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Meeting of the Parliament (Hybrid)

Tuesday 1 December 2020

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Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 1 December 2020

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): Good afternoon, colleagues. Our first item of business today is time for reflection. Our time for reflection leader is Fr Kenneth Owens, who is the parish priest at St Andrew's, St Philip's and St Theresa's, Livingston and East Calder.

Fr Kenneth Owens (St Andrew's, St Philip's and St Theresa's, Livingston and East Calder): Thank you, Presiding Officer and members of the Scottish Parliament. I welcome the opportunity to share this time for reflection with you.

I come from the Catholic community in Livingston, which is a fruit of the New Towns Act 1946. It saw 10 farms become the second largest settlement in the Lothians. I also come from the village of East Calder, which will shortly, with all the new housing there, become a town. Those two significant facts remind us that change happens. It happens in the lives of individual people and in our communities.

The year 2020 has brought unimaginable changes into our lives. Governments have had to take difficult and unpopular decisions. In order to confront the challenges of Covid-19, we have had to make changes to our routine and lifestyle. Some are very worthwhile and have created more time and space in our lives, and others have restricted our freedoms and movements.

Now is the time when we need to choose courage over comfort. We need to be renewed in hope and we need to take decisions about our personal lives and the way we live in communities. Paul, writing to the Ephesians, reminds us that we should live so that our inner selves may grow strong, and in so doing we will make ourselves more available to our families, to our neighbours and to developing and changing wider society for the better.

We can grow in that aim through a deep and profound exercise of listening to the real needs of individuals and communities. The fruit of that process will be a deeper connection to the things that really matter in our lives. It is an opportunity to stop doing the things that drain our energies and vision. We can choose to do the things that are life affirming and liberating.

Through that process, there will be the possibility of being a better community that is

committed to new actions that we can undertake with confidence. It is an invitation to be creative—and even innovative—for the whole community, such that through the pain of the present pandemic, we might become a renewed society that enables us to experience a new community spirit.

In the light of this time for reflection, what one thing is your spirit responding to?

Business Motion

14:04

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S5M-23548, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out changes to this week's business.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees to the following revisions to the programme of business for—

(a) Tuesday 1 December 2020—

delete

6.40 pm Decision Time

and insert

6.25 pm Decision Time

(b) Wednesday 2 December 2020—

after

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:
Communities and Local Government;
Social Security and Older People

insert

followed by Ministerial Statement: Scottish National
Investment Bank: Mission Oriented
Investment in Scotland's Future

delete

5.10 pm Decision Time

and insert

5.40 pm Decision Time—[*Graeme Dey*]

Motion agreed to.

Topical Question Time

14:04

School Christmas Holidays

1. **Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what consideration it is giving to lengthening the school Christmas holidays, in light of Covid-19 concerns. (S5T-02555)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): Ministers are currently seeking the views of clinicians, public health advisers, the advisory sub-group on education and children's issues, local authority partners and other key stakeholders regarding options around the Christmas period. Ministers are aware that there is a range of views, and no final decisions have been made.

Iain Gray: I appreciate that it is a decision that must be consulted on, but we are in December now, and parents, teachers and headteachers need to know. When will we hear?

John Swinney: I plan to come to a decision at the earliest possible opportunity. We embarked on and have been engaged in consultation over the course of the past 10 days or so. I discussed the issue with the education recovery group last week, and there have been further discussions with other stakeholders. I will come to a conclusion at the earliest possible opportunity.

Iain Gray: Perhaps the Deputy First Minister could show some of his working. Could he explain to us, for example, the purpose of an extension such as the one that he is considering? Is he considering additional holidays or a period of remote learning or blended learning? Will hubs be reinstated for the children of key workers? What will the impact be on the viability of the exam diet?

John Swinney: With the exception of that last point, all those matters are under active consideration in relation to this issue. On the question whether or not the time for which schools are closed during the Christmas period can be extended, either by extending holidays or by putting in place requirements for remote and blended learning, my firm view is that we want to avoid any sense of learning loss among young people as a consequence of an extension of the Christmas holiday period.

There are a couple of arguments that are material, in this. In the pre-Christmas period, some schools will be rising for their Christmas holidays on Friday 18 December, while some will not be rising until Wednesday 23 December. There is

some concern in the education system that teachers and headteachers, who are already very tired, might still be dealing with the implications of contact tracing as late as Christmas eve, or perhaps even Christmas day, for notifying outbreaks. There is a wellbeing issue in that for members of staff and everybody else involved.

There will, inevitably, be a degree more social interaction within household settings around the Christmas period, following the announcements that were made last week. The question, therefore, is whether it is advisable to delay the return of schools in order to avoid recirculation of the virus.

Those are some of the dilemmas that we are wrestling with, and there is no easy way through them, and no universal view across the education system. However, I will come to conclusions at the earliest possible opportunity.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): I thank Iain Gray for bringing the matter to the chamber. Schools break in a matter of weeks, so it is astonishing that we are still having this discussion and that parents and teachers do not know what the plans are. If a decision is made to extend the Christmas holidays, that will be of concern to many working families, especially those of our key workers and people on the front line.

Will the cabinet secretary seriously consider proposals to reopen key-worker hubs throughout the Christmas and new year period? Will he guarantee that any teaching days that are lost over the extension will be made up for later in the academic year?

John Swinney: I have already answered the point on teaching days; I do not want to see any loss of teaching days. I answered Mr Gray on that a second ago.

In relation to the hubs that were put in place under previous holiday arrangements, we obviously must carefully consider the fact that members of staff are contractually entitled to a period of leave at Christmas time. To reinstitute hubs for the entirety of the Christmas holidays would require that members of staff who are entitled to holidays do not get them at that time.

Many practical issues must be wrestled with, and I have discussed the matter with local authority partners. We will, of course, come to conclusions at the earliest opportunity.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): Those who pushed for increased flexibility and a relaxation of the regulations over Christmas must appreciate that something needs to compensate for what will, inevitably, cause an increased spread of infections during that period.

If Parliament is to scrutinise effectively whatever decision is made, we need all the evidence to be available to us.

I accept that we are talking about remote learning, rather than an extended holiday, but is the closure of schools earlier before Christmas, as well as a potential extension into January, being considered? Most critically, will modelling of any of the potential options be published for Parliament to scrutinise them effectively?

John Swinney: I think that I answered one part of Mr Greer's question in my response to Mr Gray. For some schools, we are looking at the possibility of closing earlier than planned, before Christmas. Mr Greer will appreciate that there is variation in the school holiday dates around the country. In a large number of local authority areas, schools rise for the holidays on 18 December, but in many other areas they continue into the following week.

On publication of information, I will be happy to publish a statement that explains the basis of the decision that we end up taking. As I said in my answer to Mr Gray, the decision will be informed by the views and evidence that are produced by clinicians and public health advisers—as I listen carefully to all the thinking that they provide on issues of such sensitivity.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): Even before further changes to term dates, this year was anything but normal. Every pupil and class is experiencing a different level of disruption—some have had to self-isolate multiple times, while others have not missed a minute of school. As we approach the Christmas break, will the cabinet secretary accept that pupils cannot walk into exam halls next year with an equal shot at success? Will he end the uncertainty, announce that the higher and advanced higher exams will not go ahead and establish a credible alternative that will be ready for when pupils and teachers return in the new year?

John Swinney: As Beatrice Wishart will be aware, I am actively considering those issues. The latest evidence that I have indicates that about 75 per cent of secondary 4 to S6 pupils have experienced no interruption to their learning—they have not had to self-isolate or been affected by Covid in that respect—which raises questions. Continuity of learning can be provided for young people and I would expect that to be the case should there be any disruption.

I am acutely focused on the issue of equity that Beatrice Wishart raises. It is material to my decision making on higher and advanced higher, because I have to be satisfied that every young person, no matter their experience of Covid, has access to the full opportunities for learning and teaching, and is therefore able to position

themselves in the best place to perform in any exam diet in the spring. The issue of equity is central to my decision making on the higher and advanced higher diet.

I am gathering evidence on the subject, and I appreciate the necessity for early decision making on the question. Equally, I hope that Parliament appreciates that I have to be able to consider a sufficient volume of evidence in order to come to an evidence-based conclusion.

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): Clare Adamson was due to join us remotely, but there are technical issues. Unfortunately, it does not look as though we will be able to get to her question.

Burntisland Fabrications Ltd

2. Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its involvement with BiFab, following reported comments from the company's owner that ministers' statements had been "inaccurate or untruthful". (S5T-02565)

The Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Fair Work and Culture (Fiona Hyslop): It is not for the Scottish Government to speak for JV Driver, which is the majority shareholder in BiFab. The situation at BiFab is a culmination of a number of issues, the main one being the unwillingness of the parent company and majority shareholder, JV Driver, to provide working capital investment or guarantees for the company.

As a minority shareholder, we have been exhaustive in our consideration of the options that are available to us to financially support BiFab. As requested, we have worked collaboratively with the United Kingdom Government to explore what investment was possible in terms of working capital and guarantees, but we have not identified a legally compliant way to support the business.

Mark Ruskell: Speaking this morning to the Parliament's Economy, Energy and Fair Work Committee, DF Barnes's president confirmed again that the deal that was struck in 2018 made the Scottish Government the main financier of BiFab and that the company offered to make the Scottish Government the majority shareholder of BiFab at no additional cost, but that was turned down. Was the Scottish Government aware of that financing commitment when it agreed the deal with DF Barnes? Did it understand the need for guarantees to secure contracts? Why did it turn down the opportunity to become the majority shareholder some time ago?

Fiona Hyslop: There are a number of very important points in that question. Clearly, one of the original issues with BiFab was concerns around the Beatrice contract. Indeed, the Scottish

Government took on the main responsibility for financing that contract. We then converted our loan into equity to support the newly acquired BiFab acquisition by JV Driver. The business plan for the original agreement had a number of factors, including a commitment from JV Driver to provide working capital investment and guarantees, and to use its parent company for acquisition of bonds and assurances. That answers the point about the original aspects of the agreement.

The second point is about shares and whether the transfer of shares would have provided an opportunity for legally compliant investment. On a number of occasions, we have examined and exhausted many different ways of providing investment for the company, including state ownership, which would obviously mean the transfer of shares to the Scottish Government. Even that would not allow us to invest further in the company. The idea that somehow that would have provided the Scottish Government with more flexibility to invest further capital in the company is not the case.

Mark Ruskell: On 17 April 2018, the then Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Jobs and Fair Work, Keith Brown, told the chamber:

"we are confident that BiFab has a bright future".

He also said that the

"agreement gives the workforce, the company and the Government the best possible chance of securing a vibrant future for the yards."—[*Official Report*, 17 April 2018; c 80, 72.]

It is understandable that the workforce and communities in Fife and Lewis feel bitterly let down by the most recent betrayal by both Governments. The GMB union has said that there is a clear lack of political will when it comes to creating jobs in the renewables supply chain. How does the Scottish Government intend to rebuild confidence? What will it do to secure the much-needed jobs at the BiFab yards in Methil, Burntisland and Arnish?

Fiona Hyslop: I would say to the workforce that we want to make sure that there will be jobs for them but that has to be built on a firm foundation, with a company that is prepared to provide the working capital and investment and, importantly—as we know from contracts for renewables—the assurances that are needed.

The political will is absolutely there. I am personally committed. When you look at the statements that have been made previously, you can certainly see that there were initial contracts that could have been assured. Indeed, even as recently as this time last year, there was a prospect of Seagreen and Neart na Gaoithe contracts.

In my first answer to Mark Ruskell, I talked about the combination of factors. Obviously, the delay with a number of contracts, including Seagreen and NnG, compounded the cash-flow issues for the company, which is why, back in April, discussions took place to extend the working capital provided by the Scottish Government to £15 million, which was secured in May.

On where we go from here, we need to make sure that changes are made to procurement. The UK Government is consulting on the contract for difference, which is its responsibility. I have talked previously about how we cannot allow that to be a race to the bottom, in which we can be undercut by cheap labour from other countries.

I also have agreement from the UK Government to establish a working group. My view is that the trade unions should be part of that and that one of its terms of reference should be to look at the supply chain, not just across Fife and in Arnish but in other areas, to make sure that the opportunities are there for blade work and other aspects of renewables.

There are opportunities, and we want to secure them, but everybody has to step up to the mark. That includes the companies that are doing the procuring, on which the powers still lie with the UK Government.

I have already raised all those issues with the UK Government in relation to establishing the working group. We must have jobs in renewables. I am committed to making sure that we can do that and I will make sure that we use every part of that partnership, including working with the trade unions, to achieve it.

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): Since 2017, the majority shareholder, JV Driver, has failed to make any investment in the company, despite robust support and investment in excess of £50 million by the Scottish Government. Does the cabinet secretary agree that a failure of JV Driver to provide any working capital investment or guarantees for the company has proved a major obstacle in securing a bright future for BiFab, and that it should step aside to make way for someone who is willing to invest in the company?

Fiona Hyslop: Decisions on the future of the business, including its strategy, operations and management, are for the board of directors. Clearly, however, what we want for the yard and the workforce is a way forward to ensure that the required investment and working capital can be delivered.

I have some sympathy with the points about investment. Our perspective is that the majority shareholder would provide for some of that, particularly for working capital. Some of the issues, particularly over the past few months, have

been to do with the precarious nature of the cash flow. Our concern is that decisions on further Scottish Government investment, when it came to assurances, had to be made when there were obviously severe concerns about the working capital cash-flow investment position of the company.

The Presiding Officer: I am conscious that quite a few members wished to ask a supplementary question, but that session took a bit longer than I had planned. A debate is coming up tomorrow, if members wish to ask further questions.

Covid-19

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): Our next item of business is a statement from the First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, on Covid-19. The First Minister will take questions at the end of her statement. I encourage all members who wish to ask a question to press their request-to-speak buttons.

14:22

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Presiding Officer, I will shortly set out the conclusions of the Government's weekly review of the allocation of levels of protection to each local authority area. However, I will start with a brief summary of the statistics.

The total number of positive cases reported yesterday was 754, or 7.3 per cent of all tests carried out. The total number of cases stands at 95,811. One thousand and twenty-one people are in hospital—a decrease of 20 from yesterday—and 70 people are in intensive care, which is 5 fewer than yesterday.

However, I regret to say that, in the past 24 hours, a further 34 deaths have been registered of patients who had tested positive in the previous 28 days, and that the total number of deaths, under that measurement, is now 3,759. Those figures remind us of course that the virus is still taking a toll across the country and, again, my thoughts and condolences are with everyone who has been bereaved.

At the outset, I confirm that the Scottish Government is not today proposing any immediate changes to the levels that currently apply to each local authority area, although, as I will outline in a moment, there are some areas that we are monitoring closely. Overall, though, the latest data shows that the restrictions that are in place are, we believe, having a positive impact.

Three weeks ago—in the seven days to Friday 13 November—an average of 1,116 new cases a day was being recorded. By last Friday, that had fallen to 863 new cases a day, which is a reduction of more than one fifth. Independent estimates also continue to place the R number slightly below 1; again, that is indicative of a decline in infections.

We are also now starting to see a fall in the number of people who are in hospital and intensive care units with Covid. When I updated Parliament three weeks ago, 1,239 people were in hospital with Covid—102 in intensive care. Today, as members just heard me report, 1,021 people are in hospital and 70 are in intensive care. The figures are coming down, which means that—

taking all of that into account—I can say with some confidence that we are making good progress at this stage.

It is important to stress that, because I know that for some people whose area has been in the same level of restrictions for some time, and who are still hearing us report high numbers of deaths and new cases each day, it can sometimes seem as though the restrictions are not working. It is important to stress that that is not the case. The sacrifices that everyone is making are making a difference. They are getting case numbers down, reducing the numbers who get ill and need hospital care and therefore protecting the national health service and saving lives.

That said—and I have made this point previously—the level of the virus overall, particularly in some parts of the country, is still higher than we need it to be. There are still pressures on the health service, which any increase in rates of infection would quickly intensify. As we go deeper into the winter, a number of factors might well push transmission up again, and we could see cases and resulting illness and deaths start to rise again. That means that we have an interest in driving cases as low as we can now. That necessitates continued caution.

In summary, therefore, although we are encouraged by the impact that the current restrictions have had, the need to strengthen and solidify that progress means that we should continue to take care and err on the side of caution. For all those reasons, the Cabinet, when it discussed the matter earlier today, concluded that we will not propose any changes to the levels this week.

I remind members that it is also the case that the level 4 restrictions that are in place in 11 local authority areas will be lifted a week on Friday—11 December—so, as we decide the levels into which each of those areas will go, we will have an opportunity at next week's review to look at the allocation of levels across the country more generally. I flag up right now that it is likely, therefore, that next week's review will be more substantial than today's.

For now, though, I can confirm that Highland, Moray, Orkney, Shetland and the Western Isles will remain in level 1.

Aberdeen City, Aberdeenshire, Argyll and Bute, the Borders, Dumfries and Galloway and East Lothian will remain in level 2. However, I need to be clear—I indicated this earlier—that we have been looking and will continue to look carefully in the days to come at Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire. Cases in both local authority areas have increased sharply in the past week—by 68 per cent in Aberdeen City, and by 42 per cent in

Aberdeenshire. That means that case numbers in those areas—although it is important to stress that in both areas case numbers are still below the national average—are higher than in some level 3 areas, such as Angus. Case positivity has also increased in both areas.

However, there is a need to understand more deeply the extent to which those increases are driven by specific outbreaks that are being actively managed within food processing plants and care settings, for example, versus a wider and more general increase in community transmission, which would obviously be a concern, especially as we go further into the winter. I have therefore asked that the data for Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire be considered in more depth over the next couple of days by the chief medical officer and the national incident management team and then discussed with both local authorities and the NHS Grampian director of public health.

Given the degree of uncertainty in the information that we have so far, and in recognition of the economic and social impact for any area of a move up to level 3, we have decided to await that further analysis before reaching a firm conclusion. If the information justifies a move to level 3 for one of or both those council areas, we will set that out at next week's review—or earlier, if the situation merits it.

The other level 2 council that I want to make particular mention of is Dumfries and Galloway. The data there is indicative of a move to level 1 soon. However, the concern right now, in addition to the general winter factors that we are considering across the country, is that Dumfries and Galloway is bordered by areas that have significant, higher levels of infection. That is why the strong public health advice, which the Cabinet accepted this morning, is for the area to remain in level 2 for now.

Angus, Clackmannanshire, Dundee, the City of Edinburgh, Falkirk, Fife, Inverclyde, Midlothian, North Ayrshire and Perth and Kinross will remain in level 3 for now. Last week, I expressed some concern about rising case numbers in Clackmannanshire and Perth and Kinross, but I am pleased to note that numbers in both those areas have stabilised and are improving.

Finally, as I indicated, 11 local authority areas will remain in level 4 for one further week. Those are Glasgow City, East and West Dunbartonshire, Renfrewshire and East Renfrewshire, North and South Lanarkshire, East and South Ayrshire, Stirling and West Lothian. We will confirm next week the levels that those areas will move into when level 4 restrictions end on 11 December.

I will update Parliament on three further points. First, I want to highlight the changes that we

announced yesterday and will make from next Monday to eligibility for self-isolation support grants. Those changes mean that potentially eligible individuals no longer have to be receiving universal credit to claim the payment if their local authority believes that they would qualify for universal credit if they applied. In addition, the grants are now available for people on low incomes who have to stay at home while their children are self-isolating and who would otherwise lose out as a result. Ensuring that people self-isolate is an essential part of tackling the virus, so the extension of support payments is an important way in which we can help more people to do the right thing.

The second point is to report briefly on the continued expansion of the testing programme. The mass testing of students has started successfully, and all students who are planning to return home for Christmas are advised to take two lateral flow tests a few days apart. Many students have already done that, and many more are booked in for those tests.

In addition, testing is now available for people without symptoms of Covid in several communities across the country where there has been high prevalence of the virus. For example, test sites opened yesterday in Dalmarnock and Pollokshields in Glasgow; in Stewarton in East Ayrshire; and in Girvan in South Ayrshire. Another site opens tomorrow in Johnstone in Renfrewshire. Those trials are important, not only for their own sake, but because they will inform our plans to expand community testing early in the new year. We hope that that will be a useful additional tool in reducing prevalence of the virus in areas with high rates of transmission.

Finally, I reiterate that—subject to regulatory decisions—we remain hopeful that, even before Christmas, we will be in a position to start vaccinating people in Scotland against Covid. The Cabinet reviewed the plans for vaccination this morning and I can confirm that we are ready to begin that process as soon we receive the first supplies of vaccine. We hope that, by the spring, a significant proportion of the people who are most vulnerable to Covid will have been vaccinated. Over time, vaccination will help us all to return to a more normal pattern of life, which means that a possible route out of pandemic for Scotland is in sight. We therefore have all the more reason to keep ourselves and each other safe, as we head towards—we hope—that end point.

Perhaps now more than ever, sticking to the rules continues to be the way in which we can do that. I ask for continued compliance in the weeks ahead. Outside of the three island authorities, none of us should meet in each other's homes. Meetings outdoors or in public indoor places

should stay within the limits of six people from two households. I ask everyone to continue to abide by the important travel restrictions. If you live in a level 3 or level 4 area, do not leave your local authority area unless for an essential purpose; if you live elsewhere, do not travel into a level 3 or level 4 area. Everyone must also avoid non-essential travel between Scotland and other parts of the UK.

Finally, remember FACTS, the five rules that help to keep us all safe in our day-to-day lives: wear face coverings; avoid crowded places; clean hands and hard surfaces; keep 2m distance; and self-isolate and book a test if you have symptoms. If we all stick to those rules, I hope that we will be able to see the progress that I have been able to report today continue in the days and weeks to come, which will pave the way for more parts of the country to come down into lower levels of restrictions in the future.

Ruth Davidson (Edinburgh Central) (Con): I welcome the news that level 4 restrictions will be lifted across 11 local authorities on Friday 11 December, and I encourage people in those areas to stick by the rules for the remaining time. Whether in level 4, 3, 2 or 1, having restrictions on how we live, work and see our loved ones has been difficult for us all this year. I recognise the effort and forbearance that it is taking for people to keep going, and I thank them for those efforts.

However, the question that I will ask the First Minister is about schools and the Christmas holidays. We have just heard John Swinney, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, being asked about what parents and teachers can or should expect, with insufficient information having to be dragged out of him in return. We have said repeatedly over the weeks and months of the pandemic that people need relevant information in good time in order to plan their lives. There are parents in council areas across Scotland who expect their children to be in school until 23 December and there are others who expect them to return to class on 5 January, but three days ago they awoke to press reports that there could be a nationwide break-up on 18 December and no return to lessons until 11 January.

For three days, we have had no confirmation from Government and there will not be a statement in the Parliament today. We are already in December and workers with children need to tell their employers what is going on, so will the First Minister confirm whether there will be a standardised nationwide school holiday this Christmas, when her Government will make a statement to the Parliament to confirm for thousands of families out there what is going on, and what provision is being put in place during this period for the children of key workers, who could

be faced with a childcare crisis in little over a fortnight's time?

The First Minister: We will confirm the conclusions of our deliberations as soon as we have concluded them and the Deputy First Minister or I will set out to the Parliament what those conclusions are. We are deliberately thinking very hard about all those issues; they are not straightforward and there are arguments for standardising the holidays and perhaps extending them slightly and there are good arguments against that. Those decisions have to be carefully considered and of course they have to be driven by the latest evidence. That is what we will do and I hope that we will set out our conclusions on that some time over the course of this week to give parents due notice. We will take those decisions carefully, given the factors at play.

Everything that we do right now that helps to contain and suppress the virus causes difficulties and harms in other ways—that is the nature of the decision making that is under way, not only here, but across the United Kingdom and much of the world. That is why we are deliberately taking those decisions carefully and we will communicate them as soon as we can. That is also why we have taken the approach—almost every day of the pandemic—of updating the public as we go, and we will continue to do that. It is not so long ago that the Conservatives wanted to take away our ability to do that on a daily basis, but we will continue to do that. We will notify the Parliament as soon as we have come to a decision, which will be driven by the data that we monitor on a daily basis.

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): £500 is a welcome gesture for the hard work of those key workers on the front line in health and social care, but for those key workers who have been working on the front line of other parts of the public sector and those in the private sector, such as shop workers, it will be of little comfort. Although I am sure that shop workers would like a bonus this Christmas, what they need is some reassurance that they will have a job in the new year. With the collapse of two huge retailers in the past 24 hours and the real and devastating threat now posed to many retail jobs and suppliers, what assessment has the Government made of the impact of level 4 restrictions on the retail sector and will the Scottish Government now finally get around to establishing the retail recovery group that it has been promising to set up for months to try to save what is left of our high streets?

The First Minister: First, on the £500 thank-you payment to NHS and care workers, let me take the opportunity again to say thank you to all those workers. Although no payment could ever properly

express our gratitude, it is a small but important way of doing that.

All sorts of workers in all sorts of professions, occupations and sectors have gone above and beyond the call of duty in the past nine months and they have my deep and everlasting gratitude for that. We all recognise—it is why we stood on our doorsteps for week after week earlier in the year applauding health and care workers—that the contribution of that workforce is worthy of particular recognition. It is only a matter of weeks, I think, if my memory serves me correctly, since Richard Leonard at First Minister's questions challenged me to do more to thank NHS and care workers, but, of course, as soon as we do so, he decides that that is not enough and asks for something else. However, in the face of public sector pay freezes being announced by the UK Government, we will continue to do everything that we can to ensure proper reward and recognition for not only NHS and care workers, but workers across the public sector who have contributed so much.

In relation to retail, we assess the impact of all the restrictions carefully through the four-harms analysis that we do. The reality is that, certainly on this side of the chamber, such decisions cannot be avoided. Unfortunately, the Government cannot abstain on such decisions in the way that I understand Labour is doing in another part of the UK today. We have to take decisions that suppress the virus to the extent that we can pave the way for the sustainable opening-up of the economy. If we allow the virus to run out of control, the impact on the economy will be longer lasting and much deeper than it would otherwise be.

We intend to lift the level 4 restrictions on 11 December. We will set out this time next week the levels that those areas will go into after the level 4 restrictions come to an end. We will continue to work with sectors, including retail, on recovery as we move into the next phase, start to vaccinate people and, I hope, quickly get back to a position in which the economy starts to trade and operate on a basis that is much closer to normality than it is right now.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): I am grateful for advance sight of the First Minister's statement. The slow rate of improvement in the number of infections over the past few weeks reinforces my concern that reducing the restrictions at the end of next week and reducing them further over Christmas might mean that a sharp increase in January becomes inevitable.

I would like to ask the First Minister about compliance with level 4 restrictions. I have heard about constituents who are working for an employer whose core business of food supply is

deemed essential, being expected to go out to work not to deliver food, but to do marketing, door to door and up and down tenement stairs, to drum up sales. Particularly given the extension of the furlough scheme, does the First Minister agree that employers should be deeply cautious about sending people out door to door and generating unnecessary social interactions, purely in order to drum up sales? Does she agree that such activity should not be deemed essential and that employers should think again?

The First Minister: I agree with that in general terms. In the absence of details about precisely which companies might be doing what Patrick Harvie is talking about, I will avoid going into specifics, but I would be very happy to get more details so that we could consider the matter further.

I get lots of emails and other contacts with suggestions that some companies and individuals are not complying with the letter or the spirit of the restrictions. When it is appropriate, we follow that up. In general, compliance in level 4 areas and in areas in other levels is good and strong. Where we can, we gather data on compliance. For example, in relation to transport and travel, the police gather data on the penalties that they issue.

The evidence suggests that compliance is good, but there will always be exceptions to that. The vast majority of employers are operating responsibly but, again, there will be exceptions to that. I urge all employers to behave responsibly towards their workforce and to stay within the letter and the spirit of the restrictions because, although I recognise that it is hard now, it is to the medium to long-term benefit of employers for all of us, collectively, to get the levels and rates of infection down.

I agree with Patrick Harvie on the generality of his point. I am very happy to look at the details and, if there is more that we can do or more comments that it would be appropriate for me to make, I would be happy to do that.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): People are doing what is expected of them, which is why the indicators are improving in many parts of the country. However, 10 days after the number of cases started to increase in Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire, the First Minister still cannot tell us whether the increase is because of isolated outbreaks or community transmission. That was the problem when there were rises in cases of the virus in Fife and Tayside, and the situation does not seem to have improved. First, when will the tracing system be able to tell us what is going on?

Secondly, last week, I asked about visits to care homes for families. With the virus in decline in many parts of the country, when will families be

allowed to see their loved ones in advance of Christmas?

The First Minister: I and Cabinet colleagues have looked at very detailed data on Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire over today and the past number of days. We can do that because test and protect and the tracing system are working well—we would not have that information if that were not the case. However, we need to better understand and have a degree of certainty about whether those cases that we believe are largely associated with particular outbreaks—members will be aware of some of the outbreaks that we are talking about, such as those in food processing—can be contained and have not resulted in wider community transmission. Given the economic and social implications of a move up a level, I have asked that a bit more work is done on that.

In Fife and Angus, which are areas that were moved up a level some weeks ago, the situation is improving. The virus is a difficult one to contain, but the number of cases is coming down. That is happening largely because of the compliance of the public with the restrictions, but also because of the very good work that test and protect and our public health teams are doing, which they will continue to do.

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport has set out the guidance on care homes. Local public health directors are working with care homes to normalise—as far as possible—care home visiting, while continuing to keep safe people in care homes. The further measures that the health secretary set out last week to extend testing to designated visitors of care homes will help with that process, too.

Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): With regard to the Scottish Government measures to help people to self-isolate, will the First Minister set out what the proposed changes to the Scottish Government support are and explain how she believes that those changes will facilitate further compliance with the self-isolation rules and therefore help to stem the spread of the virus?

The First Minister: At the moment, the grant is for low-income workers who are in receipt of universal credit or other benefits and who will lose earnings as a result of having to self-isolate. The two specific extensions will help more people. First, someone will no longer have to be in receipt of universal credit if the assessment of the local authority says that, if they applied for universal credit, they would be likely to get it. That will extend the number of people on low incomes who will be eligible for receipt of the grant.

The other extension, which, in some ways, is perhaps even more important, is to recognise the situation of some people on low incomes who will

have to stop working for a period if their children are asked to self-isolate, in order to provide childcare for their children. At the moment, because the adult is not the person who is having to self-isolate, they are not eligible for the grant. From Monday, they will be eligible for the grant if their child is having to self-isolate. Again, that will extend quite considerably the reach of the support payment. I think that that will make it easier for people to do something that is inherently very difficult: to self-isolate for such a lengthy period.

We will continue to look for opportunities to strengthen the support that we are giving people so that we can continue to improve compliance with what is one of the most important restrictions—if not the most important restriction—that we are asking people to abide by at the moment.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): The First Minister will know that Renfrewshire has been under heightened restrictions since 14 September. Many businesses complied with the Government's guidelines, which resulted in their trade being limited or their doors being shut completely. Sadly, some might never reopen.

Two months in, Renfrewshire still has the highest weekly infection rate in Scotland, which is double the national average and is reducing at half the rate. It is clear that something is not working. People will rightly ask why months of lockdown are still not reaping benefits. What is not working? What is being done about it?

The First Minister: Renfrewshire has been one of the areas that have remained at stubbornly high levels, which is why it was put at level 4 and will continue at level 4 until 11 December.

However, the last seven days of data—this is the data that we will publish today—show that case numbers in Renfrewshire are down by 16 per cent, which is bang on the national average, and that test positivity is down by 1.2 per cent over that seven-day period, whereas the national average decline in test positivity is 0.5 per cent.

That means that we are starting to see signs of that reduction in Renfrewshire, which will be, in large part, due to the level 4 restrictions kicking in. We want to try to accelerate that, which is why one of the mass testing pilots that I spoke about earlier is in Renfrewshire, and we will look at extending that further.

I think that we are starting to see signs for some cautious optimism about Renfrewshire, like other parts of the central belt, starting to turn the corner.

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): Can the First Minister clarify whether any consideration has been given to flexibility around the dates of relaxed restrictions for national health

service and other key workers who are required to work over the stated five-day Christmas period?

The First Minister: We recognise that the relaxation of restrictions to allow families and friends to come together if absolutely necessary is necessarily limited. The guidelines set out what we think is a proportionate and careful approach to rules around socialising. We cannot ignore the fact that any relaxation of measures carries additional risk, so the temporary easing is about helping people, particularly those who might otherwise be on their own at Christmas.

We have considered the impact of the changes on those working through the festive break as well as on key workers, but, reluctantly, we will not be able to extend that period any further for any particular groups. We appreciate that many people will not be able to celebrate Christmas in their usual way, but we believe that we have put forward a sensible position that will help us through this period, hopefully on the way to greater normality as a result of the vaccinations that will begin soon.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): In July 2020, the First Minister said that Scotland did not have a problem with Covid deaths in care homes. Deaths from care homes are not included in the daily figures. About two weeks ago, the numbers stood at 2,240 deaths—some 42 per cent of the total from Covid so far. That is more than 10 per cent higher than in England, and the trend is, unfortunately, increasing, with more than five times as many deaths now than there were a month ago. Therefore, there is a need to work faster than is proposed.

Families will be visiting loved ones in care homes at Christmas, so will the First Minister ensure that there is rapid, even daily, testing for staff, residents and families in all care homes over Christmas, to keep everybody safe?

The First Minister: First, I genuinely think that Jackie Baillie misunderstands the basis of the daily figures that we report on deaths. They include anybody who has a registered death and who tested positive within the previous 20 days, regardless of the setting in which they died, and the wider National Records of Scotland figures include cases of people who have died where the relationship to Covid is presumed, not confirmed through a test, so it is not true to say that care home deaths are not included in the daily figures.

Secondly, I have never said that we do not have a problem with care home deaths. What I have challenged—and I will demonstrate this—is that there is a particularly severe problem in Scotland relative to other parts of the United Kingdom. I have recognised and will recognise forever that we have had a problem with care home deaths, and I

do not think that it is fair to suggest that I have said anything other than that.

The point that I have challenged is the point that Jackie Baillie has made, which is that, somehow, the level of care home deaths in Scotland from Covid is significantly higher than that in other parts of the United Kingdom, and England in particular. Members can see the reason why I challenge that. Let me say that the number is too high—I am not suggesting otherwise. However, the reason why I challenge that suggestion is that the figures, which are drawn from the NRS for Scotland and the Office for National Statistics for England and Wales, show that excess deaths in care homes in England have been higher than they have been in Scotland. In Scotland, a greater proportion of them have been attributed to Covid. It is for other people to say what the excess deaths in England that are not attributed to Covid have been caused by, but it strikes me that, perhaps, one of the reasons for the differential in figures is that we are attributing more of those deaths, perhaps accurately, to Covid.

On testing in care homes, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport has set out the plans for that, and we will take them forward in a proper and considered way. It is because we are concerned about any potential for the number of deaths in care homes to start to rise again that we are being cautious about things such as visiting, which is difficult for families but is part of the important balance that we have to strike.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): I have been contacted by a number of taxi drivers in my constituency who have been severely impacted by the necessary restrictions—particularly those on the night-time economy. The discretionary funding that was announced two weeks ago is welcome news for many and provides a glimmer of hope at the end of this difficult year. What plans does the Scottish Government have to distribute that funding? What further support can be provided to self-employed taxi drivers who have been affected by the pandemic?

The First Minister: We all appreciate—the Government certainly appreciates—the devastating impact that restrictions have had on the taxi and private hire vehicle sector. On 17 November, we announced an additional £30 million in business support funding, which is being provided through the local authority discretionary fund. It is for local authorities to distribute that money, and I said that taxi drivers and others in wider supply chains should receive that support.

We have made further funding available through the Covid public transport mitigation fund to support the installation of equipment that reduces the risk of Covid transmission on public transport,

which includes taxis and private hire vehicles. We are also considering support for fixed cost pressures on taxi drivers and others, which will be distinct from the new strategic framework business fund.

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): On 10 November, the First Minister said that up to six people from two households in Shetland, Orkney and the Western Isles would be allowed to meet in homes, because of the lack of meeting places and the need to address isolation. Given that the Highlands and Moray have the same issues and have had the same levels in the allocation of levels tables on 24 November and today, will the First Minister consider mirroring the islands home visit rules in the rest of the Highlands and Moray?

The First Minister: We are considering that. The advice to date has been not to make such a change, on a precautionary basis, but we will consider the issue up to and through next week's review. If there is any change next week, I will set that out to Parliament.

Tom Arthur (Renfrewshire South) (SNP): Tomorrow, a new testing centre for asymptomatic people will open in Johnstone town hall and—*[Inaudible.]* I live in Johnstone and I have no symptoms, so I will definitely go along to get tested. Will the First Minister join me in encouraging other Johnstone residents, as well as those who work in the town, to head along to the town hall to get tested?

The First Minister: I very much encourage people in Johnstone to go to the testing centre and take advantage of the opportunity to be tested. One testing site in Glasgow is in Pollokshields, in my constituency, and I continue to encourage people there to get tested.

There are two benefits. Individuals who get tested and have no symptoms but happen to have Covid will have that detected, so that they can be given the advice to isolate. The more people take up the opportunity, the more we can test the operation of the system, which will inform our planning for the greater roll-out of mass testing early in the new year. I hope that people in Johnstone take up the opportunity for their own good and the collective good.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The First Minister will be aware of the concern that was expressed in the most recent Scottish attitudes survey that the Scottish Government's efforts to curb the spread of Covid-19 might have been hampered by the public's weak understanding of the FACTS message. Given the Christmas bubble arrangements and the need for full public trust in and confidence about the health message, what

action is the Scottish Government taking to improve the clarity of Covid messaging?

The First Minister: Our polling shows good understanding of the key messages, but we are not complacent about any of the issues. Those who have watched television in recent days—I am sure that that does not include many members—will have seen a new advert for the FACTS campaign. Perhaps I would say this, but it is very good and it sets out clearly the steps that we are asking people to take. We keep all those things under review so that the public understanding is as wide and as good as possible not just of what we ask people to do but of why we ask it and the benefits that it brings to them and others.

Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): The majority of my constituents have followed the guidance to keep the spread of the virus under control—I see that in the communities that I represent. It is disappointing that case numbers and test positivity rates have increased in Aberdeenshire. The fact that Aberdeenshire remains at level 2 shows that decisions are not as straightforward as looking at a general increase in numbers; we have concentrated clusters of infection. What work is the Government doing with Aberdeenshire Council to avoid imposing more restrictions on the area?

The First Minister: First, it is important for me to reiterate—and Gillian Martin would agree with this—that it is not anybody's fault when cases rise in an area. This is an infectious virus, and we all know what we can do, individually and collectively, to try to keep it under control. However, I do not think that we should conclude that there are different prevalence rates in different areas because people in some areas try harder than those in others to stick with the restrictions.

Gillian Martin raised good questions about the role of local government in our decision making. Local government is represented on the national incident management team and the four harms group; the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers attend both those forums as observers. Those meetings discuss the identification of emerging risks across different parts of the country, as highlighted by our suite of indicators and other research. They also consider different means and methods to manage those risks more proactively.

The Deputy First Minister spoke to Aberdeen City Council and Aberdeenshire Council yesterday, and we will have detailed discussions with them this week about Covid rates in their communities.

All local authority chief executives receive daily updates of the indicators that are produced by

Scottish Government analytical officials at the same time as the updates are sent to directors of public health. Ministers look at the same information on a daily basis.

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): An answer to a written question shows that NHS Lanarkshire received the lowest flu vaccine allocation, compared with its over 65s population, on the Scottish mainland. I have been inundated with complaints about appointments. Can the First Minister assure people in Lanarkshire that a fair share of Covid vaccines will be allocated to the health board, that everyone who needs the vaccine will get it and that the programme will be handled better than that for the flu vaccine?

The First Minister: The short answer to all of that is yes. I am happy to look into the particular point about Lanarkshire. We allocate flu vaccine supplies fairly, based on the estimates that health boards give of needs and uptake in different eligibility groups. Therefore, there is no unfairness in the system for allocating the vaccine. However, if there has been a particular issue in Lanarkshire that I am not aware of, I am happy—as is, I am sure, the health secretary—to look at it.

The health secretary has already made a statement to Parliament about the plans for the roll-out of the Covid vaccination programme. As I said, she updated the Cabinet, which reviewed those plans this morning.

This is a complex logistical exercise. It is more complex than the flu vaccinations exercise, partly because of the storage conditions and temperatures required to store and deal with some of the vaccines. Also, it is likely that, for all the vaccines that we expect to get, people will need two doses three weeks apart, or thereabouts.

It is a complex exercise. However, planning is under way and is in a good state, and we are ready to start vaccinating people as soon as the vaccines are licensed and we start to get supplies through. We are very hopeful that that might happen in the next couple of weeks.

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): Many workers do jobs that they cannot do from home. Will the First Minister set out what resources are available to employers and what responsibility they have to support employees who are advised to self-isolate but are unable to work from home?

The First Minister: We expect employers to be very sensitive and responsible, and I have no reason to believe that the majority are not being so.

If someone can work from home, it is important that they are supported to do that. However, if they cannot work from home, it is important that, if they

are told to self-isolate, they are not put under pressure to come into work; it is important that they isolate. Where companies can continue to support them financially, they should, but one of the reasons why we have put in place the self-isolation support grant is to take account of circumstances in which that is not possible, particularly for those on low incomes.

I take this opportunity to thank businesses across the country. This is an incredibly difficult time for them and I know that the vast majority are working hard to support their employees as much as they possibly can.

Mike Rumbles (North East Scotland) (LD): Does the First Minister accept that she could ask the full Parliament to agree to major changes in Covid regulations before they come into effect rather than always ask for approval after they come into effect—sometimes up to 28 days after? I will contrast that with what is happening at Westminster right at this moment, where MPs are debating and voting on major changes in their regulations before they come into effect.

The First Minister: If my memory serves me correctly, the last time that we put areas into level 4, Parliament did vote before the changes took effect. I am looking to the Presiding Officer, because he is probably more aware of those discussions.

I have made it clear that all that I care about is that we do what is necessary to control the virus. I have no objection to Parliament being involved up front and as early as possible, as long as that does not hinder any of us in doing what is necessary. I am open to any discussions or ideas about how to facilitate that better. We are not proposing any changes this week, but that may well be different next week as areas come out of level 4. I am open to trying to maximise parliamentary scrutiny and consent as far as is possible.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): What engagement has the Scottish Government had with local authorities such as Renfrewshire Council about the mechanisms for coming out of level 4 in a way that is responsible and that does not cause a rise in Covid-19 cases?

The First Minister: That is an important point. We will have discussions with all the councils that will come out of level 4, both about the level that they will go into and about the precautions that they should all be taking with health boards and others in their areas to prevent a rise in infections. We had those discussions with East Lothian Council when it came down a level last week.

That is important, because it is always vital to remember that going down a level is not a neutral act for any area. Going down a level means more

opening up of the economy and society, which gives more opportunities for the virus to spread. Unless mitigating steps are taken, there is a danger that we will start to see transmission rise to the point at which we will have to consider the area going back up a level. Those discussions with Renfrewshire Council and with other local authorities will be important in the collective attempt to avoid that happening.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): When will guidance be published to ensure that small businesses do not miss out on the new funds that have been announced? What publicity will there be to help businesses to find out whether they are eligible? When will those funds be available for distribution, and what support will be available to assist local authorities in processing those funds?

The First Minister: When we announced the additional funding, at the time of announcing the level 4 areas a couple of weeks ago, there was also an allocation for local authorities, to help them with the administrative costs of processing the grants. We will continue to discuss those costs with local authorities.

The grant scheme is already open for applications, and people can find out from their local council website how to apply. We will continue to raise awareness. There is a suite of guidance on almost every issue under the sun—almost too much guidance—and we will continue to look at where we must issue more guidance to help people to navigate their way through a complex situation.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): Level 4 restrictions will be lifted at 6 pm on 11 December. I have had representations from businesses, asking whether they could be allowed a full day's trading on that day. Is that something that the First Minister would consider? Will she tell us whether the travel restrictions will be also lifted on that day—and if not then, when?

The First Minister: On the question of time, we have decided that, just as those restrictions came into force at 6 pm, they should be lifted at 6 pm on Friday 11 December. Although I will always consider anything that I am asked to consider, I do not want to raise expectations that we will change that position.

We will consider travel restrictions when we consider next week's review and the levels that different councils will go into when they come out of level 4. I cannot say what that decision is, because we have not taken it yet. I will set that out next week. Travel restrictions will be kept in place for no longer than we think is necessary, but for as long as we think is necessary to sustain a proportionate and tiered approach to the restrictions. As I keep saying, if we do not have

travel restrictions in place when those are necessary, there is a danger that we will move the virus from area to area, which raises the risk of needing to have nationwide restrictions.

Those are important issues that we must think through carefully to get them as right as we can.

Mike Rumbles: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I would hate to think that the First Minister had inadvertently misled Parliament, but I think that, in her answer to me—correct me if I am wrong—she said that she believed that Parliament had had a debate and a vote on the tier 4 regulations. As far as I am aware—please correct me if I am wrong—the Parliament had a debate and a vote only on a motion that was non-binding. In fact, before the debate started, you mentioned that fact in the chamber. I ask for your help in making sure that the facts are accurately recorded in the *Official Report*.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Rumbles. Yes, it is the case that we had a vote on a motion that was non-binding, and I specifically said that it was not a vote on the regulations. The First Minister has made the point that these are matters for the Parliamentary Bureau and business managers to consider.

We will now move on to the next item of business, but we will have a short pause while we change seats. I remind members to observe social distancing, to wear masks when they leave their seats and the chamber, and to follow the one-way systems.

Valuing the Third Sector

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Lewis Macdonald): The next item of business is a debate on motion S5M-23408, in the name of Ruth Maguire, on valuing the third sector. I invite Ruth Maguire, on behalf of the Equalities and Human Rights Committee, to open the debate.

15:11

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to debate the Equalities and Human Rights Committee's report, "Looking ahead to the Scottish Government's Draft Budget 2020-21: Valuing the Third Sector", and our most recent budget scrutiny work, which provides an update on our views on the impact of the pandemic on the voluntary sector. Although the report was published in November last year, due to the impact of the pandemic it has not been possible to debate it until today.

I thank committee colleagues, some of whom have now moved on, for their hard work and I thank all the people who provided written and oral evidence. In particular, I say a special thank you to Glasgow Council for the Voluntary Sector and the Forth Valley third sector interfaces in Falkirk, Stirling and Clackmannanshire. With their help, the committee held events with 60 voluntary organisations, which shared their invaluable experience with us.

As members know, Covid-19 has had a disproportionate impact on many who already face disadvantage and discrimination. Our 2019 report emphasised that the voluntary sector has a valuable role to play in supporting the equality and human rights agendas in Scotland. It is therefore no surprise to us that the work of charities was key to providing immediate support to many people in their localities during the pandemic, and yet many charities are now in a situation where they may not survive for much longer. Research by the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator found that 20 per cent of Scottish charities are facing a "critical threat" to their financial viability in the next 12 months as incomes fall and demand for services grows. Today's debate is important to ensure that the committee's recommendations are not lost sight of and, indeed, are implemented to ensure the wellbeing and sustainability of the voluntary sector so that it can continue to play its vital role not just during the pandemic but in Scotland's recovery and beyond.

I am sure that members will join me today in saying a huge thank you to every single volunteer and charity worker who gives up their time to help those in their communities who are struggling to cope. During the pandemic, those individuals and

organisations have leapt into action to support their communities—from meeting the basic right to food to ensuring that people stay connected with each other to stave off the harmful effects of social isolation.

As with inequalities more generally, the pandemic has shone a light on and exacerbated the issues that already existed for the voluntary sector. The committee's recent budget work continues to highlight two core themes that are critical to the future of Scotland's voluntary sector: funding and partnership, which I will now focus on.

Last year, the committee identified that voluntary sector funding is complex and precarious. Many voluntary organisations operate in a complex patchwork of statutory funding, fundraised income, earned income and grant income.

According to the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations, there are more than 40,000 third sector organisations in Scotland. Some 40 per cent of those organisations work in either social services or health.

Around 25 per cent of third sector income comes from public sector contracts to carry out services, much of which are with local authorities. It is significant to the debate that local authorities receive around 40 per cent of their total revenue income from the Scottish Government each year.

Although the committee acknowledges that councils are under pressure to make savings, it is voluntary groups and charities that are feeling the force of the financial constraints. They are struggling to provide adequate services on the basis of councils' contracts.

We heard from Ian Bruce of the Glasgow Council for Voluntary Services that, as a sector, organisations were told to diversify their income away from grant funding and move towards trading, fundraising and contracts. He said:

"That has been regarded as good practice. Ironically, during the Covid period, that income—which was regarded as more sustainable—has vanished and organisations that are primarily grant funded have been more stable."—*[Official Report, Equalities and Human Rights Committee, 1 October 2020; c 15.]*

On the sustainability of funding, although third sector witnesses welcomed the Government's £25 million community and third sector recovery programme, and existing funders have been extremely supportive and accommodating in relation to reporting on the use of funds over the past few months, Neil Cowan of the Poverty Alliance commented that there are growing fears and anxiety about the long-term financial impact.

The committee noted that, in 2019, the Government had moved to a three-year equalities

funding cycle. We recommended that other funders should follow suit, and asked the Government to set up a working group, involving key stakeholders, to examine longer-term funding models, and for its conclusions to be made available before the end of this parliamentary session. The Government told us in its response that the

“duration of funding periods is a matter for other statutory funders”.

The committee calls on the Government to rethink its approach and show leadership in that area; to work with other statutory funders to share the benefits of longer-term funding; to harness the work of the Scottish leaders forum for change; and to bring consistency of approach and best practice through the establishment of a working group.

The committee argues that those steps are essential if the Government is to achieve its national outcomes. We are aware that there is no single, direct and effortless solution to the funding issues facing the sector, but the situation could be greatly improved if the Government, statutory funders such as local government, independent funders and the sector itself were to work together strategically to ensure the financial sustainability of the sector.

I will move on to talk more about partnership and collaborative working. Working in partnership was a key theme that arose in our 2019 report. There was an acknowledgement from the sector that it should be looking towards collaboration, for example, by co-locating to cut overhead costs, working together to make addressing shared issues easier, and enabling information to be shared and trust to be built.

However, by far the greatest barrier to partnership working is the competitive funding environment. Participants at the Forth Valley TSI event questioned how partnership working could take place between third sector organisations when they were competing for the same pot of money. Fighting over funding had led to distrust in the sector. One organisation commented, “It’s like a war.”

Conversely, the committee notes that, in responding to the pandemic, there have been many recent examples of strong partnership working between the voluntary sector and local authorities, the Government and the private sector that highlight what can be achieved.

At a national level, we have seen extraordinary outcomes achieved through partnership working, such as the temporary eradication of rough sleeping. That success has come from a partnership approach, shared goals between partners and the temporary removal of hierarchy and bureaucracy.

Our report called for “strengthening collaboration” around the involvement of the sector in service design; involvement of the sector in decommissioning; and a thorough examination of partnership working in the context of a competitive funding environment.

As we navigate our way through and out of this health crisis, we must look to Scotland’s economic future. The scale of the inequalities and societal problems that Scotland will face in the years to come dictate that no one organisation or sector will have all the answers. As the committee noted in its report, the voluntary sector has a key role to play. The Scottish Government’s response to the advisory group on economic recovery commits to “strengthening collaboration” between the voluntary sector, local authorities and Scottish Government. It is unclear exactly how that work will be taken forward. We ask the Scottish Government how the issues raised in our report and most recent budget letter will be addressed in its economic recovery planning.

The third sector should be valued not just for the services that it provides, but because of who it employs—for example, many women and carers who would find it difficult to fit employment around their commitments. It also contributes significantly to employment skills for our young people and people with disabilities. Therefore, let us not forget that by supporting our voluntary sector we are helping countless people to enrich their lives and the lives of others.

We must embrace the adversity of the pandemic and seize it as an opportunity to do things differently. We must learn from innovative practice shown by some funders and the third sector during the pandemic. The Covid crisis has shone a light on the issues impacting the sector and on inequality in our society. Indeed, I would argue that the recommendations in the committee’s report are now even more relevant.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the findings set out in the Equalities and Human Rights Committee’s 4th Report, 2019 (Session 5), *Looking ahead to the Scottish Government’s Draft Budget 2020-21: Valuing the Third Sector* (SP Paper 614), which was published on 7 November 2019, and its letter to the Scottish Government published on 29 October 2020, which includes an update on its views on the impact of the pandemic on the third sector.

15:21

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): I am delighted to open on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives in the debate aptly named “Valuing the Third Sector”. The word “valuing” allows us to debate the true extent of the worth that we place on the sector. I thank the third

sector for what it does, from the Samaritans providing mental health support, to Border Women's Aid providing refuge for women fleeing violence and the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations working with grass-roots community groups.

I also thank the Equalities and Human Rights Committee for its work in conducting its important inquiry into the funding of the third sector in Scotland. We have heard from organisations the length and breadth of the third sector during the inquiry and I am glad that the committee has come to a conclusion on the best way forward for assisting the sector during these difficult times. Charities and other organisations have worked tirelessly throughout the pandemic to provide support and comfort to lonely, disabled, sick and vulnerable people in our society. They have been pushed to the limits during stressful times and we on the Conservative benches believe that they deserve better.

The third sector is crucial to Scotland, employing more than 100,000 people and providing invaluable help to all areas of society. The funding conundrum is not a new one, as highlighted by Ruth Maguire. For too long, the Scottish Government has left the third sector in an insecure position, with cuts to local authority spending having a negative effect on its long-term viability.

That is not a consequence of the pandemic. Over the course of the decade, the Government has cut the budget for promoting equalities and human rights by 10 per cent. The Scottish Government claims that its equalities and human rights budget

“supports the drive for social justice, economic and inclusive growth, and community resilience and empowerment”

but we know that it is only 0.07 per cent of the total Scottish Government discretionary budget.

I want to keep my contribution positive and to work with the Government to ensure that recommendations are actioned, but that is hardly a ringing endorsement of the Government. We saw in the report how fragile the financial situation is, with short-term funding cycles causing instability in some third sector organisations and creating issues around staff retention and development. The SCVO made that point in its briefing for today's debate by highlighting that the Scottish Government's promises of longer-term funding are “very rarely” seen in practice.

I note from the recommendations that the committee asks the Scottish Government to set up a working group involving key stakeholders to examine the longer-term funding models available to statutory funders, which Ruth Maguire talked

about, and for its conclusions to be made available before the end of the parliamentary session. That timeline would surely tie in nicely as part of the interim report called for by the Scottish Conservatives today.

Rurality, in combination with the lack of long-term funding and reduced opportunities, is posing problems for third sector organisations when it comes to recruiting staff in many rural areas. That view was echoed by Dumfries and Galloway health and social care partnership.

I know that it is difficult for organisations across the Borders not only to feel part of a local authority budget scrutiny process but to be involved at Scottish Government level. The Scottish budget approach has been criticised as being opaque to the public and to key stakeholders in the third sector in particular, and it should go without saying that the Scottish Government must do more to make the use of public money more visible to stakeholders and encourage participation.

Last week, in the debate on equally safe, I highlighted the need for more secure funding in particular for women's charities, such as Borders Women's Aid, that tackle violence against women. In its briefing, Engender states:

“A shortage of suitable refuge accommodation has been exacerbated by restrictions on”

movement, in combination with

“a lack of temporary housing options during lockdown, leaving women with an impossible choice to stay in an unsafe home or risk homelessness.”

We need more sustainable funding that gives charities flexibility and financial back-up to support their goals of helping more women to flee a violent household to a safe space.

We know how competitive the funding environment is for the third sector, and especially for rural organisations, which I represent. I am glad that the committee highlighted that issue, as it is hugely disadvantageous to smaller charities and organisations. It must be addressed at Government level as a matter of urgency, because the work of grass-roots and smaller charities is invaluable and they are part of the fabric of our constituencies.

I turn to the Scottish Conservative amendment. We on the Conservative side of the chamber believe that it is important to see interim reporting of progress on the recommendations that the committee has made. If we are to see positive results for the third sector in the short and long term, there must be a midway point at which we can hold the Government to account and measure that improvement. We simply cannot end up years down the line with no progress having been made and no accountability for the delay.

In conclusion, I once again thank the committee for its work on the inquiry and for producing a constructive and detailed set of recommendations. I believe that, if acted on in full, those recommendations will deliver real and progressive change for the third sector.

Another solution would be to take up the Scottish Conservatives' idea of creating a permanent financial settlement for councils, which would prevent any successor Government from raiding budgets and cutting vital local funding for third sector organisations. Our amendment commits the Government to interim reporting on the recommendations that the committee has set out, and we must ensure that the Government is held to account on its progress in that regard.

I will finish with some observations by the Samaritans:

"Covid-19 has seen a renewed sense of community resilience and altruism from the people of Scotland ... The Scottish Government should not let this moment pass and must reflect the value it believes the third sector brings to Scottish society".

I move amendment S5M-23408.1, to insert at end:

“, and asks the Scottish Government to commit to an interim report on its progress in implementing the committee's recommendations.”

15:27

The Minister for Older People and Equalities (Christina McKelvie): At a time when we are faced with responding to a global pandemic and the unwanted uncertainty that Brexit is bringing to our country, I express my thanks, gratitude and admiration for the way in which the third sector has mobilised to support the people and communities who have been so badly affected by Covid-19. That tireless commitment to helping others and to working collaboratively with the Scottish Government and others has played a major part in ensuring that those who need support have been able to access it.

We should all remember that the work of third sector organisations to support those in need began long before the pandemic and, when we emerge from it, that excellent work will continue. I am therefore glad that the committee has chosen to recognise the work of our third sector partners in its report. The debate rightly marks that vital contribution, which should be central to our thinking as we recover from the pandemic.

I am pleased that, in the equality and human rights portfolio, we have overseen the single largest increase in our budget, from £24.6 million in 2019-20 to its highest-ever level of £30.2 million. That additional budget uplift is enabling us to invest in a range of third sector organisations

that are working to secure the best outcomes for Scotland's people.

My budget continues to promote equality and human rights by supporting a wide range of organisations that are working to achieve equality across the range of protected characteristics, and we will continue to support a range of Scottish Government priorities and commitments. While we acknowledge the 16 days of activism, as we did in Parliament last week, we know that much more must be done to prevent gender-based violence, and we will continue to support the important work of those in the third sector to tackle all forms of violence against women and girls.

For example, more than £1.5 million from the first round of the wellbeing fund was allocated to Scottish Women's Aid and Rape Crisis Scotland to support service redesign and to ensure that vital third sector specialist services could continue to support women and children during the pandemic. More than £1.7 million has been provided each year for the past three years to disabled people's organisations in order to support projects promoting disability equality, thereby helping to enable those with lived experience of disability to play a part in the development of policies to solve problems and dismantle barriers. We have provided more than £1.16 million to support older people's organisations at both national and local community levels, with support for community projects that support older people.

The Equalities and Human Rights Committee considered the use of multiyear funding, and I am pleased to say that we have been able to provide multiyear funding over the past three years. That ensures sufficient time and support for the application process and supports partnership working and the ideals of fair work principles.

The equalities and human rights budget will support the launch of two new funding streams that will support the third sector. Our new delivering equally safe fund will develop and deliver work that directly contributes to delivering the ambitions of our equally safe strategy. I will launch the fund very shortly, and we will announce successful applicants in summer 2021 to allow for projects to start in October 2021.

In addition, our supporting equalities and human rights fund will support organisations in advancing equality and supporting the realisation of human rights. I will launch that fund in early 2021, with successful applicants to be announced, again, in summer 2021 and projects starting in October 2021. Both those funds will run for three years until September 2024, giving that commitment to multiyear funding and providing certainty and stability for longer-term work.

I return now to the advisory group on economic recovery, which was mentioned by the committee convener, Ruth Maguire, in her opening speech. The group was established to advise on Scotland's economic recovery in the wake of Covid-19. In its report, which was published in June, the group recognised the depth, breadth and reach of the third sector and asked us to put it at the heart of planning for recovery and renewal. In our response to that report, we recognised the need for effective partnership working, and that recognition of the sector's vital role has been central to the decision to increase the equalities budget. I hope that that reassures the committee.

We are committed to progressing the recommendations in the committee's report and to addressing the barriers that the third sector faces by strengthening collaboration between the Scottish Government, local government and the sector.

Turning to the amendment in the name of Rachael Hamilton, I know that Ms Hamilton is not on the Equalities and Human Rights Committee, but I wish to reassure her that we regularly update the committee on progress, and I have already done so in my letter in October. If she was on the committee, she would realise that a number of areas cut across many other portfolios, and I updated the committee in October on a number of streams from across every part of Government. I hope that that provides a fuller response to the committee's report.

Funding and partnership working are rightly central to our thinking, and they both form part of the bigger strategic picture and everything else that we do. Earlier this year, in responding to a recommendation that was made by her national advisory council on women and girls, the First Minister announced the establishment of a new directorate for equality, inclusion and human rights in the Scottish Government, and I am sure that the Equalities and Human Rights Committee will be following its work with interest. The new directorate will bring a strategic focus to our work to embed equality and human rights into all of the work that we do. It will ensure that our capacity to embed equalities and human rights across all areas of Government is strengthened. Our work with the third sector will be central to achieving that ambition.

We can all recognise that what we know as part and parcel of the functions of government today have their roots in the past through the efforts of countless people from the charity sector and the third sector who have effectively played their part. For example, universal suffrage, free education, free healthcare and social housing are all products of people standing up for those ideals, and we can all see the impact of the third sector on our policy

decisions and our ideals through the campaigns that are championed through the third sector. They have a deep impact on the work that we do in government.

In reflecting upon those achievements, I am reminded of the words of Michelle Obama:

"There is no magic to achievement. It's really about hard work, choices, and persistence."

It is that hard work, those hard choices and that persistence that are so often a hallmark of the untiring work of our third sector in Scotland.

As we look to the future, we must not underestimate the challenges that we face, and none of us does. The Government's focus on achieving an equal and fair Scotland is unwavering. It is that focus on equality and fairness that will underpin our efforts to meet those challenges.

In closing, I thank the committee for its hard work in producing the report, and for its careful consideration of the evidence that was presented by all who contributed. Again, I acknowledge the work of the countless people in the third sector who are key to realising our ambitions for a fairer Scotland.

15:35

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): The third sector in Scotland has carried out an invaluable role in dealing with Covid-19 under incredibly difficult circumstances. We all agree that we owe the third sector a debt of gratitude. I will also mention the many community groups that sprang up during the pandemic to deliver food and comfort to those who desperately needed it.

The relationship between the third sector and the public sector needs a fundamental shift. We must begin a new partnership-based style of working. The voluntary sector delivers vital services to our communities and we cannot do without it. The sector is far larger than people may think, with more than 40,000 organisations employing more than 100,000 paid staff. However, the sector is struggling to cope with decreasing budgets and funding. The SCVO says that 20 per cent of charities reported

"a critical threat to their financial viability in the next 12 months"

and that the sector faces immediate risk. The SCVO also notes that the Scottish Government has reiterated its commitment

"to longer term funding for the sector",

which the SCVO describes as

"words which we have heard before but very rarely see in practice."

Similarly, the NSPCC in Scotland notes that local authority budgets have shrunk over a number of years, which has had a knock-on effect on the support that the third sector is able to provide.

Since the start of the pandemic, charities have had to cancel fundraising events, which has led to a loss of income-providing services. The demand for charities has been surging. Crohn's and Colitis UK, which is a charity that I work with, is such a lifeline to many people, particularly young people.

The SCVO is at the forefront of the United Kingdom-wide #NeverMoreNeeded campaign, which emphasises that, in the face of coronavirus, charities have never been more needed for the essential support that they provide. More than a third of charities are reporting an increase in demand, with front-line services reporting an exponential increase in demand. For example, in October, citizens advice bureaux issued the highest number of pieces of advice in one month since the beginning of lockdown. The figures also reveal a continued increase in demand for advice on servicing debt. A survey by the National Council for Voluntary Organisations in March showed that more than half of charities—52 per cent—plan to reduce services, which is extremely concerning.

In its evidence to the Equalities and Human Rights Committee, the Fraser of Allander institute noted that parents and people with disabilities have been particularly impacted by the effects of the pandemic. We already knew that those families are the poorest, but it highlights the scandal of care packages being taken away due to reprioritisation. That has led to a real worsening of the standards of living. In some cases, family carers have had to try to pick up the slack. Engender notes that the reduction in social care packages

“has led to an increase of the number of unpaid carers in Scotland ... to 1.1 million, of which 61% are women.”

In general, the situation for most parents has improved with schools going back, but schools are still having to send children home, and children are often having to self-isolate with no childcare infrastructure available. That means that a lot of parents, particularly mothers, are struggling.

Women have to make trade-offs to keep their families functioning, which sometimes means that their working lives have to take a back seat. Therefore, in analysing what has happened during the pandemic, we need to make sure that we are not taking a backwards step in the achievements that we have made for women.

As other members have mentioned, there has been a steep rise in domestic abuse during the pandemic, which issue we have debated many times. Scottish Women's Aid is calling for a new

funding model to ensure adequate and effective support. Funding for domestic abuse services remains precarious, and groups are increasingly reliant on grants from organisations such as the Big Lottery Fund to supplement inadequate Government funding.

The Government needs to learn lessons from its current funding model, respond to the times that we are in, and ensure that human rights and equalities are always taken into account when disbursing funds in the future. We cannot do without the third sector—it has been so vital to us up until now, and it will be in the years ahead.

15:39

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): We have seen how Covid-19 has exacerbated existing inequalities. This debate on funding for the third sector and on securing equalities and human rights is urgent, and I am pleased to be able to contribute to it.

Like other members, I begin by paying tribute to the way in which the third sector across Scotland has responded to the pandemic. I also highlight the invaluable work of the third sector in my constituency of Shetland. People came together for the common good to tackle the dreadful virus and to look out for friends and neighbours, showing that our communities pull together when they are faced with challenges and demonstrating how invaluable the third sector is.

Voluntary Action Shetland had the fantastic idea to launch the Shetland community spirit awards 2020 earlier this year, to recognise and celebrate volunteering during the pandemic and those who give so much to their communities. Some 65 awards were handed out to individuals, organisations and businesses. If more evidence were needed of Shetland's community spirit, the latest statistics from the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations show that there are 232 charities in Shetland—only the Western Isles has more per 1,000 people. It is estimated that 55 per cent of adults in Shetland volunteer formally, which is almost double the national average, and there are countless more informal ways that people in Shetland help out in their community.

Of course, dedicated staff and volunteers in the third sector need much more than warm words from politicians. In the SCVO's "Third Sector Forecast 2019", 88 per cent of respondents from rural areas believed that the sector's financial situation would worsen. The picture will almost certainly have worsened further still this year, as organisations have been prevented from fundraising in the normal ways, while demand for services has increased.

Liberal Democrats want to see the third sector provided with as much certainty as possible, through funding from both local and national Government that recognises the contribution that they make, the demand that they respond to and the need for continuity of services. Indeed, the third sector is well placed to get things moving in the renewal and recovery phase.

The Equalities and Human Rights Committee's letter to the Scottish Government of 29 October 2020 details that it is "disproportionately women" who are unpaid carers, and that carers faced

"barriers to realising their rights"

even before the pandemic. Caring can have an adverse impact on carers' health and wellbeing. That can be the case particularly for young unpaid carers, as their education and, ultimately, their life opportunities can suffer.

There was no respite for carers during lockdown. When adult day care services were stopped for months on end, with no light at the end of the tunnel, many were left feeling that they had been forgotten. The third sector stepped in to pick up some of the pieces. For example, the Shetland befriending scheme set up a Covid-19 telephone befriending service for people who are affected by dementia.

The committee makes the important recommendation that

"the role of unpaid carers ... be translated into actions in the Recovery Plan."

As we rebuild from the pandemic, work to ensure that unpaid carers and their families get the support and recognition that they deserve will benefit from the third sector and the Scottish Government working together in partnership.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate.

15:43

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): As a member of the Equalities and Human Rights Committee, it gives me great pleasure to speak in the debate.

I am sure that we all agree that the third sector plays a vital role in our society. It takes on so many different responsibilities in our communities, and it has the tough but crucial job of providing lifeline services to many people. We are indebted to the sector for those services, which is why it is absolutely right that the Government invests in the region of £500 million annually in the sector.

Has not this year set out starkly the value of the third sector? The committee started taking evidence on its value before Covid-19 was even a thing—if members can remember those days. If

such a thing as a person who did not value the third sector exists, they will surely value it now. When the pandemic and the greatest challenge of our lives struck, it was the third sector organisations that stepped up to the plate first in our communities. Many of them were the only link to the local community for people who were lonely and isolated during lockdown.

I volunteered, and saw some of the excellent work that was done in Coatbridge and Chryston to provide food, befriending, advice, and support to people who have needed it at this hard time. It struck me what a huge burden that was taking off the public sector, which was already stretched and doing amazing work. From Glenboig Development Trust to Kirkshaws Neighbourhood Centre; from the stay connected project to Coatbridge Foodbank and Lanarkshire Community Food and Health Partnership; from Coatbridge Citizens Advice Bureau and Albion Rovers Community Trust to community councils, church groups, and the many more that I do not have time to mention in just four minutes, I thank them all for all that they have done and continue to do.

The sad reality is that those services and many others across Scotland are still needed. Demand is very high as we go into the winter months and, of course, as we experience a second wave of Covid-19. We must continue to appreciate and value the sector fully, which is why I very much welcome the announcement of a further £15 million for the community and third sector recovery programme to support the work of local organisations.

As we move from the immediate response to the recovery, the Scottish Government will refocus part of the investing in communities fund as a £25 million community and third sector recovery programme. That will include business support and investment to help organisations to adapt their operations and income generation, in order to increase sustainability. That funding will support the third sector to continue to provide people and communities with services in response to the on-going impact of the pandemic.

The Scottish Government will begin work to explore other strands of social investment. That will include capital loans to support organisations in the sector to work together and co-locate as demand for office space declines, while leaving organisations with an asset in future years to enhance sustainability. The Government will ensure that that benefits all areas—in particular, those that are hardest hit by the crisis.

The Scottish Government is also committed to working with partners across Scotland to ensure that volunteering is for all and that we are able to tackle inequality and dismantle the barriers to volunteering.

That demonstrates the Government's commitment to the sector, but is it enough? Possibly not. In our report, the committee has highlighted where we need to go: we need to go further.

It is also true that all the money in the world might never be enough. That is because we cannot put a price on communities coming together and responding in love and kindness, as we saw earlier this year. We have to value our third sector, fund it as much as possible and support it to thrive through the rest of this pandemic and beyond, far into the future.

15:47

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): I welcome the debate on the value and importance of the third sector. As someone who worked in the sector for a number of years, I understand its importance in the Lothians and across Scotland.

The increase in demand for services that has resulted from Covid-19 has brought into sharp focus the tremendous importance of the third sector in the lives of many people in our communities, while living in a pandemic also continues to shine a light on the financial difficulties that many organisations in the third sector suffer.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, more than half of third sector organisations have lost funding income because of cancellation of fundraising events, closure of charity shops and so on. For example, Chest, Heart & Stroke Scotland lost £0.5 million in fundraising income in a month, in May, but has reported an 80 per cent increase in demand for its community support services. The implication for those who rely on its vital support, including disabled people who are living with long-term health conditions, and unpaid carers, is hard to overstate.

However although the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has understandably drawn much focus and attention, the work of the committee clearly shows, as has been highlighted by the SCVO, that many of those problems were already there before the pandemic. In a poll that was conducted by the SCVO in December 2018, staff reported that they faced a battle for funding for an increase in demand for their organisations' services, while 82 per cent of charities said that they were worried about the challenges that were being caused by funding cuts.

Third sector funding is a challenge. As an MSP, I have had the privilege of engaging with charities and of talking to many of them over the past four and a half years. The nature of third sector funding means that it is often gathered piecemeal from grants, earned income, statutory funding and

fundraising. Timescales are variable, grants are unpredictable and many organisations simply do not know whether they will exist next year.

The Equalities and Human Rights Committee reported that a quarter of funding for the third sector comes from public sector contracts, many of which are funded by local authorities. Despite continual increases to the Scottish budget, the Scottish National Party has been raiding council budgets to fund its pet projects. That has run down local services and pushed the third sector to the limit. Since the SNP came to power, local government funding as a percentage of Government spending has fallen from 35.9 per cent to 33.1 per cent. That has had a damaging effect on the third sector. Organisations find it difficult to plan for the future and are unsure about what tomorrow will bring.

As Ruth Maguire pointed out, if the crisis has done anything, it has shown us that we need a third sector that can work in partnership across different sectors. The sector's work will always be hampered while people have to go after the same pot of money. The Scottish Government and politicians need to address that.

The Scottish Conservatives would give councils a fair deal to ensure that they could fund our vital third sector. *[Interruption.]* I cannot take an intervention; these are my final few seconds. We would create a permanent financial settlement for councils, to stop the need for them to work out finances year by year, and would instead create three-year funding packages with ring fencing to ensure that the third sector would know what it will get.

We must all appreciate the vital role of the voluntary sector in our communities. Warm words are not enough. They must be backed up with money and long-term funding.

15:51

Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): I am pleased to speak in this debate on valuing the third sector.

Let me briefly respond to something that the Tory member who just spoke said. Mr Balfour referred to SNP "pet projects". I do not know whether he was referring to the important initiative that ensures that hungry children are fed—the Scottish child payment—which has been described as

"a game-changer ... to end child poverty in Scotland",

or to the £100 million winter hardship fund, which will give families who are really struggling a bit of help to get through the winter. I will leave that there.

I commend very much the work of the Equalities and Human Rights Committee, which produced an excellent report. We understand why we are debating it only now, some months after it was published. I also commend the organisations that took the time to participate in the various processes in which the committee engaged, as it sought to elicit as many views as possible.

In advance of today's debate, members received from excellent third sector organisations many submissions, setting out actions that they have taken in recent months and, of course, asking for funding. I am sure that those requests have also landed on the Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government's desk and that she will look at them carefully as we come to the budget period.

I was particularly struck by the submission from Samaritans. At this time of anxiety, uncertainty and upset, after many long months of Covid-19 restrictions and as we prepare for Christmas, it is important to flag up that Samaritans will, as always, be there for people who need emotional support over the Christmas period. There is a free helpline, and confidentiality is guaranteed. Its number is 116123. I urge anyone who feels that they need help to contact—by phone or email—Samaritans, whose staff are trained to provide assistance.

As has been mentioned, the third sector has been pivotal in Scotland's response to the pandemic. It has been there to help people and communities to get through, which is why I was pleased that, at the beginning of the pandemic—which seems to be a long time ago—the Scottish Government announced the £22 million resilience fund. The Government managed—through, I am sure, a lot of hard work behind the scenes—to get the fund open for business as early as 25 March.

That fund, together with other funding streams that were subsequently made available, has been pivotal in ensuring that the third sector could do what it is excellent at doing, which is helping individuals and communities to get through the challenges that face them—in particular, the challenges that have been generated by the pandemic.

During that time, there has been discussion about what will happen next. I am pleased that, in the programme for government, the Scottish Government announced the £25 million community and third sector recovery programme, which is intended to help third sector organisations through the challenging circumstances that we continue to face and the new circumstances that we face as a result of Covid, and to adapt the way in which they operate and generate their income. I am sure that that fund will be very important in helping third sector organisations to do just that.

There is also consideration of a possible capital loan scheme, because many organisations will need to co-locate with others in one setting, due to the decline in demand for office space.

A lot of activity has been undertaken by the Scottish Government to help the third sector to get through to the other side of the pandemic. I take this opportunity to commend the evident commitment of the Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government, who has shown her determination to fight her corner for her department and to make a real difference to people's lives.

I thank every single volunteer, charity worker and community champion who has gone the extra mile to make such a difference in my constituency of Cowdenbeath and across Scotland. Speaking of my constituency, it is important to thank, once again, the volunteers at the EATS—Edible and Tasty Spaces—Rosyth project and Oor Wee Cafe in Kelty. The other weekend, fantastic volunteers spent their whole weekend collecting food and financial donations from the generous communities of Benarty and Lochgelly. In just one weekend, they collected more than 3,000kg of food and more than £2,200. Where on earth would we all be without such determined volunteers and outstanding communities?

15:57

James Kelly (Glasgow) (Lab): This is a timely debate, and it gives Parliament an opportunity to thank those in the third sector who have made such a tremendous contribution during the pandemic. As a Glasgow region MSP, I thank the many citizens advice bureaux throughout Glasgow that have stepped in and done such excellent work. I also thank organisations such as Leap in Halfway and Healthy n Happy in Rutherglen, who have been at the centre of many community efforts.

I thank the Equalities and Human Rights Committee for its report and the work that it has done, which lay a good platform for the budgetary challenges that the third sector faces in the upcoming 2021 budget. The pandemic not only makes demands on the budget but makes tremendous demands on the third sector.

There have been health challenges for people during the pandemic. People have been left isolated. There have been employment challenges—people have lost their jobs, had to work from home or do part-time work—which has left a lot of people vulnerable and needing help. That is where the third sector has been required to step in.

There has been a particular challenge for women. I was concerned to read in the Engender

briefing that the number of unpaid carers in Scotland has recently gone up 392,000 to 1.1 million; 61 per cent of those carers are women. Those organisations have highlighted the impact that the pandemic has had on women, and that will be a focus of budgetary demands going forward.

Clearly, we also need to consider how money is allocated. Although it is welcome that a resilience fund has been put in place, it deeply concerns me that South Lanarkshire has not been fairly treated. If we look at the allocations per head of the grants that were paid out, we see that South Lanarkshire Council got £1.05 per head, which is the third lowest amount in Scotland. Compare that to the Western Isles, which got £15.05 per head.

The Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government (Aileen Campbell): I am not sure which fund James Kelly is referring to, but I urge him to look at the information that we have published across a range of different funds to see what other areas South Lanarkshire has been supported in.

James Kelly: To answer directly, I am quoting from appendix 1 of the analysis paper on the Scottish Government's website. I also point to the fact that Highland Council was paid £1.273 million from the resilience fund and South Lanarkshire got only £337,000.

Aileen Campbell: Will the member take another intervention?

James Kelly: Do I have time, Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): There is, indeed, time and it is a debate, so it is up to you.

Aileen Campbell: I urge the member again to look at not only the third sector resilience fund but the community wellbeing fund and the supporting communities fund, and to look at South Lanarkshire's allocation across the range of different funding streams that have been distributed to a range of local authorities.

James Kelly: I am looking at the terms of this debate. We are looking at support for the third sector, and it concerns me that Highland Council is getting nearly £1 million more than South Lanarkshire Council. The front-bench ministerial team well understands South Lanarkshire and the demands on the third sector there, so it is of great concern that South Lanarkshire Council has received £1 million less than Highland Council. I mean no disrespect to Highland Council for securing that allocation, but we need to be given much more support than we have received from the resilience fund.

There are significant issues in relation to—

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

James Kelly: Is there time, Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Everybody is looking at me with anticipation—I feel so powerful. Yes, you can take the intervention, Mr Kelly.

James Kelly: I will take the intervention.

Emma Harper: In comparing sums of £1 million and £500,000 for different regions, do we not need to dissect those amounts further? Issues of rurality need to be considered, whether in South Lanarkshire or the Highlands.

James Kelly: I accept that, but I point the member to the fact that Covid has presented significant challenges for areas of South Lanarkshire such as Cambuslang, Rutherglen, Hamilton and Clydesdale; the area is in a level 4 lockdown, so the third sector will face much more demand than other areas of Scotland. The question that I keep posing must be posed: why is the funding that those areas have received from the resilience fund significantly less than the funding for other areas?

As I was going on to say, there are real issues for the budget in relation to the third sector, because demand is going up and the ability of those third sector groups to fundraise has been limited, so their funding is also limited. Aside from the issues that I have raised in relation to examining the budget for next year, we need to look at how much money is available to the third sector and how it should be distributed.

I am glad that I have provoked a wee bit of debate. I thank the committee for its report, because it shines a light on the significant work that the third sector carries out and the question of how we fund the third sector to deal with the issues that the pandemic has brought forward.

16:04

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): I am pleased to speak in the debate at a time when the voluntary sector has never been more important. Of course, we know that the sector is vital all year round in normal times. It is a crucial partner that is embedded in our society. Frankly, all Governments rely on a functioning and well-run voluntary sector, because it is a core partner to the work of Government.

Supporting businesses has been central to dealing with the pandemic, and rightly so. All businesses are being hit extremely hard, and it is right that they should be given a lifeline. Thousands of jobs are at stake, and it is an incredibly worrying time for businesses. However, the voluntary sector should be considered in an

equal light, because a society cannot function without the great work that it does.

The helpful briefing from the Scottish Council of Voluntary Organisations reminds us that voluntary sector funding in Scotland is complex and precarious. As others have said, and as I know from my constituency, most third sector organisations operate through a jigsaw of statutory funding, fundraised income, earned income and grant income. The SCVO says that there is no silver bullet for the funding issues that the third sector faces. It welcomes the Scottish Government's financial support, but says that even with that investment, there is continued financial uncertainty for the sector, with 20 per cent of charities reporting a critical threat to their financial viability in the next 12 months.

The equality and human rights budget allocation has been significantly increased and now stands at its highest level: £30.2 million, which is up from £24.6 million in 2019-20. Crucially, there is the £25 million community and third sector recovery programme, which aims to support charities, community groups, social enterprises and voluntary organisations that are supporting people and communities through the shift from lockdown to recovery. I am delighted that the Scottish Government is also increasing support to the violence against women and girls sector through revised funding streams, and supporting work to embed equality and human rights more firmly across Government.

That is the good news, but these are not normal times. The third sector and, in particular, social enterprises have been severely impacted during the crisis, and citing figures and statistics does not always mirror what is happening on the front line. There is no doubt that the third sector would have a much greater chance of securing regular and realistic funding if the Scottish Government had the necessary financial levers. Not knowing what our budget allowance from Westminster will be from one year to the next severely hampers our ability to reassure the sector of sustained funding.

That said, the Government has committed to seek to extend three-year rolling funding where possible, and it is actively progressing that work by striving to confirm future grant offers before the preceding funding period ends. We know that local support is normally the responsibility of the local authority, and the Government is encouraging all funders to consider longer-term funding, wherever possible.

In my Strathkelvin and Bearsden constituency, we are extremely fortunate to have a thriving voluntary sector. In fact, my constituency office adjoins the East Dunbartonshire Voluntary Action office, which is a fantastic body that co-ordinates the many strands of voluntary agencies throughout

the area. As has been the case in other areas, during the pandemic, the sector has come into its own—from new community groups that are working to deliver food and help to vulnerable residents, to established agencies that are working 24/7. Like others, I thank those groups sincerely. The acts of kindness, generosity and compassion across our communities have told a story about Scotland and its people that we need to celebrate and build on.

We have seen the enormous contribution that the voluntary sector has made during this terrible pandemic. We must build on that work, because a thriving third sector is vital to Scotland and is an essential partner to Government.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Alison Harris, to be followed by Emma Harper.

Alison Harris (Central Scotland) (Con): [*Inaudible.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Your microphone is off, Ms Harris. Is the card working properly? [*Interruption.*] Oh goodness—that is exciting. You will have to move seats, because the microphone needs to be on for the official report. Can you move to another seat? I realise that that is not exactly the best system. That happened to me the other day, so we have that in common.

I will take Emma Harper, if she is ready, and we will come back to Alison Harris. Ms Harper, you have lift-off.

16:09

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): Thank you, Presiding Officer—I am ready.

Although I am not a member of the Equalities and Human Rights Committee, I am interested to speak in the debate, as I have had much involvement with third sector organisations across Dumfries and Galloway. I, too, thank the members of the committee and its clerks for all their hard work in producing the report, and everyone in the sector for all their hard work, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic.

I am the deputy convener of the Health and Sport Committee. Earlier this year, it conducted a short inquiry, the report on which is entitled "Social Prescribing: physical activity is an investment, not a cost". The report that we are considering today, "Valuing the Third Sector", has many similarities with that report. One of the overarching conclusions in the Health and Sport Committee's report was that there is not enough investment in social prescribing activities, which can help to support people's physical and mental health and wellbeing. Many of those social prescribing activities are delivered by third sector

organisations, such as Third Sector Dumfries and Galloway.

The third sector plays a crucial role in supporting community development and inclusive growth, and in providing lifeline services, facilities and employment to people across Scotland. The third sector also provides funding for life-changing social prescribing models to help people with a range of health conditions, from depression and anxiety to addiction and isolation.

One example of a fantastic partnership project is the River Garden Auchincruive in Ayr, which I have spoken about many times in this session. It is a residential alcohol and drugs recovery service that uses a social prescribing approach to recovery from alcohol and drugs misuse. The team did well to engage the community, reduce stigma and enhance the human rights of the River Garden residents. The programme works in partnership with the third sector and receives third sector funding. It is a strong example of the partnership working that is called for in the Equalities and Human Rights Committee's report, which Ruth Maguire described in opening the debate, and of how supporting the third sector can, in turn, help to support people, our society and our economy. It is interesting to read the conclusion in paragraph 137 of the Equalities and Human Rights Committee's report, in which the committee

"asks the Scottish Government to direct or encourage a greater focus on human rights and partnerships with the third sector within the budget allocation process."

I welcome that.

I also welcome the Government-funded third sector resilience fund, which opened for applications on 25 March. It has been a welcome lifeline for many organisations across Dumfries and Galloway and Scotland. Through the fund, £22 million was made available as part of the £80 million that was allocated to the third sector, which enabled community organisations such as Third Sector Dumfries and Galloway to offer grants to community groups across Scotland, as well as to support their own efforts to prevent social isolation and loneliness during the pandemic. I volunteered with Third Sector Dumfries and Galloway during the initial lockdown. I participated in the telephone touch base scheme, which enabled me to speak to people who identified as being at risk of isolation or loneliness as a consequence of lockdown.

There is no doubt that the third sector resilience fund helped many people across Scotland, and I appeal to the minister to ensure that the new £25 million community and third sector recovery fund continues to work to tackle isolation and loneliness, as well as funding lifeline services across Scotland.

I again welcome the engagement and support that the third sector has provided for River Garden Auchincruive and look forward to that continuing. I echo the findings of "Valuing the Third Sector" in emphasising the importance of valuing the third sector, and I appeal to the Scottish Government to ensure that it is funded adequately to enable the fabulous, outstanding work that the third sector does to continue in the future.

16:13

Alison Harris (Central Scotland) (Con): Before I begin, I declare an interest: I am involved with a third sector charity. I refer members to my entry in the register of interests.

The third sector in Scotland is in a dire situation. All across the country, organisations that cover every imaginable cause have never faced a more worrying future. If that were not the case, the Equalities and Human Rights Committee would never have needed to undertake its inquiry, and we would not be debating its findings today.

Of course, the Covid-19 pandemic, which has brought the world to its knees, has certainly not helped matters, but the sector was in big trouble even before then. Most of the problems that are set out in the inquiry report predate the pandemic. Let us be honest: that is, in part, very much due to the Scottish National Party Government's approach to council funding. The Government should not hide behind Covid when the actual reason for the situation that we are in is 13 years of domestic failures. [*Interruption.*] I will make some progress, thank you.

The stark situation that charities face is, in part, a result of a political choice and is not all down to a misfortune of circumstances.

Without local government cash, charities and voluntary groups can barely keep the lights on. They need core funding to enable them to operate. The consequences of their struggle to stay afloat are far-reaching. Whether we are talking about children in poverty, women fleeing domestic abuse or local groups that provide care to adults with learning difficulties, the third sector is an irreplaceable fixture in Scottish society.

It is not just those in desperate trouble who benefit from third sector organisations. They help people improve their skills and careers and more than play their part when it comes to aspiration and people reaching their potential. Evidence that was given to the inquiry described the depressing state of affairs that is faced by many groups that are trying to improve the prospect of normal Scots. Equate Scotland, which aims to get more women involved in science, has said that it can no longer provide one-to-one career clinics that support women seeking work. Why would any Government

be satisfied that that kind of problem was developing under its watch? A Government that was serious about the third sector would not allow that to happen.

The third sector has a great deal more to offer than simply helping people at their lowest ebb, although that is a crucial factor too. The voluntary sector employs more than 100,000 people in Scotland—around 3.4 per cent of the workforce. They are talented people who provide economic benefit by paying their taxes and contributing to society.

Even before lockdown, the SNP planned to cut council budgets by more than £200 million. *[Interruption.]* I will make some progress, thank you.

If the pandemic has taught us anything, it is that charities and voluntary groups that put the needs of others before their own make an immense contribution. I put on record my personal thanks to everyone involved.

Society cannot afford to live without the third sector, and nor can the economy. Therefore, we need a commitment that the Government will support the sector. It can start by adopting the Scottish Conservative proposal to create a permanent financial settlement for councils, ring fencing vital money.

Let us not forget that the work that is carried out by third sector groups would in many cases fall on the state if they were to collapse. Therefore, the Scottish Government must heed the evidence of those who took the time to get involved in the inquiry, and we must all ensure that, the next time that Parliament meets to discuss the third sector, it is to pay tribute to its remarkable contribution rather than to discuss threats to its very existence.

16:18

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): I thank Ruth Maguire and her committee for the excellent work that they have done on what is an excellent report.

I have always valued the third sector and have always felt that it plays a crucial role in our communities. From my early days as a councillor on Renfrewshire Council, I could see that the third sector provided not just a different way to deliver services but, in many cases, a better way. I can see that the Scottish Government wants to create the best conditions for the third sector and voluntary sector to thrive and to contribute to the recovering economy and society. The announcement of the £25 million investment is a perfect example of that.

Many people can talk about what the third sector did in our communities during lockdown, and many have done so today. Many third sector

organisations in Paisley did great work, but I will stick with one organisation and its many component parts: St Mirren Football Club.

Many football teams claim to be more than just a football club but, in the case of St Mirren, that is true. During the lockdown, the St Mirren Charitable Foundation delivered emergency packages throughout the town and worked with first team players to ensure that the supporters were okay. Gayle Brannigan of the foundation is a force of nature. She ensures that the foundation delivers for the people of Paisley and is always out and about, getting the funding that the organisation needs.

I declare an interest in relation to what I will say next, as I am the convener of the St Mirren Independent Supporters Association. St Mirren FC is part of a pretty unique partnership. In 2016, SMISA and local businessman Gordon Scott set out on a journey towards fan ownership. Under a 10-year plan, SMISA was to own a majority of the shares in the club by 2026, which would ensure that our club was never the plaything of a currently wealthy person or of those who were attracted by the big bright lights of professional Paisley football.

This is where it gets extremely interesting. SMISA will own a majority in the club next year, after entering into a unique partnership with the Kibble Education and Care Centre, which is a charitable organisation that has been around in Paisley since 1840. Two of the town's great institutions—Kibble from 1840 and St Mirren from 1877—have come together to work in a unique way.

We took the German football club model. In Germany, the commercial partner tends to be a major public limited company or organisation, but we have done the Scottish thing of going for a third sector organisation. What club can we say is delivering for young people in Scotland? Many of the young people who Kibble works with go on to work in hospitality. If we can find a way to use the club to make life better for them, so much the better. That is the unique difference of our partnership.

Instead of being fan owned in 2026, St Mirren will be fan owned next year, through SMISA working together with Kibble. That has not been easy—it has been difficult to bring together businesspeople, a charitable organisation and volunteers. However, nothing that is worth while is easy in life—we must step up to the challenge and do it. I have always been a great believer in being positive and finding a way to solve the problems that face us.

The way in which St Mirren Football Club and Kibble are working towards one goal and moving

forward is the future for Scottish football and fan ownership in Scotland.

16:22

David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):

I am delighted to close for Labour in this excellent debate on valuing the third sector, which I congratulate the Equalities and Human Rights Committee on securing. The convener, Ruth Maguire, set the scene well when she stressed how embedded the third sector has been in all our lives, not least during the pandemic.

Every member has a connection with the sector—whether it is personal, through family or through work and leisure. I am no different. I volunteered with the Samaritans in Inverness in my early 20s; I worked as an assistant director for the SCVO in my late 40s; and now, in my early 60s, I am a trustee of the Scottish Cot Death Trust, which supported my family through a time of grief and sorrow.

In its briefing, the SCVO makes the key point that,

“During the pandemic, a light was shone on the financial vulnerability of the sector”.

Many organisations had to cease trading, public funding was halted and demand for services and support increased significantly for many organisations, while others could not operate at all.

Many members, including Rona Mackay, Fulton MacGregor, Jeremy Balfour and James Kelly, argued that third sector funding is complex and precarious. Do we need a new compact between the Scottish Government and the sector, to ensure the sector’s long-term financial sustainability? Surely the time is right to look for a new funding model that will ensure that human rights and equalities take centre stage.

As the NSPCC briefing aptly puts it, the Covid-19 crisis presents an

“opportunity to make meaningful, sustainable, transformative change. We need to harness the desire to do things differently, to reach out to families with a strengthened social safety net to prevent longer term difficulties developing in children and young people’s lives.”

I was struck by the consistency of positivity in the speeches, if I can put it in that way. Rachael Hamilton said that the third sector is crucial and invaluable to our society, and the minister said that the third sector’s work started long before the pandemic and will continue long after it ends. Pauline McNeill said that 20 per cent of the charity sector faces financial crisis during the next 12 months, and Beatrice Wishart talked about paying tribute to the third sector during the pandemic and made specific reference to Shetland.

I believe that this has been an excellent debate, with well-informed and insightful speeches from across the chamber. We owe the third sector a deep debt of gratitude for the work that it carries out in Scotland—not as an optional extra, but as a key component of our welfare state. Surely the message from the chamber is that we value the third sector in strengthening our communities, delivering vital services and building a wellbeing economy.

Scotland’s budget for 2021-22 offers an ideal opportunity to embed the third sector as a key player by creating sustainable funding and reinforcing its partnership role in a fairer, greener nation. As John Holmes famously said:

“There is no exercise better for the heart than reaching down and lifting people up.”

16:26

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am delighted to close on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives in this debate on valuing the third sector.

Having served as a local councillor for 18 years, I am well aware of the work that takes place across the sector. We have heard about the 40,000 charities in Scotland that are supporting individuals and organisations the length and breadth of the country. There is no doubt that they play a crucial, positive role in supporting individuals day to day.

The third sector has had a vital role to play throughout the pandemic that we are suffering at present, which has ensured that, as we move towards the recovery that will take place in the weeks and month ahead, we will see the third sector continue to shine. Its organisations and structures are there to support people on the ground, and it has the expertise and agility to adapt to the changing circumstances and environments that it faces. However, we have heard about the significant amount of public sector money that is required to ensure that the third sector can thrive and survive, and many organisations faced difficult times prior to the pandemic.

The question of sustainable funding has been raised repeatedly. Many organisations rely on significant levels of funding, and the third sector has struggled to ensure that it is continually supported. We have heard about the funding packages and multiyear funding that some sectors and organisations receive, but not all of them are in that fortunate position. They rely on local authorities to support them, and, since the Scottish Government has come to power, there has, without question, been a real-terms funding gap in local government. That has been taken on board

by many organisations and individuals, and some charitable organisations in the sector have said that local government funding is a major issue. We need to understand that and support local authorities to ensure that they have that involvement.

The Scottish Conservatives want a fair deal for local councils. That will require the Scottish Government to ring fence a percentage of its budget, year on year, to ensure that local government funding follows something similar to the Barnett formula. If that had taken place, hundreds of millions of pounds could have been poured into local government. Instead, we have seen hundreds of millions of pounds removed from local government. The Scottish Government has also ensured that the budgets of many in the third sector have reduced since 2014.

Aileen Campbell: I hear the largely conciliatory tone that Alexander Stewart is using. However, I want to put on record the fact that the Scottish Government has endeavoured to treat local government fairly. Local authorities have enjoyed a cash-terms revenue budget increase of 3.6 per cent between 2013 and 2020. If we look at what the member's own party has done to English local authorities, we see that there has been an equivalent real-terms reduction of 22.8 per cent.

Alexander Stewart: I thank the cabinet secretary for her intervention. Funding for Scotland's local authorities has been reduced year on year, in real terms, since the SNP Government came to power 13 years ago. Those reductions in funding do not help when they lead to a reduction in council services. Age Scotland has said that the third sector is being used to plug the gap where services were previously provided by the public sector. Equate Scotland, a charity that aims to get more women into science, has said that it will be unable to support some of those individuals because its costs have increased while its funding has remained stagnant.

I pay tribute to Ruth Maguire, the committee's convener, who spoke about the engagement that has taken place. Committee members have gone out to listen and talk to many individuals and organisations that play a vital role.

We have talked about partnership working, co-location, information sharing and respect for the third sector, and those are all vital. Pauline McNeill talked about community groups having provided support during the pandemic. They have made an effort and have saved many people from the depths of the pandemic, providing respect and support.

Jeremy Balfour talked about the difficulties of income loss for many charities. A third of bodies in

the sector have seen dramatic decreases in their support.

I hope that the Scottish Government will support the Conservative amendment and will consider the committee's conclusions before the end of this parliamentary session.

The Scottish Conservatives fully support the excellent work that the third sector does. Those groups play a vital role in ensuring that everyone is valued and looked after. Excellent work takes place every day, and many organisations have gone above and beyond that during the pandemic. We must not see them disappear, because they plug the gaps. I am delighted to participate today, and I pay tribute to every volunteer who has gone the extra mile to support our communities.

16:32

The Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government (Aileen Campbell): I am pleased, on behalf of the Scottish Government, to close this important debate about the third sector and how it can be supported.

I place on record my thanks to the countless third sector organisations throughout the country that have done an inordinate amount of work over the past nine months to support and look after our communities. I also put on record my thanks to the committee for its hard and thorough work. The committee has heard directly from a wide range of third sector partners and has used that evidence to instruct a valuable report.

Although Covid interrupted the timing of the debate on that report, it is useful to have the discussion now. The past nine months and the impact of Covid have shown just how important the third sector is to our people, our communities and our country. Those organisations' reach, the variety of what they provide and the compassion that they show have been, as the SCVO's campaign slogan captures, never more needed.

That is why, early in the pandemic, I announced £350 million for our communities, our local authority partners, the third sector and TSIs to help to support and ensure our national resilience. Throughout the pandemic, I kept in regular contact with the third sector partners who were helping to administer the funding. We are grateful for what they did and grateful also to the third sector partners who were delivering on the ground.

There were groups in Orkney, the Western Isles, Glasgow and South Lanarkshire. James Kelly will be happy to know that I engaged with Healthy n Happy. I met Healthy Valleys in my constituency, too. We also met the impressive Falkirk TSI, which Ruth Maguire mentioned in her introductory remarks. The third sector interface in

Falkirk, supported by Stenhousemuir Football Club, again illustrates the point made by George Adam about how instrumental our football clubs have been to community resilience. Stenhousemuir is one of those.

The groups all act with compassion and care, and they do what works in the context of the communities that they know best. In response to that, we delivered the funding with flexibility and with trust. Partnership flourished at a pace and scale that we do not want to lose.

That is why, among the trauma and awfulness of the pandemic, we are determined to capture the good changes, the things that worked and the messages that we have had from the third sector over the past nine months about feeling valued, supported, trusted and respected. Even though the unfortunate prompt was a pandemic, we need to use this moment to improve what we do and how we value our important third sector. That is why my colleague Shirley-Anne Somerville and I established the social renewal advisory board, with a key focus on what we need to change and the system that we need to disrupt to protect the third sector. The third sector and volunteering circle is examining how we do that, and the social renewal advisory board will report to us very soon.

In response to a demand for a move away from resilience towards recovery, we announced a £25 million community and third sector recovery programme in this year's programme for government. The programme, which opened for applications on 21 September and will run until March of next year, is designed to help charities, community groups, social enterprises and voluntary organisations to continue to provide on-going crisis support to those in need.

The programme has two elements. One is adapt and thrive, which will assist organisations to plan and implement changes to their operating models and working practices to enable them to continue to operate in a very different social and economic climate. The other element is communities recovery, which will support organisations in planning and restarting the delivery of existing services for communities and/or the development of new services that are identified as a priority due to the impact of Covid. As part of the winter support package, we will expand the programme and invest a further £15 million in it. That funding will be used to enable more community and third sector organisations to feel supported and to ensure greater resilience.

We are taking those actions and providing that funding because, if recovery is to be about more than just reverting back to the old ways of doing things, we need a flourishing third sector. For us to translate the ambition of the national performance framework into reality, we need the third sector.

Therefore, I agree that funding needs to be multiyear. I have endeavoured to provide that in my portfolio, but we need it to happen more widely across the rest of Government and wider public life. We also need to respect the third sector, which is why, in response to the advisory group on economic recovery, we committed to work with local government and the third sector to address the barriers that face the sector. That is taking on board the steer from the committee, and, no doubt, it will also be among the recommendations from the social renewal advisory board.

I must point out that it feels as though the Tories are attempting to politicise what has largely been an instructive debate. They need to realise that the funding situation is not helped when we continue to get a one-year budget or that budget continues to be delayed. It does not help that we have continued Brexit uncertainty and it does not help the third sector—*[Interruption.]*

If the members who are shouting from the side would care to listen to people in the third sector, they would say that callous welfare cuts certainly do not help the sector to survive and thrive. However, let us not get bogged down by the attempts to hijack the debate, because that is not what people in the third sector want from their Parliament. They want their Parliament to work together to ensure that the sector continues to flourish.

We have opportunities ahead, and we will be instructed by the really useful report that Ruth Maguire has led on. We have the opportunity of the recommendations that will come shortly from the social renewal advisory board. We have provided funding to help the third sector to adapt and thrive and to cope with the new situation that it is experiencing.

We desire to move to using wellbeing and away from gross domestic product as the simple way of determining whether we are a successful country. Along with that, we will need the third sector to flourish. We need the sector to be respected and to be at the head of decisions on budget, not at the coo's tail, which is quite often what happens. We need to continue to work with the third sector in partnership and to have it alongside us on the journey, as that is the only way that the sector will be able to continue to flourish.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: It is a while since I have heard the coo's tail mentioned, but there we are. I call Mary Fee to close for the committee.

16:39

Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab): It is a pleasure to close the debate on behalf of the Equalities and Human Rights Committee. The

importance of the work that the third sector carries out has shone through members' speeches. Many of our constituents rely on the services and advocacy that the voluntary sector provides to lead their lives or to help them when they face particularly difficult times.

That has been evident in my area in the west of Scotland through the work of Home-Start. Its tireless efforts to support vulnerable young families in a variety of ways over the past nine months, including supplying food and providing children's activities have meant that 118 families across Renfrewshire have had some of their burden lifted.

As Pauline McNeill highlighted, the third sector has become a beacon in the community during the pandemic by providing essential services to our most vulnerable. Beatrice Wishart spoke of the valuable work that the third sector does in Shetland, and praised the Shetland community spirit. I take this opportunity to associate myself with George Adam's remarks about St Mirren Football Club and Kibble in Paisley and the fantastic work that they continue to do.

One of the central themes of the committee's report is the increasing demand for services, while funding is being reduced. Almost all the written submissions that we received highlight the funding challenges or express the view that public funding for the third sector should be increased.

Age Scotland believed that the voluntary sector is often left to "plug the gap" for services that were previously publicly funded, and other groups faced increasing demand at the same time as their budgets were being reduced. The Health and Social Care Alliance reported a growing trend for local authorities to demand that

"third sector organisations deliver services ever more cheaply".

In response, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities argued that the funding of third sector organisations fell predominantly within the unprotected portion of council budgets and that in the 2019/20 budget, only 39 per cent were unprotected. When savings had to be made, however, COSLA said that

"councils have no choice but to take any necessary savings from service areas that fall within the non-protected area",

meaning that budgets on wellbeing, infrastructure, the economy and the creation of sustainable communities were affected. Cuts were amplified in those areas and a 2 per cent cut in overall budgets became at least a 5 per cent saving from non-protected areas.

Jeremy Balfour spoke of the concerns that local authorities have raised and must deal with day to day. Members from all parties raised concerns

about funding and called attention to the fact that 20 per cent of charities in Scotland do not think that they will be financially viable in 12 months' time.

Those tensions demonstrate the need for closer partnership working across central and local Government, other funders and the voluntary sector. It is clear to the committee that the current approach is not working and is not sustainable in the long term, particularly as we enter a period of uncertainty due to the health crisis, in which there are already signs of continued increase in demand for services.

As the committee's convener outlined, there is a need for a long-term funding model for the voluntary sector. Short-term funding of one year or less creates unnecessary churn for charities. They spend time and resources applying for funding and the people who work in the sector face the constant threat of losing their jobs if funding applications are not successful. That also results in time and money being devoted to recruitment and training, adding a further burden and diverting resources away from front-line delivery.

I welcome the minister's comments in her opening remarks about the move to multiyear funding. However, concerns remain, as speakers from all parties have pointed out. Short-term funding means not only that charities lose talented employees, but that they risk vital projects being compromised due to time and financial constraints.

The Covid-19 crisis has made the need for long-term planning ever more urgent, as unprecedented challenges and threats have emerged. The pandemic has brought to the fore many pre-existing issues relating to the long-term sustainability of the sector.

The Scottish Government's support for the sector during the pandemic has been welcome, but some groups are falling through the gaps and are facing difficult times.

The issue of the accessibility of funding streams arose during our 2019 deliberations on the third sector. We heard from the Fife Centre for Equalities about how challenging it is for smaller equality groups to access funding and, last month, in relation to the emergency funding provided by the Scottish Government, we were told that organisations in Glasgow serving ethnic minority populations did less well than expected in accessing emergency funding. It is vital that the Government ensures that parity of access to funding is achieved and the committee urges it to heed the concerns that have been raised during the debate and in our reports and to revisit what it can do to support the sector, to ensure that there is equal access to funding.

We know that reduced budgets and short-term funding contribute to a gap between national policy aims and the experience of the third sector and service users on the ground. Several examples of the failure of the system to protect rights were provided by those who attended the Glasgow TSI event in 2019. A number of participants described the people whom they support as being afraid of public services—housing, immigration, social security, criminal justice and social care were specifically mentioned. We also heard concerns about disabled women not having access to key health services or screening and about women who were fleeing from violence not being able to access housing or other key services. Those are not a result of the pandemic; they are pre-existing concerns that we know will have been exacerbated by the health crisis.

In the Minister for Older People and Equalities' response to our report, she emphasised the role of prevention, close partnership working and outcomes-based performance to improve outcomes and tackle inequalities in a sustainable way. We have heard today that there has been very little progress on the outcomes for the sector and the people who rely on it. The committee therefore urges the Scottish Government to do more to address those very serious concerns.

I thank again everyone who took part in the debate. It is clear that not only is there widespread support for the third sector, but a great deal of respect from members across the chamber for the valuable work that it does in all our communities. I support the motion in the name of Ruth Maguire.

Mental Health Support for Young People

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): The next item of business is a debate on motion S5M-23498, in the name of Johann Lamont, on an inquiry into mental health support for young people in Scotland. I ask members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak button.

16:47

Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on behalf of the Public Petitions Committee about its inquiry into mental health support for young people in Scotland and its report, which we published in July. Before I talk about our inquiry in more detail, I will start by reflecting on the catalyst for that important piece of committee work.

In December 2016, a public petition was lodged by Annette McKenzie calling for consultation with, and consent from, a parent or guardian before medication is prescribed to treat mental ill health if the patient is under 18. Ms McKenzie lodged her petition following the tragic death of her daughter, Britney, from an overdose of prescription medication. Annette McKenzie has shown such courage in highlighting her concerns, doing so in circumstances that no parent should ever have to face, and we know that she continues to raise alarm about the scale of distress among our young people and the desperate need for action.

The committee took written and oral evidence on the petition from a wide range of individuals and organisations, including the Scottish Government and representatives from the medical profession and organisations that have a role in promoting and protecting children and young people. From that evidence, it was clear that there was strong support among key stakeholders for young people under the age of 18 being able to give consent to treatment for themselves and for the principle of patient confidentiality being protected.

Although some people will hold a different view, as a committee we respect the position that young people have a right to confidentiality when accessing medical advice and support. However, we noted the importance of medical professionals highlighting to young people, when prescribing for their distress, the importance of them seeking support from someone whom they trust.

The evidence that the committee gathered raised serious concerns about young people's experiences of seeking help for their mental health, in particular when they were doing so for

the first time. The evidence was compelling, and it was clear to the committee that we needed to explore the issue in greater detail. We therefore agreed to establish an inquiry to enable us to understand the issues and suggest improvements for how young people who are feeling low and/or anxious, in particular for the first time, can get the advice and support that they need.

The committee is grateful to all those who engaged with our inquiry and met with us. We are especially proud that our work has been heavily influenced by the views of young people who were prepared to share their experiences of accessing mental health support services. I thank them all for their bravery and their honesty; the evidence that they gave was critical to our understanding and, ultimately, to our report recommendations.

Throughout our report, we acknowledge that good work is being done across the country. We recognise the desire and the energy in government at all levels, and among educational, healthcare and third sector organisations, to actively improve the support that is available for young people. The committee was fortunate enough to see some of that work at first hand.

However, it was evident from our engagement that, notwithstanding that desire and energy, many young people are struggling to find the help that they need. We heard examples of successful approaches, such as the whole-system approach that is being applied in the Scottish Borders and North Ayrshire. Partnership working was highlighted throughout as key to providing good-quality support to young people. However, such a co-ordinated approach is not the experience of young people in all parts of the country. We therefore believe that it is imperative that integration authorities and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities work together to identify areas of good practice and opportunities for agencies to work more closely together to develop specialist services.

It was clear from our evidence that there is a lack of information—or at least accessible information—for many young people and their families, and even for those professionals who are seeking to support them, about the services that are available. We therefore stress the need for a comprehensive mapping of the range of services that are being offered in communities. That would ensure a more effective network of services, while creating an opportunity for gaps in support to be identified and addressed. It is crucial that the information is available and accessible and is actively promoted to young people and relevant professionals. To achieve that, we urge the Scottish Government to set out the minimum level of tier 1 service provision that should be available

locally and to work with integration authorities to provide clear pathways to support services.

We recommend that integration authorities take an inventory of all the services that are supporting young people's mental health in order to build an accurate picture of the provision that is available locally. That information then needs to be shared widely. Although we recognise that some integration authorities have already done that, it is clear that not all of them have.

Parents and carers, in sharing their experience and knowledge with us, have expressed how desperately they have tried to support their children as best they can. However, in many cases, they too are struggling. Alongside information and advice to help them to identify the signs and know who to turn to when mental health issues arise, we recognise that parents may also need support themselves. As a result, we recommend that the Scottish Government commission work to identify how best to support parents and carers to access information about their children's mental health and signpost them to access the right services.

There has been much scrutiny across the Parliament of the Scottish Government's commitment to ensure that every secondary school has access to counselling services. Although the committee welcomes that commitment, we note that counselling alone will not address the needs of young people and can therefore only ever be one part of a package of measures. We recognise the successes that a number of local authorities have achieved using programmes that focus on early intervention and resilience. It is imperative that consideration is given to how counselling services can complement those approaches.

Given the limitations of the policy in isolation and the considerable costs that are involved, we believe that the Scottish Government should be ready to reallocate the spending if it appears that schools counselling is not delivering the desired outcomes, and if there are other interventions that may be effective instead. We therefore recommend that the Scottish Government work with COSLA to review the extent to which the policy is delivering on its intended objectives while achieving best value with the resources available. The results of such a review should be reported to Parliament by early 2022.

We began our work prior to the coronavirus, but we considered our final report during lockdown, when it was already becoming clear how much of an impact the Covid-19 pandemic was having on the lives of everyone, and none more so than young people. The impacts of home schooling and cancelled exams and the effects on training and employment prospects have been clear, and the

wider impact on mental health remains to be seen. We can only look into the future and dread. We acknowledge that the Scottish Government has allocated additional resources for mental health services, but we do not yet know the full consequences of the pandemic. More work will be required in the longer term to monitor, identify and address the significant challenges facing young people.

We highlight the clear role that exists for all employers in Scotland. Although many employers recognise their duty of care to their employees, there is more to do to ensure that good practice is shared among all employers. We therefore advocate that employers ensure that there is suitable mental health training for members of staff with line management and/or human resources responsibilities.

Another key theme in our report is the need to properly equip those who work with children and young people with skills and knowledge so that they can identify and support children who are struggling. We firmly believe that a young person should be able to choose in whom they wish to confide. Whether that is a teacher or member of school staff, a general practitioner or a youth worker, there should be training available to ensure that people in those roles can support young people. As a consequence, we recommend that the Scottish Government work with relevant partners to develop an online mental health first aid training course for all people who work with children and young people. Although the committee does not consider that that training should be mandatory, it suggests that the Scottish Government take steps to ensure that the course is easily accessible to all those who want it.

Given the amount of time that children and young people spend in school, we recognise that, for many young people, a teacher would be their chosen trusted adult. We therefore believe that it is essential that teachers are equipped with the confidence to identify and support young people with their mental health. To achieve that, we recommend that Education Scotland ensure that mental health first aid training is included in initial teacher education by the start of the academic year 2021-22. We also recommend that regional improvement collaboratives identify the availability of continuing professional development for teachers in relation to supporting young people's mental health.

The committee again acknowledges the hard work of all those who are supporting young people and who are seeking to improve the services that they can access. The people we met were passionate about helping young people, and they are eager that they and the young people they work with have the support that they require.

I thank all committee members, past and present, the clerks and others for their work throughout the inquiry and during consideration of our report.

Finally, to Annette McKenzie I say that, although I recognise that she has not got the change that she asked for, she has prompted a very important conversation and consideration in Parliament of the support that is available to young people for their mental health, which I hope she will see during our debate today.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the conclusions and recommendations contained in the Public Petitions Committee's 3rd Report 2020 (Session 5), *Inquiry into mental health support for young people in Scotland* (SP Paper 776).

16:57

The Minister for Mental Health (Clare Haughey): I thank the Public Petitions Committee for looking into this important issue. I am pleased to respond on behalf of the Scottish Government.

The issues that the Public Petitions Committee has raised are critical. Following the committee's final report on its inquiry, I wrote to it with the Scottish Government's response to key recommendations that were made. I wish to take some time to summarise that response.

The report made recommendations relating to local mental health support and service availability and the need to ensure that appropriate guidance and pathways are in place for children and young people. We are working closely with local authorities, supporting them to develop new community mental health and wellbeing services. Last month, we announced a further £15 million to respond to children and young people's mental health and wellbeing issues, building on our previous investment. That funding has been allocated to local authorities to support local responses for five to 24-year-olds, their families and carers.

In addition, in March, we provided local authorities with a framework for how community mental health support and services should be provided. That framework aims to set out a clear, broad approach for the support that should be available to children and young people within their communities; to assist local children's services and community planning partnerships with the commissioning and establishment of new services or support or with the development of existing services and support; and to facilitate the enhancement or creation of services that can deliver support that is additional and innovative, wherever those services are best placed.

One of the report's recommendations focuses on support for the parents and carers of those experiencing mental health issues. We are working across sectors to ensure that a wide range of information and support is available to families who need it—for example, through our Parent Club website, which offers guidance on children's mental health. Solihull Online parenting support can also be accessed through that site. We are investing £240,000 in Solihull Online to provide additional support during pandemic restrictions and into the next phase of recovering from, and exiting, restrictions.

The committee also raised the issue of increasing public awareness. As members will know, Clear Your Head is the national campaign that was launched on 21 April to support people to cope during the pandemic. The campaign and associated website highlight the practical things that people, including young people, can do to help themselves to feel better and cope with the restrictions during the pandemic. We have worked with Young Scot to develop *aye feel*, which is a resource that encourages young people to look after their emotional wellbeing and provides key advice and signposting.

On the committee's recommendation regarding support in employment, we have committed to delivering the young person's guarantee, so that every person aged between 16 and 24 will have the opportunity to study, take up an apprenticeship, job or work experience, or participate in formal volunteering. We have also committed to working with employer groups and trade unions to promote mentally healthy workplaces.

The report recommended further work to review the provision of school counsellors. We are on course to invest more than £60 million so that every high school has access to counselling. As part of the joint agreement with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and local authorities on that commitment, the Scottish Government has agreed a reporting form to understand progress and measure outcomes for those who access a counsellor via their secondary school.

The committee recommended that online mental health first aid training for people who work with children and young people be developed. I am pleased to say that we are developing an online, open-access professional learning resource in mental health and wellbeing for all school staff across primary and secondary education in Scotland, and it is expected that the training will be available by spring 2021. That is in addition to previous mental health first aid training and the mental health in schools working group resources to support mental wellbeing, which have been available since June 2020.

With a focus on the Covid-19 pandemic, on 8 October, I set out the Government's response to the mental health challenges of Covid-19 through our new transition and recovery plan. In the plan, we laid out a range of actions to respond to the needs of our young citizens, including emotional wellbeing, support that is available in education settings, and pathways into specialist mental health services.

Alongside the plan, and further to the measures that I have already mentioned, we have put in place additional support measures, such as enhanced digital resources on mental health and wellbeing, and expansion of the Distress Brief Intervention programme, which supports people who present to front-line services in distress, and is now available nationally to those over the age of 16. In particular, on 6 November, we announced £1.32 million of additional funding to support students with the mental health impacts of the pandemic. I extend my thanks to the students of Scotland, who have dealt with substantial challenges over the past three months.

Despite such positive developments, as today's published child and adolescent mental health services waiting times statistics show, there is still work to be done. It is encouraging to see more children and young people starting their mental health treatment sooner, but as demand continues to increase, we know that some people are still having to wait too long for treatment. We recognise that long waits are unacceptable, and we remain committed to meeting the standard that 90 per cent of patients are seen within 18 weeks.

A number of boards have focused on the children and young people who have been waiting the longest. That concerted effort to address backlogs has pushed down the proportion of people who have been waiting for less than 18 weeks, and who are being seen. Notably, NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde has more than doubled its capacity to see new patients over that period, and has reduced the CAMHS waiting list by more than 1,000 since the end of March 2020. Several other boards, including NHS Grampian and NHS Tayside, also made significant progress in meeting demand for CAMHS and are now in a good position to meet the standard in the future.

Although those initiatives to reduce long waiting times necessarily impact on the performance standard, I welcome that increasing numbers of children and young people who had been waiting are now receiving treatment under CAMHS care, despite the obvious operational difficulties caused by Covid-19. However, in a number of board areas, the proportion of people who are waiting longer than 18 weeks has gone up over that time. That is why the Scottish Government is directing

enhanced improvement support to the boards that are not on track to meet the standard.

In our transition and recovery plan, which was published on 8 October, we set out a number of actions to progress improvement in access to CAMHS. They include the implementation of our CAMHS service specification and a tailored programme of support for national health service boards to improve their waiting times performance and address unacceptably long waits. We will work with mental health leads in those boards to develop and implement recovery plans by the end of March 2021.

Despite the constraints that have been caused by the pandemic, health boards have responded creatively, and many have made significant progress. We have been working closely with all boards to plan the recovery of CAMHS across Scotland and to help individual NHS boards to respond effectively to the anticipated increase in demand in the months ahead.

Members will also be aware that, on 24 November, annual suicide statistics for Scotland were published. We continue to prioritise our work on suicide prevention through our suicide prevention action plan and the national suicide prevention leadership group. Every one of those lives lost is a tragedy. My heartfelt sympathies go out to those who have been bereaved by suicide.

I would also like to recognise the efforts of our mental health workforce through the pandemic. Mental health workers have worked tirelessly throughout, supporting children, young people and families. Without those workers, many people would not be receiving the support that they require. I thank them for everything that they do to ensure that mental health is seen as a top priority across Scotland.

The adversities that have been faced because of Covid-19 have shone a critical light on the importance of good mental health. Although it has been a very difficult time for everyone, I am grateful that mental health is now being spoken about far more openly and is at the forefront of everyone's mind—exactly where it should be.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you. I still have a little time in hand, so if our opening speakers go slightly over, as the minister did, that is okay by me, but do not overegg it. I call Brian Whittle to open for the Conservatives.

17:06

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): As if I would overegg it, Presiding Officer.

I start by declaring that I have a daughter who is the head of guidance in a secondary school.

I am glad to have the opportunity to open the debate on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives, because my time in this place is done. One of the biggest memories that will go with me is the first time that Annette McKenzie appeared in front of the Public Petitions Committee and, with incredible bravery and a quiet dignity, spoke about the tragic death of her 16-year-old daughter. I remember her being terrified just to be sitting in front of parliamentarians and the cameras. She was driven by a sense of need to try to prevent what happened to her from ever happening again.

As the committee convener said, Ms McKenzie's daughter presented at her GP's surgery with anxiety symptoms. She was prescribed a full month's worth of medication, and she died after taking an overdose of that prescription medicine.

Ms McKenzie's simple ask was that a parent or a guardian should know of such a diagnosis and prescription. She said that had she known, she would have been able to ensure that her daughter took the prescription medication in the required doses.

Under the Age of Legal Capacity (Scotland) Act 1991, a person under the age of 16 has the legal capacity to consent to any medical

“procedure or treatment where, in the opinion of a qualified medical practitioner”

the person understands

“the nature and possible consequences of the procedure or treatment.”

That got me thinking about the capacity of a young person—or of anyone, for that matter—presenting to a GP with poor mental health to make rational decisions. As the convener can tell anyone, I pushed that point throughout the inquiry. Surely the very nature of poor mental health must bring that into question. I cannot accept the blanket answer that there is patient-doctor confidentiality—to me, that is a cop-out. I am asking whether we have the balance wrong. I say that we have, and I think that the medical profession must take—

Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): Although I understand exactly what the member is saying, and I do not rebut it, does he accept that being in mental ill health does not prevent someone from being able to engage positively with what happens to them?

Brian Whittle: I was going to come on to say that it is a complicated issue and it is not straightforward. I am not suggesting that I have an answer. What I want to see on the back of the inquiry is the medical profession taking another look at the issue and for us to see whether we can change, or massage, the legislation that was first

brought in, in order to help people like Annette McKenzie.

The debate is related directly to last week's debate on the Health and Sport Committee's medicines inquiry. In that debate, I said that there was an overprescription of drugs to tackle anxiety, more often than not because of medical practitioners' limited treatment options and lack of the time to spend with a patient in order to make a full assessment of need. In my opinion, that should be linked in turn to other inquiries, such as the Health and Sport Committee's social prescribing inquiry, because I do not think that the current plan is working particularly well.

The inquiry into children and mental health support gathered a worrying level of evidence that highlighted serious concerns about the experiences of young people who seek help for their mental health. We know how much pressure CAMHS were under prior to the Covid crisis, with thousands of children—more than a third of cases, according to the latest figures from Public Health Scotland—waiting for longer than the 18-week waiting time target that was set by the Government. More than 1,000 children and young people have now waited for longer than a year for mental health treatment, yet we know that early intervention is key.

During the Covid crisis, referrals for young people have dropped by more than half, at a time when we know that mental health issues are rising steeply. That should set alarm bells ringing. Recently released statistics show a sharp increase in suicides in the year prior to Covid, and we have a continued rise in the number of drug-related deaths—at three times the rate of the rest of the UK—which are often associated with childhood trauma. We should all be concerned about what is coming when this year's figures are announced. I would like the Scottish Government to have a plan now to look at that.

The roles of the third sector and the school environment are crucial, because they offer options in a non-medical environment to those who are suffering. It is somewhat ironic that this debate follows the one on valuing the third sector, which is grossly underappreciated and underfunded. There has to be better integration of mental health services in the NHS and the third sector. There are examples of where such integration works well and is very effective. We need to replicate that across the country.

Recently, Johann Lamont and I had an impromptu discussion—her reputation is now destroyed—about the importance of keeping sport accessible to our children and young people. That was hugely important before Covid; now, it is absolutely essential. Any parent—me included—of children who participate in sport but had that

option taken away during Covid will know exactly what I am talking about. Prevention is better than cure.

I will finish where I started. Given Ms McKenzie's long campaign—it is now a four-year one—the support that she has galvanised over that time for her petition, and the hugely important issues that she has raised, the Parliament owes her, and all those who have children who suffer from poor mental health, full consideration of the issues that the petition raised. What has really changed in all that time? The answer is very little. The most damning thing about this Parliament is that, after a full term and with everyone gearing up for an upcoming election, such issues, which really matter, are still not being properly addressed.

The Public Petitions Committee has done its job, and I thank all the clerks and staff, as well as my colleagues, for taking on a huge issue and delivering such a comprehensive report. The Scottish Government has talked long but has come up really short on definitive action. It now has a committee report to galvanise it into taking action.

The matter is beyond petty politics. Despite all the political manoeuvring, and attempts to get one over on each other, surely there has to be room for the issue to be properly addressed; otherwise, what are we doing here? I urge the Scottish Government to take a breath, take stock of the committee's report and work with members of all parties to develop a strategy and plan in order to support our children and young people into good mental health. In these times, more than ever, that is crucial.

17:13

Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab): On behalf of Scottish Labour, I welcome the committee's report. We agree that mental health provision for young people in Scotland is complex and fragmented, and for that reason I welcome the conclusions and recommendations that have been offered by the Public Petitions Committee.

I thank the many organisations and young people who voiced their concerns and spoke of their experiences of mental health services for young people. I also thank Annette McKenzie for lodging the petition that led to the inquiry. It will have been incredibly difficult for Ms McKenzie to talk about her experience and the tragic loss of her daughter. As other members have done, I praise her for the incredible strength and commitment that she has shown in raising the extremely personal and important issue that led to this debate.

I also thank committee members and the clerks for their work in recent months to produce the report.

Any investment in mental health services for children and young people is welcome, but it is crucial that investment is adequate, and the Government has not achieved that. The Government has invested in mental health services across the population in the months since the report was published. The committee welcomed the additional funding in response to the pandemic; it also rightly pointed out that there were calls for the expansion of services before the Covid-19 public health emergency. The pandemic has exposed further the mental health crisis that already existed. Many young people, particularly students, will be feeling even more isolated.

In the first wave of the virus, we witnessed a sharp drop in referrals to CAMHS. The continuing high rate of rejected referrals shows that hundreds of young people remain without the support that they urgently need. Today's CAMHS statistics for June to September 2020 show that referrals have increased again while rejected referrals remain at a steady level. Of the 9,699 children and young people who were left waiting at the month end, it is shocking that more than half have waited longer than 18 weeks and almost 1,000 have been waiting for more than a year.

What is required is more connected work on mental health services for young people, along with effective throughcare in the transition from CAMHS to adult services. The expansion in mental health counsellor numbers is welcome—Labour members called for that—but it is not a single solution and must be part of a collection of services that work alongside one another. There is a stark difference between what is on offer and what must be on offer.

Recruitment and training play a part in the challenge of supporting young people's mental health. In relation to the commitment to have counsellors in all secondary schools by September this year, Stuart Valentine, the chief executive of Relationships Scotland, said:

"there are not enough qualified children and young people's counsellors to fulfil the commitment."—[*Official Report, Education and Skills Committee*, 5 February 2020; c 10.]

Obviously, the pandemic will have played its part in the Government's ability to achieve its ambition this year. I would be grateful if the Minister for Mental Health could update the Parliament on success in meeting the deadline.

Schools have a strong part to play in supporting young people's mental health. A further tool at our disposal is mental health first aid training for all school staff and senior pupils, a key aspect of

which must be about identifying and signposting pupils to services. A crucial theme of the committee's report is the lack of signposting. People do not know where to seek further support.

Parents and carers raised that issue with the committee. Parents and carers need support if they are to be able to support young people. A parent who contributed to the digital consultation said:

"if there was common knowledge and education available for parents then I feel we as parents could help more and make a start on the healing process."

The inquiry stemmed from a petition that raised concerns about the prescription of medication to young people. In certain cases, medication has a role to play in dealing with the poor mental health of anyone at any given time, but medication should be only the start of recovery. It is rarely a long-term solution, and it should be given alongside other services. We agree that early interventions and better training and resources are key to helping teachers to support young people.

Finally, I hope that the Government takes on board the conclusions and recommendations in the committee's report. It is more important than ever that mental health services are properly funded and signposted. Schools have an important role in the mix of mental health support and throughcare in the transition to adult services, but they should not be the cliff edge that many young people face or have faced in the past. The pandemic has worsened mental health across the population, and we cannot leave a generation of young people behind as we rebuild.

17:21

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): Mental health is a subject that should be a permanent fixture for debate in the chamber. As Scottish Liberal Democrats pointed out in our Opposition debate a year ago, there is a mental health crisis in Scotland. I am grateful to the Public Petitions Committee for producing the report. I am grateful, too, to the petitioner, Annette McKenzie, and pay tribute to her for submitting the petition in 2016 that inspired this body of work.

This latest report adds to the mountain of evidence that already exists to show that Scotland has its work cut out to put together an effective system that is capable of looking after the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people.

That has only become more obvious during the pandemic. As the committee points out, it has been reported that 9 per cent of 18 to 24-year-olds across the UK have lost their jobs altogether, which is the highest figure for all age groups. As a member of the Education and Skills Committee, I

have seen the challenges to mental health and wellbeing that have been created by the waves of disruption to young people's education. School closures, cancelled exams and all the uncertainties around higher and further education restarts have created a perfect storm for anxiety and isolation. In evidence to the Education and Skills Committee earlier this year, Educational Institute of Scotland general secretary Larry Flanagan said that an increasing number of children will have been "severely traumatised" as a result of the coronavirus crisis.

It is blatantly clear that, with the current workforce levels, the system cannot cope. Too many young people are waiting too long for mental health treatment. Once again, Scottish Government figures released today show that well over 1,000 are waiting for more than a year. It is heartbreaking to see that many more children are now struggling at the back of one of the longest queues in the health service. That figure is just the tip of the iceberg. As the Scottish Association for Mental Health points out in its briefing, some children and young people are rejected from CAMHS after a paper-based referral without any in-person contact. Problems that may start as something small become worse and, too often, as a consequence of that wait, comes tragedy. Waiting times are not just numbers that do not add up; they are evidence of individuals who have reached out, only to find that the support that they need is just not there. For someone who is at their most vulnerable, that realisation must be crushing.

In my remaining time, I will speak about another issue that has had the attention of the Education and Skills Committee in recent months—school counsellors. Issues that were highlighted in evidence to the Public Petitions Committee chimed with my own reflections. One contributor to a round-table evidence session held by the committee stated:

"school based counselling services are essential to ensure this help is available at the earliest opportunity."

I agree. That is why I was troubled by evidence that the Education and Skills Committee heard in the autumn, which showed a fragmented system. There was no quality assurance, no co-ordination and no profile of demand. When asked for details, those giving evidence reverted to CAMHS figures

As SAMH has pointed out, people

"feel like they need to be in crisis"

to access CAMHS, but there are large numbers of people who need support and do not fall into that category. If the Scottish Government does not take immediate and material action, the situation will only get worse. It requires more boots on the ground, and a coherent and accountable system in place to back them up. That means building the

workforce and making sure that those who work in front-line roles such as teaching are given the training that they need to process and understand the issues that children and young people face.

SAMH research found that 66 per cent of teachers feel that they have not had enough mental health training to do their job properly. Worryingly, that is more likely to be the case for those who qualified in the past five years. SAMHS has called on the Scottish Government and Education Scotland to take measures to protect time for mental health training for all school staff.

The Scottish mental health first aid programme has paused its face-to-face training because of the pandemic. Since May, Scottish Liberal Democrats have called on the Scottish Government to restart that work, because by failing to provide those basic interventions, we make everything much worse. Too often, Government spending focuses money on reactive policies that only try to fix problems when they have already reached the point where interventions are needed.

On that basis, I support the committee's findings.

17:26

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): I thank the clerks and the Scottish Parliament information centre, as well as my fellow committee members, for their hard work in contributing to the report on the inquiry into mental health support for young people in Scotland.

I also thank everyone who gave written and oral evidence to the committee. We were fortunate to hear from a wide range of charities and stakeholders, including Penumbra, SAMH, Children in Scotland, representatives of the medical profession and many other organisations.

It is important that we also heard from individuals about their personal experiences and the mental health support that they had received. I thank them for sharing their stories with us.

As others have done, I begin by noting my thanks and appreciation to Annette McKenzie. In December 2016, Ms McKenzie lodged a public petition calling for consultation of and consent from a parent or guardian before prescribing medication to treat mental ill health in patients under 18 years of age. Ms McKenzie lodged the petition following the tragic death of her daughter, Britney, from an overdose of prescription medication. I am grateful to Ms McKenzie for her courage in highlighting concerns to the committee, which has brought the issue to where it is today.

Mental health influences how we think and feel about ourselves and others, and how we interpret events. It affects our capacity to learn and

communicate, and our capacity to form, sustain and end relationships. It also influences our ability to cope with change, transitions and life events. Good mental health allows children and young people to develop the resilience to cope with whatever life throws at them, and to grow into well-rounded and healthy adults.

The central purpose of CAMHS is to develop and deliver services for children and young people—and their parents and carers—who are experiencing the most serious mental health problems. It also has an important role in supporting mental health capabilities in a wider network of children's services.

Delivery of good-quality child and adolescent mental health services is vital, and relies on adequate numbers of well-trained staff being recruited and retained across NHS Scotland. Over the past decade, the number of people working in child and adolescent mental health services has increased by more than 50 per cent, and investment of £58 million over four years is helping health boards to improve access to CAMHS and psychological therapies through workforce development, recruitment and retention, and service improvement support.

Timely access to healthcare is a key measure of quality that applies equally in relation to access to mental health services. Early action is more likely to result in full recovery and, in the case of children and young people, it will also minimise the impact on aspects of their development such as their education, which will improve their wider social development outcomes. Figures show that three children in every classroom will, by the time they are 16, have experienced a mental health problem and that a worrying 74 per cent of young people do not know what mental health information, support and services are available in their local area.

When we have a physical health problem, we all know where to turn and what we need to do, but when we become mentally unwell it is often hard to know where to turn. It is vital that our young people know what support is available and how they can access it. Similarly, people who have roles in supporting young people must be aware of the services and support that exist.

During our evidence sessions, it became clear that there can be a confusing and cluttered landscape for young people who are seeking help for their mental health, and for people who are trying to help them. Although a range of services is available in the public, private and third sectors to support young people who are seeking help for their mental health, we must continue to improve how we distribute not only the message, but information about the avenues of support that are available for young people, their families and

friends, and the professionals who are supporting them.

I very much welcome the Government's actions to ensure that children and young people receive the support that they need at the earliest possible stage. Support includes the £60 million that is guaranteeing that every high school has access to school counselling services, and which is guaranteeing delivery of 80 additional counsellors in further and higher education.

During the committee's engagement events with young people, several young people highlighted how helpful it is to have access to a counsellor or mental health professional in their school. The benefits of school counsellors were similarly highlighted to the committee by several teachers. It was hugely encouraging to hear at first hand feedback from pupils and teachers about the services and the role that they play as part of a wider range of measures.

The establishment of a mental health in schools working group is also a welcome step forward in the Government's on-going commitment to supporting positive mental health in children and young people in schools. The group's remit includes supporting the development of professional learning resources for all school staff. That will provide the essential learning that is required to support children and young people's mental health and wellbeing.

It is accepted that mental health support for young people was a challenging area for public policy even before the considerable impact of Covid-19. It has therefore never been more important for young people to be aware of their mental health, the steps that they can take to protect it and the services that are available for those who need them. It is expected that school closures, cancelled exams and general uncertainty regarding the future, on top of what is often already a stressful time in a young person's life, are likely to lead to increased anxiety in young people.

Given the scale of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, good practice must exist across all local levels, and focus must be put on intervention and prevention. The Scottish Government's 10-year mental health strategy sets out a commitment to

“create a Scotland where all stigma and discrimination related to mental health is challenged, and our collective understanding of how to prevent and treat mental health problems is increased. We want to see a nation where mental healthcare is person-centred and recognises the life-changing benefits of fast, effective treatment. We want a Scotland where we can act on the knowledge that failing to recognise, prioritise and treat mental health problems costs not only our economy, but harms individuals and communities.”

We have certainly made progress, with the 2019 annual report showing that progress has been made on all 29 recommendations of the audit of rejected referrals to CAMHS, and that there has been development on 19 of the 40 actions in the mental health strategy.

Mental health is an integral part of public health. It is as important as physical health to the overall wellbeing of individuals, communities and societies. The events of recent months have shown how important it is that children and young people have the emotional resilience to adapt to social pressures, challenges and changes in circumstances.

I welcome the report's recommendations and the response from the Scottish Government, and I look forward to the progress of our mental health strategy, as we continue to advance the development of services and information to ensure that no child or young person is left behind.

17:33

Tom Mason (North East Scotland) (Con): The debate and the report that underpins it come at a vital inflection point, as we look at ways to improve access to mental health care for young people. I joined the committee at the end of its work on the report, which might have been helpful because I was able to provide a fresh look at some of the issues.

The latest data suggest that there have been decreases in the number of children and young people starting treatment. Nearly 40 per cent are not being seen within the 18-week target. We have some of the longest mental health waiting times on record and an extensive backlog of cases to be taken forward. That is the backdrop. We have to improve the care that is provided to young people.

Those declines have, of course, taken place during extraordinary circumstances. I do not doubt the will of all the people involved to make things better, but the issues with CAMHS waiting times predate the pandemic, so there is a need to look beyond the events of this year in order to understand the changes that are needed.

The committee's work has raised a number of issues. In particular, it has identified challenges in improving early intervention and prevention. That is the key, and the recommendations that minimum levels of service provision in local areas should be set out, and that clear pathways to support for young people should be published will be vital in ensuring that the available support is at a high enough level to treat all those who need such support.

In her response to the committee, the minister set out the actions that the Scottish Government is

taking to meet those challenges. In particular, she referred to the £2 million of new funding and the framework for local authorities that was issued in March this year.

However, a lot has happened in the intervening period. With that in mind, could the minister set out whether she believes that that is sufficient to deal with the problems that have arisen since and, if not, what further support the Scottish Government will put in place to ensure that its commitment to the committee is kept?

Clare Haughey: Mr Mason will be aware of the fact that, last month, we increased funding to local authorities so that they could provide a direct response to the effects of the mental health challenges that children and young people face. I mentioned that in my speech. I take it that Mr Mason welcomes that commitment.

Tom Mason: I am sure that people understand that.

The committee also identified issues with the provision of school counsellors, and questioned whether the current level was sufficient for the performance that is needed. School counsellors are a vital part of any mental health strategy for children, as they can be the first to witness potential problems; they can do so long before a young person might discuss issues with a doctor or seek referral for treatment.

I am conscious that many different pressures affect our young people, including pressures on their physical welfare, such as those to do with the perception of body image and dietary problems. We should recognise that those pressures have become more apparent in recent years, and may have developed alongside declining family stability and the growth of social media. We must recognise the impact that both those issues can have on a young person's wellbeing, and that addressing them should, therefore, be part of the solution.

The committee has asked the Government to work with COSLA to fully review provision of counsellors. Although the minister has said that she is working with COSLA on mental health support, a commitment to reporting to Parliament on that specific issue by early 2022 would be very reassuring.

The availability of mental health support to children and young people is vital at the best of times, never mind during the current pandemic, when the focus has understandably been drawn to other areas. It is my hope that the committee's report and the recommendations that it contains will help the Government to improve the quality of care for young people, so that if someone is struggling with their mental health, support is

available to them, regardless of where they live or how old they are.

17:38

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): I thank Johann Lamont and the Public Petitions Committee for bringing this crucial debate to Parliament. Young adults have been especially badly hit during the pandemic—they have been hit by a triple whammy of curtailed education, diminished job prospects and reduced social contact with peers. In many ways, it is quite heartbreaking.

Young people who have been shielding during the pandemic have had an especially tough time, as it has impacted on their jobs. For many, it has affected their ability to socialise with people after lockdown. The Office for National Statistics tells us that young people who reported that their wellbeing was being affected were much more likely than people over the age of 30 to report that the lockdown was making their mental health worse. The period between the ages of 18 and 24 is a time of especially high risk of experiencing mental health problems: three quarters of mental health problems arise before a person reaches their mid-20s.

I recognise Clare Haughey's dedication to provision of mental health support, but I also have a plea to make, because the current system is not fit for purpose. What I see on paper looks fine, but the reality is not, as I know from bitter experience.

A young woman whom I know recently made an attempt on her life following two failed requests to her general practitioner for support. After several weeks, no action had been taken. There seemed to be an argument between the Rossdale mental health resource centre in Glasgow and wellbeing services with regard to which was the right service for her.

After six weeks, she was sent a letter, the wording of which I found astonishing. It said that, if she would like to opt in to the service, she had five days to do so, after which she would be removed from the list. She was, of course, removed from the list, because she was unable to cope with life, but she was angry at that letter.

That young woman is underweight and fragile, not because of an eating disorder but because of other health issues. She has difficulty holding down a job, and her issues are affecting her relationships. What she needed was to talk to someone swiftly, as soon as she left hospital, and to feel that the service was there for her. I can assure members that she thinks that it was not there. The delays and lack of serious treatment have only added to her problems. She wonders why no one seems to care.

A week ago, after three months, she made an attempt on her own life, which is a clear cry for help, in my opinion. She has had one phone call and now has to wait for a further two months to be told whether any action will be taken or, indeed, whether there will be a diagnosis.

In contrast, another young woman in Glasgow, in the same health board, was referred two weeks ago and has already had a video appointment and has been referred to Rossdale mental health resource centre, following a request to her GP.

I have some questions. Why is video not standard across the board? Why is the follow-up so slow? What is the service opt-in all about? Does that really help struggling young people? Why is it that someone who has made an attempt on her own life is still waiting for help, while someone else in the same health board area has accessed help through their GP? That disparity is not acceptable. How many more young people will suffer because the service is under so much strain that there is a month between the first assessment and the outcome? Why is there such a lottery in one health board?

The mental illness situation is only going to get more acute. There have been some great speeches about that this afternoon, including those from David Torrance and Mary Fee. We have to get the system right, and that has to be done swiftly.

In the Government's latest wellbeing survey of young people, which was done before the pandemic, 38 per cent of young people reported that they had poor mental wellbeing—the highest level on record. Obviously, the pandemic has made that worse. The drop in referrals to CAMHS over the first lockdown was deeply concerning.

The most common reason for a referral being rejected was that the condition was not deemed to be severe enough, even when children were self-harming. I find that quite astonishing.

The Mental Health Foundation said that there is an urgent need to put in place measures to support the mental health and wellbeing of people aged between 18 and 24. We need to be prepared to make design changes in the light of the pandemic. We need to focus on that critical age group. If we do not, the consequences will be bleak.

17:42

Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): I thank the committee for its report and I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. I know that the process has been difficult for the petitioner and that it has taken four years, but I welcome the report and I thank the petitioner for the work that

she has done to bring this critical issue to the Parliament.

Everyone agrees that good mental health is as important as good physical health. I believe that it is right, therefore, to assert that there should be the same access to support and services for mental health as there is for physical health. However, as some of the speeches that we have heard today have demonstrated, that it is not always the case and, tragically, in the most extreme cases, young lives are lost.

The effects of the pandemic have touched everyone, but none more than our young people. I have been in dialogue and have had Zoom meetings with Samaritans and the Scottish Association for Mental Health to discuss the impact of the pandemic on young people's mental health. The particular demographic of my constituency has made me aware of and concerned about students' mental health and how they have coped with the restrictions. Early indications have shown that there has been a worsening of mental health issues in that younger age group.

The evidence is overwhelming that good mental health and wellbeing contributes to students' ability to participate effectively, grow in confidence and thrive in their studies. Poor mental health can negatively affect the learning of students and others, their progress and their ultimate outcomes.

Before 2020, a first-year college or university student would have had a really different experience when starting their studies: they would move away from home, make new friendships, go to a new city, be financially independent or just be independent. All that has been taken away by the pandemic. The measures that have been put in place are necessary, but they have had an effect on students' mental health.

Unfortunately, it is no surprise that the number of young people who are looking for support has risen. Through its helpline, Samaritans has identified increased levels of anxiety and concerns about mental health, finances and employment—that has been mentioned—as well as feelings of loneliness and isolation. Samaritans has answered almost 1 million calls for help, and about one in four contacts have focused on concerns about coronavirus. In a recent survey of call handlers, one said that young people

“seem to have little hope for the future, what will happen about their”

university course or their job.

A few weeks ago, I raised the issue of mental health in the chamber and sought assurances that students will have access to support. I acknowledge the Minister for Mental Health's

response and welcome the action that the Scottish Government has taken to provide an additional £3.6 million for 80 additional counsellors, which David Torrance mentioned, in colleges and universities over the next four years, as well as the funding of NUS Scotland to host Think Positive, the student mental health project, which supports students who are experiencing mental ill health.

I asked whether the applied suicide intervention skills training would continue to be accessible—I think that Beatrice Wishart mentioned that. It is a vital component of the services that are offered to provide support. The evidence shows that it is an effective training programme that provides people with the skills and confidence to intervene. The minister said that ASIST was not being delivered because of the pandemic, which I understand, as the training is delivered face to face in normal circumstances. However, a number of organisations have had to adapt—as the Parliament has adapted its meetings—so I ask the minister whether the decision to stop the delivery of ASIST could be looked at again. The training could be provided virtually, as we in the chamber and in committees participate virtually. That could be a useful and effective way to bolster our mental health services.

I acknowledge that the Scottish Government is taking action and working with professionals and organisations. We see that in the work that is being carried out with the NUS, Samaritans and SAMH, to name but a few. Yesterday, I had the opportunity to meet SAMH, when I discussed today's debate and said that I would speak. SAMH has engaged with the Public Petitions Committee's inquiry, and it has a number of asks of the Scottish Government. Perhaps the Scottish Government could explore what SAMH has raised with the committee and me and incorporate that into the work that it is already doing.

17:48

Maurice Corry (West Scotland) (Con): I, too, am pleased to take part in the debate as a member of the Public Petitions Committee. Along with my colleagues, I have found exploring the impact of mental health on young people to be truly eye opening. I am grateful to Annette McKenzie for submitting the petition and for her strong persistence. I also thank the clerks for their hard work.

Through the committee's work, I had the privilege of listening to many people around Scotland—particularly young people—who were amazingly open in sharing their experiences of mental health and what they feel must improve for young people. I am sure that the report goes some way to highlighting the ways in which the

complexities of mental health support can be better addressed without any more delay.

Young people can face several pressures: school work, exams, family-related issues and bereavement. The impact of Covid-19 has increased those burdens to a dangerous extent. Uncertainties about health, exams and future work opportunities, as well as the potential for bereavement, have heightened feelings of stress and anxiety.

However, those are far from being new problems. Covid-19 has served to worsen the ongoing mental health crisis that was already plain to see before the pandemic. With a rising number of suicides, increasing waiting times for mental health treatment and concerning vacancy numbers in psychiatric services for children, the gaps in mental health support are in dire need of fixing. The necessity of establishing mental health support pathways that are widely available and easily accessible has never been more pronounced.

The committee noted a clear need for much greater emphasis to be placed on early and proactive intervention. Guidance at the point of need would help to target mental ill health before it escalates and worsens.

Clare Haughey: On the basis of the points that he has made, I take it that Maurice Corry will welcome the establishment of the community wellbeing centres for five to 24-year-olds that are being rolled out across the country by local authorities. They will provide a lot of the early intervention and lower-level therapeutic interventions that he has spoken about.

Maurice Corry: I thank the minister for that very valuable intervention. Yes, I totally support that. I also have an interest on behalf of veterans—our early service leavers, who fall into the higher end of the age group—and I very much welcome those centres.

Hand in hand with early intervention, there must be a more co-ordinated, partnered approach to mental health support provision. A major concern for many young people—often shared by their teachers, pupil support assistants and, on occasion, GPs—is knowing which way to turn and how best to navigate mental health support services. Each local area differs in the pathways of support that are available, with varying degrees of signposting.

The committee learned of the benefits recognised by organisations across the public, private and third sector in working together—a prime example being Place2Be, in Ayrshire, which is in my region. That charity works with schools and the local council to build resilience by

encouraging more open dialogue and developing coping strategies for young people.

That joined-up approach needs to be more consistently available across the whole of Scotland. I certainly agree that there is a need to build up a network of services, which will be furthered by greater information sharing and integration across local authorities, so that those services are as transparent and accessible as possible for young people and their families. That was highlighted in the minister's intervention, and I agree with the points that she made.

Families, teachers and GPs play a key role in supporting young people through mental health issues, and that is not without its own pressures. The limits on teachers' and GPs' time to spend with young people has caused concern. Indeed, having the time and space to simply listen cannot be underestimated. Moreover, the committee recognised the obligation to ensure that parents can receive training and counselling in how best to support their children through mental ill health.

Young people's mental health and the impact of Covid-19 must be taken seriously. I hope that the Scottish Government will act on those concerns without delay. Young people and their families are deserving of the best possible access to support. If they are to be able to get that, there must be a greater focus on co-ordination and early intervention, as is exemplified by the process that is being followed.

17:53

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): I express my gratitude to the Public Petitions Committee and everyone who contributed to the inquiry and report. It has been an excellent debate, and I welcome the contributions from colleagues across the chamber.

It was heartening to hear from committee convener Johann Lamont's opening remarks that the committee found evidence of good mental health services and strong examples of partnership working across the country. That is important. It is also positive that, as a country, we are speaking much more openly about mental health; that must be welcomed.

However, it is clear from the evidence that there are gaps in the support and that those must be filled. Urgent action is needed to ensure that every child and young person receives the right support when they need it, and that there is support for parents and carers too. That came across strongly in the comments from Johann Lamont and others.

Annette McKenzie has shown great courage in the face of the worst possible adversity. The tragic death of her daughter Britney clearly made a mark

on the committee members and on those who have supported Annette and her family. It was right that the convener recognised that Annette's petition has been the catalyst for the committee's comprehensive enquiry.

The mental health of young people in Scotland has been a prominent issue during my time in the Parliament. Before Covid, youth campaigners in Scotland described the growing mental health crisis as their generation's epidemic. Long waiting times for mental health treatment are intolerable and urgent action is required to prevent our children and young people falling deeper into mental health crisis.

As we have heard, life in lockdown is affecting the mental health of people of all ages and from all backgrounds. But, for children and young people, who may not understand the magnitude of what has been happening, and for those who have experienced direct trauma, it is particularly difficult. The minister for mental health has acknowledged today, and previously, that the Scottish Government anticipates an increase in demand for mental health services.

We have heard from members, including Beatrice Wishart, about the important role played by schools in supporting young people in these difficult times. Adequate funding is required now more than ever, for not just the NHS but the vital third sector organisations that provide lifeline support.

We have heard about the importance of proper pathways. Signposting is important too. We all know of examples of excellent services in our communities, but how many of our constituents know how to access those at—or, more importantly, before—the point of crisis?

Covid-19 has affected not only businesses; it has hit the voluntary sector hard. Many charities have been unable to fundraise.

I join the minister in paying tribute to the mental health workforce, who have had to adapt enormously during the pandemic. I welcome her commitment to addressing unacceptably long waits for CAMHS, which have been highlighted again by today's figures.

There is an area where we are beginning to make some progress. I thank the minister for her work in bringing opposition spokespeople together with experts from charities and young people with lived experience to address the issue of self-harm. I do not think that the Parliament has addressed that enough, but there is a cross-party commitment to do better.

I was shocked to learn that one in six young people in Scotland between the ages of 16 and 24 has self-harmed at some point in life. We know

that the prevalence of self-harm increases with deprivation. People who live in the most deprived areas are more than twice as likely to self-harm as those in wealthier areas—that economic factors affect mental health is true in general. Self-harm is mentioned in almost one in four contacts that under-18-year-olds make with Samaritans' helpline service. I am grateful to the minister for bringing people together on that issue. It is clear that there is a lot of passion in the Parliament to get that right for all young people.

SAMH is asking for each local authority to have a central mental health hub that children and young people are referred to if they need support that is not readily available in their community and where they can be quickly assessed by a multi-disciplinary team and connected to the support that they need without the threat of rejection. That is important. SAMH is also asking for the professionalisation of personal and social education, with mental health education as a core part of PSE. That is just one example that shows that it is not the job of one minister to get this right: all parts of Government must work together.

To pick up on a local example, the minister will be familiar with the work of FAMS—Families Affected by Murder and Suicide—a Lanarkshire-based charity founded seven years ago to support families affected by murder or suicide. The charity has recently been in touch to say that it is financially vulnerable because it is not able to fundraise, but that demand for its service is overwhelming. It says that the cost to the NHS and emergency services of FAMS closing could be thousands of pounds in terms of visits to accident and emergency, general practitioners and so on, and that the cost in human terms would be immeasurable.

We need to act, because we cannot leave a generation of children and young people behind. I was struck by the words of Annette McKenzie, whose daughter Britney has inspired much of today's debate. Annette said:

"Britney's beautiful smile hid a world of pain, her smile could brighten up the darkest of days, just not her own."

As we think about building back better, we need to think about building back kinder, so I will finish with Annette's words. She said:

"reach out to all your friends tonight let them know you love them and are glad for them in your life and you're here for them."

18:00

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): The debate has been really interesting. I am pleased that all members have taken part constructively, although we have made some punchy points, which I will reflect on in summing up.

I thank the Equalities and Human Rights Committee for its work in producing the report. I also thank Annette McKenzie, who has become a strong and courageous campaigner on young people's mental health issues and who was the catalyst for the report. I was struck by the mantra on her social media that

"It's easier to build strong children than broken adults."

How right she is. However, in working on the Parliament's Redress for Survivors (Historical Child Abuse in Care) (Scotland) Bill, I have heard at first hand about the experience of survivors who were broken children and who have become strong adults. There is hope.

In the context of Covid, the report is timely and much needed. We have a virus on our hands that is harmful to our physical health—particularly among older and more vulnerable people—but that is equally harmful to the mental health of young people, who have been disproportionately affected by the secondary impacts of the lockdown. They have lost social interaction and jobs. They have been cooped up in the house, often with their parents, and have been unable to see their friends. There has been a tragic rise in online bullying and in the stress of social media. There has been a lack of sports and hobbies and a lack of access to support and much-needed medical care. Support has often moved online or on to the telephone, and, for too many, it has simply been about prescribed medication on repeat, with no face-to-face catch-up or counselling. We know that that is now the norm for far too many young people.

That is not because GPs do not want to help; it is because they have only 15 minutes. There are waiting lists of months for cognitive behavioural therapy, talking therapies and other forms of intervention. Many things that young people used to do to self-help, such as hobbies, having coffee with a friend, volunteering, working and education have all gone now, too.

The issue goes far beyond anecdotal evidence; the data speaks for itself. According to Samaritans, the suicide rate among young people is the highest that it has been since 2007. Another report tells us that one in nine young people in Scotland has attempted suicide. Members should think about that when they visit schools and colleges. In any group of young people there, one in nine will have attempted suicide, and one in six will have self-harmed, which Monica Lennon referred to.

Among the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex community, the numbers are even higher. I have lost two friends in my network in just the past three months. I know that because they popped up on Facebook—it is another month and

another loss. Both of those people were still surrounded by so much stigma and taboo.

That is why we all need to take the committee's report seriously. I do not say this lightly, but I believe that the current physical health emergency, which we are now nine months into, will lead to a mental health emergency that will last for years—a mental health emergency that we have not seen the likes of and for which, sadly, we are woefully underprepared. It is simply too early to work out how the emergency will manifest itself but, just as we equip our nurses with personal protective equipment, we need to equip teachers with the skills to spot the signs and to support those who need help.

As the committee report recommends, and as many members have said in the debate, that work must start now. It should have already started, because those sad statistics speak for themselves. The report mentions the "confusing and ... cluttered landscape" for accessing support. That gets to the heart of the matter. The pathways to get support are not only unclear; they are often not there at all.

We know that the NUS Scotland study found that a third of students had nowhere to go for support. When they go for support, what happens? They face lengthy and unacceptable waits, even for that first vital assessment, never mind for ongoing treatment. I do not mean that they are waiting for weeks—in many cases, they are waiting for months, and, in some cases, for more than a year. How can waiting a year just to see someone be acceptable to any of us?

I know that the minister takes the issue seriously, but we talk the talk in this place about mental health. We say that it has equity of importance with physical health, but does it really? There would be outrage in the Parliament if someone who had been diagnosed with a severe physical disease had to wait nine months before they saw a consultant. Indeed, in some cases, we do see that. Where is the same outrage over mental health support?

Let this debate serve as a stark warning to us all. It must be the catalyst for a renewed overhaul of our approach to supporting young people's mental health. There must be a support mechanism and a focus on community-led, bottom-up approaches, with mental health first aid training for our teachers and opportunities for their professional development. We know that school counsellors will play a vital role, so we must meet the target of having them in every school; every school must have access to one.

We know that there is a workforce crisis in providing mental health support, because the Royal College of Psychiatrists warned us of that.

We know that there are many vacancies in consultancy posts. We must ask why that is and what is being done about it. I hope that the minister will reflect on the recruitment issue in her summing up.

Clare Haughey: I am happy to respond now.

Jamie Greene: I am in my final minute, but I would like the minister to address the issue in closing.

I cannot take part in the debate without addressing the substance of the petition, because it raises an important and grave issue. I do not have the answer to the complex issue of whether parents or guardians should be informed about a mental health diagnosis or about the prescription of medication. I do not have teenage children with depression who are taking medication or self-harming, but would I want to know whether they had been prescribed medication? I probably would—if nothing else, to ensure consistent adherence to their treatment plan.

Do I also think that young adults should have the right to privacy? I would not interfere in their contraception or in their sexual or other personal health issues, but if someone is vulnerable and their general practitioner says so, the moral question is whether their guardian should be informed.

That conundrum has yet to be resolved, but we know that we cannot let down those young people a day longer. If we can prevent every loss of life, every act of self-harm and every day of darkness, we must. If we do not, that will be a shameful legacy of our shared time in this Parliament. We can do better. We have to do better.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I give Clare Haughey an equally generous six minutes.

18:08

Clare Haughey: Thank you, Presiding Officer. I thank members for this thoughtful and constructive debate, which has addressed many important issues this evening, and I again thank the committee for its work and its report.

As the Minister for Mental Health, I am reassured that there is clear consensus that the mental health of our young people is of paramount importance and that we, as a country, must continue to do more to ensure that children and young people have the support that they need. We must work together to ensure that our mental health is cared for and talked about as equally and openly as our physical health is. That is true from perinatal and infant mental health all the way through to mental health for older people.

As I mentioned at the start of the debate, Covid-19 has brought new and significant challenges into everyone's day-to-day life. It has changed life as we know it. It has taken away many comforts that we rely on so heavily—the usual things that we might do to improve our mental wellbeing, such as visiting friends or going to the gym—and alternatives must be found.

The pandemic will undoubtedly have a substantial impact on the mental health and wellbeing of our population for some time to come. However, we continue to strive to provide the best possible mental health care and support for Scotland's children and young people, including those who support them, particularly their families and carers.

The actions in our transition and recovery plan set out how we will do that as we continue to live with the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and, I hope, as we move towards the successful development and distribution of a vaccine.

The experiences that members from across the chamber and beyond have shared today have been honest and telling. I am sure that we have all, as constituency MSPs and members of communities, heard personal accounts of the mental health challenges that are faced by children and young people throughout Scotland. It is those stories and experiences that drive me to keep working to improve services—to improve access to CAMHS, to develop alternative services for those who would benefit from support in the community and to ensure that every young person in Scotland can access high-quality information to support their mental health and wellbeing.

Before the debate closes, I will take a moment to thank all our key partners, some of whom have been mentioned in the debate, particularly third sector organisations across Scotland. They have shown absolute resilience through the most trying of times to ensure that local services and support are still available to our children and young people. I am sure that members will join me in recognising their hard work and commending them for all their support over the past nine months and beyond.

Similarly, I say thank you again to our young people of Scotland. I hope that future generations never have to experience challenges like those that our young people have had to face through the pandemic. I am aware that the repercussions of Covid-19 will be felt for years to come and it is extremely important that we remember that. When the virus itself is no longer with us, the indirect effects of it will remain for some time.

During the debate, we have heard many interesting and thought-provoking points. I will address a few of them. Mary Fee asked for an

update on school counsellors. We are on course to invest £60 million so that every high school has access to counselling. Our local authority partners made excellent progress during the school closures and plans indicated that they were on course to deliver by the end of October. My officials are currently confirming that position with the authorities, and we will report on that in due course.

Jamie Greene raised the issue of workforce. The Scottish Government is supporting the Royal College of Psychiatry's choose psychiatry programme, which aims to encourage medical graduates to work in the field of mental health, and we will continue to do that.

Johann Lamont raised the issue of mental health training. We have a range of training materials, including online resources that are provided by NHS Education Scotland, which are available to all staff who are currently working with children and young people.

Sandra White and Beatrice Wishart both raised the issue of ASIST—applied suicide intervention skills training—and I know that I have answered a question from Sandra White about that in the chamber. It is quite complex, so I commit to writing to both members to give a full explanation of why it cannot currently be delivered online.

Pauline McNeill raised concerning issues about constituency cases and the issue of CAMHS using Near Me. CAMHS is one of the highest mental health users of Near Me. Mental health services across the country have been using Near Me and have adapted to using it remarkably well over recent months. In the case of CAMHS, video consultations are not always appropriate, for reasons that include digital exclusion and safeguarding. However, we will continue to work with our CAMHS colleagues and try to address digital issues where that is appropriate.

I thank the Public Petitions Committee again for its dedication to the inquiry into mental health support for young people in Scotland and for requesting the debate, and I thank the petitioner, Annette McKenzie, for her drive and determination, which was so evident when I met her. As someone who has also lost a child, I can only express my admiration for the work that she has done.

As we near the end of 2020, it is fair to say that this year mental health has been discussed more than ever before. We have routinely checked in with friends, family and colleagues to ensure that they are feeling and coping okay, and we have been putting the mental health of others and ourselves first. I am thankful for that—it is something that I hope will continue far beyond this year.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Lewis Macdonald): I call Gail Ross to wind up the debate on behalf of the Public Petitions Committee.

18:14

Gail Ross (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP): I, too, thank everyone who has been involved in the inquiry and the production of the report, especially our committee clerks. It is a strong report with recommendations that have to be taken seriously.

I thank the minister for her consideration and that of the Scottish Government; I note that other members have put on record their thanks to her for listening and engaging across the parties on the issue. I have no doubt that she cares deeply about the subject and will continue to commit herself and her team to the young people of Scotland. I also thank all those members who have spoken today in what has been a particularly challenging, and sometimes emotional, discussion. I am glad to hear that everyone agrees with our report's recommendations.

As the convener said in her opening remarks, and as many other members mentioned, we are here for this debate because of the courage of Annette McKenzie. Despite her grief and pain, she has campaigned for change, aiming to help other young people and their families. While the committee recognises the concerns that have been raised and the specific action for which she originally called, we really hope that Annette feels proud that today's debate has taken place in no small part because of what she started with her petition.

With regard to the petition, Brian Whittle spoke about the capacity of young people to make decisions about their own treatment, especially given the petitioner's situation. Jamie Greene also addressed that issue. Both members agreed that there is no easy solution, and the committee really struggled with that aspect, too. Many members highlighted the need for better access to mental health support, especially—and importantly—at the point when young people need it the most. However, we know that starting a conversation about mental health is sometimes not easy, and we need to try to change that.

As we recognise in our report, there is no question but that the impact of Covid-19, given how it is likely to impact on mental wellbeing, will lead to an increase in demand for mental health services over and above what we have already seen. A few members, including Mary Fee, Brian Whittle, Tom Mason, Maurice Corry, Monica Lennon and others, spoke about the need for

joined-up services and a more streamlined approach, and the committee agreed on that, too.

To inform our report, we undertook extensive external engagement, and we are grateful to all those who met us. The experiences of the young people, their families and friends and the professionals who are doing all that they can to support them were critical to our understanding of how young people are currently able to access support for their mental health.

As many members said, the committee is grateful, in particular, to the young people who took the time to meet us and share their—sometimes painful—experiences. Their voices have been central in shaping the recommendations in our report—and, by extension, shaping the debate—to increase the support that is available and access to it, and to tackle the stigma of mental health. Monica Lennon spoke about stigma and how we need to get through that in order to give people the support that they need. She is absolutely correct—we have come far, but we still have a long way to go.

We want to empower young people so that they can have more awareness and, ultimately more agency, in respect of their own mental health. Around this time last year, I—along with Brian Whittle, who was my committee colleague at the time—had the privilege of meeting a group of young people in Parliament. They were honest and frank about their experiences and the support that they had received from teachers and school staff, and from third sector organisations working with the schools. A number of members highlighted the relevance of our debate earlier today, on the importance of the third sector.

I was struck by how important it is for young people—as they told us—that they are able to access the right support at the right time. It is also important that young people know how to express themselves and make themselves understood, so that they can ask for help more effectively.

The committee has seen at first hand the good intentions and commitment of all those working in healthcare and educational settings, in third sector organisations, in national Government and in local government to support people with their mental health. Our evidence shows, however, that, where things are working well, that could be shared more widely, and that those who work with young people could be equipped with better resources and training. Discussions about mental health and about possible avenues for support need to be more open and accessible. We recognised that, although much is being done, it is often not enough.

We heard about early intervention programmes such as let's introduce anxiety management—

LIAM—in NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, but its success depends on being used at the earliest stages of anxiety. It is therefore concerning that there are waiting lists for that programme in many areas. In Highland, there are challenges with recruitment, which results in similar situations: there are long waiting lists, and young people are struggling to be heard.

Many members—if not everyone who spoke in the debate—highlighted the need for training, especially in specialist services such as CAMHS, noting the huge waiting lists that some areas face. I thank the minister for recognising that in her remarks, and I welcome the actions to help boards that have particularly long waiting times.

Like Maurice Corry, I welcome the creation of the wellbeing centres by local authorities across the country, and I echo the minister's thanks to every single person who is working in mental health at the moment. We owe you a huge debt of gratitude for all that you are doing.

David Torrance's speech was powerful, pointing out how important it is for young people to have good mental health in so many aspects of life. He also spoke about challenging stigma and living in a Scotland where we prioritise mental health, and I agree with that whole-heartedly.

Tom Mason noted the rise in mental health issues and the increased use of social media. That is something that other members have discussed in other debates.

Sandra White mentioned the Samaritans, SAMH and all the good work that they do, highlighting the asks that both those organisations have, and she asked that those be incorporated into the current Scottish Government's work programme.

Maurice Corry noted the pressures that young people face, mentioning the worrying rise in the incidence of suicide among young people, which I know is something that worries us all.

Jamie Greene reminded us of GPs being under immense pressure, with only 15 minutes per appointment. He painted a bleak picture of the statistics of self-harm and suicide, particularly in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex community. He told us how he has personally lost friends. I cannot imagine how difficult that must be, so I thank him for telling us about that.

The likely impact of the Covid-19 public health emergency on our mental health as well as our physical health has been recognised by all members who have spoken. Beatrice Wishart noted the challenges to health and wellbeing due to the interruption to education and the inability of the current mental health system to cope. She also spoke about the importance of training and

access to help, and about the big role that education plays in that.

Pauline McNeill spoke about the impact of lockdown and how it is affecting our young people. She recounted a distressing situation involving someone who was let down by services and attempted to take their own life. She pointed out that there are discrepancies between some areas in the services that can be accessed.

Mary Fee and Sandra White spoke about students and their feelings of loneliness and isolation. As was pointed out, that issue has been around since long before Covid-19, albeit that Covid has exacerbated and will exacerbate the situation. We do not yet know the full extent of the longer-term impact of this crisis, but we know that the challenges that many young people face, such as disruption to their education and to the employment opportunities that are available to their age group, have been significant.

The committee acknowledges that meaningful work and commitment to improve mental health support for young people was already being undertaken by the Scottish Government before our report was published. Our report shows, however, that more needs to be done. The impact of Covid-19 will only compound the situation. As a Parliament, it is our duty to ensure that our young people have the best possible support for their mental health.

In conclusion, I echo Monica Lennon's words: get in touch with somebody, phone them, ask them how they are doing and tell them that you love them.

I support the motion in Johann Lamont's name.

Decision Time

18:25

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Lewis Macdonald): There are three questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that amendment S5M-23408.1, in the name of Rachael Hamilton, which seeks to amend motion S5M-23408, in the name of Ruth Maguire, on valuing the third sector, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The second question is, that motion S5M-23408, in the name of Ruth Maguire, as amended, be agreed to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

That the Parliament notes the findings set out in the Equalities and Human Rights Committee's 4th Report, 2019 (Session 5), *Looking ahead to the Scottish Government's Draft Budget 2020-21: Valuing the Third Sector* (SP Paper 614), which was published on 7 November 2019, and its letter to the Scottish Government published on 29 October 2020, which includes an update on its views on the impact of the pandemic on the third sector, and asks the Scottish Government to commit to an interim report on its progress in implementing the committee's recommendations.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The third question is, that motion S5M-23498, in the name of Johann Lamont, on an inquiry into mental health support for young people in Scotland, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament notes the conclusions and recommendations contained in the Public Petitions Committee's 3rd Report 2020 (Session 5), *Inquiry into mental health support for young people in Scotland* (SP Paper 776).

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Carers (Support After Bereavement)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S5M-22523, in the name of Mark Griffin, on the report, "Life After Death: supporting carers after bereavement". The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament welcomes the Marie Curie, Reform Scotland and Sue Ryder report, *Life After Death: supporting carers after bereavement*; notes that it calls for more recognition of the impact of death on the carer and the effect on the carer's physical and mental health, their relationships, ability to work and finances; understands that over 15,000 people have died of all conditions during the COVID-19 epidemic in Scotland, leaving behind a significant number of bereaved people; notes the report's key recommendations for future policy and legislation, including a new Carers (Bereavement Support) (Scotland) Bill early in the next parliamentary session to provide information and a plan to support carers following the end of their caring role, a new fund to support training and education for carers returning to work/seeking employment, a new post-caring support payment to help carers experiencing financial problems following the end of their caring role, and to extend eligibility for the Carer's Allowance and Carer's Allowance Supplement for up to six months after the person's caring role comes to an end from the current eight weeks; recognises that 78,870 people were claiming Carer's Allowance before the pandemic struck, including 12,044 in Central Scotland; notes the calls for the Scottish Government to consider these recommendations, and thanks Scotland's carers for all that they do to support terminally ill people and those at end of life.

18:27

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): I thank the members who supported the motion and who join me, in the chamber or remotely, this evening. I hope that they will also join me in offering thanks to Scotland's unpaid carers for the work that they do in supporting loved ones day in, day out. The debate will deal with the upheaval of what comes after providing care; I hope that we can show carers our willingness to agree to support them better, now and in the years ahead.

I am grateful to Marie Curie, Sue Ryder and Reform Scotland for asking me to bring to the chamber their report, "Life After Death: supporting carers after bereavement". The report presents a firm platform for supporting bereaved carers into the next decade, with concise and logical policy solutions that can help bereaved carers in a meaningful way. I hope that the Government, and every other party, will consider those suggested solutions ahead of the budget and the upcoming election.

The report provides a stark reminder of how tough our unpaid carers have it. Virtually every aspect of life is impacted: loneliness, health concerns, sleepless nights and financial worries are all regular issues for carers. For an estimated 40,000 to 50,000 carers every year, the period of support that they give their family and friends ends with loss. Their grief is further compounded by worries about the future and finances, and by even greater loneliness.

The past year has been torturous for our unpaid carers. They have had to worry about catching Covid-19 and spreading it to their loved ones, and they have faced increased costs amid unemployment or furlough. Some of them nursed the 4,000 people who spent their final moments at home. Those deaths have resulted not only from Covid-19—this year, 1,500 people have died from cancer, and 1,000 from heart disease, at home. Although many people would prefer to die at home, we do not know whether those people had the quality of care that they would expect in hospital, nor do we know how they and their carers coped in those final moments.

Some of us might feel rudderless right now, but I cannot imagine how carers are coping in a distanced society, especially when they face loss. It is estimated that the number of bereaved carers will increase by 10 per cent this year because the vast majority of Covid-19 deaths were of people who were aged over 75 or who had an underlying health condition. At the same time, more people are now caring for older, disabled or seriously ill relatives or friends since the Covid-19 pandemic. Carers Scotland believes that the number has shot up by 400,000. I ask the Government what research it has commissioned to see how people have coped and what can be learned from carers' experiences over the past year.

Our unpaid carers have borne the brunt of loss during the pandemic—there is no getting away from that—so today's debate could not have come soon enough. The proposals from Marie Curie, Sue Ryder and Reform Scotland are sensible and would give carers continued assurance that the support that we offer them has not stopped at the carers allowance supplement or the implementation of the Carers (Scotland) Act 2016.

The proposal for a carers bereavement support bill, to reflect in law the principles behind the bereavement charter for Scotland, has to be the starting point for all parties in the next session of Parliament. Securing a right to a post-carer support plan is also important. That could build on the familiar person-centred support plans and young carer statement model by organising the right bereavement support for carers, in addition to providing advice on benefits and employability services.

The longer someone has been caring, the longer they are likely to have been out of the labour market and, as the organisations that I mentioned put it,

“potentially isolated from the networks they had before becoming a carer”.

We know that most unpaid carers are women, and it is clear that the impact of no longer providing care and trying to get back into work is acutely gendered. How do those carers re-enter the labour market after having given up work for such a long period of time? What happens to their own income when their entitlement to carers allowance ends eight weeks after their loss?

Even in normal times, former carers might struggle to simultaneously grieve and recover, but we are not living in normal times. The pandemic continues and unemployment is set to rise month on month; it is plain to see that the jobs market will be very competitive. As the report says, we need to recognise that it will take people more time to rebuild those connections and adjust.

An extension of the entitlement to carers allowance to six months after death, and a new post-caring support payment, would provide stability after a loss and could serve as a recognition of the commitment that unpaid carers have given to their loved ones. Those are realistic and tangible solutions that could give meaningful support to bereaved carers, and they are within reach. The organisations—Marie Curie, Sue Ryder and Reform Scotland—have provided initial costings for those proposals, and I ask the Government to work collaboratively with them in that regard.

When I lodged my motion, the second wave of Covid was still to emerge. Since then, hundreds more carers are likely to have experienced the same fear and devastating loss at the hands of the virus. We cannot, in all good conscience, expect them to return to work and to normality in a world that is clearly not going to be normal for some time. I hope that we can agree that we must do more to support carers, now and in the years ahead, when they experience that loss.

18:34

Tom Arthur (Renfrewshire South) (SNP): I thank Mark Griffin for securing this debate and commend him for his thoughtful and eloquent speech. I also thank Sue Ryder, Marie Curie and Reform Scotland for producing their policy proposals paper, “Life After Death: supporting carers after bereavement”. Most important, I thank unpaid carers across my constituency, Renfrewshire South, for all the support that they provide.

In recent years, we have made progress in making Scotland a place that takes a more person-centred and flexible approach to unpaid carers and the people whom carers support. Landmarks in that regard include the introduction of self-directed support, the integration of health and social care, the Carers (Scotland) Act 2016 and the devolution of the carers allowance, which was followed by the introduction of the carers allowance supplement. In addition, the Carer Positive scheme, which I have been proud to support in the Scottish Parliament and in Renfrewshire South, has led to a growing number of employers being accredited for putting in place workplace policies that support working carers.

The report that we are considering in the debate makes an important contribution, in that it focuses on what happens to carers after bereavement, when there is no longer a person to care for. It identifies a number of issues, including the loss of financial support, transition and employment support.

A central recommendation of the report is the introduction of a carers bereavement support bill early in the new parliamentary session, to put a new post-carer support plan on a statutory footing, commensurate with that of the adult carer support plan and the young carer statement, which were provided for in the 2016 act. According to the report’s authors, the proposed new plan

“would be an opportunity to identify information and services to support someone following the end of their caring role. This could include bereavement support, information and advice on financial support/benefits available, as well as identifying any services locally or online to support a return to work. For those not looking for work, it is just as important that they are helped to rebuild connections and not left feeling isolated.”

Although many groups and organisations, such as carers centres, provide various strands of support, a post-carer support plan could provide additional support to help a person to navigate the options in a period of potential distress and trauma.

The aims of the proposed plan are laudable and I imagine that they command universal support in the Parliament. The idea is worth exploring, and there is an opportunity to do that through post-legislative scrutiny of the Carers (Scotland) Act 2016 by the successor committee to either the Health and Sport Committee or the Public Audit and Post-legislative Scrutiny Committee, early in the next session.

It is worth noting that the 2016 act contains provision for the information in the adult carer support plan and the young carer statement, as well as the form that those documents take, to be amended or supplemented via statutory instrument. That might allow the Scottish ministers

to incorporate a post-carer support plan into the existing legislative architecture, thereby obviating the need for primary legislation.

The report contains many other worthy proposals, including on devolved and reserved social security and employment support. I encourage members to read it, if they have not yet had the opportunity to do so.

I again thank Mark Griffin for securing the debate and Sue Ryder, Marie Curie and Reform Scotland for producing the report. I know that the Scottish Government will carefully consider all proposals to enhance support for carers and I look forward to hearing the cabinet secretary's response to the debate.

18:38

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I thank Mark Griffin for securing the debate, and I thank all the organisations that sent us briefings.

Support for carers after bereavement is probably an issue that not enough of us have considered. I am sure that many members have spent time in the company of carers, to learn about their experience and consider what we might do to address the issues that they face in their caring roles. We have thought about carers' financial position, and the Parliament increased the carers allowance. We might have thought about the isolation that a caring role can bring and about the situation of the many young carers who have to fit a caring role into their childhood.

However, I have to be honest and say that I had never considered what happens next if the caring role ends because of a bereavement. As Mark Griffin said, a report by Carers UK Scotland noted that nearly 400,000 more people in Scotland have found themselves caring for an older, disabled or seriously ill relative or friend during the Covid pandemic, so it seems obvious that the situation must occur all too often. Many are financially supported in that caring role, so what happens when that role and the vital support end?

First, there is the bereavement itself and the mental stress of losing a loved one that the carer has been instrumental in caring for. In many cases, that has been the carer's main purpose in life, so bereavement must have a significant impact on their physical and mental health.

The carers allowance continues for only eight weeks after the death of the cared-for person, which is not long enough to allow the carer to grieve, regroup and find a job. It is hard enough to lose a loved one, and trying to rebuild interaction with the community must be more difficult in the current circumstances.

Today, we are considering the development of a support package that is designed for carers who are going through that difficult process—that is the crux of Mark Griffin's motion. A carers bereavement support bill should be introduced early in the next parliamentary session, with provisions to support carers back into work, including the offer of training and education. The idea of a post-caring support payment that is linked to the length of time that the person has been a carer and out of the job market is eminently sensible and would help with the financial stresses that come at the end of a caring role. There is also a proposal to extend carers allowance to six months after the caring role ends—currently, the period is eight weeks.

Those ideas are not big asks, particularly when we consider the role that carers play in society and the sacrifices that they make—not to mention the financial worth of their role in our communities.

Now and again in the chamber, we discuss situations that are hard to imagine and difficult to deal with, and this is one of those. I again congratulate Mark Griffin on giving us the opportunity to discuss how we support a part of our community that, all too often, is forgotten. Perhaps the debate can begin the process of delivering long-overdue solutions.

18:41

James Kelly (Glasgow) (Lab): I congratulate Mark Griffin on securing this important debate. I also congratulate him on highlighting the role of unpaid carers, the difficult issue of what happens to them when they suffer bereavement and the impact on them when the person they have cared for is no longer part of their life.

The role of Scotland's unpaid carers has grown in recent years. Analysis for an earlier debate today showed that the number of unpaid carers has gone up by almost 400,000 to 1.1 million, which is a significant figure. Carers often give up work or retire early. They devote much of their time to caring for a partner or loved one. The role becomes all-consuming—it takes over their life. If the carer loses the person they have been caring for, not only is there a massive hole in their life, together with mental and emotional pain, but it is difficult for them to get back into and participate in society and find the physical and financial support that they require.

The report highlights those issues and outlines a way forward to support carers in the aftermath of a bereavement. It lays out a number of asks. The first is the introduction of a carers bereavement support bill, which would enshrine the rights of carers, post-bereavement, and make it clear what support they were entitled to. Many carers are

young, such as those who look after a parent, and they may have difficulties getting back into the workplace. A second ask is for a training and education fund, which is essential, as is an appropriate support payment.

A key ask, which is mentioned in Mark Griffin's motion, is that eligibility for carers allowance be extended. The allowance is in place for only eight weeks after a bereavement. That is welcome but, after eight weeks, many carers will in no way have rebuilt their life or their role in the community. Carers need the period of financial support to be extended to six months. That would make a substantial difference in the Glasgow region, which I represent—it would help up to 15,000 people there, including 1,558 people in the Rutherglen constituency alone.

The debate has been worth while because it has devoted time to the important issue of supporting unpaid carers and highlighted the support that we can give them when they suffer bereavement as a result of the death of the person they have cared for. Mark Griffin's excellent motion sets out significant asks that I hope that the cabinet secretary will reflect on and take forward.

18:46

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): I add my thanks to Mark Griffin for lodging the motion and securing the debate. I also thank those who prepared the report that we are discussing.

We have heard from other members that any loss is difficult and traumatic. People need a period to mourn and reflect before there is any possibility of moving on. That is particularly true for those who have had caring responsibilities towards or at the end of someone's life.

In a previous life as a church minister, I took funerals of people who had died from cancer or other terminal illnesses. The carers who were left perhaps needed longer than others to come to terms with that, to adjust their lives and to get the house back to a different arrangement. Suddenly, doing what we all consider to be normal things was back on their agenda.

Some of the report's recommendations are welcome; I hope that they will get cross-party support not only tonight, but beyond. Extending from two to six months the period for which people get money is sensible and would be welcome, but the greatest concentration should be on the support that people need in order to get back into employment. Such people have often been away from employment for years, and things such as technology and how to prepare a CV or for an interview will have moved on. Most important is that an individual's confidence might have gone. Any support that local authorities, the third sector

and others can offer to equip a person to feel able to go back into employment at the right time for them is welcome.

I hope that the debate will start a bigger debate and that the report will not sit on a shelf, but will bring together groups in civic society and bring together political thinking so that we can move forward.

I thank Mark Griffin again for lodging the motion, and I look forward to hearing the cabinet secretary's response.

18:49

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Security and Older People (Shirley-Anne Somerville): I begin by thanking Mark Griffin for bringing this important matter to the chamber and for his contribution, which was considered and thoughtful—as, indeed, were the other speeches.

We know that unpaid carers play an important role in Scotland, and the Covid-19 pandemic has shone an even brighter light on the significance of that role. The Scottish Government has remained in close contact with carers' representatives during the pandemic in order that it could understand their needs and concerns and act accordingly. We are absolutely committed to supporting carers, as they support others, now and into the future.

However, our support does not and should never end when a caring role comes to an end. That is especially true when that is the result of the death of the cared-for person. As Mark Griffin and others have said, at the same time as coping with their grief and loss, carers can face big life challenges in adapting to their new life without that caring role.

The report from Marie Curie, Reform Scotland and Sue Ryder highlights the challenges that carers can face following the death of a cared-for person. It also recognises that, because of the pandemic, many more carers might have experienced such losses this year. Across Government, and working with our partners in the third and public sectors, we already provide a wealth of support that can help carers with the transition from the caring role. We continue to listen to and work with carers and their representatives to raise awareness of what is already available and, importantly, to consider how support can be improved in the future.

For carers who are experiencing bereavement, we already work closely with NHS boards, health and social care integration authorities and the third sector to make sure that our bereavement support services meet their needs. We have continued that work throughout the pandemic so that those services continue to be available during this

difficult time. That has included provision of funding to accelerate the expansion of remote bereavement support to ensure that it is available across Scotland, with further funding having been provided in October to prepare for any increase in demand over the winter.

The report also highlights the importance of advice and support for carers following bereavement. Under the Carers (Scotland) Act 2016, carers already have the right to a personalised plan to identify what is important to them and what support they need. Our statutory guidance specifically highlights that those plans can include bereavement support, where that can be anticipated.

Carers also have rights to information and advice, which are usually delivered by local carer centres, and which the 2016 act specifies must include information and advice on a number of the areas that are highlighted in the report, including income maximisation, education and training, and bereavement support.

However, it is no good establishing such rights and local support if people do not know about them. As the number of carers and the pressures on them have increased this year, helping people to see themselves as carers and to understand the support that is available has become an even greater priority. That is why, last week, we launched a carers national marketing campaign to help more people to recognise themselves as carers and so that they know about the support that exists for them. I take the opportunity to encourage all members to promote the campaign in their constituencies. Members can find out more at the campaign website, which is www.nhsinform.scot/caring.

We have also heard about the challenges that many carers will face in seeking to return to work, particularly given that they might have been out of the labour market for some time. Our “No one left behind” approach to employability is aimed at ensuring that carers, like others who face barriers to entering the labour market, receive flexible and personalised support that meets their specific needs and aspirations. A range of funding and support is already available, including through individual training accounts and our parental employability support fund, as well as from our fair start Scotland employability service.

We also recognise—as have contributors to today’s debate—that the majority of Scotland’s unpaid carers are women. Our women returners programme was launched last month and, backed by £500,000, it will fund projects to support women back into work after a break in their careers.

The report also highlights the financial impact on carers of the loss of a cared-for person when a

caring role comes to an end. It recognises that support is available through our funeral support payment, to help to reduce the financial difficulties that people might face in paying for a funeral. We have significantly increased eligibility for that support over eligibility for the United Kingdom Government payment that it replaces, which will allow us to help about 40 per cent more people, who would previously have received nothing.

We are committed to ensuring that carers and others can access all the support to which they are entitled, which is why we published a benefit take-up strategy last October, and last month wrote to encourage the UK Government to do the same.

The report calls for carers to continue to receive the carers allowance and extra support through our carers allowance supplement for up to six months after the loss of a cared-for person, and for a new payment to be created to support carers after a caring role has ended. From working with and listening to carers and the organisations that support them, I know that support at the end of a caring role, particularly following the death of a cared-for person, is one of the areas in which they would like to see real change in the future.

To build on what we have learned from those conversations and a range of research, early next year we will consult on the aims for our replacement benefit for carers allowance—Scottish carers assistance—to ensure that it better meets the needs of carers, and has stronger links to wider support. As we continue with conversations around the replacement, we appreciate the input from Marie Curie, Sue Ryder and Reform Scotland in the report, and would very much welcome their continued contribution to the conversations, as we go forward.

The report and the debate today have rightly highlighted carers’ stories and experiences of the end of caring roles. Making sure that carers are heard and that their views and needs shape our work is absolutely integral to our approach to supporting carers. We have maintained that approach throughout the pandemic; I guarantee that it will continue into the future.

As we develop our replacement for carers allowance, I appreciate and look forward to continued input from the organisations that are behind the report. I will also welcome contributions from members from across the chamber as we consider how we can better support our carers in the future.

Finally, I echo the thanks of contributors to today’s debate to Scotland’s carers for all that they do—in these exceptionally difficult times, as always—to provide vital support to friends and family with terminal illness and at the end of their lives.

Meeting closed at 18:57.

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