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Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 7 September 2021

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

Good afternoon. I remind members that social distancing measures are in place in the chamber and across the Holyrood campus. I ask members to take care to observe the measures, including when entering and exiting the chamber. Please use the aisles and walkways only to access your seats and when moving around the chamber.

The first item of business is time for reflection. Our time for reflection leader is the Rev Hayley Cohen, the minister of Northesk parish church, Musselburgh.

The Rev Hayley Cohen (Northesk Parish Church, Musselburgh): Presiding Officer and members of the Scottish Parliament, it is an honour to address you today.

I wonder whether you were someone who, in the beginning of lockdown, noticed that it appeared that the birds were singing louder than before. Perhaps you, like me, in those more difficult days of lockdown, found listening to the birds, walking in the woods and enjoying nature in general to be a source of joy, solace and strength.

We know now that it was not that the birds were singing louder—in fact, in some cases they were singing more quietly—but that we humans had slowed down enough to notice them.

Lockdown shone a light on how alienated we have become from the natural world around us. We have filled the world with so much noise—from the literal noise of traffic to the general noise of our lives—that we failed to notice that the birds have been calling out for us to slow down and pay more attention.

If you were one of those people who heard the birds, I wonder whether you are still noticing them or whether life has resumed its absurd pace from before.

In the gospels, Jesus encourages his disciples to look at the birds of the air as a pathway to understanding how much God cares for each of us and for the world that we share. Jesus knew that, when we slow down and take time to be in nature, we cultivate a greater appreciation for our own lives, each other and the world around us.

That sense of appreciation hopefully leads us not just to look after ourselves with more care but

grows within us a desire to look after the world that we live in and the people with whom we share it with compassion, justice and love.

In just a few weeks, Scotland will be host to the 26th United Nations climate change conference of the parties—COP26. With our climate in crisis, we know that there has never been a more pivotal time to slow down and listen to the needs of the world around us and act quickly to save not just ourselves but the whole of creation.

My prayer for all of you is that you look at the birds and, in seeing them, grow in appreciation for our world, and that you act out of that gratitude for all our sakes. Thank you, and God bless you.

Topical Question Time

14:03

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is topical questions. In order to get in as many members as possible, short and succinct questions and responses would be welcome.

General Practitioner Appointments

1. **Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the use of face-to-face general practitioner appointments. (S6T-00139)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Humza Yousaf): I take the opportunity to thank our hard-working GPs for all that they did before the pandemic and, crucially, for the good work that they have done during the pandemic.

Public Health Scotland is publishing guidance on distancing and infection control measures in health settings that will change the 2m rule to a 1m rule. That means that there will potentially be more space for patients in waiting rooms, where that is appropriate, while we continue to ensure that everyone is kept safe. In the light of that, joint national health service and Scottish Government guidance for general practices will be published later today. That is an important step in getting more in-person appointments in primary care.

Today's guidance also makes it clear that there is no longer a need to triage every patient, although GPs and clinicians should continue to screen patients for Covid before seeing them face to face. The guidance contains resources to help practices to improve their communication with patients, as well as advice on access arrangements.

Sue Webber: We face a postcode lottery in patients' experience when they try to access their GP. Although patients are permitted to have face-to-face appointments with practice nurses and other health professionals, GP appointments have been limited to phone calls, which, in some cases, have no specific time for a call back. With the reports at the weekend of the new contract signed by NHS Scotland to expand such consultations, many patients are worried about access. We know that early diagnosis is crucial for many conditions, yet many patients are not able to access their GP. Does the cabinet secretary believe that Scottish patients have the right to see their GP face to face, and does today's guidance give a date for when they can expect that?

Humza Yousaf: Yes, I agree, where that is clinically appropriate. I am somewhat disappointed

that Ms Webber did not take the opportunity, as I did, to thank our GPs for the hard work that they have done over the pandemic, because the situation is not due to a lack of hard work. Our GPs are working incredibly hard, as they have done over the past 18 months, but it is because of the appropriate and clinically advisable infection prevention and control measures that are in place that digital solutions such as the NHS Near Me video consultation platform have been used.

I agree with Ms Webber that patient choice is absolutely critical, and I suspect and hope that the guidance that is being published today will lead to an increase in the number of face-to-face appointments. The NHS Near Me video consultation digital platform has been well used—in excess of 1 million appointments have been held using NHS Near Me since the beginning of the pandemic. Nevertheless, I recognise—our recovery plan lays this out in black and white—that face-to-face appointments can help us with some of the acute pressures that we face in our hospitals. I would like to see more face-to-face appointments, as, I suspect, would everybody else in the chamber, and I hope that the guidance that we publish will help in that respect.

Sue Webber: It gives no date, then. As I mentioned, accessing healthcare is a problem for many patients right now. With many unable to access their normal healthcare routes, such as going to their GPs, they are simply turning to our accident and emergency services. For the past four weeks in a row, we have seen the number of patients not being seen within four hours at A and E departments hit shocking new highs, and Scotland's largest health board, NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, is now telling people not to turn up unless the situation is life threatening. What has been done to tackle those waiting times now, and, as we move into the critical winter period, what planning is under way to ensure that we do not see a future A and E winter crisis?

Humza Yousaf: I say again that it is clear that we are under pressure. Every health service—across the world, I suspect, but certainly across the United Kingdom—is under pressure. Ms Webber is absolutely right in saying that A and E waiting time targets are not being met. That is, of course, deeply regrettable, but I cannot magic away the effects of the pandemic. Those effects are being felt right across the UK. This is no consolation to anybody who has had to wait for more than four hours, but our A and E service continues to perform better than any other A and E service across the entire UK.

We are taking immediate action, and £12 million has gone to health boards to help with the immediate pressures. I hope to see some response to the crisis that we are currently facing.

In terms of the autumn and winter pressure, I can give an absolute assurance to Ms Webber and any member in the chamber who wishes to have more detail about our autumn and winter planning, which started months ago, that we are very concerned about the winter because we suspect that we will see challenges around flu. We are already seeing challenges around RSV—respiratory syncytial virus—and the autumn and winter generally see more trips, slips and falls as well.

We are concerned, but we are already investing to make sure that our workforce continues to be not just at record high levels but the best paid in the entire UK.

Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): I take the opportunity to thank our GPs and acknowledge the importance placed on high-quality care in general practice when GPs have time to nurture and maintain relationships of trust with patients.

According to a recent British Medical Association survey, one third of GPs are considering taking early retirement. In relation to the Government’s remobilisation plan, Dr Lewis Morrison, the chair of BMA Scotland, has said that the plan contains “worrying gaps”, including the “crucial omission” of any plan to retain current NHS staff.

The plan states that there will be 800 new GPs by 2026 or 2028, depending on which paragraph you read. Will the cabinet secretary clarify that target and outline what action will be taken during the current crisis to retain GPs and ensure that there is sufficient capacity for people to see their doctor?

Humza Yousaf: Mr O’Kane raises some very important points, many of which I agree with. Retention is clearly going to be a key strategy as part of our NHS recovery plan.

The GP workforce is at the record level of 5,134 GPs, and we remain on track to meet our target of 800 additional GPs by 2027.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): The cabinet secretary creates the impression that all these problems are new, but the problems in primary care were deep seated well before the pandemic started. A bit of recognition of the long-term problems would not go amiss.

I am concerned about continued physical distancing of 1m. It is welcome that it has moved from 2m to 1m, but even that distancing restricts the option of GPs seeing some patients in person even though that might be the best thing for them.

Will the cabinet secretary look again at the physical distancing rules in primary care and justify his thinking that it is appropriate to continue with them? It is not all about Covid any more;

there are other issues. I am as cautious about Covid as any minister in the Government is, but I am deeply worried about the long-term and deep-seated problems that continue to exist in the NHS.

Humza Yousaf: Many of the actions that we have taken were taken pre-pandemic, such as the increase in the level of GPs. There is now a record staffing level that we have invested in and funded. Equally, I say to the member—I know that he knows this, but it is worth reiterating—that the pandemic has been the biggest shock our NHS has ever suffered. It is going to take investment but also time. That is why our NHS recovery plan is ambitious but also realistic in its timeframes.

In terms of his ask, I will look again at physical distancing rules. However, I say to Willie Rennie—I know that he understands this—that we take advice from public health experts and clinicians. We challenge them robustly but, ultimately, it is important that we take that clinical advice. It is important that we take soundings from patients but it is also important that we listen to stakeholders such as the BMA and the Royal College of General Practitioners. Willie Rennie has asked me to look at the matter again, and I promise him that I will do that.

Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): Clearly, restoring more face-to-face GP consultations as quickly and safely as possible is absolutely vital, but many people have welcomed the opportunity to use e-health and telehealth solutions such as NHS Near Me to contact their GP. Can the health secretary confirm that those new avenues will be maintained after the pandemic for those who choose to use them?

Humza Yousaf: Yes, absolutely. Gillian Martin makes an important point. A number of surveys have shown that a significant majority of people prefer to have telephone appointments or video consultations. As I mentioned to the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee this morning, a couple of weeks ago I was able to phone my GP to get the ointment that I needed for an eczema flare-up. It was done without having to disrupt my work, as I was able to have the appointment between other calls, and that made life easier for me.

However, that is not the case for everybody. Clearly, many people in particular demographics would like face-to-face appointments. A hybrid mix of options—video consultations through NHS Near Me, telephone consultations and face-to-face appointments—is something that I am keen to maintain.

ScotRail (Industrial Disputes)

2. **Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to

the on-going industrial disputes with ScotRail. (S6T-00127)

The Minister for Transport (Graeme Dey): First, I want to reiterate the Government's recognition of and appreciation for the contribution that all our rail workers made during the pandemic to keep rail services operating.

Only one dispute currently impacts ScotRail services, and that is on Sundays. As part of agreed working conditions, all rail staff who work on a Sunday receive an enhanced payment. The dispute concerns enhanced payments for working rest days. That arrangement, which was made between the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers and ScotRail, provided an additional, time-limited enhancement for ticket examiners and conductors, largely in acknowledgment of the extra work that existing staff were undertaking while ScotRail recruited and trained additional staff to minimise the requirement to work on rest days. Now that there are 140 additional ticket examiners and conductors, the issue of excessive rest day working has been resolved. I understand why the unions and workers might want to make that additional allowance permanent, but it simply is not sustainable in the long term.

I know that one group of RMT members has now voted in favour of extending the current industrial action, but I encourage settlement of the dispute. Any cancellations as a result of industrial action have the potential to not only undermine the recovery of our rail services but impact on vital revenue streams from ticket sales.

Neil Bibby: Industrial relations on Scotland's railways are at an all-time low. That is a damning indictment of Abellio's treatment of the key workers who have kept Scotland moving and a damning indictment of this Government, which is leading Scotland into the 26th United Nations climate change conference of the parties—COP26—with growing unrest on the railways and the prospect of strikes bringing Glasgow to a halt. That is a national humiliation and a failure of leadership from the Government.

The minister must get a grip and do so now. Why has he not intervened to ensure a satisfactory resolution to six months of RMT action and overtime bans? Will he intervene to ensure that ScotRail's dispute with engineers, who last week voted overwhelmingly for strike action, is resolved? Will the minister explain why industrial relations have nosedived in the final months of the Abellio contract and on his watch?

Graeme Dey: Negotiation is a matter for the transport operator and the trade unions. However, I have had discussions with Abellio and the trade

unions and have encouraged every constructive effort to resolve the situation.

We cannot continue the level of funding that is now going into rail. Prior to the pandemic, Scotland was spending about £1.1 billion per year on its railway. That figure covered all aspects, including investment. Because of the money that we have had to put in due to the pandemic, that figure has risen to around £1.5 billion per year. That is simply not sustainable.

We have encouraged unions and management to come together constructively and to identify efficiencies on both sides that could be used to fund reasonable pay increases. I reiterate that point today.

Neil Bibby: Negotiation is a matter for the operator and the trade unions, but it is also a matter for the transport minister and the Scottish Government. Government and taxpayers are paying ScotRail for a seven-day-a-week service but getting six days at the moment, because ScotRail does not have the workforce to cope with an overtime ban. Workers' terms and conditions are under attack, jobs and services are being cut, ScotRail will not rule out compulsory redundancies, key workers are not getting the fair deal that they deserve and nor are passengers, who cannot even get replacement bus services on a Sunday.

Abellio is making a mockery of the Government's commitment to fair work, as are five Scottish National Party MSPs who have done nothing to resolve the dispute and who have shamefully blamed the disruption on Scottish workers exercising their rights, rather than on ScotRail's intransigence.

Whose side is the Government on? Is it with the workers who are defending their jobs and conditions and defending services for passengers, or is it on the side of unreasonable bosses who, in the era of COP26, are wrecking our railways?

Graeme Dey: The Government is on the side of delivering a sustainable rail service for the future and protecting employees' jobs, but it is time for everyone to act responsibly. It is time to recognise the challenges that we face on the railway and to find a way to build back from the pandemic in a manner that delivers a more sustainable and efficient service that is ready to meet future demand.

"Everyone" includes Labour. No politician can expect to be regarded as credible if they argue—as Labour members appear to have been doing in the past week—that we should continue subsidising a pre-pandemic pattern of rail service, regardless of affordability and usage, at a time when the public finances face extremely significant challenges, and that we meet the cost of pay

claims without seeking to achieve that by delivering efficiencies.

We all aspire to having an efficient and sustainable rail service and we all have a responsibility to help the delivery of that service.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): We have seen cuts to services, a dispute that has now passed 130 days, 90 per cent of Sunday services cancelled, engineers now threatening strike action and the looming threat of all that continuing while world leaders visit rat-infested, SNP-run Glasgow in November. All of that is happening on the transport minister's watch. When will he take control and get it sorted?

Graeme Dey: That is a typically pejorative contribution from Mr Simpson. I agree that it is unacceptable to have no Sunday service for passengers. Behind all the rhetoric and behind the scenes, there are moves to try to resolve some of those disputes.

A meeting is taking place today with a trade union and Abellio, and I know that another is planned for later in the week. Every effort is being made within the constraints that I have highlighted to bring the matter to a conclusion.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): It appears that we are now in a perfect storm, with COP26 and disputes and timetable changes that are rocking the confidence of workers and the travelling public, but next year ScotRail will pass into public sector ownership. What best practice from the public sector—in terms of industrial relations, fair work, patient negotiation and consultation—can be brought to the new franchise?

Graeme Dey: Mark Ruskell makes a very fair and reasonable point, and that is where we aspire to get to. [*Interruption.*] I hear groans from members on the Conservative benches, but his contribution is the most constructive one that we have heard this afternoon.

The model that we want to deliver is one that protects workers' jobs, delivers fair wages and has negotiating protocols in place that allow the unions—rightly—to seek a reasonable pay increase for their members. All of that can be achieved with a reasonable and proportionate approach from all sides, and that is what we look to deliver.

Programme for Government 2021-22

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is a statement by Nicola Sturgeon on the programme for government 2021-22. The First Minister's statement will be followed by a debate, so there should be no interventions or interruptions during it.

14:21

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Today, I will set out the Government's programme for the year ahead and our priorities for the duration of the current session of Parliament as we implement the manifesto that we were resoundingly re-elected on in May and our co-operation agreement with the Scottish Green Party.

The programme addresses the key challenges that Scotland faces and it aims to shape a better future. It sets out how we will tackle the challenge of Covid and rebuild from it, address the deep-seated inequalities in our society, confront with urgency the climate emergency in a way that captures maximum economic benefit and mitigate as far as we can the damaging consequences of Brexit while offering a better alternative.

In detail, it sets out plans to invest in and reform our public services, establish a national care service, extend and increase the Scottish child payment, build more affordable houses, guarantee opportunities for young people, build an economy fit for the future and show real leadership on the climate crisis. It also reaffirms the Scottish Government's commitment to an independence referendum.

Our democratic mandate to allow people to decide the country's future is beyond question, and at this juncture in history it is essential that we consider the kind of country that we want to be and how best to secure it. As we emerge from the pandemic, choices fall to be made that will shape our economy and our society for decades to come. Which Parliament—Westminster or Holyrood—should make those choices? What principles will they be guided by? Those questions cannot be avoided or postponed until the die is already cast, so we intend to offer the choice. We will do so only when the Covid crisis has passed, but our aim—Covid permitting—is that it will be in the first half of this session of Parliament, before the end of 2023.

Crucially, we will ensure that the choice, when it comes, is a fully informed one. To that end, I can confirm that the Scottish Government will now restart work on the detailed prospectus that will guide the decision. The case for independence is a strong one and we will present it openly, frankly

and with confidence and ambition. Building a better future for those who come after us should be the ambition of any Government.

Of course, the immediate priority of the Government is to lead Scotland out of the pandemic. We are currently experiencing a surge in cases, although we are possibly seeing an early sign that the rate of increase is beginning to slow. I will update Parliament on that in more detail tomorrow. However, we remain focused on keeping the country as safe as possible in the face of a highly uncertain situation.

We will continue to maximise uptake of vaccines across eligible groups and extend vaccination quickly in line with any advice from the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation or the chief medical officer. We will support test and protect and will introduce a coronavirus (compensation for self-isolation) bill, which will allow health boards to focus on key services while local and national Government provide support for those who are asked to self-isolate.

We will work with businesses to ensure safe environments for workers and customers. As part of that, and to ensure that limited public resources support the most affected sectors, we will introduce a non-domestic rates Covid-19 appeals bill, to prevent inappropriate use of the provisions on material change of circumstances in non-domestic rates legislation.

We will take steps to encourage continued compliance with mitigations such as face coverings, rigorous hygiene and good ventilation. We will work with local authorities, schools, universities and colleges to put protections in place for young people and minimise disruption to education.

This week, we will seek Parliament's approval for a targeted system of vaccine certification, as a proportionate alternative to the risk of further closure of higher-risk settings. All those measures are likely to be essential as we head into autumn and winter.

As we seek to protect against Covid in the short term, we will also prepare for recovery in the longer term. A Covid recovery bill will embed in our public services and justice system reforms that, although necessitated by the pandemic, have delivered improvements. That bill will also help to build resilience against future health threats.

We will also shortly publish our wider Covid recovery strategy, setting out the targeted actions that we will take to address the impact of the pandemic on those who are hardest hit.

An essential aspect of recovery from Covid is the reform and renewal of our public services. Our health and care services have performed

magnificently in the most difficult of circumstances imaginable. They remain under severe and intense pressure. The Scottish Government will do all that we can to support those who work in health and care. We have already implemented a 4 per cent pay increase for agenda for change staff—the biggest single-year rise in the history of this Parliament, and the biggest among all four United Kingdom nations. We will continue to ensure fair and competitive pay for all who work in the national health service and, through our work to build a national care service, we will deliver national bargaining and improved pay for those who work in the care sector.

We will support implementation of the NHS recovery plan. In order to ensure that Covid-related backlogs are addressed and waiting times brought back within targets, we will substantially increase NHS capacity. In-patient and day-case capacity will increase by 10 per cent over the next 18 months and by 20 per cent over the next five years. There will be a 10 per cent increase in out-patient capacity by the end of the parliamentary session and, over the same timescale, a mix of innovation and extra capacity will deliver 90,000 more diagnostic procedures. The recovery plan will be backed by more than £1 billion of targeted investment, and I confirm today that we will increase investment in front-line health services by 20 per cent over the lifetime of this Parliament. That means that, by 2026-27, the front-line health budget will be £2.5 billion higher than it is today.

We will also increase investment in primary care by 25 per cent by the end of this parliamentary session, with half of all front-line spend invested in community health services so that more care is delivered closer to home. I also confirm that, having already removed dental charges for everyone aged under 26 since our re-election, we will abolish dental charges for all.

In the year ahead, we will invest an additional £120 million in mental health services—and we will increase direct investment in mental health services by 25 per cent over this parliamentary session and ensure that mental health commands at least 10 per cent of front-line health spending. The immediate funding will support the recovery and transformation of services, with a focus on prevention and early intervention, enable the full implementation of the national child and adolescent mental health service specification and clear historical waiting lists.

We will also invest in the modernisation of the NHS estate. Capital investment of £10 billion over the next decade will see health facilities built and refurbished across Scotland. That will include completion of the network of national treatment centres. I confirm that 1,500 additional NHS staff members will be recruited to support that network.

Centres in Fife, Forth Valley and Highland will open next year. I also confirm that we will support the replacement of the Edinburgh eye pavilion.

We will improve public health, with action to cut tobacco use, tackle alcohol misuse and reduce obesity. Over the course of the parliamentary session, we will double to £100 million investment in sport and active living.

We will also address the drugs death crisis. We will do so with urgency and a deep sense of responsibility, and will be guided by lived experience. Additional funding of £250 million will be invested across the lifetime of this Parliament in supporting better outreach, treatment, rehabilitation and aftercare in every part of Scotland.

This year, our focus will be on ensuring access to same-day treatment and a wider range of treatment options. We will also provide guaranteed funding for grassroots organisations providing essential community support.

Finally, on health and care, I confirm that we will introduce, in this parliamentary year, a national care service bill. It will provide for the establishment of the new service, which we intend to be operational by the end of this parliamentary session, and implement what is arguably the most significant public service reform since the creation of the national health service.

Alongside reform, there will be investment. I confirm that we will increase funding for social care by at least £800 million—25 per cent—over the lifetime of this Parliament. We will also remove charges for non-residential care and introduce Anne's law, giving nominated relatives or friends the same access rights to care homes as staff.

I know that the establishment of the national care service will spark much debate, and it is vital that we get the detail of it right. However, done well, as we intend, a national care service will be one of the biggest ever achievements of this Parliament—and, just like the national health service in the wake of the second world war, it will be a fitting legacy of the trauma of Covid.

This programme will also support and reform other key public services. The measures that we outline today will help our justice system recover from Covid. I confirm that we will protect Police Scotland's resource budget for the duration of the parliamentary session and support the modernisation of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service.

We will upgrade the prison estate, with investment of half a billion pounds. A new community justice strategy—to be published next year and backed by new investment—will also

support a substantial expansion of community justice services and help reduce re-offending.

We will improve support for victims of crime with the appointment of a victims commissioner and a new fund to support victims organisations. We will introduce a bail and release from custody bill to improve how decisions on bail are reached and better support release from custody.

Although we are proud of the reputation of Scotland's justice system and the distinctive Scots law principles that underpin it, we will consider reforms to make it stronger still. I confirm that, this year, we will launch a public consultation on whether the not proven verdict should be abolished. We will also consult on the potential separation of the dual roles of Scotland's law officers.

I also confirm that, in the first year of this Parliament, we will introduce the gender recognition reform bill. I understand that some have sincerely held concerns about that legislation. It is therefore worth stressing what it will do, but also what it will not do.

It will make the existing process of gender recognition less degrading, intrusive and traumatic. In other words, it will make life that bit easier for one of the most stigmatised minorities in our society, which is something that any Parliament should feel a responsibility to do.

What it will not do is remove any of the legal protections that women currently have. We should never forget that the biggest threats to women's safety come—as has always been the case—from abusive and predatory men; from deep-seated sexism and misogyny; and, in some parts of the world, from lawmakers intent on taking away basic freedoms and removing the rights of women to control our own bodies.

That is why I also confirm that, in this parliamentary session, we will invest £100 million to tackle domestic abuse and violence against women and support the front-line organisations that do so much to help them. We will also take account of the recommendations of the working group on misogyny and criminal justice, which is due to report next year, take forward our groundbreaking women's health plan and move to incorporate key human rights conventions into domestic law.

We will also take forward a number of measures to tackle long-standing concerns and address past injustice. We will introduce a fireworks and pyrotechnics bill to tighten the law on the sale and use of fireworks and reduce the misery that they can cause in communities. We will make legislative changes to tackle irresponsible dog ownership and we will introduce the fox control bill

to strengthen the law on the use of dogs to flush foxes and other wild mammals.

Last but by no means least, we will introduce the miners pardon bill to provide a collective pardon for people who were convicted of certain offences during the 1984-85 miners' strike. I very much hope that that will bring some closure to those who were convicted, their families and the communities that were affected.

In the year ahead and over this parliamentary session, we will continue our investment in and reform of education. We will implement the recommendations of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's review of the curriculum. We will continue our work to close the poverty-related attainment gap, with further investment of £1 billion over the course of the session.

Since the election, more than £200 million has been provided to local authorities, headteachers and other partners. We will also provide funding for councils to recruit 3,500 additional teachers and 500 classroom assistants; £50 million of that funding has already been allocated to support the recruitment of all the classroom assistants and the first 1,000 teachers.

We will reduce the cost of the school day. Since the election, we have abolished music tuition charges and extended universal provision of school meals to children in primary 4. Over the course of the session, we will extend free school meals to all primary school pupils, all year round. We will also provide every child with an electronic device and a connection to get online, recognising that that is as essential to education today as jotters and pencils were in years gone by.

Support for children and young people is one of the key themes that run through this programme. One of the landmark achievements of the previous session was the expansion of free childcare provision for three and four-year-olds and vulnerable two-year-olds. In this session, we will go much further. We will extend entitlement to funded early years learning to all one and two-year-olds, starting with low-income households, and we will develop a system of wraparound childcare, offering care before and after school and during the school holidays. That will be free for families on the lowest incomes and available at an affordable cost to others. A delivery plan will be published during the coming year.

We will also keep the promise that was made in the previous parliamentary session to care-experienced young people to ensure that all young people grow up loved and supported. We will introduce a new care experience grant, which will be payable to young people with care experience between the ages of 16 and 26, and we will

complete a review of the children's hearings system.

We will do more to avoid children entering care by improving the preventative support that is available to families before they reach crisis point. A £500 million whole-family wellbeing fund will support those services over this session of the Parliament. We will also work with local authorities to introduce a minimum national allowance for foster and kinship care.

We—and I hope that this commitment is shared right across this Parliament—are determined to end child poverty. The Scottish child payment, which already benefits eligible families with children up to age six, will be extended to cover children up to age 16 by the end of next year. This year—ahead of that full roll-out—we will make bridging payments for all children who are eligible for free school meals.

In our manifesto, we committed to increase the child payment from £10 to £20 per child per week by the end of this parliamentary session. That commitment stands, and I confirm today our intention to deliver this as early within the life of this session as possible. Given the scale of the commitment, it must be considered as part of our budget process; we will set out how and exactly when the commitment will be met when we publish the budget bill—our firm intention is to do it sooner rather than later.

Of course, the Scottish child payment sits alongside the wider support that is provided to families and communities. During this parliamentary session, we will work to develop a minimum income guarantee. The aim is to ensure that, through a combination of earnings, targeted payments and services, everyone has a sufficient income to live with dignity. A cross-party steering group to guide the work has already been established, and although that work will be important for its own sake, I hope that it will also lay the foundations for the introduction of a citizens basic income when this Parliament has full powers over tax and welfare.

We will build on our investment in housing over the previous session, to further improve the availability of good-quality, affordable, energy-efficient homes. I confirm that we will invest almost £3.5 billion in this parliamentary session to progress our commitment to an additional 110,000 affordable homes across Scotland. At least 70 per cent of those homes will be for social rent.

That Scottish Government funding will support total investment of £18 billion. As well as delivering affordable homes, the investment will support up to 15,000 jobs. By the end of the year, we will publish a new strategy for the rented sector. That will include a commitment to an

effective system of national rent controls and measures to strengthen tenants' rights. We will also invest an additional £50 million to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping, and extend the transformative housing first approach right across Scotland, to ensure that people have access to secure housing and the support needed to tackle the wider causes of homelessness.

Our support for public services, and individuals and families, must be matched by support for our economy. A fair, equal society and a strong, sustainable economy are not competing aims—they are interdependent. Businesses continue to be badly affected by the pandemic. I am hugely grateful for the efforts of thousands of companies across the country to keep workers and customers as safe as possible. Just as they are supporting our collective efforts to tackle Covid, so, too, must we support them. As we do so, we will work in partnership with business. I can confirm that we will continue to deliver the most competitive non-domestic rates framework anywhere in the UK; 100 per cent rates relief will continue for the retail, leisure, aviation and hospitality sectors for the whole of this financial year. The small business bonus, the fresh start relief and the business growth accelerator will all continue for the entire duration of this session of Parliament.

We will promote growth sectors such as space and life sciences, and support key sectors such as tourism and food and drink. As part of that, we will introduce a good food nation bill in this parliamentary year.

We will support our culture sector, recognising the enormous benefits that it brings to our economy, international reputation and wellbeing.

We will do more to support local businesses. Having already launched the Scotland loves local campaign to encourage people to do more shopping in local communities, we will now launch a £325 million place-based investment scheme to revitalise town centres.

We will also support our rural economy. In the next 12 months, we will launch a fund for rural entrepreneurs to support the relocation or creation of 2,000 new businesses. We will set out plans to support farmers, after our forced withdrawal from the European common agricultural policy, and we will consult on an agriculture bill to be introduced later in the parliamentary session. I can announce that we will double the community land fund over the course of this session of Parliament, to support further community buyouts of land and property in rural and urban areas.

We will support and promote the digital economy. Our reaching 100 per cent programme will help make superfast broadband available to every business and household in Scotland. Our

connecting Scotland programme will help to connect 300,000 households who might not otherwise have the means to do so. We have opened the £25 million digital boost fund to help small and medium-sized enterprises get access to the skills and equipment that they need, and we will continue to implement the Logan review of the technology sector, for example by supporting tech scalars in five of our cities.

We will enhance our international competitiveness by implementing the vision for trade. We will strengthen ties with Nordic and central European partners by establishing Scottish Government bases in Copenhagen and Warsaw—adding to our very effective existing network of overseas hubs—and we will introduce a moveable transactions bill to make certain commercial transactions less expensive and more efficient, and enable easier access to finance.

We will do more to promote fair work across our economy. We will apply fair work first criteria to public sector funding and contracts. We will support pilots of a four-day working week, backed by a £10 million fund for participating companies, and we will develop a longer-term plan for the economy, designed to recognise and harness the vast benefits of decarbonisation. Our 10-year strategy for economic transformation will set out how we can, and will, become a net zero economy in a way that enhances prosperity, equality and wellbeing. When the strategy is published, we will also set out the criteria for a new national challenge competition. Backed by £50 million, the competition will fund projects with the greatest potential to drive and accelerate our net zero transformation. That national work will be supported by regional economic partnerships, which will be established over the coming year.

We will also implement the recommendations of the just transition commission. As an early commitment to that work, we will establish a 10-year, £500 million just transition fund for the north-east and Moray, recognising the particular challenges for the region of the transition from oil and gas to renewable and low-carbon sources of energy.

We are also determined that this generation of young people will not bear the long-term burden of the pandemic. I confirm that up to £70 million will be invested this year to support the young persons guarantee, which is intended to give all young people between 16 and 24 the guarantee of a job, a place in education or training, or a formal volunteering opportunity. That is part of a wider commitment to skills and employment across all age groups.

We will invest an additional £500 million to promote good and green jobs, address skills gaps—many of which are being caused by

Brexit—and help people to retrain. That is essential to protect our economy from the severe consequences of Brexit and to achieve a net zero transition. We have already established a green jobs workforce academy, and later this month we will make the first allocations from the £100 million green jobs fund.

We will also work to secure greater benefit from the renewables and low-carbon revolution for the Scottish supply chain, for example through the current ScotWind leasing round. We will invest £200 million this year and £1 billion over the parliamentary session in the Scottish National Investment Bank, which has as one of its key missions the transition to net zero.

Over this parliamentary session, we will deliver capital investment of more than £33 billion, and in the coming year we will start work to establish a national infrastructure company to ensure that all public infrastructure investment delivers the greatest possible public good.

In summary, today's programme aims to ensure that individuals, businesses and the country as a whole are equipped to meet the challenge of the net zero transition, and realise the benefits in the form of jobs, investment and revenue for our country.

Tackling the climate emergency is both a moral and an economic imperative. In less than two months, Glasgow will host the 26th United Nations climate change conference of the parties—COP26. It represents the world's best chance—possibly the last chance—to limit global warming to 1.5°C, in line with the Paris agreement. The Scottish Government will do everything possible to support the success of the summit and secure a Glasgow agreement that allows us to look future generations in the eye. To support that outcome, we must lead by example, and we will. We must act fast to decarbonise heat and transport, just as we have already done for electricity.

Today, I confirm that we will invest at least £1.8 billion over the course of this parliamentary session to make homes and buildings easier and greener to heat. That will enable the decarbonisation of one million homes by 2030.

We will lead a green travel revolution. By 2024-25, at least 10 per cent of the transport budget will be dedicated to active travel. Building on the pilots that are under way, free bikes will be provided to children whose families cannot afford them. Those policies will encourage healthier lifestyles and reduce carbon emissions. They will also help our aim of 20-minute neighbourhoods, where people can live within 20 minutes of key amenities such as shops, services and green space.

One of the most valuable assets in many communities is the local library. Libraries do not

only provide access to books, vital though that is; they also host a range of services that support wellbeing. The pandemic has hit libraries hard, so, to help, I am announcing a fund of £1.25 million to help to get and keep libraries open, particularly in areas of deprivation.

I am also proud to confirm that, from January, everyone in Scotland who is under 22 years of age will be eligible for free bus travel. By the end of 2023, the vast majority of diesel buses will have been removed from Scotland's roads, and by 2030 we will have ended the sale of new petrol and diesel cars.

We have also started the process of taking ScotRail into public ownership and aim to complete that process by March. In this parliamentary session, we will make progress towards the full decarbonisation of our railways by 2035, which will include trialling the first hydrogen-powered train later this year. All those measures will reduce Scotland's overall car use by 20 per cent by 2030 and significantly reduce transport emissions.

We will also protect Scotland's biodiversity and natural habitats. By next autumn, we will publish a biodiversity strategy, which will be followed later in the parliamentary session by a natural environment bill. The bill will establish statutory targets for restoring and protecting nature. We will designate a new national park, and ensure that 10 per cent of Scotland's marine environment becomes highly protected. Over the parliamentary session, we will invest £500 million in our natural economy, and restore more woodlands, peatlands, and other natural habitats. The climate crisis is inseparable from the nature and biodiversity crisis. Scotland has a duty to show leadership on both. I am determined that we will.

The Scottish Parliament must support the transformational changes that will shape the next generation. As we begin our recovery from the pandemic, the year ahead will be crucial. In the face of the challenges, our ambition must be bold.

The programme for government sets out clear plans to lead Scotland out of the greatest health crisis in a century and to transform our nation and the lives of all those who live here. We will deliver a national care service, double the Scottish child payment and invest in affordable, energy-efficient homes and green travel. We will ensure that businesses have the support and people have the skills to succeed in the low-carbon economy of the future. We will show global leadership in tackling the climate crisis and we will offer people an informed choice on Scotland's future.

The programme addresses our current reality, but it also looks forward with confidence and ambition to a brighter future. It recognises that out

of the many challenges we currently face, a better Scotland, as part of a better world, is waiting to be built—and it sets out detailed plans to deliver that.

I am proud to commend the programme for government to Parliament.

Programme for Government 2021-22

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a Scottish Government debate on the programme for government 2021-22.

14:51

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): This is a programme for government that was delayed from last week because Nicola Sturgeon prioritised taking Green MSPs into her Government over outlining her plans for the year ahead. Her priorities were wrong last week and they are still wrong this week. Another independence referendum is front and centre of the First Minister's plans for the year ahead. In a statement that is 27 pages long, it takes Nicola Sturgeon four paragraphs to reach a mention of independence. It is right up there, in front of all the other priorities that we should—*[Interruption.]*

Scottish National Party members are heckling me. This is a debate and I am happy to take an intervention.

Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Douglas Ross: I will come to Mr Allan. I am happy to take an intervention from any member who thinks that it is correct that, in the time of a pandemic, it is right for the First Minister to prioritise independence over anything else—yet again.

Dr Allan: The member mentions all that as if it were never made clear, either in the manifesto or in the election result, that the SNP is in favour of a referendum on independence.

Douglas Ross: The election that Mr Allan refers to is one in which the SNP failed to win a majority.

Let us remember that Alasdair Allan, Nicola Sturgeon, Humza Yousaf and all the SNP MSPs—like all the Conservative MSPs, Labour MSPs, Liberal Democrat MSPs and Greens—said in the election that our priority for each and every one of the 129 of us would be Scotland's recovery from the pandemic. However, that is not the priority of the First Minister. She told the people to trust her to prioritise the recovery, but she has put another independence referendum front and centre—in paragraph 4 of her statement.

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Will Mr Ross take an intervention?

Douglas Ross: We have heard from the First Minister for well over half an hour, but I am happy to give way to hear more.

The First Minister: We agree on the importance of the recovery from Covid. I wonder whether Douglas Ross will take the opportunity to comment on any of the 26 and a half pages of the statement that set out bold and ambitious plans to lead Scotland out of the pandemic. It is his speech, but perhaps we can hear some of that in due course.

Douglas Ross: We will hear some of what was totally omitted from the First Minister's speech, but I will come to that in a moment.

Nicola Sturgeon has put independence above Scottish jobs and separating Scotland is the top priority for her Government, rather than a recovery. The SNP Government's focus on the future of Scotland is on a referendum, not on getting through the pandemic. Surely the Government should be pouring every single bit of time and effort into our economy, tackling drug deaths and remobilising our NHS? But no, it has put independence at the forefront again.

The Government will start work on a detailed prospectus for an independent Scotland, taking time and resources away from the priorities that it should be focusing on and putting them towards another independence referendum. Nicola Sturgeon is giving us a new white paper on independence instead of a plan for jobs, a plan to tackle drug deaths or a plan for the recovery of our NHS.

However, there are elements of the programme for government that we support—elements that the Scottish Conservatives have led on for the past year. We welcome the fact that the big headline policy trailed ahead of the document was wraparound childcare. We announced that that policy would be in our manifesto for May's election some time before the First Minister announced that it would be in hers. Ensuring that parents can continue in the job—*[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: First Minister.

Douglas Ross: I will give way again, because the First Minister was chuntering away to the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care—

The First Minister rose—

Douglas Ross: I am sorry, but when I am standing, the First Minister has to sit.

The First Minister: I was asked to stand.

Douglas Ross: We were told that there would be a new style of politics, but it seems that the First Minister likes to announce a new style of politics, but not deliver it herself.

The First Minister: Douglas Ross wants to know what I was saying to the health secretary. I said that listening to Douglas Ross is like listening to playground politics and that we should all raise

our game. Now that he wants to join me in that, perhaps we could hear some substance from Douglas Ross instead of what we have had for five minutes into his speech.

Douglas Ross: The irony of Nicola Sturgeon accusing anyone of playground politics will not be lost on people who are watching the debate.

She asks for substance; I was saying that the Scottish Conservatives welcome the commitment to wraparound childcare because we can see how important it is to ensure that parents can continue in their jobs and continue with secure employment when their child moves from nursery and early years into primary school, and that all children are able to benefit from extracurricular activities such as sport and music lessons, not just those who have the ability to pay.

As the son of a school dinner lady, I welcome the continued roll-out of free lunches and breakfasts in primary schools; again, that is a policy that was first put forward by the Scottish Conservatives and voted on in the Scottish Parliament in the previous session.

However, the positives in the document are far outweighed by what we cannot agree with and the major areas of inaction. The First Minister describes her investment in the NHS as a record investment, but the Institute for Fiscal Studies made clear during the Scottish Parliament election that a £2.5 billion increase over five years is worse than the Barnett consequential of what is promised to the health service in England. That seems like far from a record investment.

We cannot see a repeat of the Government's previous tactic of siphoning off health funding for other priorities, which is what we saw when Nicola Sturgeon was health secretary. As a bare minimum, we need to see the Scottish Government's health funding increases being spent on health, here in Scotland. We know from recent United Kingdom Government announcements that we will see hundreds of millions of pounds in Barnett consequential delivered to the Scottish Government. That gives the SNP a second chance to do what we called for it to do during the election: rip up the flimsy pamphlet from last month and produce a paper on NHS remobilisation, because that has to be the priority going forward.

Give our NHS the support that it needs—not in five years' time, but right now, this year. Give clinicians and healthcare professionals the funding that they need to end the backlog in treatment in hospitals, restore accident and emergency waiting times, speed up our ambulance services and return to full face-to-face general practitioner surgeries. The First Minister has to confirm that every penny of that one-off injection will be put at

the disposal of our NHS staff. Anything less would be a slap in the face to the brave health service workers who have done incredible work over the past 18 months.

I come to an area that the First Minister glossed over, which is not surprising because she has admitted that she took her eye off the ball on the matter. Her statement re-announces what the Scottish Government said last year that it would do to tackle the drug deaths crisis in this country when the figure stood at 1,264. That has now jumped to 1,339. What new policy, new action or change is there from the Scottish Government? Nothing. The programme for government outlines exactly what was outlined in January this year, before the record number of deaths that were announced this summer. [*Interruption.*] The First Minister should listen.

The First Minister rose—

Douglas Ross: No, I think that we have heard enough.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We have a long debate ahead of us, and perhaps a calmer approach by everybody would be helpful.

Douglas Ross: I was saying that, every single day in Scotland, more than three people die from drug overdoses and drug abuse. The response from the SNP Government, which has seen an increase in drug deaths in all of the seven years in which Nicola Sturgeon has been the First Minister, has been to make no change to the plan and proposals it made in January this year—they are exactly the same as what it has proposed in the programme for government.

The Minister for Drugs Policy (Angela Constance): Does Mr Ross recall the statement that I made in the Parliament on 3 August? One example of a new policy was the announcement that we would have, for the first time, a national rehabilitation and recovery service for children and families, backed up by £8 million-worth of investment.

Douglas Ross: I was responding to what the First Minister said and what she has put in her programme for government, which is exactly the same as what has been announced before. Indeed, that announcement only put money back in that Nicola Sturgeon and SNP members voted to take out. After seven years of increasing numbers of people losing their lives because of drug misuse in Scotland, I thought that we would hear more from the Minister for Drugs Policy or the First Minister on that issue, but we are not doing so. We are not hearing vital proposals, which is why the Scottish Conservatives will bring forward our own plans for a right to recovery bill, to ensure that that national scandal is treated with the laser focus and resources that it deserves. The

programme was a chance for the Government to commit to our proposal. It will be a disappointment to many, both inside and outside the chamber, that the SNP has failed to do so.

On social care, we had promises of a major centralisation towards a national service and about stripping accountability and control away from local government. It is clear that the SNP Government wants to entrust councils with little more than bin collections—although, from looking at the state of Glasgow at the moment, I am not sure that Susan Aitken would be able to deal with even that. The Scottish Conservatives will oppose that damaging reorganisation, which will see funding spent on administration rather than on front-line care staff.

The programme lacks support for our economic recovery. It is clear that the economy is not a top priority for the Government. Throughout the week in the lead-up to today, we have heard calls from the Confederation of British Industry and the chambers of commerce for the Government to prioritise the economy and our recovery from the pandemic. They will not be happy with what we have seen.

The document is the usual myriad of schemes, but we know from the Government's record on such funds—shown by the growth scheme and the Scottish National Investment Bank—that it announces a big number and has no intention of ever paying out that money. Businesses throughout Scotland have already reacted with concern to the formation of the national coalition between the SNP and the Greens. The programme for government was the First Minister's chance to reassure them and to show them that the Government still considers jobs and growth to be a priority, but they will have received no reassurance at all from the statement. A number of business representatives and organisations have called for specific priorities and policies, and they have not heard about them. All that we get from the Government is the news that it will press ahead with damaging policies, such as the car park tax.

The Government is continuing to press ahead with its proposals to make permanent Covid laws that were brought in as emergency legislation. I am sure that we will discuss that more, later on this week.

On education, we have heard about a continued push by the SNP with the same failing agenda, which has seen Scottish education fall from being among the best in the world to being considered internationally average. It is moving away from exams, courses that teach knowledge and rigorous standards. We welcome the Government's continued move towards scrapping the Scottish Qualifications Authority, but that alone

will not undo the harm that the SNP has caused a generation of young people. We have no confidence in an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development review that is entirely Government managed.

Are we getting much extra time, Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You can have a wee bit of extra time, Mr Ross, but not too much.

Douglas Ross: I took some interventions, and I was pleased to do so, because this is a debate.

The programme for government confirms what we already know about the nationalist coalition, which is that the Government is being drawn away from the priority of working for Scotland and from the priorities that really matter to people. There will be tens of thousands of SNP voters who no longer recognise the party that they voted for, who rejected the extremist views of Harvie and Slater at the ballot box only to watch in horror as Nicola Sturgeon let them walk through the front door of Bute House.

We cannot support the programme, because it puts another referendum ahead of our recovery from the pandemic. Not only does that disregard the essential support that we have seen over this period from the UK Government, it is also totally the wrong priority. It is irresponsible and it is reckless. The fact that the Government cannot park its obsession when it is faced with the countless problems that face Scotland today tells us everything that we need to know about Nicola Sturgeon and her priorities.

When our NHS is on the brink of a fresh winter crisis and our economic recovery hangs in the balance, the SNP and the Greens would prefer to waste taxpayers' money on preparing for a second independence referendum.

This is a programme for independence, not a programme for government. As long as the coalition continues to put separation at the top of its plans, the Scottish Conservatives will continue to oppose that nationalist agenda.

15:06

Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): Scotland needed a programme for government that recognised the scale of the challenge that our country is facing, but instead it got a programme that is short on big ideas. It is not good enough, it is not bold enough and it will not do enough.

Undoubtedly, there are individual measures in the announcements that we can welcome and support—Anne's law is a good example of that. However, this programme for government does not go far enough.

Barely a week goes by without someone from the Government's front benches declaring something mundane, rebadged or self-serving as historic. However, the dire truth is that, despite the SNP's rhetoric, the only historic things today are the levels of poverty in our streets, the numbers waiting for treatment in hospitals and the depth of the economic crisis facing our country. In the face of those challenges, this is a tired and rehashed programme from a party that has clearly run out of big ideas.

This disappointing programme for government shows that there is a lack of ambition from this SNP Government. Seriously, is that it? Is that as good as it gets? Is that the scale of ambition for this country? I do not think so. *[Interruption.]* I would like to make a bit of progress before giving way.

This Government's record is defined by delays, broken promises and a gulf between spin and action, and it seems that we can expect more of the same.

We are up against a global pandemic, a growing healthcare crisis, a jobs crisis and the climate emergency. There is no time to waste. However, instead, we get this piecemeal plan.

This may surprise the First Minister, but there are ideas that are bigger than independence. I accept that the pandemic has changed all of our lives and has left a devastating legacy that that we must confront, but it would be wrong to suggest that all of our country's problems are because of the pandemic. Many of the challenges that we face predate Covid-19.

We are all aware that the pandemic has not gone away. Cases are at record levels, the vaccine is working but the overall progress is stalling and we have a Government that does not appear to have a coherent strategy for this phase of the pandemic. All of that holds back our nation and our national recovery. I see that the Scottish Government is proposing to introduce a Covid recovery bill, but that must be about embedding protections for our nation, not embedding state control. We will debate issues around that later this week, but it is clear that this is an attempt by the Government to look in control of a virus that is clearly out of control.

Let us look at the big challenges facing our country. One in four children in Scotland lives in poverty. That is more than 250,000 people. On the first day of this parliamentary session, the First Minister said that fighting child poverty should be the driving mission of the session. In the previous session, we set legal targets without caveat and without condition, and it is clear that the measures in this programme for government will not meet that ambition.

Let us be clear: there can never be an acceptable level of child poverty. One child in poverty is one child too many. One night that a child spends in poverty is one night too many. Therefore, we again call on the Tory Government to think again about its plan to scrap the uplift of universal credit. However, let us be clear: when we set that legal target in the previous session, it was without condition and without caveat. More than 100 organisations wrote to the First Minister demanding immediate action and the immediate doubling of the Scottish payment, and every faith leader wrote to the First Minister demanding immediate action.

We should double the Scottish child payment immediately, then double it again next year. That simple act would cut child poverty by nearly a third, transforming 80,000 lives. If we do not do that, we will miss that legal target. It is bad enough to break the law, meaning that hundreds of thousands of people are left on NHS waiting lists, but it is another thing to break the law and abandon hundreds of thousands of children to live in preventable poverty.

The First Minister: This is one of the most important issues that we face. Anas Sarwar's predecessor as Scottish Labour leader called on me to deliver a payment for children of £5 a week. We are already delivering £10 a week—so, doubling what we were originally asked to do—and we have given a commitment to double that again to £20 a week as soon as we can put the budgetary provisions in place. That is what children in poverty need: a Government that is going to do the serious work to deliver as quickly as possible the commitments that we want to deliver. That is very different from simply plucking figures out of thin air, with no idea whatsoever of how to deliver them. Frankly, children across Scotland living in poverty deserve better than what Anas Sarwar is offering.

Anas Sarwar: I welcomed the £5 payment and the £10 child payment—I am talking about the original policy—but the reality is that when we set that legal target in the previous session, it was not for a press release or so that we could say, "Yes, this Parliament's thinking big". It was to set a legal target for this Parliament to meet. If we do not take meaningful action, we will miss that legal target. That might be a bad news story for the Parliament on one day, but that bad news story would mean thousands of children still living in poverty across our country—that is why we need urgent action.

However, that lack of ambition is not just evidenced in the child poverty target—it is also seen in the approach to the NHS. Across Scotland, 600,000 people are left languishing on NHS waiting lists, and even before the pandemic, that figure was 450,000. Rather than publish an

NHS recovery plan that was dismissed as unrealistic by health workers, the First Minister could have shifted the machinery of the Government into tackling that crisis head on. We could have seen the programme for government bring forward a real NHS recovery plan that got services back on track, prioritised dealing with the backlog in diagnostic services and care, delivered a credible workforce plan and rewarded so many undervalued staff by raising social carers' pay to £15 an hour.

Instead, we have seen a focus on rhetoric and a failure to confront the reality, with no credible plan that will reverse the crisis in our NHS. That utter lack of ambition is, again, not limited to the issues of poverty or the NHS but is seen in our jobs recovery and economic recovery. In Scotland, 30,000 young people are unemployed. We are creeping towards the cliff edge of furlough, but there is no coherent plan for how we provide a jobs guarantee and an economic development plan for all parts of our country to make sure that we have an inclusive urban, rural, coastal and island recovery.

Scottish Labour called for the most ambitious job creation scheme in the history of the Scottish Parliament to confront that crisis: guaranteeing a job for every young Scot by investing in a national training fund and a business restart fund. However, the only meaningful job creation scheme that we have seen is for the First Minister's pals in the Parliament. That is not quite what we meant by a focus on green jobs. In 2010, the SNP promised 130,000 green jobs by 2020, a laudable aim to help tackle the climate emergency. However, the number of people directly employed has fallen to just over 23,000. The Scottish Government's £100 million green jobs fund, announced almost a year ago, has yet to create a single job.

We keep hearing about a just transition, but unless we act right now, we will not get the buy-in that we need to give communities support. We need a truly workers-led transition so that the Scottish Government does not repeat the mistakes of previous Tory Governments, when whole communities were left on the unemployment scrap heap. The programme for government could have put climate, not the constitution, front and centre, with a focus on a real plan for a just transition that focused on the skills needed in a green recovery and protecting jobs and communities impacted by the transition to net zero.

On education, there is not enough in the programme to support Scotland's Covid generation. However, they were being failed long before the pandemic. The truth is that Scotland's pupils have been short changed by the First Minister, whose attempt to promise the world delivers little.

It is right that the failed Scottish Qualifications Authority will be scrapped, but the scars of the pandemic will mark our education system for years to come. An entire generation of pupils will bear the weight of that disruption as they go through their education. That could, without serious action, weigh heavily on their life chances and life outcomes.

Despite that, the action to support pupils and teachers to work against the disruption of the pandemic has been minor at best. The number of full-time equivalent teachers in schools is 1,700 fewer than when the SNP came to office in 2007. More than 2,600 teachers have dropped or lost their professional registration during the past five years. That is a warning sign to this Government that keeps being ignored.

Whatever action we take now, we will have to rebuild after more than a decade of SNP cuts, which damaged our education system before the pandemic even hit. We reiterate our call for an education comeback plan, including a personal tutoring programme for pupils of all ages and a genuine effort to encourage people to work in our education system. Anything less than that is an abdication of responsibility to our country's future.

I end by repeating my plea to the Government: focus on the challenges that our country is facing, and focus on our country's priorities, not the SNP Government's priorities. Scotland deserves a national recovery plan that meets our ambition to build a fairer and stronger Scotland together. Instead, what we have seen in this programme for government is just another example of a pattern that has defined the SNP Government's approach: promise big, never deliver, blame someone else and hope that people have forgotten about it when it gets round to promising the same again. Frankly, Scotland deserves better.

15:16

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): After everything that we have been through, Scotland needs new hope right now. We need new hope in our fight against the climate emergency, whereby we take serious action on the way that we move about and the way that we build and heat our communities, and on the decarbonisation of our economy. We need new hope for our young people that they might once again enjoy the world-beating education that they are used to, access jobs of their choosing and get on the housing ladder, no matter where they come from. We need new hope for the health of the nation, whereby people can receive the care that they need in safely staffed settings instead of being lied to by a Government-sanctioned letter that tells them that they will be seen in 12 weeks when there is no hope that they will be seen in 50

weeks. However, in the pages of the programme for government, there is little in the way of that new hope to be found. Rather, it is old hype, reheated and, as Anas Sarwar has said, rebadged. Indeed, we have heard many of the assurances before.

It has become a sombre tradition for the Liberal Democrat response to the programme for government to highlight mental health waiting times. This will be the fourth year in a row that we have done so. Each year, the First Minister promises to bring down waiting times, but each year the waiting times for children, young people and adults all increase. The first time we raised the issue, 208 children were waiting for more than a year. The next year, that number had more than trebled and the First Minister described that as unacceptable. However, last year we reached a new high, with 1,500 children on the waiting list. Official statistics that were published this morning show that 2,138 children and young people are now waiting for more than a year for first-line care.

Before the pandemic, the only thing that the SNP's waiting times recovery plan had delivered in three years was the longest queue in the national health service for our most vulnerable children and young people. Now, the SNP-Green coalition is promising to clear waiting times in two years. I welcome that—I really do—but I want to know how that will happen. The Government needs to immediately publish its workings on that in full. Children and young people deserve access to the very best care. They must not be parked on medication or referred to inferior online interventions just because ministers have a target to meet. It requires proper investment, on top of the £120 million already secured by the Scottish Liberal Democrats in the previous Scottish budget, and an ironclad plan to increase the workforce.

A similar laser-beam focus will be needed to tackle the drug deaths catastrophe that Anas Sarwar just mentioned. I sincerely hope that this will be the last year that we have to raise those problems in the chamber.

If I lay to the side those concerns, there are aspects of the—

The Minister for Mental Wellbeing and Social Care (Kevin Stewart): Will Mr Cole-Hamilton give way?

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I will give way to the minister.

Kevin Stewart: Since the Government came to power, there has been an increase of almost 80 per cent in child and adolescent mental health services staffing. We will continue to do our best for young people across the country. I respectfully say that it is not helpful when Mr Cole-Hamilton

calls some of the services that are being delivered inferior.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: If someone is referred to a website called Beating the Blues when they have anxiety or self-harming behaviour, that is an inferior intervention. The Government may have invested in the CAMHS workforce, but the truth and reality of the situation is found in the statistics that were published this morning. The minister cannot ignore the problem.

There are aspects of the programme for government—on school meals, the child payment and Covid business support—that the Liberal Democrats welcome. We also welcome the overdue expansion of funded child care, but we will be paying close attention to the capacity strain in the sector and to how flexibility is afforded to meet the needs of families that work irregular hours or have training needs.

We also welcome the planned reform of the Gender Recognition Act 2004, because the GRA is harming people every day. The proposed reforms do not seek to endanger women or create an environment for predation. Instead, they will offer trans and non-binary people the dignity and freedom that are enjoyed in countries such as Ireland and France, which have already reformed their gender recognition laws. In those countries, concerns about a suggested link between self-identification and abuse have just not been realised. It is because the Government deferred parliamentary consideration of the reforms that the debate has become so toxic.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): Alex Cole-Hamilton will have seen that Police Scotland today accepted corporate criminal liability for events around the M9 crash in 2015. The case is still live, so I am restricted in what I can say, but it is clearly a significant case with consequences for both the police and the Government. Does Mr Cole-Hamilton think that it would be appropriate for the Government to consider apologising for what happened?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before you resume your contribution, Mr Cole-Hamilton, I stress that the case is still live and that you should therefore approach the subject with caution. Thank you.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I will certainly proceed with caution, Presiding Officer. Willie Rennie makes a powerful point, but those are not matters for me. I am certain that he would have intervened on the First Minister earlier had he been permitted to, so I offer the First Minister the opportunity to address Willie Rennie's concerns by intervention just now.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Cole-Hamilton, please resume your seat. On a point of

clarification, the First Minister's contribution this afternoon was in the form of a statement, and the member will be aware that statements are given with no interventions or interruptions accepted. Mr Cole-Hamilton will be aware that that is what the Parliamentary Bureau agreed to.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: Of course. I am just making an offer to the First Minister to respond to Willie Rennie's point, if she is so minded.

The First Minister: It is particularly important that I behave responsibly in responding to that point. I am not aware of the stage of the court case today, but it may well be a live criminal case. Therefore, it would not be appropriate for me to respond in substance. As soon as it is possible for the Scottish Government to do that, however, we will.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I seek clarification from you in relation to the nature of the statement that the First Minister gave. Is it not the case that the First Minister herself insisted that there should be a statement today with no interventions and that it is not a case of convention or procedure of the Parliament?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Kerr, I have attended the same Parliamentary Bureau meetings as you have attended. We discussed the matter and the bureau agreed that that was the way forward. As the member will be aware, issues concerning programme for government debates are always under review, and that will be the case as we go forward.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I am grateful to the First Minister for taking time to address Willie Rennie's concerns. The centralisation of Police Scotland, and the careless manner in which it was rammed through, will forever be one of the biggest mistakes of this Government. It was not just that control rooms descended into chaos; it was the target culture that went with it, and stop and search.

The experience of the botched and rushed centralisation of the police in Scotland is one of the many reasons why the Liberal Democrats are so worried about the planned ministerial takeover of social care. In today's statement, we heard further detail about the proposals for a national care service, but the term is deceiving in itself. The First Minister has many talents, but she is not some 21st century Nye Bevan. The NHS, our most trusted national institution, was forged in the rubble and poverty of war. It answered a need for treatment that was free at the point of delivery, and it has established a template for socialised medicine the world over.

To call it a national care service is disingenuous. There has been no suggestion that this will be a

socialised model of care, and it certainly will not be offered free at the point of delivery. It is a gimmick and a ministerial power grab. As such, the Scottish Liberal Democrats stand with the Royal College of Nursing and other stakeholders who believe that the proposals will distract from and delay implementation of other important reforms.

I want to address the centrepiece of the coalition Government's agenda, starting with a reflection on the SNP's new partner. Only in Catalonia will we find another Green Party that seeks to blend environmentalism with separatism. Everywhere else, the international green movement is rightly dedicated to strengthening ties with neighbours as the logical and progressive route to addressing the global threats that we all face.

The coalition agreement that was confirmed last week will be greeted with concern by those who vote Green on the basis of the climate emergency. The Scottish Greens have hitched their wagon to an Administration that has repeatedly missed its own emissions targets, in large part due to a lack of ministerial interest in anything that is unconnected to the constitution.

One would hope that Green ministers would relish the opportunity to hold the SNP's feet to the fire on the issue. However, far from anchoring the attention of Government to the climate emergency—which is where the attention of every nation in the world should be—that existential crisis that we all face inexplicably plays second fiddle once again to independence. Indeed, the First Minister had not drawn breath before the road map to that shared goal was laid out. She has clearly learned nothing from taking the independence referendum campaign off pause on the eve of the deadly second wave last year. *[Interruption.]* I do not have time.

The hour is late; the world is on fire. If the Greens will not step up and prioritise the climate emergency, the Liberal Democrats will.

The last thing that we need right now is the introspection of another referendum, but, despite everything, this coalition will drive for holding one, by legal means or otherwise. Despite platitudes about a new prospectus, it will likely ask people to vote blind on a proposition. This "land of milk and honey" and "it'll be alright on the night" approach seems to be the central pillar around which everything else is built, at a time when warning lights are blinking across the dashboard of public policy. I say to the Government, if it has civil service time for a new white paper, it should get officials to focus on the business—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Cole-Hamilton, bring your remarks to a close, please.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I am just closing now, Presiding Officer.

It should get them to focus on the many aspects of public policy that are crying out for their attention.

Scotland needs new hope right now—for the climate, for our patients, for our young people and our businesses—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Cole-Hamilton, I have asked you to bring your remarks to conclusion, please.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: That requires each of us to set aside the battles of the past and work together towards a genuinely brighter future.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Cole-Hamilton. We move to the open debate.

15:27

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): I appreciate the opportunity to take part in the debate. It certainly looks as though a wide range of things are coming up to build on the SNP's excellent record over the past 14 years. In passing, I welcome the abolition of dental charges, the creation of a victim's commissioner, the building of more affordable housing, and the provision for 10 per cent of front-line health spending to be devoted to mental healthcare.

However, for me, one of the highlights of any year is the budget. Although the budget bill will have its own timetable, there is now agreement that all of us on committees should be thinking about the budget all year round. Therefore, on the question of the budget timetable, I hope that Westminster will be more responsible this year and will hold its budget process first—for preference, during the autumn—so that we can set our budget in the light of that, and so that local government authorities right across the UK will know where they stand with their budgets. Westminster announcing its budget in March is, frankly, irresponsible.

It is easy for all of us to say we want more money for this or for that. This morning at the Finance and Public Administration Committee, we heard suggestions about moves including increased child payments and reduced business rates, but there was reluctance to say where the money should come from to pay for them. We have seen that again this afternoon, from Anas Sarwar. We were told this morning that doubling the child payment would cost some £220 million; I presume that quadrupling it would cost at least £440 million. We need to know where that money would come from.

It is more challenging to say, for example, that there should be more money for mental health, but that to balance that, there would be less for hospitals, or to argue for more for colleges but less

for universities. That is the responsible way of looking at things.

I say to the Opposition parties and the parliamentary committees that I hope that if, as we go through the budget process, they have different priorities from those of the Scottish Government, they will say so.

The budget process and scrutiny would also be more meaningful, and the public might engage more, if we heard some more realistic alternative proposals for higher expenditure in some areas and lower expenditure in others. I think that past committees have been reluctant to say that any sector should get less money, but it seems to me to be clear, from being on the Finance and Public Administration Committee, and from a briefing that we saw this morning, that

“tough spending and taxation choices await”.

I therefore encourage committees seriously to consider, when they are proposing increases in one area, making recommendations for reductions in another.

I turn to plans for the national care service. There have been many good aspects to care, both in care homes and at home. However, some aspects could be improved, one of which is the traditionally low pay of care workers, many of whom are women.

As a Parliament and as a country, we have choices to make. Do we want to take a more localised approach with different fees, standards and wages across the country, which some people would call a postcode lottery, or do we want a more consistent approach to fees, standards and wages, which some people would call overcentralisation? Those are serious questions; we must grapple with them.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): I am sure that John Mason will agree that setting up a national care service is hugely ambitious, which Mr Sarwar refused to acknowledge in his comments.

John Mason: I am happy to take that point. Politicians have tried to dress that up and to pretend that we can have both consistency and local decision-making, but one—either more centralisation and consistency, or more localisation—must be prioritised.

We must also seriously consider the cost of a national care service. If there are consequential from Westminster, that will be well and good, but the service must not be funded by national insurance increases. NI is a regressive form of taxation that kicks in for the lowest-paid workers some £3000 earlier than income tax does. Income tax is by no means perfect, but it is more progressive, with those who are better able to pay

more doing so. In contrast, increases in NI hit the less well-off people hardest. The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities has said that the national care service is a “distraction”. I do not agree with that. However, the service will come at a cost that we must tackle.

It was difficult to prepare my speech with little knowledge of what would be in the First Minister’s statement. I will mention one or two other issues.

The proposed gender recognition bill is likely to be interesting. People’s views on that subject are very polarised and I am not sure whether we can find middle ground that we can all agree on, or whether it is inevitable that one side will defeat the other. I hope that we in Parliament can handle the bill in a civilised way. We dealt with same-sex marriage quite calmly within Parliament, even if feelings were running high outside it. I hope that we can do the same again.

Some of us have signed up to the Royal Society of Edinburgh’s Young Academy of Scotland’s charter for responsible debate, which talks about debates being informed, respectful and inclusive. Although we can disagree on issues such as self-identification, I hope that we can accept that there is a range of views and that we can be respectful even when we disagree.

I look forward to debate and discussion on many other topics that were raised in the First Minister’s statement. There is to be a consultation on the “not proven” verdict. I hope that one of the options will be to have two verdicts: proven and not proven. I welcome the fireworks bill, which will help the Dogs Trust at its base in my constituency. Dogs—and some people—experience a terrible time with fireworks.

I also welcome the minimum income guarantee and, of course, a referendum on Scottish freedom.

It is great to be back after the summer recess; I look forward to a busy year ahead. The programme for government offers us many opportunities. I look forward to getting more into the detail in the coming months.

15:34

Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): Much has changed since last year’s debate on the programme for government. With more Scots having been protected by the roll-out of vaccination, we can turn our attention to the major challenges that are facing us all. How we address those challenges will define us as a nation for years to come.

As Douglas Ross said, securing Scotland’s economic recovery and creating jobs must be a priority for this Parliament. That is why Conservatives have called for the programme for

government to ditch plans for an unwanted second independence referendum so that we can tackle the economic emergency that we all face.

Presiding Officer, I hope that you will indulge me because, given my brief, I would like to focus on our NHS, which is at crisis point. Even before the pandemic, Audit Scotland warned in 2019 that Scotland's NHS was under increasing pressure, with rising demands and costs, while it was struggling to meet key waiting-time standards. Moving forward to 2021, we can see that the immense pressure that has been brought to bear by the pandemic has exacerbated those challenges.

Throughout the pandemic, health workers across Scotland have demonstrated remarkable resilience in the face of adversity. However, it is important that we are clear about the scale of the pressures that our NHS faces as we head into the winter. Many services are at risk of spiralling completely out of control. Meanwhile, bodies including the Royal College of Nursing have made it clear that staff are exhausted, burned out and demoralised following months of acute pressure.

Several of the commitments that the First Minister announced in her statement are welcome—not least, the investment in our front-line services—but they are, frankly, long overdue, given the scale of the challenges that our services face.

I will take as an example accident and emergency services, which are on their knees. Last week, Scotland recorded its third consecutive week of record lows for A and E performance. With nursing and medical staff being pushed to the limit, more Scots are being forced to wait longer for emergency care. As staff who work on the front line have acknowledged, the figures are the kind that we typically see in the harshest winter months. That is not sustainable, nor is it acceptable.

The pressures are also having clear knock-on effects on other emergency services that people rely on in times of need, including the Scottish Ambulance Service. Members are hearing from their constituents of cases in which vulnerable people have waited for hours on end for ambulances to arrive. In one case, the wait was a staggering 16 hours.

Something that the First Minister did not mention in her statement this afternoon was long Covid—an awful aspect of the disease, in which horrible symptoms can linger for weeks or even months on end. Figures point to there being about 70,000 people in Scotland who are suffering with long Covid, which has a debilitating impact on their physical and mental health. The failure to act on long Covid has also placed undue pressure on our

NHS. That is why, with my colleague Dr Sandesh Gulhane spearheading our work, we have been demanding that the Government treats long Covid with the seriousness that it deserves.

However, if the NHS recovery plan is anything to go by, we have a long way to go. As part of our suggested—

Humza Yousaf: Annie Wells said:

“If the NHS recovery plan is anything to go by, we have a long way to go.”

Does she recognise that her party in the UK Government has basically copied our NHS recovery plan? It is also looking to increase mental healthcare spending by 10 per cent. I also point out that our £1 billion investment is higher than the £600 million investment that Annie Wells says the Tories will commit to NHS recovery.

Annie Wells: I thank the cabinet secretary for that intervention. However, I was talking about long Covid, and the £600 million that I spoke about was just to deal with the backlog that our NHS is facing and to help front-line staff to achieve what they are being asked to achieve.

As part of our suggested response, we call for the establishment of specialist long Covid treatment clinics to offer vital support to the people who are worst affected. I recognise that the Government has set aside funding for research and innovation, but we are clear that practical support is urgently needed for long Covid assessment, treatment and rehabilitation. To put it simply, I say that so many Scots are suffering with long Covid, and many cannot afford to wait any longer for help.

Over the years, we have—sadly—become accustomed to the shocking statistics on deaths that are linked to alcohol and drug addiction. Not only was the number of alcohol-specific deaths in Scotland last year the highest that it has been for 12 years, but drug deaths have also soared to record levels, with the 2020 level representing the seventh annual increase in a row.

Given that awful record, people rightly expected—as Douglas Ross pointed out earlier—new measures in the area to form a key part of the NHS recovery plan. Yet again, however, the plan has been found wanting, with nothing new in the document to address alcohol-related and drug-related deaths. Given that we have a clear public health emergency that has significant implications for victims and the NHS, the Government must make the matter a top priority.

With the backing of recovery groups, the Scottish Conservatives will bring to Parliament a bold and ambitious bill on the right to recovery. We want to make sure, with additional funding targeted at residential rehab, that everyone can

access the necessary treatment that they need in order to survive and get better.

I recognise that our country has been gripped by the pandemic. Ensuring that our healthcare system is match fit will be one of the greatest challenges that any Government will face. However, I remain concerned that, in several areas, the programme for government fails, at least in substance, to respond properly to the array of the greatest challenges that we face.

15:40

Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): It is a great privilege to speak in the debate on our programme for government for the parliamentary year. Last week, I spoke about Argyll and Bute's amazing natural larder, so I am very pleased to see that a good food nation bill will be introduced to Parliament. The link between diet and infection has been emphasised during the pandemic. That piece of legislation will be most welcome.

However, today I will concentrate on some of Argyll and Bute's other natural resources: its wind, water and geography. All three of those combine to make Argyll and Bute a renewable energy powerhouse.

By 2030, the Scottish Government aims to generate 50 per cent of Scotland's overall energy consumption from renewable sources, helping Scotland to become a net zero economy. The 26th UN climate change conference of the parties—COP26—in Glasgow is our opportunity to limit global warming to 1.5 per cent. Onshore wind, solar and hydro all operate the length and breadth of my constituency. The proposed development of the W1 wind farm will bring in offshore wind, and I am sure that it will not be long before the power of the tide in the Sound of Islay is captured. Over the summer, I visited 11 islands across Argyll and Bute, many of which have invested in community renewable energy schemes.

When I first moved to Islay, I was part of a small team that established a community wind turbine. With the feed-in tariff that was available then, as well as generating renewable energy for the grid, our turbine created funds for our community. It is expected to raise around £2 million over its 20-year life—a local initiative with positive effects on the wealth, wellbeing and environment of the islanders.

In the programme for government, there are opportunities for islands to lead the way to reaching net zero emissions targets by 2045: in introducing 100 per cent renewable energy, creating circular economies, making homes and buildings greener to heat, tackling waste and introducing sustainable transport.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): Will the member take an intervention?

Jenni Minto: No; if the member does not mind, I would like to continue.

There are a few islands in my constituency that I know would be perfect for piloting those things. Iona Renewables has developed a local energy road map, which lays out a vision for how a community-led scheme can work towards owning, generating, storing and using energy on the island. It is in discussions with the Scottish Government to take that to the next stage.

In Kintyre, the East Kintyre renewable energy group highlights the socioeconomic implications of wind farms, and maximises the benefit to the community for agreed developments. It is also exploring opportunities for community shared ownership in new developments, to help fund projects that have been identified in the local area plan.

A circular economy is important in making such things work, and I cannot leave Kintyre without mentioning CS Wind. The current situation is very disappointing for the Campbeltown community, with a highly skilled workforce and a factory—which is sitting empty—both being unproductive. I will work with the community, Highlands and Islands Enterprise and the Scottish Government to try to get a resolution to that sorry state of affairs.

Throughout Cowal, hydro power schemes are dotted across the landscape. Many are micro schemes; however, the Loch Striven scheme, which was built in 1950, is still providing power. That is infrastructure investment from 70 years ago. I welcome the establishment of a national infrastructure company to deliver for the public good.

On Friday, I had the pleasure of attending the official opening of the Glen Noe hydro scheme. With a capacity of 2MW, it can provide sufficient renewable electricity to power around 1,400 homes each year. The scheme will also invest £3,000 into the local community every year. The work was completed using Scottish contractors, and NatureScot has complimented the regeneration work, which has embedded the scheme perfectly into the landscape.

It is clear that one size does not fit all but, to reach net zero by 2045, we need to be flexible in our sources of energy. Harnessing our natural energy, looking at the best schemes for the environment, and investing appropriately in our workforce to enable a just transition are all key elements of the programme for government.

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): The programme for government pledges to increase the annual native woodland creation target to

4,000 hectares, which is welcome. However, Jenni Minto will know that the biodiversity strategy has a target of between 3,000 and 5,000 hectares. Does she share my concern that we could see a decrease instead of an increase?

Jenni Minto: I thank Monica Lennon for that intervention. I will cover that later in my speech.

Argyll and Bute is at the centre of a perfect storm for renewable energy. For it to work for everyone, we need to ensure that communities are properly informed and consulted by power providers about changes to hardware in their area in order to find the best solutions. I look forward to the consultation on a new onshore wind policy statement.

Argyll and Bute holds another very important natural asset in combating climate change: the carbon sink that is the Celtic rainforest. I have to declare an interest as the Parliament's champion for these amazing places. Yesterday, I had the pleasure and educational experience of visiting one near Crinan.

Plantlife Scotland's website explains that the combination of high rainfall—there is a lot of that in Argyll and Bute—and stable mild temperatures makes the woodlands very humid, allowing for the growth of some really special residents: lichen, mosses, liverworts, fungi and ferns. It is those species that really make the Celtic rainforests what they are. Not only do they help maintain the humidity in the forest; they give it a mysterious and magic feel—they certainly do. Those natural habitats are of worldwide importance, and I am pleased that there is Scottish Government investment of £500 million to expand them as a nature-based solution to the climate emergency, backed by a natural environment bill.

I will end on a personal note. In 1999, I sat in my office in BBC Scotland watching the live broadcast of the reopening of the Scottish Parliament. I watched with pride and confidence as my home country took a major step on the road to being in charge of its own destiny. Little did I expect then to be standing here now, representing Argyll and Bute in the parliamentary session in which a bill on a second independence referendum will be debated and, I believe, passed. The people of Scotland will soon have the opportunity and the right to vote on who they believe is best to lead Scotland to economic recovery and growth.

15:47

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): There are some announcements in today's programme for government that I and many others will welcome: a national care service that ends non-residential care charges, a disability and equality strategy and a bill to reform the Gender

Recognition Act 2004. I will work with the Government where I can on all those matters, in particular where they reduce poverty and progress equality and human rights.

However, I am really disappointed, as some of the crucial things that I had hoped to hear are missing. In Scotland today, 26 per cent of children live in poverty—that is one in four children. One child in poverty is one too many, and one day in poverty is too long. That is why I am deeply disappointed that the Government has not committed to doubling the Scottish child payment immediately. Doing so would make a massive difference to families right across Scotland right now. It would lift at least 10,000 children out of poverty.

As it stands, we are set to miss the child poverty targets that we set ourselves in law—targets that were agreed unanimously by this Parliament before the pandemic, and without caveat. That is why we are deeply disappointed not only that there is no commitment to increase the payment right now but that the ambitions outlined in the programme on child poverty—the ending of which we in Scottish Labour will be laser focused on—do not go nearly far enough.

Members will be aware that we in Scottish Labour believe that the Scottish Government must go further and faster. It must double the payment now, and again within the year. An increase to £40 a week is the best chance that we have of meeting our interim child poverty target of 18 per cent. We did not pluck that figure out of the air: the Institute for Public Policy Research and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation have modelled it. In one action, we could lift a further 50,000 children out of poverty and make a real difference to lives right across the country.

I urge the SNP-Green Government to recognise the urgent need to act now to tackle the scourge of poverty in the country.

The Minister for Zero Carbon Buildings, Active Travel and Tenants' Rights (Patrick Harvie): As the First Minister said, the Government wants to increase the Scottish child payment as early as possible. Does the member recognise the wide range of other actions in the programme that will reduce household costs—from rents to school uniforms to public transport and many more costs—and make a significant contribution to tackling child poverty?

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Yes, there are actions in the programme that will reduce costs, but none of them alone will do enough—and even all of them together will not do enough—to reach the target of reducing the child poverty rate to 18 per cent in the time that we have. Also, 18 per cent of children

living in poverty is still a lot of children. We need to go much harder and faster on all those things.

Some 260,000 children in Scotland live in poverty and there is no more time to waste. In 2019, the Scottish National Party announced the Scottish child payment as a “game changer”, but it is a game changer only if the game is changed and action is delivered; announcements alone do not do that.

Not only has the Government not yet doubled the payment, but not all children who should get the payment get it. Currently, 125,000 children are missing out on the Scottish Government’s bridging payments as a result of a discrepancy between the eligibility criteria for the Scottish child payment and free school meals. The Government is aware of that and I await clarification as to what it intends to do about it. It is not good enough that children fall through cracks that we all know are there and can be filled by immediate action. The gaps are not just abstract concepts in parliamentary speeches; they represent real children, real families and real lives.

The Scottish Government must act now to get payments to those children and work towards full roll-out to all six to 16-year-olds. It must do all that it can to ensure that families who receive the Scottish child payment can do so and that those who are not able to receive it yet can get it. That is why we have repeatedly called for full roll-out and automation.

Beyond that, the Government should introduce a supplement for lone-parent families and families that have a disabled person in them—groups that are disproportionately in poverty.

We know that if the cruel cut to universal credit goes ahead—which our colleagues in Westminster and in this Parliament, and other members here will do all that we can to oppose—some families in Scotland will lose their eligibility for the Scottish child payment. We have asked, and I ask again, that the Scottish Government commit to continuing to pay the Scottish child payment to the families who currently get it. We cannot simply blame things on the Tories in Westminster and move on; we have to act here. We have the powers, and the Scottish Government must use them to get money into people’s pockets.

Members of this Parliament will have heard me say, time and again, that we must—please—not fall into the trap of thinking that there is nothing that we can do. In my experience, when people say to someone, “You can’t”, it is because they have not seen the person’s potential to act. In Scotland, we have that potential; we are just not using our powers to their full potential.

The things that we have not heard about in the programme for government show that. Right now,

all that we are doing with our powers on disability benefits is improving their administration as we implement the rule book that has been passed down from the Department for Work and Pensions. The programme that was outlined today includes no plans for changes to the eligibility criteria for or adequacy of the payments. The Scottish Government could have created a truly radical new system. Instead, it has ignored calls to reform that part of the system.

We must be ambitious. We are here to transform lives. Tackling poverty is a mission that needs the focus of all the Government and the Parliament. It should be a national mission. That is why Labour members will push both Governments to use all existing powers and to go hard and fast.

As we come through the pandemic, we must think bigger and be bolder than before. We cannot go back to normal; we have to go forward to something better. Where there really is a will to do that, there is always a way. We can increase the Scottish child payment, with a supplement for families that have a disabled person in them, right now. We can write our own rule book on the eligibility for and adequacy of disability payments, right now. We can reform the Scottish welfare fund, so that it acts as a lifeline for all who need it. We can reform carers allowance, so that more of the hundreds of thousands of carers who do not get any financial help get some help.

If this Government is serious about ending child poverty, progressing a minimum income and genuinely making Scotland the best place in which to grow up and live, it will do those things and take action now.

15:54

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): Far from offering a bold and ambitious plan to help us to rebuild and to recover from the pandemic, the SNP Government is simply offering more of the same. We are back to tired arguments that are peppered with grudge and grievance. That approach did not cut it pre-Covid and it certainly does not cut it now—unless, of course, we are talking about street cleansing in the First Minister’s home city, Glasgow, where cuts seem to be the SNP’s only answer.

The truth is that it does not matter how many shiny new policies and initiatives Nicola Sturgeon sets out, because the people of Scotland know the reality. They know that, just like in previous years, promises are made that are not kept. They know that the gap between the rhetoric and what happens in our communities is growing with each of the SNP’s 14 years in office. Worse still, the level of ambition has dropped, and the SNP’s promises this year seem even less noteworthy

than last year—yet another sign of a tired Government that is out of new ideas.

Nicola Sturgeon might believe that she pulled off a great con trick in bringing the Greens into her Government to spruce it up, but I suspect that she will come to see that being anti-jobs and urban-centric and wanting to break up the UK are the very things that stood between her and the SNP majority that she craved and expected. She did not really need the Greens to help with that. The sad reality is that nothing that we have heard today takes away from the fact that we have a nationalist Government here at Holyrood that is more interested in a referendum than in recovery. It is beyond me how those in power expect people to believe that a referendum is possible in the first half of this session of Parliament while simultaneously claiming that a referendum will not take place until after the pandemic. It is a nonsense claim that hangs like a dark cloud over this programme for government. Worse still, it is a betrayal of the many sacrifices that people across this country have made during the past 18 months. Surely to goodness we deserve a break and a chance to focus on the things that really matter. That means not just talking about the challenges but having the will to take forward the policies needed without any distractions and the inevitable division.

Take education—an area where past promises loom large. Whatever happened to closing the attainment gap? Why can ministers still not tell us when they expect to see progress? What happened to the promise to make education the top priority? Perhaps the Government could remind us what happened to the planned education bill in the previous session of Parliament? Silence, because, rather than sort out any of the issues that the SNP Government has created on its own watch, and admitting that it has got things wrong and that its decisions have caused standards in our education system to decline, this Government would rather paper over the cracks with a combination of new policy initiatives that sound nice in theory but do very little in practice, and more radical reform that makes it hard to measure outcomes at all.

The fact that we had to wait for a report from the OECD for the Government to admit that anything was wrong is depressing. The criticisms in the report are even more shocking when we realise just how hard ministers worked to influence the findings and the limit that they put on dissenting voices even taking part. It should not have taken international concerns for the SNP to agree to act. Parents, teachers and educationists here in Scotland, as well as Opposition parties in our national Parliament, have been voicing concerns for years. Surely anyone who cares about Scottish education would want to work with people to make

things better, not simply ignore them. As I asked last week, where is the big vision? Where are the plans to turn education around? When will we see a return to the tried-and-tested methods that we already know work? Silence. Instead, all we get from this SNP Government is the galling sight of the First Minister patting herself on the back for the belated decision to reverse SNP cuts to teacher numbers—cuts that left us badly short during the pandemic. No apology for doing it in the first place, and no apology to the young people who have already been let down. And so the Government ploughs on, making the same mistakes over and over again.

We see that today in the announcement on childcare. It is something that we on these benches support and called for but, once again, where is the detail? Where is the practical, evidence-based work on how that pledge will be delivered in practice? It comes at a time when existing early learning and childcare settings are struggling to recruit the staff that they need in order to fulfil existing plans. As is so often the case with this SNP Government, providers feel most annoyed not about the substance of what is being announced and set out in Parliament but about the fact that no one took the time to seek their views. There must be a better way to do government than this.

In closing, I say that this is not a programme for government that rises to the challenge of the day. It is merely a public relations exercise that tries and fails to repackage the SNP's tired thinking and policies as something new and bold. Over the summer, perhaps there was too much focus on getting the Greens on board, and backing up their extremist plans, rather than on looking right across the chamber and our society to build a forward-looking coalition that is based on new ideas that respond to the challenges of today and does not drag us back to the arguments of the past.

16:00

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife (Green)): Green MSPs warmly welcome the programme, which comes on the back of our truly historic agreement with the Scottish Government. From its very first day, the Parliament was designed for sharing power across the chamber and with the people.

Since 1999, every major political party except one has entered government at Holyrood. Now, more than ever, is the right time for the Scottish Greens to step up. Although we are the first generation to witness the catastrophe of climate change, we are also the last generation that can address it. Those who deny the need for stronger action on the climate when our world—our home—

is literally burning down are betraying future generations.

The transition that we have to make must be just and leave no one behind. For sectors such as oil and gas, there must be more than a vague hope that the new jobs will appear soon. That is why I am delighted that we have Lorna Slater's drive and expertise at the heart of the Government. She understands the industry from the inside out, and she knows how to use the toolbox to deliver that transition.

A new deal to double the capacity of onshore wind energy, support for marine and offshore renewables, a £500 million transition fund for the north-east and the requirement for just transition plans for sites such as Mossmorran are really just the beginning. The deal will deliver transformative change.

Housing is a basic human right, but it is a disgrace that many tenants and their families now pay more each month in rent than it would cost to pay a mortgage on the same property. We urgently need a new deal for tenants and I am delighted that Patrick Harvie, as the first ever minister for tenants' rights, will be leading on the delivery of new rights, rent controls and regulation.

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): Will the member take an intervention?

Mark Ruskell: If I can get the time back, I will take a brief intervention.

Sue Webber: Does Mark Ruskell accept that, despite perseverance, rent controls have failed in Sweden and have only created a second-hand market of sub-let properties?

Mark Ruskell: There is international experience that shows that we can learn and move forward. The green deal and the commitment to tackle the issue—due to the poverty in our society, as has already been pointed out in the debate—mean that we will come forward with a package that will work and deal with the crisis.

Our agreement commits to building new, better homes, and retrofitting existing homes, at a pace and scale that have never been seen before. There will be more than £2 billion of investment in warm homes, with standards that will keep the bar high. It is a green new deal for housing through which public investment levers in private investment, creating new jobs in the supply chain and tackling climate change and fuel poverty.

We need more homes, but they need to be affordable and future proof. They must form neighbourhoods that are designed for people to safely get around by foot, wheel or cycle and are connected to local services and green space. Our reforms to planning and road safety will start to deliver that vision, while a trebling of investment in

active travel will allow the biggest reprioritisation of road space that has been seen in generations. To put it simply, places will need to put people, rather than cars, first.

Investing in the links between our places will continue to be important but, first and foremost, such investments need to deliver on traffic reduction, safety, community benefits and climate adaptation. The days of simply investing in roads that lock in car dependency are over. We expect a strategic transport projects review to deliver a step change—

Oliver Mundell: Will the member take an intervention?

Mark Ruskell: I will if I can get the time back.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): There is a bit of time to play with, Mr Ruskell.

Oliver Mundell: Does Mark Ruskell understand that my constituents and many other people across rural Scotland are concerned to hear plans to halt road building? Does he recognise that there are some parts of the country that are not well served at the moment?

Mark Ruskell: The member needs to recognise that as I, too, live in a rural area, I know that some roads will be absolutely necessary for the reasons that I have already pointed out: safety issues, climate adaptation and connectivity. However, the days of unlimited growth of public roads are over—it is just a waste of public money. There are better priorities for us to invest in now.

We expect that investment to come through the strategic projects transport review, which is a step change: £5 billion investment in rail with a public operator running rail services in the public interest, new funding for councils to deliver models of public bus ownership and the delivery of free bus travel for under-22s. There will be a strong future for those public services.

Under the agreement, our debt to the natural world will start to be repaid. Legally binding nature targets will be set to restore nature and drive the reform of planning, agriculture and fisheries policies that have led to catastrophic collapses in biodiversity in the past. The nature restoration fund, established by the Greens under the last budget, will be dramatically increased to drive action. Nature networks of Atlantic woodland and rainforest, pollinator superhighways and kelp forests can now be planned, paid for and protected.

Our connection with the natural world will be strengthened with a third national park in Scotland. Our human right to a healthy environment, the need for environmental courts to deliver justice and a future generations commission will all be

advanced while we work with the Government to reform driven grouse moors, crack down on wildlife crime and even bring back the beaver properly.

In this Parliament, we must not hold back on the rights of the most vulnerable groups. No one should be made destitute because of their immigration status. Trans and non-binary people deserve as much dignity, equality and inclusion as the rest of us. We need to double down to eradicate hatred and misogyny wherever it rears its ugly head.

Covid has brought into sharp relief the need for action to address the mental health crisis, the staffing issues in our schools and the need to provide care as a basic human right. Our agreement will give Parliament the foundations for change in those areas. There will be more availability in mental health services in our communities, 5,000 new teachers, with a stronger additional support needs workforce, and the first step next year to establish that pivotal, national care service.

The Scottish Greens are a party in a hurry. We will stretch the powers of the Scottish Parliament to their limits and then we will ask the people whether they want to complete the journey to independence. We look forward to working with all those who share our vision.

16:07

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): I am extremely proud to talk about the programme for government over the next six months. I will start with a quote:

“Politics is not a game. It is an earnest business.”

Who said that? None other than Winston Churchill. Indeed, politics is a serious business. Let us not forget that the SNP won an overwhelming victory in May on a manifesto that deals with the serious issues that we face, from climate change to Covid and Brexit. In normal times, facing one of those issues would be difficult enough, but facing all three requires a programme for government that deals with them all. Although the challenges are daunting, they present us with an opportunity to do things differently.

We have heard those on the Tory benches complain about lack of support for business, yet they supported the Brexit withdrawal in the middle of the pandemic, and look at the impact that we now face in Scotland—empty shelves and massive drops in exports.

We need a steady hand and a steady Government to guide us through the next five years. People in Scotland overwhelmingly voted for the First Minister and the Government to take

Scotland forward. The programme for government rightly focuses on the recovery from Covid, but it also focuses on sustainable recovery that looks to the future.

I will focus on a few key areas. As we emerge from the pandemic, we will strengthen and improve our health and social care system, so that everyone gets the care that they need, while recognising and repaying the efforts of staff, given the toll that the pandemic has had on them. We will see the NHS benefit from a £2.5 billion increase over the parliamentary session, which is an increase of 20 per cent. That will help Scotland’s health recover from the pandemic.

The creation of the national care service will also mark the biggest reform of health and social care since the creation of the NHS and will help to ensure that every patient’s care is focused on their individual journey. The Scottish Government is already investing record amounts in the NHS, but that 20 per cent increase will help to transform the way in which we deliver services and will ensure that the system is ready to meet the challenges that lie ahead. Recovery from Covid-19 across society is the Scottish Government’s first and most pressing priority, and the programme for government will allow the health service to continue managing Covid-19 and our longer-term population health challenges.

Primary care funding will go up by 25 per cent over the parliamentary session, with half of all front-line health spending invested in community health services. I know from discussions with constituents that that is extremely important. That will include investment of £29 million to provide an additional 78,000 diagnostic procedures, as well as increasing in-patient and day-case activity by 10 per cent by 2022-23 and out-patient activity by 10 per cent by 2025-26. I look forward to working with the health secretary and seeing the benefit of that investment in the East Lothian community hospital. I also welcome the additional £250 million investment to tackle the drugs issues that we face in Scotland.

I want to touch on families. Douglas Ross said that the recent agreement between the Scottish Government and the Greens is anti-family, but I warmly welcome the introduction of free wraparound care for low-income families. Nearly 1,800 families in my constituency benefit from the Scottish child payment, but they will be hit by the cut in universal credit that is set to be imposed by the Tories and supported by the party opposite. There is silence on that subject although Craig Hoy, the MSP for South Scotland, whom I competed against, supported that cut in a radio interview a few weeks ago. Free wraparound care will be much welcomed. It will give families support and the ability to access the services that work for

them. On top of the 1,140 hours of early learning and childcare, that shows the Scottish Government's commitment to families. I also welcome the £500 million whole family wellbeing fund.

I am aware that I have only six minutes, but I welcome the announcement on gender recognition reform, which is much needed. The announcement on tackling misogyny is also welcome, and there are measures in relation to tackling climate change and, of course, the ability of people in Scotland to decide on their future, with the pro-independence majority—*[Interruption.]* No, I need to make progress.

This is a programme for Covid recovery that supports families and investment in our health recovery. I look forward to delivering the programme and the benefits that my constituents in East Lothian will feel.

16:12

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): I draw members' attention to my entry in the register of members' interests, which shows that I own a rented property in North Lanarkshire.

Today, we learned that research by Shelter Scotland put the cost to councils of housing those who have been made homeless due to evictions to manage arrears at £28 million in the year before the pandemic. Perhaps anticipating that research, the sector reiterated the statement that it signed with the Government in June, saying that it does not evict those who are working on a repayment plan. The City of Edinburgh Council's SNP housing convener, after the council decided to end its short-lived eviction ban, said that the council

"will only ever go to court as an absolute last resort",

but also, tellingly, that it goes to court

"to prompt engagement with tenants".

If we ever needed an example to show that our housing system is broken, a housing convener who is charged with overseeing a council's homelessness service telling the press that it uses court proceedings to shunt tenants to pay arrears is one.

A report that was commissioned by Shelter Scotland on understanding the true cost of evictions in Scotland said that just 20 per cent of social rented evictions result in the property being recovered. In addition, the cost of eviction, when it happens, is not just financial. The process can be highly stressful and potentially damaging to mental and physical health, and it has lasting impacts on the mental health of children.

I welcome today's confirmation that work is under way on the rented sector strategy, but the

programme for government will leave tenants waiting for years. There will not be a housing bill this year, and we do not know when there will be legislation on rent controls and a new private rented sector regulator, as the Government's ambition is to introduce legislation

"by the end of the Parliamentary session."

Having no legislation on rent controls will mean that vital data will not start to be collected, and, like the planning and transport bills in the previous session, implementation will be pushed into the next session of Parliament. Of course, the SNP and the Tories threw out the chance to legislate for a fair rents bill in February, in the previous session.

Having no housing bill will mean that the homelessness prevention duty is also unlikely to become a reality until the second half of this parliamentary session, which means that tenants will have to rely on promises rather than rights in legislation. In meetings that I had over the summer, I was told that the bulk of what is in "Housing to 2040" must get under way in the next 18 months if it is to be a success, and that includes the rented sector strategy.

Before the summer, we debated at length the need for an extension to the evictions ban in the Coronavirus (Extension and Expiry) (Scotland) Bill. Ten weeks on, the promised grant fund has not been launched. We are told that the Government is working at pace, but it will be the end of the year before hard-up tenants even get access to the fund. Many—no doubt including the four in five who were unsuccessful under the loan scheme—will be well into their six-month notice period by now, and evictions in the social rented sector are already up by 500 per cent.

The premise of the loan scheme was woefully inadequate, and its success rate was dismal. More than twice as many people were rejected as were successful, and many of those were rejected because they failed a credit check. Rather like the revolving door of threatening court action and then having to rehouse people as homeless, that was symptomatic of a broken housing system. It is not unreasonable to expect the Government to comprehend that tenants who were struggling to pay their rent and were in arrears and a dire financial position, and who sought support from the Government, might not have satisfactory credit records.

Our homes have never been worth so much to us as they are now. They are a first line of defence against Covid, but the summer has exposed a gulf between the haves—who are comfortable enough to own a home, possibly work from home and make renovations, with house prices shooting up at the fastest rate in 14 years—and the have nots.

The number of households in temporary accommodation is the highest on record, and they are now staying for a staggering 199 days.

In meetings with stakeholders, we have discussed the fact that there is no true understanding of the affordability of housing—private, social rented or otherwise. In fact, the Government does not know how to define housing affordability because it does not have or collect the data. It needs to be able to determine what affordable is. Is it any wonder that organisations have described the system as broken?

I welcome a plethora of the commitments, including that of getting all our housing stock to the level of energy performance certificate C, but we are a long way off tenants and owners understanding their responsibilities or the costs that lie ahead. Those reforms are not insubstantial, as they strike right at the heart of tenants' rights and housing affordability in general. It is tenants and owners, not the Government, who will fund those changes.

Over the summer, I was told repeatedly about the pressure on tenants' rents, which fund new builds. That is becoming considerable. Although the affordable housing supply grant looks set to increase, tenants' costs will be stretched further by their funding the changes in energy efficiency and decarbonisation.

In discussions with landlords and letting agents, Citizens Advice Scotland has found that they are supportive of greater energy efficiency but that there is a perceived lack of financial and technical support to inform decision making. If we believe that housing is a human right, we should be affirming those rights for tenants in law before substantial housing reforms are implemented.

We had the opportunity to pass a fair rents bill towards the end of the previous session of Parliament. That we will now not get the opportunity to pass a fair rents bill until the end of this session is a glaring omission from the programme for government.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind all members who have participated in the debate that they need to be in the chamber for the closing speeches, which we will move to shortly.

16:19

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): From the outset, I want to join the First Minister in recognising the impact that the pandemic has had on every part of our society, in particular the physical and mental health of our fellow citizens. My condolences go to everyone who has lost a loved one to Covid-19 and, equally, my thanks go to all the health and social care staff in the

community and in hospitals who work every day to keep us safe, healthy and well. I remind the chamber that I am still currently a registered nurse.

The programme for government will work to protect families, businesses and communities across Scotland and is focused on the recovery from the pandemic. Since being elected in May, the Scottish Government has already taken positive steps to support our NHS and health and social care workforce. The Government has published an NHS recovery plan setting out how it will achieve a 10 per cent increase in activity in key services. I am a member of the Health and Sport Committee, and today we heard from the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care, Humza Yousaf, about the plans that are in place to address many of the health needs that have been identified, including issues around non-communicable diseases, which were highlighted in the report that the British Heart Foundation published yesterday.

A 4 per cent average pay increase this year for NHS agenda for change staff has already been implemented and was seen in pay packets in June, and the Government is already on course to increase direct investment in mental health services by 25 per cent over the course of the session, which is particularly welcome given the impact that the pandemic and its restrictions have had on health and wellbeing. The Government has also begun the consultation on legislation to establish a national care service, and I look forward to closely engaging in its progress.

The first three rapid diagnostic test centres for cancer have already opened. One is in Dumfries and Galloway, in the new Dumfries and Galloway royal infirmary. That is good news and good progress. However, I want to raise an issue around cancer pathway arrangements across Dumfries and Galloway. Currently, people with cancer across the area are required to travel to Edinburgh—a 266-mile round trip from Wigtownshire—for types of cancer treatment such as radiotherapy instead of going to Glasgow, which is closer. That is because Dumfries and Galloway is part of the South East Scotland Cancer Network and not the West of Scotland Cancer Network. NHS Dumfries and Galloway says that patients are offered a choice of place to attend but constituents tell me that they are not. Additionally, unlike in other rural parts of Scotland, such as the Highlands and Islands and Ayrshire and Arran, patients in Dumfries and Galloway do not automatically receive reimbursement for travel over 30 miles. The reimbursement that can be accessed is means tested. I, along with Dr Gordon Baird, Dr Angela Armstrong and Galloway community hospital action group, have been calling for changes to the situation around place of

treatment and travel costs. I will be grateful for action on those points as we progress this ambitious programme for government.

The programme for government also commits the Scottish Government to building on our already world-leading environmental policies in the face of the global climate emergency. I welcome that, in doing so, the Government has committed to protecting outdoor green spaces and promoting and enhancing biodiversity.

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): As a rural MSP, the member will no doubt recognise that, although the reaching 100 per cent programme for national digital infrastructure was announced in 2017 with a commitment to be completed by 2021, it is now not expected to be completed in the central and south of Scotland areas until 2024 and 2025 respectively, and not until 2027 in the north. Does the member agree that the SNP Government is great at big announcements—and regurgitated ones, as we have heard today—but is terrible in delivering on them and is failing rural Scotland?

Emma Harper: What I would say is that I am keen to progress the work that is being taken forward to use whatever digital technology we can to enhance everybody's access to the internet. We know that that is important as we are planning our recovery from this pandemic.

The programme for government outlines a specific commitment to establish a new national park in Scotland. I want to highlight the work of the Galloway National Park Association, which is lobbying for it to be located in Galloway, particularly through its new "It's got to be Galloway" campaign, which I support.

The programme for government also makes a commitment to implementing the strategic transport projects review 2, which will improve road, rail and other infrastructure across Scotland.

In response to Oliver Mundell's intervention on Mark Ruskell about roads, I note that, on ITV's "Representing Border" last week, Patrick Harvie said that he does not oppose improvements on roads on the grounds of safety and efficiency, specifically mentioning the A75 and the A77. Therefore, I certainly cannae wait—[*Interruption.*] I do not have time to take an intervention. I certainly cannae wait to hear what investment will be announced when STPR2 is announced later this autumn.

The programme for government is full of progressive commitments, including the doubling of the carers allowance, establishing the neurodiversity commissioner, improvement in tenants' rights and protecting health. I look forward to the programme for government being implemented.

The Conservatives continually say that the Scottish Government is prioritising independence over recovery from the pandemic. However, I would argue that independence will aid our recovery. It will give the Scottish Parliament full control over our finances, criminal justice, reform of drugs policy, employment law and equalities, to name just some areas. Without full control over those areas, the Scottish Parliament is restricted in what it can do. Independence is required to deliver that fair, progressive and equal Scotland, and I want to be part of that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the closing speeches. Before we do so, I note that John Mason does not appear to be in the chamber, although he participated in the debate earlier.

I call Sarah Boyack to speak for around eight minutes.

16:26

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): It has been an interesting debate. Scottish Labour will welcome some elements of the programme for government, but we want to be a constructive Opposition party, so where we think that the Scottish Government is getting it wrong or not going far enough, we will hold the Government to account and suggest the alternative routes that it needs to take.

For example, we will support Anne's law and the pardon for miners, which is long overdue. We will also support the principle of a good food nation, but I ask the Scottish Government to look at the work that my former colleague Elaine Smith and my current colleague Rhoda Grant have done, because it is not the headlines that matter but the detail, the ambition and the delivery.

In that spirit, I also welcome the commitment to build a new Edinburgh eye pavilion, which was a major election issue that became a cross-party issue. I am glad to see that that commitment is included in the programme for government, but it was only a one-liner. We want to know the details; we want to know that it will be properly funded by the Scottish Government and we want a timescale for the new building, because the old building is not fit for purpose and NHS Lothian has had plans to replace it for years.

It is not enough to make headline announcements, though, because we need legislation that will make the differences that our constituents need. The national care service is a case in point, because the funding will be vital in ensuring that it delivers. In the previous session of Parliament, we saw patients stuck in hospital without the opportunity to access care and step-down care, and there have been years of

underinvestment in care and adaptations to people's homes.

In addition, a top priority has to be reinvestment to ensure that we keep people who work hard as care workers, and who have been through difficult circumstances during the pandemic, supporting their families and the families with whom they work. That is why Jackie Baillie's campaign, which the Scottish Labour Party strongly supports, for increased pay and national terms and conditions for all our care workers is vital. Those are the first actions that are needed; we want a detailed commitment to the value of our care workers and to ensuring that they can develop their skills.

We must also ensure that we reverse the increases that we have seen recently in delayed discharges. Those numbers rising again is bad news for patients and their families and it reinforces the need for wider care in our communities, which requires proper local planning. We do not want a centralised national care service; we want our councils to be funded and empowered to work together so that the future demand that will need to be addressed will be met. We want to see, for example, a reversing of the cuts in Edinburgh. At a time when we are seeing an increase in delayed discharges, we also see the proposal to close council care homes without proper analyses of what is needed and of people's future needs and demands.

I am keen to hear in the Government's closing speech how the £800 million that the First Minister has promised will be spent to make sure that the transformation in care that we need across the country happens—not just in payments for care homes and care staff, but in support for unpaid carers.

Mark Griffin rightly highlighted the need to invest in local councils so that they can deliver the investment in community services on which people rely, whether that is schools or the new housing that is needed.

It was so fascinating to hear the First Minister offer £1.5 million for libraries across Scotland, especially given the proposed cuts in her own city. Our arts and culture services are vital to the wellbeing of our recovery across Scotland. We need to invest in those services.

There is irony in the Scottish Government's putting centre stage the demand for more powers for itself while centralising the powers of local councils. Some 14 years on from the promise to scrap what the SNP described as the "unfair council tax", we have seen zero progress on that promise, even when there has been cross-party willingness to work with the Government to come up with better solutions to enable our councils to be properly funded. We still have no idea what the

Government will propose. Again, more work needs to be done.

Pam Duncan-Glancy and Anas Sarwar spoke passionately about the need to tackle child poverty. Even with today's announcement, children will still be living in poverty—a situation that will be exacerbated by the UK Tory Government's dangerous cut to universal credit. We need to be clear that the pandemic has pushed our country backwards and has put people on low incomes under even more pressure.

We need to ensure that our students get a comeback plan and we need the long-awaited action on the education attainment gap to be delivered. We need new teachers to be given not just short-term commitments to appointment, but the promise of careers, with on-going support for our schools and eradication of the inequalities that our schoolchildren experience.

On poverty, it was disappointing not to hear any reference to fuel poverty in the First Minister's statement. Fuel is another example of where the cost of living is rising. The cost of energy is rising. Mark Ruskell made important points about the importance of investing in existing homes, but there must be a joined-up strategy to invest in our communities, eradicate fuel poverty, create new jobs and create new incomes for our communities. Again, I was disappointed not to hear anything about development of community-based and community-owned heat and power networks and companies, which would not just enable the transition to low-carbon heat and power, but would reinvest the profits and create jobs in our communities.

We need to make sure that it is not a top-down plan for our country. There needs to be investment in our communities, led by our communities. There needs to be a partnership of respect between the Scottish Government and councils. That is long overdue. We did not get that in the previous parliamentary session, so it is vital that we get it in the current one.

There is irony in hearing discussion about the journey to independence when we still face major problems in the run-up to COP26. I very much welcome the First Minister's commitment to investing in active travel. That necessary investment must be in safe dedicated routes, so that the parents of the young children who will be getting free bikes will not worry about them using those bikes. That means that we need to invest not just in existing roads, which have deteriorated in quality, with councils cutting spend on potholes, but in new dedicated routes.

Today, just as we sat down for the debate, there was irony in hearing the Minister for Transport justify cuts in ScotRail services. At a time when we

want people to get into using trains, with more choice and not having to use their cars, we will see train services being removed. I know people who will have to shift from travelling by train to travelling by cars, because their community will no longer have a service that they can use. How can that make sense when we are trying to have a just transition?

If we consider buses, the situation is worse. The cuts have been going on for years. We have been losing buses; during the previous parliamentary session, bus services were reduced. Therefore, although I welcome the increase in free bus travel, including for young people, we need services that every bus user is encouraged to use, because doing so is free. We support more people getting access—everybody needs to be able to access the services.

The services need to be there for them, and they need to be locally driven and locally accountable. During the last session of Parliament, we amended the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019 to deliver powers that need to be implemented, so that we see more local community-led bus services, like Lothian Buses. That is a success that could be replicated across Scotland.

However, that needs political effort—everyday effort—and that is why it is disappointing to hear that the SNP will be diverting political energy and the work of civil servants from what should be the top priority, which is not just getting through the pandemic but recovering from it and from the steps backward that we have seen on poverty, with people losing their jobs.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You must wind up now.

Sarah Boyack: Let us make this session of Parliament successful. Let us not pull our country apart. Let us work together, because even the SNP supporters of independence have warned about the decades that it would take to recover from leaving the UK and about the fact that it would be 10 times worse than Brexit. Let us think about that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You must wind up, Ms Boyack.

Sarah Boyack: Let us focus on what the Parliament was set up to deliver.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We now move to Jamie Greene for around nine minutes.

16:35

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): It is that time of year. The programme for government is generally when the Government and its back

benchers get excited about its plans for the coming year. Most of the time, it tends to whip itself into an energetic and self-congratulatory frenzy, but there did not seem to be much of that this year. We listened, but there did not seem to be much of that in the muted response from members on the centre benches.

More important is what happens outside the bubble of the chamber, because the programme for government tells the people of Scotland what the direction of travel is for the Government of the day. In this case, it is a new Government—a new and energetic Government; just look at them. The programme for government tells the people of Scotland where the Government's priorities really lie, and after listening to the debate I am afraid that the prognosis is deeply worrying for all of us.

Scotland faces significant and huge challenges as we try to rebuild from Covid-19. We have heard from members across the chamber about some of the severe challenges that we face, and I will go into some of them.

The programme announced today is as unfortunate as it is disappointing, because we are now essentially governed by a tired nationalist party with no new ideas, made worse by being backed up by a radical nationalist party with all the wrong old ideas. What a dangerous mix that will prove to be for our country, because few people—including, I suspect, many in the SNP—truly believe that the Green pact is good for either government or Scotland.

The proof is in the pudding. Today's programme for government did not even try to pretend that Covid recovery is front and centre of the Government's priorities. We did not get past the first page of Nicola Sturgeon's speech before the words "independence referendum" crossed her lips. It took three pages before she mentioned the NHS, education, mental health, ferries, roads, businesses or, God forbid, jobs. There were three pages of Scotland's First Minister talking up why she thinks it is a good use of our civil service's time to draft a new white paper on separation when I think—and I believe that most sensible MSPs think—that every minute and ounce of its fibre should be spent on tackling Covid recovery and the real-world issues that real people face outside this building.

There were, of course, bills announced and announcements made that we should welcome, such as those on tackling fireworks and on mesh removal—I include even the good food bill, which has made an appearance in a programme for government for the fourth time. There are policies that have cross-party support, for which many members have been pushing for years—on childcare, school meals and achieving net zero. In

my view, those rightly command cross-party support.

However, there were headline announcements such as those on the five-line Covid recovery bill or the national care service, that were sorely lacking in detail. We have been in the chamber throughout, and health and social care have been at the forefront of all our minds over the past 18 months, but today's statement was inexplicably silent on the economy and jobs. Why? The question is important because the two are interlinked: a strong economy pays for strong public services—we do not need a white paper to tell us that. A strong economy leads to better health and social outcomes. The two are interlinked.

What is required is boldness, the likes of which we have not seen for a very long time in the Scottish Government—bold targets on economic growth, bold statements on job creation and bold ambition on new business start-ups, apprenticeships or reshaping our high streets. I am afraid that economic growth has for too long been seen as a dirty concept in the corridors of this Scottish Government.

The Confederation of British Industry called on the Government to use its announcement today to make good its promise to prioritise our economic recovery. Its failure to do so surprises no one. There is a history of litanies of failure in similar speeches that we have heard in years gone by from the First Minister. On R100, a target was missed and reannounced. On house building, the target of 50,000 affordable homes was missed. A huge issue for Scotland's island communities is the disastrous ferry procurement and manufacturing process that is being overseen by the Government. Where in today's speech was the First Minister's plan to build the three dozen ferries that our islands need? There was nothing—not a peep, no plan, no mention of it. That is a disgrace.

I also have concerns about the influence that the Green Party will have on our rural communities. I want a firm commitment from the Government today that not a single promised infrastructure project for rural Scotland will be canned under pressure from Green ministers. If the Government does drop a project, it will have to explain, not just to the Parliament but to the electorate, why that happened.

It does not take much to listen to some wise advice. The former MSP Alex Neil was right when he recently said that this Government has

“significantly increased the centralisation of decision-making”,

and that that has been

“detrimental . . . to our poorer and remoter communities”.

The Government's track record on that is so poor, why should we trust that anything will now change?

Let me address some other issues and thoughts about today. If last week's protests outside Parliament are anything to go by, the debates that we have around complex issues such as gender recognition reform have already turned quite toxic. We have a really poor track record of contentious debate in this Parliament. It does not bode well, so far. The Government's bills on hate crime, offensive behaviour at football and named persons are all a testament to how not to legislate. Let history not repeat itself. I agreed entirely with John Mason when he made the very good point that respect must lie at the heart of our deliberations on complex and rather divisive issues. It will do so on our side of the chamber, and I hope that it will do so on the Government's side as well.

John Mason: Will the member give way?

Jamie Greene: I cannot give way, as I have a lot to get through, but I agree with Mr Mason's statement.

Let us talk about education, because that was the Government's number 1 priority in the previous parliamentary session—apparently. Alex Neil was right: where in the programme for government are there any bold and radical changes? Why is it that, after 14 and a bit years of this Government, a quarter of pupils are starting secondary school with poor literacy and numeracy? Why has the SNP failed to deliver its 2007 manifesto commitment to reduce class sizes to 18? Why did it shelve its education bill, and why is that bill not in this programme for government? We set down the gauntlet now for the First Minister. Now is her chance to truly reform Scottish education and put it at the top of every damn international league table imaginable, where it should be. We should not settle for average—we have settled for it for too long. Now is the time to listen and act.

Let us talk about—[*Inaudible*]. The First Minister said in her statement that she

“will protect Police Scotland's resource budget”.

Let us not forget that that is after having sought to make a billion pounds of savings by 2026.

The First Minister talks the talk on supporting victims of crime, but let us not forget that it was her Government that cut legal aid and has spent double the amount of cash on services for offenders than it has on services for victims.

Of course, that is typical of the SNP: it creates a problem and then it rushes in and saves the day with its own solution. It was the First Minister's Government that oversaw the backlog of tens of thousands of court cases, stretching our justice system to breaking point long before Covid. It was

her Government that oversaw a record number of prisoners on remand—at a rate of one in four, it has been dubbed a human rights tragedy. It is also under her watch that there were 7,300 confiscations of illegal drugs by prison officers, a figure that has gone up by thousands and thousands year on year. It remains a fact that people are entering our judicial system without a drug addiction and leaving prison with one. Domestic and violent crime are on the rise—the list goes on and on. We do not need endless, long-grass consultations on the dual role of the Lord Advocate, or the not proven verdict, or victims' rights; we need action.

This is not day 1 of a new Government. It is the 15th year of an old one that has failed to tackle Scotland's gravest problems: our drugs and alcohol travesty, our ferries fiasco, our lagging economy and the gap in life expectancy between Greenock and Giffnock.

Having listened to endless promises in today's statement of billions of pounds of rehashed fund after fund, I wonder why neither the First Minister nor any of her back benchers stood up to acknowledge where on earth all the money will come from. Nothing is free. Every giveaway that the First Minister announces costs money. There was no acknowledgement in her statement of the role of the UK Government in supporting Scotland and the Scottish Government. Perhaps her new, honest paper on independence might eventually tell the people of Scotland where all those billions of pounds will come from. The money will not come from oil if Patrick Harvie has anything to say about it.

The programme for government is more of the same timid and tired managerialism that we have come to expect from a tired Government. I say with some depression that if this is the height of the Government's ambition for Scotland, we have a long five years ahead of us.

16:46

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

I welcome the opportunity to close the debate for the Government and I apologise for being unable to do so in person due to a requirement for Covid self-isolation.

The annual programme for government debate stirs up a series of positive and negative reactions. We have heard many positive remarks about the programme for government from Sarah Boyack, Pam Duncan-Glancy and SNP members, but we have also heard negative reactions from Douglas Ross, Anas Sarwar, Alex Cole-Hamilton, Jamie Greene and Oliver Mundell.

What those comments and negative reactions ignore is the outcome of the election, to which none of them referred. The outcome was that the SNP gained ground, the Green Party gained ground, the Labour Party lost ground, the Liberal Democrats lost ground and the Tories were as flat as a pancake. I encourage the commentators that I named to recognise that their strategy of endless negativity and of always talking down the genuine achievements of the Scottish Government is getting those three parties nowhere. It has not advanced their electoral cause.

The public have handsomely supported the SNP and the Green Party, which led to the positive discussions that we had over summer and the creation of the partnership agreement. Mark Ruskell gave a clear and strong explanation of the merits and strengths of sharing power across Parliament and with the public, which he cited as part of the foundation of this Parliament. Our partnership agreement is designed for that type of sharing.

Alex Cole-Hamilton made a fair point about international co-operation agreements in which green parties have been involved. He said that green parties had participated in progressive Governments around the world. I am glad that we have added Scotland to the list of areas of progressive co-operation.

The First Minister made it clear in her statement that the programme for government focuses on a number of key themes. The Government's immediate and highest priority is the challenge of Covid. We will address deep-seated inequalities in society and confront the climate emergency. We will mitigate the consequences of Brexit—we heard absolutely nothing from the Conservative Party about the dire implications of Brexit. We also heard about the importance of shaping our choices about our economy and society by giving people in Scotland a choice about their constitutional future. I will return to that topic later.

The programme for government is focused on the immediate challenges of Covid recovery, but it is also about setting the direction of travel for Scotland to be able to take the decisions that matter about the future of our country.

In summing up for the Government, I want to comment on a number of specific issues, and the first is child poverty. That is an example of an area where the Government wants to act more and go further and faster than we have been able to go so far. Pam Duncan-Glancy said that the Government must do exactly that. Patrick Harvie made it clear in his intervention that there is a range of measures that the Government has taken and is taking—on school clothing grants, free school meals and the abolition of core curriculum charges, to name but three—where we are

significantly reducing the cost of schooling and therefore family budgets, and making an impact on child poverty. That is in addition to the early steps that we have taken on the child payment.

However, as the First Minister said earlier, the question of doubling the child payment, which is an aspiration that the Government would wish to achieve at the earliest possible opportunity, is one of the decisions that we will have to take in a budget process, so the opportunity is there for the Labour Party to engage constructively with us on how we make the hard financial choices that will have to be made if we wish to progress on the agenda earlier and at a faster rate, which the Government is intent on doing.

The second issue is energy and climate change. Jenni Minto made a powerful speech about the renewables capacity of Argyll and the islands, and Mark Ruskell set out some of the elements of the programme for government that emerged from the partnership agreement with the Greens in order to ensure that we are able to deliver the investments in energy-efficient housing that will strengthen the country's ability to meet the aspiration of achieving net zero, and to do that in a way that supports families in overcoming poverty into the bargain.

I am certain that the contributions of Lorna Slater and Patrick Harvie to the Scottish Government and the partnership agreement that we have reached with the Scottish Green Party will help us significantly to advance on those questions and to ensure that the aspirations, which are broadly supported in Parliament, can be taken forward in an effective way across the whole of the current session of Parliament.

The third issue that I want to talk about is the proposed national care service, which I am certain will be the subject of a great deal of substantive debate. It represents a bold and significant reform to the way in which we deliver care services in Scotland. John Mason accurately highlighted the challenge that will lie at the heart of the debate. At times, there are demands in Parliament for there to be much greater consistency in the standards of care that are delivered around the country. Indeed, there has been enormous parliamentary pressure on ministers on many of these questions.

However, one person's demand for there to be less variability and, therefore, more consistency is another person's rush to centralisation. If Parliament wishes there to be more consistency or much less variability so that our citizens in every part of the country can be assured of the quality of care and the standards that they should be entitled to expect, what will come with that is some requirements being inherent in the national care service in the same way we experience in our national health service.

We cannot duck that issue or that sensitivity about the importance of what will lie at the heart of the decision making around a national care service, because it is integral to the decisions that we will take about consistency of service provision around the country. The Government will, of course, engage constructively with our local authority partners on all those questions, but if Parliament wishes to see progress on consistency of care services around the country, it has to be prepared to will the means by which that will come about. That is the rationale behind a national care service.

Finally, I want to talk about the question of the independence referendum, which dominated a number of speeches from members across the political spectrum. I very much agree with a point that Annie Wells made about the question. She said that how we address the challenges of Covid will define us for years to come. I think that that is absolutely correct, and I do not want the response to Covid to be defined for my country by Boris Johnson and the people he surrounds himself with in the UK Government, because I do not agree with the direction of travel that that UK Government represents. What I agree with is the right of the people of Scotland to make their own choices and decisions, and to define how they wish to take forward the steps that Scotland makes in recovering from Covid.

The decisions that we take now will affect the economic opportunities in our society and the way—and the extent to which—we tackle inequality. I certainly do not want to be in a situation whereby we do not do everything in our power to tackle the fundamental inequalities that have bedevilled Scottish society and which have been exacerbated by Covid. I want the Scottish Parliament and the people of our country to have the powers to determine those issues. They can do that by taking the power into their own hands, through a referendum on independence. That is the promise of this programme for government, alongside a range of other significant priorities, not least of which is protecting the country from the effects of Covid. That is the mission to which the Government is committed, and we look forward to doing that in the spirit of the partnership that we have constructed with the Scottish Green Party, and which we are determined to sustain for the years to come.

Stephen Kerr: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. For the benefit of those who are watching our proceedings, I ask you please to make clear that it is not possible for any of us to intervene on speakers who are participating virtually. Clearly, many things have just been said by the Deputy First Minister that some of us on these benches would have liked to ask him about, but it is not possible for us to do that because he is not here—

that is for a good reason, but it is important that the watching public understand why there was no debate on the substance of what the Deputy First Minister has just said.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I thank Stephen Kerr for his point of order. It is indeed the case that the Deputy First Minister is currently, for wholly understandable reasons of public health and safety, unable to attend Parliament.

We are aware of, and have had discussions within and outwith the Parliamentary Bureau on, the frustration that members can feel when they are unable to intervene in specific situations. However, this case is the result of a specific set of circumstances. We will move on to the next item of business.

For clarity for members, the debate on the programme for government 2021-22 will continue tomorrow afternoon. I remind members that, if they have spoken in the debate this afternoon, they must be present in the chamber for closing speeches tomorrow afternoon.

Urgent Question

Accident and Emergency Departments (Waiting Times)

16:58

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): To ask the Scottish Government what immediate action it will take in light of the record high waiting times in accident and emergency departments during the last four weeks.

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Humza Yousaf): The pandemic has brought unprecedented pressure to bear on our national health service, our hospitals and our accident and emergency departments. That is why we invested an additional £12 million earlier in the summer to support non-Covid emergency care, and why we have set out our ambitious NHS recovery plan to increase capacity; that plan is backed by £1 billion of investment.

In addition, to help to address the challenge, we have established a systems response group, which is chaired by NHS Scotland's chief operating officer, John Burns. That group of health and care professionals is working on the ground to help to improve systems and performance. Its work will include re-establishing previous good practice, such as on hospital discharge, and optimising flow through hospitals, which creates additional bed capacity.

We have provided an additional £20 million to the Scottish Ambulance Service, which is accelerating work with health boards and integration joint boards to enable more people to be helped by non-emergency department options, in cases for which that is safe and appropriate.

Over the next few weeks, boards are also further boosting staffing levels, which are at a record high, to help put measures in place to reduce waiting times for urgent or emergency treatment and are increasing available bed capacity.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I am grateful for that reply. The cabinet secretary may reference the pandemic, but this is a problem to which the SNP Government was unequal long before anybody had heard of Covid-19. More than a quarter of people attending A and E experience painful waits of more than four hours when they need help the most. In a country that prides itself on its health service, that is utterly depressing.

The percentage of people not being seen in time has reached record levels in each of the past four weeks. Health boards are actively warning people to stay away. The cabinet secretary referred in his

response to funding that was made available three months ago. What will the Scottish Government do to make changes this week to ensure that those people do not have to wait?

Humza Yousaf: I will go into some detail in response to Alex Cole-Hamilton's question. However, listening to him, you would have no idea that there was ever a pandemic. You would have no idea that the NHS has just suffered, and is suffering, the biggest shock in its 73-year history.

A range of factors impact A and E performance. To think that we can look at A and E in isolation is incorrect. We have to look at the whole system of the NHS in order to help alleviate some of the significant pressures. A and E performance is not where I would like it to be—understandably so, given what I have just said about the pressures of the pandemic. However, despite those pressures, it is still the best performing A and E department in the entire UK.

On what we are doing, that £12 million investment is helping our boards to increase staffing at a local level, increasing bed capacity and providing additional transport options to improve flow in and out of hospital. We expect to see the impact of that in the coming weeks. However, I cannot wave a magic wand. I will not treat the public like fools and pretend that somehow we can simply wave a magic wand and the effects of the pandemic will suddenly disappear.

It is incumbent on us all, particularly the leader of an Opposition party, to recognise the seriousness of the challenge and come together. Where there are good suggestions from the Opposition, I will of course look to implement them.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: The cabinet secretary is treating the Scottish public like fools. He expects them to believe that the waits in A and E are caused solely by the pandemic. We know that they are caused by an interruption in flow throughout the health service caused by a paucity of social care to receive people from hospital in-patient beds.

The ripple effects are catastrophic. Ambulance waiting times are off the charts. Waits are excruciatingly long. Two weeks ago, a pensioner in Edinburgh reportedly waited 16 hours for help to arrive. Staff are working tirelessly, but they need more. In addition to dealing with the waits at A and E, what immediate action will the cabinet secretary take to address the pressure on ambulance crews?

Humza Yousaf: Alex Cole-Hamilton really needs to make sure that he is grounded in reality. He is not acknowledging that the pressures of the pandemic affect not only A and E. He referenced

social care—is he seriously suggesting that social care has not been impacted by the pandemic? Of course it has, which is why we are investing in every single part of the NHS. We are investing £80 million this year in order to address some of the effects of the pandemic.

We are investing an additional £20 million in the Scottish Ambulance Service, because we recognise the pressures that the pandemic has put on that part of the system. Last week, in the last recruitment tranche, it recruited 60-odd additional ambulance staff to help in the north and north-east of the country.

We will continue to invest right across the NHS, but if there are real tangible suggestions from the Opposition, Alex Cole-Hamilton will find that I have an open door to listening and working collaboratively with him or other members of the Opposition. However, let us not make false promises to the public who are listening. We will invest and put in the effort to tackle backlogs, but we also have to be realistic as much as we are ambitious.

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): There are record A and E waiting times, record ambulance waiting times and record waiting lists. There is also a serious NHS staffing crisis in Glasgow, leading to all non-essential surgery being cancelled across Glasgow today—all non-essential surgery has been cancelled—increasing waiting lists. Will the cabinet secretary explain what he will do to address this crisis?

Humza Yousaf: Not only do we have record levels of staffing in Scotland, we have the best-paid NHS staff of anywhere in the United Kingdom.

Difficult decisions are being made by NHS boards up and down the country. Those decisions are not being made easily or lightly; they are having to be made, to make sure that we can provide the urgent care that is absolutely necessary.

We still have a large number of people with Covid-19 in our hospitals—more than 800 people are currently in our hospitals with Covid-19—at a time when our NHS is remobilising.

What will we do? We have launched our NHS recovery plan, which looks to increase capacity by 10 per cent—[*Interruption.*] I heard a Conservative member shout, “Flimsy”; it is not so flimsy, given that the member's party has copied that 10 per cent target. The plan is backed by £1 billion of investment, which is £400 million more than the Conservatives have committed.

We will make that investment, but I say again: let us not take the public for fools; it will take time

to recover and remobilise our NHS, particularly as we are still in the midst of a global pandemic.

Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): Dr John Thomson, vice-president for Scotland of the Royal College of Emergency Medicine, said in July:

“the Emergency Medicine workforce in Scotland is not adequately staffed to deliver the highest quality patient care. This has led to an increase in intense pressures on the existing workforce and is very likely to be a contributing factor to the continued deterioration in performance.”

He went on to say that

“before the pandemic, the increase in demand put ... pressure on staff”,

and it was a

“struggle to meet the four-hour”

target.

Given that A and E pressures in summer are resembling those in mid-winter, given that the NHS recovery plan has been met with scepticism by the British Medical Association and the Royal College of Nursing, and given that we have the worst waiting times since records began when this Government took office, is it time that the cabinet secretary stopped denying that there is a crisis, acknowledged that the crisis is on his Government’s watch and started listening to the serious and real concerns of the people who know best, that is, the doctors, nurses and workers on the front line?

Humza Yousaf: What is disappointing from Paul O’Kane is, again, that he made no acknowledgment at all that there has been the biggest shock in the NHS’s entire 73-year history. In its entire 73-year history there has been no shock to the system like this one.

We are proud of our record of making sure that we have the best-paid NHS staff here in Scotland, compared with any other UK nation, the best terms and conditions and record staffing levels under this SNP Government—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Can we hear the cabinet secretary, please? I would like to hear him.

Humza Yousaf: We will continue to invest. We will continue to make sure that staffing levels are high and that staff are paid better here than they are anywhere else in the entire UK.

Business Motion

17:07

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-01102, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out changes to this week’s business.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees to the following revision to the programme of business for Thursday 9 September 2021—

delete

followed by Scottish Government Debate: A Caring Nation - Recovering, Remobilising and Renewing Health and Social Care in Scotland

and insert

followed by Scottish Government Debate: COVID-19 Vaccine Certification Scheme—[*George Adam*].

Motion agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: I am minded to accept a motion without notice under rule 11.2.4 of standing orders to bring forward decision time to now. I invite a member of the Parliamentary Bureau to move the motion.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 11.2.4, Decision Time be brought forward to 17:08 pm.—[*George Adam*]

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

17:08

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

Point of Order

17:09

Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

During my speech in the debate on the programme for government, I made reference to the community wind turbine on Islay. Neil Bibby reminded me that I should have made reference to my entry in the register of members' interests, with regard to my investment in the Islay wind turbine. I apologise for not mentioning that earlier and I hope that I have corrected the record.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):
Thank you, Ms Minto. You have indeed.

Reserved Board Seats for Islanders

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The final item of business is a members' business debate, in the name of Alasdair Allan, on reserved board seats for islanders. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament acknowledges what it sees as the important role that Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd and CalMac Ferries Ltd play in everyday life in the Western Isles and other island communities in the west of Scotland; understands with regret that, at present, the board of neither organisation contains members who are resident on islands within the CalMac network; notes the view that there should be reserved board seats in both organisations dedicated for members who are resident on islands within the CalMac network, and believes that such a measure would promote more community input into decision-making processes.

17:12

Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): I will not rehearse again the complete list of problems that arose around island ferry services this summer. I realise that the Minister for Transport is well aware of those difficulties and has, to his credit, been in regular contact with island MSPs about them since he took office. I know that he is, nonetheless, aware of the significant human and economic impact that those problems have had and it would be remiss of me not to mention briefly some of the problems that reached an acute point during the period when social distancing impacted most on vessel capacity.

Islanders were, in many cases, simply unable to travel for work, caring commitments, business or to visit family members, not even, in the most extreme of situations, seriously ill family members. Although CalMac Ferries staff tried hard to accommodate individuals when cases were brought to their attention via MSPs, I have to be honest that it was an extremely difficult situation. I am sure that the minister will want to say something about the solutions, but we know that CalMac needs more vessels, particularly a better choice of relief vessels; a better booking system; a fares review; and better communication with customers.

I know that the minister will mention some or all of those things in his summing-up speech, but I want to add to the wider debate the point that is the subject of my motion. In my view, CalMac needs to be more grounded in the communities that it serves than it presently seems to be. As far as I can establish from looking at the board of CalMac Ferries Ltd, which runs the services, and

the board of Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd, which holds the vessels and some of the piers, not a single board member currently lives in any of the island communities that depend on CalMac ferry services. That situation is not unique to CalMac and CMAL though, because there are, to my knowledge, few members of the Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd board who live in the Highlands and islands.

I emphasise that I point that out with no disrespect to the existing CalMac board members. However, in an era when lived experience is rightly prized in public appointments, it seems to me and, I can assure members, to most islanders, as the minister will be aware, that the current situation cannot be allowed to continue forever. CalMac would be better managed if its board members had to face the travelling public whenever they went to Tesco in Stornoway or the Co-op in Daliburgh or, if things went wrong, every time that they set foot outside their house. That would be a healthy accountability that, in my view, would help concentrate CalMac's mind.

I am convinced that it would improve services if at least some board members ever had to feel the direct personal consequences of what happens when a ferry does not appear for 10 days in a row, which has happened more than once in the past couple of years on the isle of Barra, for example. Due to new technical issues with one of CalMac's vessels, for over a week now there have been no services operating between Mallaig and Lochboisdale, and services only every other day from Tarbert to Uig. Those are the kind of problems that board members resident in the islands would experience.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): I congratulate Alasdair Allan on securing the debate and I echo his comments on not just CMAL but HIAL. Does he believe that if islanders were on the boards of those companies, as his motion proposes, we would have seen the situation where HIAL seeks to centralise air traffic services in Inverness, much against the desires of pretty much all the communities that are represented by those lifeline air services?

Dr Allan: As I mentioned, my comments apply also to HIAL and my views on the issue to which Mr McArthur referred are a matter of record.

I realise that appointing board members is no simple task and that the criteria used for appointment become key in this case. However, in communities where so many people have professional seafaring experience as well as more general experience of living on an island, plenty of people are well qualified for board membership. As the Uist economic task force pointed out in its petition to the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee, increased community

participation would be in keeping with the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 and the national islands plan. I also realise that not everyone is willing to put their head above the parapet when it comes to board appointments—the islands suffer from unfilled job vacancies of many kinds—but we have to start making the boards more representative somehow, so I hope that the Government will consider my proposal.

Councillor Donald Manford, who represents the islands of Barra, Vatersay, South Uist and Eriskay, has long highlighted the need for stronger input into decisions about ferries from the communities affected. He is talking not about communities owning ferries, but having a more recognised way into decisions. I hope that the Government might be able to consider some of Councillor Manford's ideas. Certainly, having some CalMac board members live on the islands that the ferries serve would be a positive start.

For CalMac, some of those points apply to more than only the board. Everyone is reassessing working patterns after Covid and we are looking at ways to disperse more public sector jobs. We should therefore give thought to how best disperse more of CalMac's central shore-based staff to the many local offices that the company already has around the country. Organisations such as Transport Scotland should also consider whether they have positions that could be based closer to the communities that they serve.

I have tried to concentrate in my speech on one practical measure that I believe could help improve ferry services in the years ahead. That step would of course not solve every problem faced by ferry users, but I believe that it is a step that would improve matters and is worth our considering. The oft-quoted unofficial paraphrase of Psalm 24 says:

"The earth belongs unto the Lord and all that it contains,
Excepting for the Western Isles, for they are all
MacBrayne's."

I believe that reassessing the composition of the CalMac board to include islanders would reverse some assumptions about where power lies and give a much healthier sense that MacBrayne answers to a much greater extent to Scotland's island communities.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Kenneth Gibson, to be followed by Jamie Halcro Johnston, who will join us remotely. I ask members to speak only for the allotted time, which is up to four minutes.

17:19

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I congratulate my colleague Alasdair Allan on securing debating time for this important

matter. As an MSP representing the islands of Arran and Cumbrae, I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. Having represented the people of Cunninghame North for over 14 years, I can safely say that ferry-related issues are consistently island residents' greatest concerns.

Ferries are rightly described as lifelines for island communities; not only are they the only means of travelling to and from the mainland, but they also play a vital role for businesses, not least by sustaining importing and exporting. It is therefore hardly surprising that islanders are frustrated when that crucial service does not operate efficiently or at all. That situation was especially severe this summer. As soon as Covid capacity restrictions were lifted, there were positive cases among the crew of MV Caledonian Isles, resulting in it leaving the service. Breakdowns, cancellations and diversions further increased pressure on sailings, and there were 65 cancelled sailings in 11 days.

Islanders struggled to travel to attend engagements such as weddings and funerals and to do business, while tourism and hospitality businesses faced reduced income because of lower visitor numbers. Food and drink producers who are already grappling with Brexit-related trade barriers and disruption were confronted with delays in exporting their produce—that was all at the height of the summer season.

Given island communities' absolute reliance on ferries, I was glad that the "National Transport Strategy Delivery Plan 2020-2022" included a clear commitment to minimise the connectivity and cost disadvantages faced by island communities and those in remote rural areas. However, I agree with Alasdair Allan that the plan should reflect reality and not simply be a paper exercise. We must involve island communities with lived experience of those issues more strongly in the day-to-day running of lifeline ferry services.

In its first annual report on the national islands plan, the Scottish Government islands team and Transport Scotland indicated that further regard should be given to island communities when transport-related policies, strategies and services are developed. When it comes to the provision of ferry services, Dr Allan is right about the crucial importance of CMAL and CalMac Ferries. When services fail, island residents' expressions of dismay and frustration are directed mainly at those two organisations and the Scottish ministers, often via their MSP. In many cases, service users are a lot more understanding once the origins of and potential remedies for the disruption are clearly communicated and explained to them. Unfortunately, too often a lack of clear, timely communication and information leaves passengers disillusioned.

I firmly believe that giving reserved board seats to island residents can only be advantageous. CMAL and CalMac would benefit from the knowledge and lived experience of island residents on their boards and it would surely improve their customer focus. I can think of island constituents who have acquired over the years invaluable knowledge and understanding of the issues at stake. Those constituents include members of the Arran ferry committee and the Cumbrae ferry users group, with which CalMac regularly engages and which are the main island voices for ferry-related matters on Arran and Cumbrae, made up of representatives of the community and business sectors.

Island communities are at the end of their tether. Often, patient individuals are frustrated by frequently cancelled sailings following breakdowns of CalMac's exhausted and rapidly ageing fleet—cancellations that are now exacerbated by Covid-19 disruptions. I am encouraged by the Scottish Government's announcements about increasing islanders' input into the development of transport-related services, policies and strategies, and I hope that the new islands connectivity plan will meaningfully contribute to that notion of greater community engagement.

Reserved seats for islanders on the boards of CMAL and CalMac would be mutually beneficial. Nevertheless, CalMac primarily needs to deliver a service, not a contracted timetable. The issues that islanders face need more than having board members who are island residents. Many islanders believe that CalMac sees the Clyde and Hebrides ferry services as just one contract among others that it manages. Communicating and explaining, for example, why a sailing has been cancelled is crucial. CMAL and CalMac would benefit from greater community input and would be able to develop a more customer-focused approach. Islanders would see their concerns better represented in the decision-making processes while—I hope—receiving more regular and extensive updates and communications about CMAL's and CalMac's day-to-day operations.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I now call Jamie Halcro Johnston, who joins us remotely.

17:23

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I congratulate Alasdair Allan on bringing the debate to the chamber.

This summer, we have seen unprecedented disruption to the lifeline ferry links to Scotland's island communities. The costs to island communities will be high, with visitor journeys impacted, some businesses seeing their

operations affected and local residents forced to have real disruption to their travel. All that comes on the back of a pandemic that has brought its own impact on jobs, businesses and livelihoods. Some islands have been, in effect, cut off and others have come to realise that a truly unreliable service is no real service at all. Last week saw yet more sailings withdrawn as Scotland's ageing ferry fleet—in desperate need of repairs and replacements, as members have highlighted—continued to creak under the pressure.

We will undoubtedly see more failures, symptoms of long-term strategic failures that have seen our islands deprioritised at the highest level in Edinburgh. This debate could therefore hardly be more timely.

Alasdair Allan is right to highlight that a gulf has opened up between the decisions that are made about our west coast ferry network and the interests of islanders. There is anger, and rightly so. This summer, our islands could not have seemed further from Edinburgh, in so many ways.

To address the substantial points of today's motion, it is undoubtedly the case that the boards benefit from a diversity of skills and knowledge. Existing board members bring a range of talents and experience—many of them have maritime experience brought from elsewhere, and a number bring skills that are more organisationally focused. That is no bad thing, but I suspect that we would not be debating the motion had the Scottish Government's appointments process recognised the value of not only those attributes, but local island knowledge and an ability to reflect and represent the communities that CalMac and CMAL serve. That should be fundamental, and should not require a debate or forced change.

At the core of the problems that we have seen is not only organisational ability, but accountability. CalMac is state owned. Next year, the Scottish Government intends to bring ScotRail into public sector operation—the suggestion being that it will be better able to serve the public. We are right to ask where the accountability lies. Ministers, including the First Minister, aligned themselves closely with the building of the two new, and very necessary, ferries in Port Glasgow, and the operation of Ferguson Marine, which is also now under Scottish Government control.

Endless failings have been well documented, including by a committee of the Parliament, but what has happened? The failings have continued, with the cost falling not to those who are responsible, but to our island communities. Successive transport ministers, before our current ministers' tenures, have failed to make the long-term decisions needed to make the service resilient. Before being held to account for those failings, they simply moved on, often to some

loftier position, which, in most cases, was one that befitted their ambitions rather than their abilities.

While this summer's crisis was on-going, we called for a statement to be made to the Parliament during one of the virtual sittings. We were told that the transport minister was on holiday. That is one thing; however, in Scotland's biggest ever ministerial team, we also have a Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport, and a Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands, too. I hope that they will forgive me for suggesting that their excuses for failing to provide someone to make a statement was about not availability, but a reluctance to come before the Parliament and answer hard questions about what they are doing during this unprecedented crisis.

Building boards that can represent the interests of the islands is important, and would go some distance to bridging the gulf between island interests and operations. However, accountability is important too, and that is what is missing from the equation. As Alasdair Allan said in the press yesterday,

"it is clear that what we witnessed over the summer can never be repeated."

He is right, but unless there is considerable change in the strategic direction from ministers, there is no reason to believe that it will not be repeated. As long as islands are an afterthought in St Andrew's house, our island communities will suffer. As an islander, I say that we deserve better than that.

17:28

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): I thank Alasdair Allan for bringing the motion to the chamber. I support the central argument in support of representation for island communities on the boards of CMAL and CalMac Ferries Ltd.

I often travel to the isle of Lewis in Dr Allan's constituency to visit family, and I agree that the infrastructure and lifeline services that CMAL and CalMac provide are an important part of the everyday life of the islands. I represent West Scotland, and I can tell members that the infrastructure services that are provided by those two bodies are also an important part of everyday life of the islands on the Clyde coast.

Arran has been hit particularly hard by what islanders themselves have called a ferry fiasco. We know why that is the case—the CalMac fleet is ageing and increasingly unreliable. Frequent ferry disruption has an enormous impact on the local economies and island life. It means disruption to supply chains, visitor cancellations and missed hospital appointments. That is unacceptable, and I

agree with Kenny Gibson's comment that islanders are at the end of their tether.

A robust and resilient ferry service would be the foundation on which to build stronger, more sustainable island economies. Through inaction, neglect and what a committee of this Parliament called a "catastrophic failure" in the procurement of replacement ferries, the people of Arran and other islands have been denied the resilient ferry service that they deserve. If Scotland's islands had a dedicated voice on the boards of CMAL and CalMac, it would be harder to ignore the concerns of people on our islands.

They would have a voice on the boards that shape the critical services that their communities cannot do without. Not only does it make practical sense, we should, as a matter of principle, support greater passenger and workforce representation in the governance of public transport systems—of ferries, bus services and the new publicly owned ScotRail.

Alasdair Allan said that not a single member of the CMAL board lives on one of the island communities they serve. Not a single member of the board lives with the reality of the decisions that they take and the mistakes that they make. That can no longer be justified. CMAL should be accountable to Scotland's islands, as it is to ministers in Edinburgh. Let me also say that ministers in Edinburgh should be accountable to Scotland's islands. The ferry fiasco is not over; there are still demands for a public inquiry, and ministers must not escape scrutiny. They are ultimately responsible for the dismal failure to provide resilient ferry services.

It is a national disgrace, meaning that the new ferries that we need are delayed and £100 million over budget. That is £100 million that we could have been investing in our islands, our local services and in strengthening our ferry network as a whole. The minister should today give a crystal clear commitment that there will be no further delays and no further cost increases to those ferries.

Once the ferries have been delivered, there should be a national ferry building programme with direct awards to the lower Clyde, in line with calls made by the leader of Inverclyde Council, Stephen McCabe, last month.

On the issue of voices on boards, I take the opportunity to say that, had the trade union at Ferguson Marine had a formal voice on the board of Ferguson during the past few years, perhaps mistakes could have been avoided and the Glen Sannox would not be delayed and over budget.

I reiterate the need for robust and resilient ferry services in Scotland, and agree that representation for islanders on the boards of the

bodies can help us to press that case. Scotland's islanders deserve better. They need a voice and that voice needs to be listened to.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before I call the next speaker, I say that, because of the number of members who wish to speak in this debate, I am minded to accept a motion without notice, under rule 8.14.3, to extend the debate by up to 30 minutes. I invite Alasdair Allan to move such a motion.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 8.14.3, the debate be extended by up to 30 minutes.—[Dr Alasdair Allan]

Motion agreed to.

17:32

Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Yesterday, my journey to this place started with catching the 7 am CMAL ferry the Hebridean Isles, operated by CalMac. As Dr Allan said, for islanders, our ferry service beats the weather as a topic of conversation. Since I was elected, my inbox attests to that, as do conversations that I have had on Mull, Iona, Tiree, Coll, Colonsay, Islay, Gigha, and Jura, and in Dunoon and Campbeltown.

I would like to put on the record how helpful and accommodating the staff at the ports and on the ferry are, whether they are employed by CMAL or CalMac. Last year, my husband was trampled by cattle and helicoptered off Islay to hospital the following day. The CalMac staff ensured that I was able to get on the ferry at very short notice so that I could be with him in Glasgow.

There are many examples of CalMac staff going above and beyond to help islanders and visitors alike. However, I know from emails from my constituents and from many conversations that that is not always the case, as was highlighted earlier.

CalMac cannot guarantee space for islanders to get to mainland hospital appointments or visit sick relatives, or for getting vital services on to the islands. Although I know that there can be two sides to every story, I believe that mechanisms should be put in place to prioritise islanders' access to their lifeline service.

Through their ferry groups, my constituents regularly suggest how services might be improved, and they take part in consultations on new vessels. The introduction of the community board in CalMac was a positive step, and it has had some successes. The transport minister recently met the community board, and I believe that he sees it as a key driver for change.

However, the organisation has to be willing to change, and at a reasonable speed. CalMac's website says of the community board that

"Its primary purpose is to be the voice of the communities and provide the community view to CalMac"

but a biannual report to the CalMac board—as per the terms of the community board—does not provide the community with a very loud or regular voice.

For example, in 2018, I learned from Islay high school that the school minibus was charged more than a camper van was to get on and off the island. I asked that the issue be raised at a community board meeting to see whether something could be done. Something was done, but I think that everyone will agree that living on an island should not be a barrier to kids attending cultural or sporting events. It has taken three years for that change to happen, which begs me to ask why.

Dr Allan's motion calls for the reservation of places on the boards of CMAL and CalMac for islanders who are served by CalMac services. To be honest, I am slightly taken aback that that is not already the case. The minutes of CalMac's board meeting on 5 May this year state that

"although there were no west of Scotland islanders on the Board, the Board skills matrix required Board members to have an understanding and appreciation of stakeholders including communities."

I am interested to know what defines

"an understanding and appreciation of".

Is it enough to have simply been on a CalMac ferry and visited one of the islands that it serves to tick the boxes of that skills matrix?

I suggest that both organisations need to increase the diversity of their boards. As other members have mentioned, when lived experience is given such a high priority in all other walks of life, why should that not be the case for CalMac Ferries and CMAL? It happens elsewhere. Neil Bibby talked about representation on boards. The board of BC Ferries comprises four directors who are nominated by postal regional district, one director who is nominated by the trade union and four directors who are appointed by the province.

This year, the people of Scotland elected a Parliament that reflects our diverse country. It is time that the boards of the two organisations that are responsible for decision making on the lifeline ferry services of Argyll and Bute, the Clyde islands, the Inner Hebrides and the Western Isles are shaped to formally incorporate the voices of the communities that they serve.

17:36

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): I also thank Alasdair Allan for securing this important and welcome debate, which acknowledges the role that CMAL and CalMac Ferries play in the life of island communities across the Western Isles and the west of Scotland. I am happy to support the motion.

Alasdair Allan has highlighted the impact that lifeline transport has on the everyday lives of people who live in island and remote communities. When people in the central belt have issues with their transport connections, they can usually find alternative methods of reaching their desired destination, regardless of whether it is their desired means of travel. If someone's flight from Edinburgh to London or Paris does not fly, they can probably get a train to another airport, such as Glasgow or Manchester, and then go onwards to their destination. If the train does not run, the chances are that they will be able to get a bus. Obviously, that option is not available if people cannot get on or off an island.

Our islands cannot survive and thrive without good transport connectivity, whether it be external or internal transport. Like our islands, that connectivity comes in all shapes and sizes. Whether it is the ferry from Ullapool to Stornoway, the ferry from Kirkwall to Eday or the internal island flight from Tingwall to Foula, which I had the pleasure of taking recently, they play a critical role in the lives of each passenger and in the wider community. They allow people to visit family, go to a wedding and attend a hospital appointment or business meeting, and they allow an engineer to come to an island to repair a vital piece of equipment.

I agree with Alasdair Allan's point about having reserved seats for island residents on the boards. I say that not just to show support for his motion or commonality with another island group but because I believe in empowering local decision making. Including island residents on boards will make for better decision making for the communities that the boards represent.

The same principle should be applied to other organisations that have a dominant public service role in the lives of islanders. Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd is another example of an organisation in which island voices are lacking on its board. The make-up of HIAL's board supports Alasdair Allan's point about the boards of CalMac and CMAL. The boards need to include direct island representation—people who live and work in the communities that they represent and who have local knowledge and understanding of how the communities function socially and economically and of the impact that decisions that board members take have on them. That is vital if we are

to avoid further calamitous scenes such as those on the west coast ferry routes this summer, and if we are to avoid HIAL's vanity remote towers project.

Reserved board seats for islands will bring decision-making closer to the communities that the boards serve. That can only be good for island communities.

17:39

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): I congratulate Alasdair Allan on bringing the debate to the chamber. It has been interesting for me to listen to members who represent islands—I do not represent islands, so it is great to hear from people who do and who have first-hand experience of the problems that islanders have faced, particularly this summer. We heard from Dr Allan, Kenneth Gibson and Jamie Halcro Johnston, who spoke of islanders' anger, and we heard from Jenni Minto—I will come back to something that she said.

Alasdair Allan set out very well the problems and issues that people have been facing over the summer. I take issue with one thing that he said, which relates very much to his motion. He said that having islanders on boards would in itself improve services. It would not in itself improve services; however, it is the right thing to do.

Dr Allan: The member and I are probably not a million miles apart. He probably agrees that although it would not magically solve problems it would certainly make things better.

Graham Simpson: That is why I said that it is the right thing to do. It will not in itself improve matters. What will improve matters is having more ferries and newer ferries.

That is the issue. We have an ageing ferry fleet, as all members who represent islands and all people who have to use ferries know. The fleet is too old and we have underinvested in Scotland's ferries for decades. That is why we are in the position that we are in.

Let me talk about the role of a board member. A member of a company board has a responsibility to act in the interests of the whole company and every community; they should not just try to secure decisions that suit their particular interest group—if we can call it that. If someone from island A is on a board and sees themselves as an islands representative, there is a risk that they might act in a way that does not serve the interests of island B.

However, if we are adults about this, we can get through the problem. That brings me back to what Jenni Minto said. She was absolutely right to say that British Columbia Ferry Services has

representatives from different communities. I have spoken to a board member of the company. They do things rather differently in Canada: British Columbia Ferry Services has been given a decades-long contract to run the ferries, which enables it to invest in ferries in a way that we have not seen in Scotland.

There is an opportunity to do things differently. I urge the minister to look at the serious proposal from Alasdair Allan and others and to involve the people who use the services.

17:43

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I congratulate Alasdair Allan on securing the debate.

It is sad that Alasdair Allan has had to raise in the chamber something that we would surely have expected to happen naturally. That it has not happened smacks of a bygone colonial age when people had decisions made for and about them by a distant power. We must strive to be better than that.

There is a host of talent in our island communities, alongside the numerous people who make their living at sea—people in the Merchant Navy, people who fish and people who work offshore, for example. There are businesspeople and people with in-depth knowledge of logistics and customer services—I could go on. The talent is there. We have the skills and expertise on the islands to fill boards.

We must acknowledge the importance to our communities of resilient and dependable ferry services. When someone's livelihood and wellbeing depend on those services, the person has a whole new perspective on them. If islanders were on those boards, would we be in the position that we are? Too many cancellations to mention have had a devastating impact on the lives of those who live on the islands, and on the islands' economies. That ferry staff having to deal with the fallout of that also makes life very difficult for them.

I question whether we believe that CMAL should exist. Is it necessary for ferry provision? The experience with the ferries that it has tried to procure—the MV Glen Sannox and hull 802—have proved the point that CMAL is no longer fit for purpose and, worse, that it is damaging the communities that it should be serving. Those services no longer need to be put out to tender, and it follows that CalMac should own and procure its own vessels. Islanders need an end to vanity projects. I am sure that, had islanders had been on those boards, they would have ensured that the ferries had been designed before the contracts had been signed, and that the design would have ensured that the ferries could dock at the harbours

from which they operate and at other harbours where they might be required as relief vessels. It is absolutely nonsensical that the harbours will be required to change in order to allow the ferries to dock at and operate from them. The cost of those two ferries is much greater than the cost of just building them, because it also includes the cost of adapting the harbours.

Island board members would have also seen to it that vessels would provide the additional capacity that is required in the summer months, and the flexibility and resilience that are required in winter. It is well known that the people of Lewis wanted two smaller vessels rather than the MV Loch Seaforth. That would have provided additional capacity in the summer and a relief boat to cover maintenance and dry docking in the winter. That makes perfect sense if you live on an island and are well used to the turmoil that is created when boats need repair. I have been asking for a relief vessel for many years.

Covid-19 created a perfect storm this year, but the service was struggling prior to the pandemic. Others have highlighted the impact of all this. I am really worried about what will have to happen before the Government will act. Our islands desperately need resilient seagoing vessels that are fit for purpose and built on time and on budget. I suggest that, had island dwellers been on the boards, that would have happened. I think that the same is true of HIAL: had islanders been on the board, the centralisation of air traffic control would not have happened, because those board members would have understood the importance of service before vanity.

I would urge the minister to heed the motion and to act before our island economies are damaged beyond repair.

17:48

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): I congratulate Alasdair Allan on securing the debate, which highlights the huge frustration that is felt by many who rely on lifeline ferry services. It really is astonishing that there is not one person who lives on an island on either the CalMac or the CMAL board, particularly given that so many people who work on CalMac ferries live on the islands and that that has been the case for many decades. It is quite clear that the expertise is there. I know many islanders who have applied for positions on the boards and have not been able to secure one. It is right that the case is being made for a model that requires reserved seats for islanders. I also believe that we need reserved places for the workforce and that their voices need to be heard.

It is absolutely clear that there has been a catalogue of poor decision making, unfortunately, in relation to our ferry services. The Scottish Government has committed to a new model, and I agree that one is needed. It has committed to delivering a model of ferry services that will deliver accountability, transparency and good outcomes for communities. That is what we are all looking for.

In the 14 years since 2007, the Scottish Government has commissioned only 12 ferries and only five have been delivered. In the 14 years prior to that, 26 ferries were commissioned of similar tonnage. In 2019, more than 1,000 ferry sailings were cancelled, and over a five-year period more than 1,000 were delayed due to mechanical issues.

There is absolutely no doubt that one reason why there are so many problems is the old nature of the fleet. However, it is not just money that is needed. Alasdair Allan is absolutely correct to highlight that the way that decisions are made is also an issue. Any of us who has represented an island constituency will have seen example after example of communities saying clearly and consistently, over extended periods, that those in authority are making the wrong decisions. That is partly because there is a level of expertise and knowledge among the communities that rely on the services and because there is self-interest in the correct decisions being taken.

We have heard from my colleague Neil Bibby about the ferries that are being built at Ferguson Marine, which is perhaps the most high-profile example of poor decision making. However, there are many other examples that show the significant problems with the current model, such as the building of Brodick pier and the current situation in which investment is still not signed off for Ardrossan harbour after almost five years. I understand that the reason why the Ardrossan harbour investment has still not been signed off is that the land is owned by Peel Ports and the Government feels that the balance of risk is wrong in relation to the negotiations that have taken place. North Ayrshire Council is willing to take Ardrossan harbour land into public ownership to facilitate that much-needed investment. I hope that the Scottish Government will be supportive of that wish from the council to try to make progress.

That situation highlights the need for a new model for the ferries. It simply does not make sense that we have a fragmented model in which the ferries are owned by one organisation, another organisation, CalMac, operates them and the ports are owned by a multitude of organisations, including CMAL. I ask the minister, in his considerations after the debate, to look at the long-term issues and at a new model that will

ensure that the voices of communities and the workforce are heard and taken into account in future decision making.

17:52

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): I thank Alasdair Allan for securing the debate, the motion for which calls for reserved seats for islanders on the boards of Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd and CalMac Ferries Ltd. Scotland is an island nation, and it is also a nation of islands. It is time that we recognised and celebrated that and supported the people who live on our islands. For them, life on the islands is not a remote and peripheral way of life. Islanders live and work at the heart of where they live, and we must do all that we can to remove barriers to that way of life and ensure that people can thrive and flourish there.

It should be straightforward to remove one barrier by putting in place measures to reserve seats for islanders on the boards that make decisions that affect island life. The debate is about board seats being reserved so that islanders have direct input into the provision of lifeline ferry services. Having visited Na h-Eileanan an Iar over the recess, I learned about the richness of island life and the challenges that islanders face. I experienced at first hand the anxiety of that moment of not knowing whether a ferry was going to sail. I would have missed a meeting that could have been rearranged, but for many it would have meant missing a crucial appointment or a loss of income because of not getting produce to market.

In travelling from Barra to Benbecula and North and South Uist, Harris and Lewis, I was struck by the stunning diversity of the landscape. Landscape shapes our way of life, and each island has its unique form. From the top of Ruabhal, 124m above sea level, Benbecula, North Uist and South Uist rolled out before me, a fragile and ancient lace laid delicately across the Atlantic and the Minch.

The following day, I encountered the utter and immediate contrast to the north as I travelled through the skyward mountains of Harris and on to the low peatland plains of Lewis. Walking up Ruabhal gave me perspective, but I will never have the whole perspective of what it means to live year round on an island and nor will any mainland member of a board—no matter what skills and experience they have.

A board is a decision-making body that takes businesses and organisations forward, tacking from decision to decision, depending on the changing context in which they are operating. The challenge faced by people who sit on boards—and, indeed, by all of us—is that we have blind

spots. It is surely a large blind spot to have a board that makes decisions about the ferries that affect island life that has no islanders on it. Consultation and calls for views are not enough. When the diverse communities of the Western Isles and other island communities face daily threats to life and livelihood, and when decisions are made about ferries or matters that affect islanders, they should have a seat at the table, just as Scotland seeks to have a seat at the table in our international negotiations. However, I call for more than one seat at the table—there should be more than one island seat on a board. Life in Stornoway is very different from life in Castlebay or on the islands mentioned by my colleague Jenni Minto. We need that range of views, which can only enhance the decisions that are made.

In every conversation that I had during my visit, islanders told me how they were inspired by the life-changing democratic process that the Faroe Islands undertook in building tunnels to link their islands, so that everyone has ease of access to the capital city of Tórshavn. However, the issue of fixed links is for another debate. For now, to ensure that our islands thrive and flourish, there must be islanders on the boards of CMAL and CalMac so that matters are considered from all perspectives and those who are most affected by the decisions that are taken about their lifelines can shape the way in which they flourish.

17:57

The Minister for Transport (Graeme Dey): Let me begin by commending Alasdair Allan on securing the debate. I welcome the opportunity to respond to the point that he has raised and the wider issues. I appreciate your indulgence, Presiding Officer, in affording me a little extra time in which to do that.

The motion highlights the importance of ensuring that the views and experience of islanders inform the delivery of ferry services. That has been at the core of my thinking since I took on the transport portfolio, a few short months ago. On the specific matter of island-based board members, let me be clear that I would very much favour an island-based presence on the boards of Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd and David MacBrayne Ltd. Although it is clear that any member of the board must bring the requisite skills to guide the business and to meet the fiduciary duties in relation to the interests of the company, I recognise the desire of many people to ensure that there are board members who can bring direct and current experience of island living to the table.

The chamber will be aware that CalMac Ferries Ltd is a subsidiary company of DML and that the board is appointed by DML rather than by ministers. In the most recent board recruitment for

David MacBrayne Ltd, it was made clear that people applying must have a strong focus on serving our island and remote communities and experience or knowledge of the issues affecting those communities, as well as having an understanding and knowledge of tourism and economic and social regeneration—all issues that affect our rural and island communities.

The most recent recruitment for the board of David MacBrayne Ltd is on-going, so there is a limit to what I can say about it. However, I can say that the positions were advertised widely, including on the vessels travelling to our island communities, and a high number of applications were received. If, after that process concludes, further progress is required, I would be happy to explore how we might achieve that. I give Dr Allan and others that assurance. It is neither tenable nor credible that there continues to be no representation from anyone living on our islands in those environments.

There are, of course, other means by which we can ensure that the voices of island communities are heard. The boards of DML and CMAL, though important, are just one part of the delivery of our ferry services. Both DML and Serco NorthLink ferries, which operates the northern isles service, are major employers in our island communities and both draw more than a third of their employees from the island and remote rural communities that they serve.

Specific to Alasdair Allan's constituency, the contact centre team in Stornoway, for example, has now grown to six people, including one who has just been promoted to be the contact centre team leader. In addition, CFL has recently recruited two new senior managers to positions within the operations team, both of whom are based in the Western Isles. That is progress, although there is perhaps more that can be done on recruitment for some other non-geographically specific posts. I look forward to the new CalMac agile flexible working policy that will come into force later this month, which will perhaps facilitate that.

The issue that there has been on ferry service networks since I took up my post is very much a priority for me. That engagement was largely virtual and strategic in nature to begin with, while social distancing was restricting seat numbers on our ferries until a few weeks ago. Over the past six weeks or so, however, I have had the opportunity to visit a number of island communities to see at first hand some of their ferry services and ports and to meet islanders and hear directly from them about the issues that they are facing. Along with the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands, I will attend the upcoming islands strategic group to discuss transport matters with the leaders

of all six island local authorities, although I have already met in person those of Argyll and Bute, the Western Isles and Orkney.

I reassure the chamber that we are very much listening to communities and, importantly, hearing their views and ideas for improving the current services. On the basis of feedback and requests from communities, CFL recently removed motor homes from standby queues across the network. It was a small action but one that could be taken immediately, and it dealt with a level of unfairness and disproportion in the use of that element of available space. There were some initial reactions around what it meant for islanders with camper vans, but a solution was quickly found.

Picking up on Jenny Minto's point, we are also working up a plan to reduce fares for school buses that are being used for extracurricular activities, which was another community ask. Officials have been engaging with CFL and the ferries community board to finalise details of the scheme including exact fares, eligibility, costs and timescales.

That is just the start of the process of better responding to the reasonable asks and ideas coming from our island communities. I am particularly keen that we build on the work of the ferries community board. Therefore, I have asked it to take on an enhanced role, contributing to the early stages of some key pieces of policy work that are strategic and network-wide in nature. The board members can help to inform that policy development and highlight any key issues or unintended consequences on the basis of their expertise as ferry users and representatives of their communities. We look forward to working with the community board on other ticketing and fares initiatives over the coming weeks, and I place on record my appreciation for the enthusiastic commitment to that approach that we have had from Angus Campbell and his colleagues.

That is in no way designed to supplant the excellent work that is done by ferry committees or transport forums, which will still have a key role to play in community-specific issues such as vessel replacement. I hope that my engagement with the Harris transport forum and the Mull ferry committee demonstrates my commitment to that. I look forward to meeting the Arran committee in person later this month.

We are improving and standardising our approach to engaging with communities in the development of new vessel projects such as the new vessel for Islay, where that approach has been welcomed. Last but by no means least, engagement with relevant local authorities is also a vital part of all this. Later this month, I will follow up on initial helpful dialogue with North Ayrshire

Council around the issue of Arran and Ardrossan. I look forward to progressing that work.

Let me turn to some of the points that members have made. Alasdair Allan was right to say that I am acutely aware of the human and economic impact that was felt on our islands because of difficulties that were heightened by, but not entirely due to, the need for social distancing. That was not acceptable, and improvement needs to happen. We need to increase the resilience of the fleet over the short, medium and long terms.

Kenny Gibson noted the impact that lifting the restrictions has had—the difficulties that that has caused—and he was right to do so. Covid outbreaks have affected a number of our ferry services, particularly in Arran, and I make a plea to ferry users to exercise all due care in utilising the vessels.

Kenny Gibson, like Alasdair Allan, also highlighted the need for clearer messaging when communicating bad news around cancellations, including the need to provide specific details about such cancellations and the plan to mitigate them. To be fair to CalMac, we are seeing some progress on that.

On second-hand and new tonnage providing relief to the problems that have been experienced this year, we have, of course, added the time-chartered MV Arrow temporarily, and we are actively progressing efforts to add more permanently in the immediate term.

As far as the progression of new vessels is concerned, I hope to have news on that quite shortly in the form of the Islay vessel. That kicks off the already announced building programme—it is part of a £580 million investment in the fleet and the accompanying infrastructure.

Rhoda Grant questioned the future structures behind ferry services, which I entirely understand. However, as Katy Clark noted, a review of those is under way. I suspect that neither member would expect me to prejudge the outcome of that review, but let me be clear that what matters is finding the most effective and efficient way to manage and deliver services. We owe that to our island communities.

Graham Simpson: On the review, which I think is very important, can the minister say when that will be concluded? Is he prepared to make a statement to Parliament once it is concluded?

Graeme Dey: The exact timescale for that is not in our hands, but I am certainly happy to consider that option. I will talk to members from all parties about that if they feel that it is appropriate.

Katy Clark also noted the situation at Ardrossan, and I can advise that progress does, at last, seem to be being made, thanks in no small part to the

support of the local council. I am relieved that that is the case, not least because we need to make progress but also because that will give me peace and quiet from Kenny Gibson, the local MSP.

I further assure Katy Clark that I am very much looking at the model of port infrastructure ownership and operation. We might not agree entirely about what that would best look like, but the model that we have currently is certainly not appropriate to our needs.

Katy Clark: The “Scottish Government Ferry Services Procurement Policy Review Interim Report—Emerging Findings”, which was published in December 2017, said:

“We will build a case for making a direct award to an in-house operator”.

Is the Government still taking that approach?

Graeme Dey: It is fair to say that that issue is not at the top of my agenda at the moment. I have much to be getting on with in the ferry space, and the ferry services contract is not due for some time. It is something that we will come to, but it is not high up on my agenda, as the member will appreciate.

In concluding, I thank Alasdair Allan for lodging the motion, which has provided the Parliament with an opportunity to discuss the important issue of community involvement in ferry services and how we can further develop that.

If you will indulge me a little bit more, Presiding Officer—I know that I am pushing my luck—I will take the opportunity to express my personal thanks to our ferry crews and the backroom staff for the tremendous job that they have done throughout the pandemic. I had the chance to do that personally on the MV Hamnavoe at Stromness and when I was travelling on the MV Coruisk and the MV Loch Seaforth. I also did that when I met front-line ticket office staff in Kirkwall, Mull, Oban, Stornoway and Ullapool. I reiterate more widely the point that I made to them, that those who have delivered our ferry services throughout these difficult past 18 months deserve our grateful thanks.

Meeting closed at 18:08.

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