consider, and Mark Griffin will be aware that the Social Security Committee is considering it at the moment. Halfway through our inquiry, there are no simple answers as to why people do not take up either the benefits that are devolved to Scotland or those that remain at Westminster.

Mark Griffin: I completely agree with Mr Balfour that there are no simple answers as to how we increase uptake. Why do the Conservatives feel that it is appropriate to let the BBC take decisions on social security entitlements—on who qualifies for free TV licences and who does not? Surely that is a job for an expert, qualified agency within central Government that has experience of administering social security benefits. It is not something that should be left with the BBC.

Jeremy Balfour: That is an interesting point, which I will come back to it in closing in a few moments. We need to look at why people are not taking up benefits, but I am not sure that that is a debate for today.

Where there is disagreement between my party and the rest of the chamber is in regard to what happened in July 2015. With respect, I think that the cabinet secretary and others are trying to rewrite history slightly. Lord Hall, whom I have met once or twice, is no mean negotiator. He is not some kind of pussycat that simply rolls over and does whatever people want him to do. Lord Hall went in to renegotiate the charter and, rightly, to get the best deal possible for the corporation. There was no criticism of this by Lord Hall or others back in 2015. In fact, there are still those in the BBC who say that it is the best deal that they could get.

Fiona Hyslop: Will the member give way?

Jeremy Balfour: May I just develop this point to an end? For us as politicians to second-guess why the BBC made that decision and what pressure it was put under is to miss the bigger picture that it was a decision that the BBC made. Claire Baker says that it came with no financial help but, again, that is simply not true. Part of the negotiation was to make people who watch the iPlayer have a TV licence. That gives extra income to the BBC and there were other things to give the BBC more funding.

Fiona Hyslop: During that period I had numerous meetings with the BBC, including with Tony Hall, because of Scotland’s interests in broadcasting, and I am quite aware that this was a one-sided deal. Discussions on such issues as the iPlayer and the licence fee increases should have

been happening anyway. Most of the chamber thinks that the UK Government should shoulder responsibility for welfare policy. If the Scottish Conservatives think that the BBC should fund this policy, what services do they think the BBC should cut to fund it? How many orchestras would the Scottish Conservatives close? Would they close BBC2? Would they get rid of CBeebies? That is the choice that the Conservatives are placing in front of the BBC just now. What would the Scottish Conservatives cut to fund this policy which should be funded by the UK Government?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Balfour, that was a long intervention, so you will get time back.

Jeremy Balfour: You are too kind, Presiding Officer.

I think that that is the key issue. Unlike the Scottish Government, the Scottish Conservatives believe that the BBC should be independent and not be told what to do by any political party. Therefore, that decision is not for us to make; it is for the BBC. [*Interruption.*] If Mike Rumbles wants to stand up, rather than grumbling from his seat, I will take an intervention.

Mike Rumbles: Does the member not understand the points that we are making? Has he never heard of the phrase “making someone an offer they can’t refuse”?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Balfour, you do not have time for more interventions.

Jeremy Balfour: Again, I think that we are undermining Lord Hall and the BBC with regard to the open negotiations that took place and were signed up to and agreed. It is not for me to tell the BBC what to do and how to function—that is its decision to make. Personally, I think that we should look at some of its salaries, its pay structure and some of the programmes that it produces, but those are the BBC’s decisions, and not ones for us as politicians.

There may well be some consensus on my final point. However we decide to vote tonight, and whatever decisions are made, I think that, after the general election, when the Conservative Government is returned, it is important that the UK Government and the BBC get around the table to have proper discussions on how we take this issue forward. Ultimately, it is a BBC decision—the BBC is accountable for it and has to fund it—but we need to protect the most vulnerable pensioners in our society and make sure that they get the free TV licences that they deserve.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Members look a bit puzzled about the time, but we hope to bring decision time forward to 4.45, although the motion to do that has not been moved yet. That is why I am calling the cabinet secretary—you are,

unusually, looking a bit bewildered—to make her closing speech now, for nine minutes or thereabouts, please.

16:36

Fiona Hyslop: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

I thank members from across the chamber for their contributions to this important debate. I think that there is shared anger about the UK Government’s decision to transfer the costs of the over-75s licence fee concession to the BBC without any funding, knowing full well that the BBC would be faced with cutting channels, programmes, services and jobs in order to keep the licence free for over-75s. The responsibility for that lies fairly and squarely with the Conservative Government.

Maurice Corry talked about the negotiations, but they were one-sided negotiations. Claire Baker is correct that the BBC had no choice but to accept that deal. That is why the Scottish Government believes that the licence fee should be raised for the purposes of public service broadcasting alone and that the fee should be set by a body that is independent of Government. We also believe that we should keep the concession scheme under review.

I think that the Conservatives said that the negotiations between the Government and BBC were open, but that was not the case. The negotiations took place behind closed doors and were not transparent. There was cross-party agreement on that in reports from the House of Lords and the House of Commons. It is incredible that the Scottish Conservatives are the last bastion standing in defence of what is clearly a mistaken UK Government policy.

We have heard how the decision on the over-75s licence fee will impact detrimentally on older people’s choices and lifestyles. We are deeply concerned about the impact on older people in our society with regard to social isolation and loneliness. Indeed, through the Scottish Government, Scotland is one of the first countries in the world to set forward a strategy to tackle social isolation and loneliness, which is being taken forward by my colleague Christina McKelvie, who is the Minister for Older People and Equalities.

The BBC is fundamentally a public service broadcaster—it exists to serve the public—and the decision on the licence fee is likely to deny older people the ability to access the services that the BBC provides, whether that is news or entertainment. Licence fee funds should be devoted to delivering the BBC’s public purposes, including showing and having the highest-quality and most creative and distinctive output and

services. The decision on the licence fee will divert money that should be spent on developing new TV programmes and, importantly, on supporting our creative economy.

The BBC has warned about potential closures of services if it was to fund free TV licences for all over-75s and has said that bearing the cost would have a direct impact on viewers and listeners in Scotland. In her introductory speech, Claire Baker listed the equivalent value of the channels and programmes that would have to be cut were the BBC to follow through on the licence fee decision. That is why there is a very strong argument for us to collectively say that the next UK Government, of whatever shape or form, should take back control—dare I say—of responsibility for that licence fee welfare policy.

Many jobs in the Scottish media and creative sectors depend to a degree on BBC activity, so any across-the-board cut in service budgets would be detrimental to the sectors. We have heard from over-75s' representative networks about their concerns about the licence fee. We have also heard in members' speeches of Age UK's criticism of the plans and of its concerns about how we support older people.

A number of members, including Neil Bibby, made that point. The BBC plans that a specific group of people will pay support visits to the over-75s with the intention of helping them to understand the system. That would mean the over-75s licence police knocking on the door of your grandparents without the skills, empathy and understanding of those who have worked for many years in that sector to help and encourage people on benefits. That is very worrying. As the House of Commons committee report put it, there remains an overall lack of clarity for the public on how collection of the fee will be implemented.

I draw members' attention to Age Scotland's general election manifesto, which highlights the issue as one of great concern. The manifesto says:

"it will make hundreds of thousands of our poorest pensioners choose between continuing to watch TV, by cutting back on other essentials, or giving it up altogether."

That is hard to swallow when Age Scotland also tells us, as Alison Johnstone pointed out, that for nearly half of all over-75s, a TV or radio is their main companion. The manifesto also rightly points out that, without a licence, those people would be breaking the law. Do we really expect licence fee vans to patrol the streets seeking out the over-75s? That is utterly unacceptable.

It is evident from the points that members have made that there is consensus about where responsibility lies. I talked earlier about the negotiations, and I was struck by Mike Rumbles

describing the deal as the Don Corleone offer—an offer you can't refuse. An independent commission is needed so that there is transparency in setting the licence fee in the future. Annabelle Ewing described it as a shady deal and reflected that the cross-party House of Commons report described it as "hasty and secretive". Indeed, it was a cynical ploy.

I think that Gillian Martin understands what the BBC tried to do in 2015. It was in the context of the new Conservative Government coming in, many of whose members were concerned about or did not support public service broadcasting. The move has really been about undermining public service broadcasting.

Kenneth Gibson's speech was particularly powerful. He reminded us that the 2017 Conservative manifesto said that the Conservatives would maintain pensioners' free TV licences. Until Claire Baker pointed it out, I had not heard that that was a problem of cutting and pasting in the production of the manifesto. Let that be a warning to all who are putting their manifestos together, including Richard Leonard, who has just joined us in the chamber.

Kenneth Gibson made an important point about means testing, which goes to the heart of why the policy of over-75s having free TV licences is so important in tackling social isolation. He asked how the Tories could means test for loneliness and social exclusion. That is why the debate is so important. It is about respect and dignity for our older population, who have benefited for 20 years from what became an accepted form of social welfare policy. It is only in recent years that the UK Government has shirked that responsibility.

We want to ensure that the responsibility is laid fairly and squarely on the shoulders of the UK Government and that it understands that responsibility. If the UK Government is not prepared to undo the mistake, the next round of negotiations on the TV licence fee must be carried out in a different way, which is why the establishment of a new body in time for that is absolutely right.

We have repeatedly made our views known to the BBC and, as I said, I was extensively involved in discussions on the issue. It was known to be on the horizon. The position of the BBC in this regard was completely untenable; it had to accept the deal or not receive the other aspects, which members have talked about. It was a one-sided negotiation.

During the BBC consultation process, we expressed our view that an independent body be established, particularly in regard to the licence fee concession.

As members will know, the Scottish Government believes that broadcasting should be devolved to ensure that proportionate decisions are made that consider the needs of Scotland.

Members have made powerful contributions and set out the evidence. It is clear that there is a division in the chamber, which is about whether members see free TV licences for the over-75s as a welfare policy or, as the Scottish Conservatives advocate, something for which the BBC should take responsibility by cutting channels and services.

The choice is clear, and it is time that we made our position clear. We need to stand up for our over-75s and for public service broadcasting, and argue that the UK Government should stand up to its responsibility to fund TV licences for the over-75s.

Motion without Notice

16:45

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): If no member objects, I would be happy to accept a motion without notice, under rule 11.2.4 of the standing orders, that decision time be brought forward to now. I invite Patrick Harvie to move such a motion on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 11.2.4, Decision Time be brought forward to 4.45 pm.—[Patrick Harvie]

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

16:45

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): I remind members that, if the amendment in the name of Rachael Hamilton is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Claire Baker will fall.

The first question is, that amendment S5M-19967.2, in the name of Rachael Hamilton, which seeks to amend motion S5M-19967, in the name of Fiona Hyslop, on television licences for over-75s, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Ballantyne, Michelle (South Scotland) (Con)
 Bowman, Bill (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Corry, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
 Davidson, Ruth (Edinburgh Central) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lindhurst, Gordon (Lothian) (Con)
 Mason, Tom (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Denham, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)

Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lyle, Richard (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Derek (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Ross, Gail (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Rumbles, Mike (North East Scotland) (LD)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Wightman, Andy (Lothian) (Green)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 18, Against 54, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S5M-19967.1, in the name of Claire Baker, which seeks to amend motion S5M-19967, in the name of Fiona Hyslop, on TV licences for over-75s, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Denham, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)

Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lyle, Richard (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Derek (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Ross, Gail (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Rumbles, Mike (North East Scotland) (LD)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Wightman, Andy (Lothian) (Green)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Ballantyne, Michelle (South Scotland) (Con)
 Bowman, Bill (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Corry, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
 Davidson, Ruth (Edinburgh Central) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lindhurst, Gordon (Lothian) (Con)
 Mason, Tom (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 54, Against 18, Abstentions 0.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S5M-19967, in the name of Fiona Hyslop, on TV licences for over-75s, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)

Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Denham, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lyle, Richard (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Derek (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Ross, Gail (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Rumbles, Mike (North East Scotland) (LD)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
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 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Wightman, Andy (Lothian) (Green)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Ballantyne, Michelle (South Scotland) (Con)
 Bowman, Bill (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Corry, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
 Davidson, Ruth (Edinburgh Central) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lindhurst, Gordon (Lothian) (Con)
 Mason, Tom (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 54, Against 18, Abstentions 0.

Meeting closed at 16:49.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament believes that the UK Government's decision to stop funding free TV licences for people over 75 was wrong; considers that the BBC should not be expected to use the licence fee to fund a welfare policy and calls for the UK Government to fully fund free TV licences for all over 75s; notes that the decision to shift this cost to the BBC was taken in secret discussions by the UK Government on the setting of the licence fee; believes that the licence fee should be set independently of the UK Government to decouple the setting of the fee from any undue influence that links it to wider funding of initiatives that should be the responsibility of government; commends the importance of universal access to publicly-funded public service broadcasting; recognises research from Age Scotland that 100,000 older people in Scotland feel lonely all or most of the time and that, for around half of over 75s, TV or a pet is their main form of company; highlights the additional financial strain that this decision places on older people, including those already living in relative poverty, and deplores the impact that this decision could have on older people's lives.

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

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