



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Meeting of the Parliament (Hybrid)

Thursday 23 September 2021

Session 6



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

© Parliamentary copyright. Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body

Information on the Scottish Parliament's copyright policy can be found on the website - www.parliament.scot or by contacting Public Information on 0131 348 5000

Thursday 23 September 2021

CONTENTS

	Col.
GENERAL QUESTION TIME	1
School Inspections	1
School Sports (Spectators).....	2
Homelessness	2
School Sports (Spectators).....	4
Short-term Lets (Licensing)	5
Mental Wellbeing (Schools).....	7
FIRST MINISTER'S QUESTION TIME	9
Accident and Emergency (Waiting Times)	9
Ferries.....	14
Parades Commission	17
Vaccination Passports (Evidence).....	18
Libraries (Funding).....	18
Long Covid (Employment)	19
City of Culture Status (Borderlands Bid)	20
Prestwick Airport.....	20
Free Ports	21
Low Incomes (Support)	22
Police (Spitting on Officers).....	23
Energy Price Increases (Engagement).....	25
Endometriosis (Diagnosis).....	27
FETAL ALCOHOL SPECTRUM DISORDERS AWARENESS DAY	29
<i>Motion debated—[Siobhian Brown].</i>	
Siobhian Brown (Ayr) (SNP).....	29
Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)	31
Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con)	33
Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab)	34
Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)	36
Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con)	37
The Minister for Mental Wellbeing and Social Care (Kevin Stewart)	39
POINT OF ORDER	42
PORTFOLIO QUESTION TIME	43
RURAL AFFAIRS AND ISLANDS	43
Brexit (Food and Drink Industry).....	43
Inshore Fisheries (Activity Cap).....	44
Crofting Legislation	45
Crofting Reform	46
Brexit (Labour Shortages)	48
Agriculture Reform Implementation Oversight Board (Recommendations)	49
Snares	50
Agriculture (Fruit and Vegetable Sector) (Support)	52
POINT OF ORDER	54
DECARBONISING SCOTLAND’S TRANSPORT	55
<i>Statement—[Graeme Dey].</i>	
The Minister for Transport (Graeme Dey)	55
CARER’S ALLOWANCE SUPPLEMENT (SCOTLAND) BILL: STAGE 1	67
<i>Motion moved—[Ben Macpherson].</i>	
The Minister for Social Security and Local Government (Ben Macpherson)	67
Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP).....	71
Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con).....	74
Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab).....	76
Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD)	79
Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP).....	80
Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)	82

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)	83
Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab)	85
Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)	86
Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green)	87
Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con)	89
Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)	90
Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab)	92
Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con).....	94
Ben Macpherson.....	96
CARER’S ALLOWANCE SUPPLEMENT (SCOTLAND) BILL: FINANCIAL RESOLUTION	101
<i>Motion moved—[Ben Macpherson].</i>	
PARLIAMENTARY BUREAU MOTION	102
<i>Motion moved—[George Adam].</i>	
DECISION TIME	103

Scottish Parliament

Thursday 23 September 2021

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

General Question Time

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

School Inspections

1. **Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the restarting of school inspections. (S6O-00191)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education will adopt a phased approach to resuming its range of scrutiny activities as the year progresses, given the current Covid-19 pandemic. In carrying out any scrutiny activity, HMIE will take into account the pressures and challenges being faced by schools and settings due to the pandemic. Initially, inspectors will visit those establishments that are awaiting the outcome of a further inspection following an inspection before the pandemic. Routine inspections of individual schools and early learning and childcare settings will resume later in the academic session, from January 2022.

The inspectors are of course aware of the changing situation around Covid, and they will of course keep their plans under review.

Oliver Mundell: While it is understandable that inspections were paused during the pandemic, many schools across Scotland have already gone years without inspection under the Scottish National Party Government. Can the cabinet secretary tell teachers, parents and young people how often a school should be inspected? What is the maximum number of years between inspections that the Government thinks is acceptable?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As I said in my original answer, the plans for this year very much take into account the views of the inspectors that we need to be aware that the pandemic is not over, and it is not over in our schools. Our school leaders and teachers are still dealing with the mitigations that are in place to ensure that schools are safe for staff and pupils. That is exactly why inspectors will be taking a phased approach in

going through their work. They will of course keep their plans under review, as I expect members would wish them to do.

I point out to the member that the number of school inspections that were delivered over the past years had increased in 2018-19. It is certainly the case that, if it had not been for the pandemic, that number would have increased further in 2019-20. That demonstrates our willingness as a Government to ensure that we are supporting and inspecting schools and supporting the work of Education Scotland to do exactly that.

School Sports (Spectators)

2. **Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on when parents will be permitted to attend school sports to watch their children play. (S6O-00192)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Our priority is keeping children, young people and school staff safe. The guidance on reducing Covid risks in schools is in line with the current advice from the Covid-19 scientific advisory sub-group on education and children's issues. The sub-group keeps the mitigations in schools and early learning and childcare settings under constant review. It considered the issue of parental attendance at school sporting events at its meeting on Tuesday 21 September, and it will provide advice to ministers on that and other issues in due course. We will consider that advice, and we will announce the outcome as soon as possible.

Jeremy Balfour: I find it incredibly strange that, on Saturday morning, when my girls are playing football, I cannot watch them but, on Saturday afternoon, when we go to the local running club, I am able to go and watch them. Why the difference between a school activity and an activity run by a club? Are parents not entitled to go to both?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As I hinted to Jeremy Balfour in my original answer, that is very much being kept under review, and it has been the subject of a most recent discussion within the scientific advisory sub-group. It was also briefly discussed at the Covid-19 education recovery group—CERG—this morning. I absolutely recognise the situation that Jeremy Balfour talks about, and that is exactly why the sub-group has been assessing the evidence. I will consider that evidence in due course, when it is presented to me, and I will of course ensure that we provide an update on it as soon as possible.

Homelessness

3. **Joe FitzPatrick (Dundee City West) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will

provide an update on its efforts to prevent and alleviate homelessness. (S6O-00193)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government (Shona Robison): I intend to provide Parliament, next month, with a progress report on our “Ending Homelessness Together: Updated action plan, October 2020”. That will be one year on from the publication of the updated plan, which renewed our commitment to ending homelessness and rough sleeping and placed a greater emphasis on prevention.

We remain focused on a rapid rehousing and housing first approach, and we will invest an additional £50 million over the current parliamentary session to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping. We are also committed to a new homelessness prevention duty and to the removal of night shelters. Our ambitions will be aided by a new deal for tenants in the private rented sector and the commitment to the delivery of 110,000 affordable homes by 2032.

Joe FitzPatrick: The cabinet secretary will be aware that the Dundee housing first pathfinder project is set to end on 30 September and that the service is being mainstreamed by Dundee City Council, with Transform Community Development continuing to lead on delivery of the service. Can the cabinet secretary provide an update on discussions between the Scottish Government and Dundee City Council and its partners regarding the efforts that are being made to ensure that there is a smooth transition, particularly for those who are receiving support?

Shona Robison: My officials are in regular contact with Dundee City Council, which is fully committed to delivering the housing first programme in Dundee. The council is investing in its housing first programme by bringing in specialist support staff and other organisations. For example, the council is funding positions to deliver gender-specific and youth-specific support as well as community social workers who will be embedded within the housing options service and will support housing first functions.

To date, the housing first programme in Dundee has been very successful, with 87 people starting housing first tenancies and receiving the tailored support that is required to meet their needs. Of those, 86 per cent are maintaining their tenancies.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): In 2018, the First Minister pledged to invest in and expand housing first by supporting 800 people over a three-year period but, as of 31 July, only 540 people had received support through the pathfinder programme. What is the Scottish Government doing to speed up the roll-out across Scotland?

Shona Robison: As part of local authorities’ rapid rehousing transition plans, they considered the development and implementation of housing first. Information that was gathered from the plans in 2020 indicated that 29 of the 32 local authorities are developing a housing first programme. We will certainly continue to work with local government to ensure that the issue continues to be a priority.

School Sports (Spectators)

4. Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it is having with local authorities regarding spectators returning to watch school sports events. (S6O-00194)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Shirley-Anne Somerville): As I noted in my earlier response to Jeremy Balfour, the arrangements for attendance at school sports events were considered on Tuesday by the scientific advisory sub-group on education and children’s issues. The principal consideration remains the safety of children and young people and school staff. We will consider the sub-group’s advice and respond as soon as possible.

Liz Smith: I listened carefully to the reply to Jeremy Balfour. The cabinet secretary will know that I am not the only member who has received, throughout the summer, a considerable number of emails from parents right across Scotland asking what the logic is behind the decision. They want to know why they cannot go to watch their youngsters taking part in school matches, when many thousands can attend football matches and last week’s TRNSMT concert. Is there any logic in that decision?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I am afraid that I probably do not have much to add to what I said to Jeremy Balfour. We are of course listening carefully to the emails from parents that are coming in to members, and directly to the Government, on the issue. As I said to Jeremy Balfour, that is exactly why the advisory sub-group has been looking at the issue again.

I hope that the chamber expects me, rightly, to listen carefully to the advice that comes from the advisory sub-group on that and on all other issues. The measures have been kept under review since schools got back. We have kept mitigation measures in place to ensure that we were, therefore, allowed to make other changes, for example, around self-isolation, but we are keeping the arrangements under review. I have said to Liz Smith and Jeremy Balfour that the matter has been looked at and I assure Liz Smith that, when I have the advice, I will respond to it as expeditiously as I can.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): As a clarification, can the cabinet secretary absolutely confirm that the sub-group has looked at the issue of public and family spectators at school sports matches?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The advisory sub-group looked at a range of issues to do with visitors within school settings, and that included the aspects around sport within and outwith school settings. I hope that that gives the clarification that the member was looking for.

Short-term Lets (Licensing)

6. Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its position regarding short-term lets licensing. (S6O-00196)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government (Shona Robison): Regulation of short-term lets is vital to balancing the needs and concerns that people and communities have raised with the Scottish Government, elected members and local authorities with wider economic and tourism interests.

Over the summer, we held a consultation on the legislation and the business and regulatory impact assessment. We are now reviewing the responses to make sure that we get that important legislation absolutely right. We have informed the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee that we will lay the licensing order in November. By allowing local authorities appropriate regulatory powers through a licensing scheme, we can ensure that short-term lets are safe and address issues that local residents and communities face.

Finlay Carson: Given the contentious nature of the licensing scheme and the Scottish Government's failure to adequately work with the self-catering sector to resolve the issues that arise, particularly with regard to rural businesses, can the minister set out how the Scottish Government or local authorities will compensate businesses—including many in rural areas such as Dumfries and Galloway—whose livelihoods could be taken away due to a short-term licence being refused on the ground of overcapacity?

Shona Robison: I do not accept Finlay Carson's contention, as I believe that efforts have been made to work with the sector. Indeed, I met representatives from Airbnb and the Association of Scotland's Self-Caterers just a few weeks ago and I have committed to continuing to work with them.

I do not believe that those responsibilities are onerous. The BRIA sets out clearly that the licensing fee will not be onerous and that local authorities can recoup only the cost of providing their licensing system. In addition, local authorities'

powers will be very important in addressing issues of local concern, which I hope Finlay Carson will also listen to, because it is important that we hear local concerns. The legislation is aimed at giving local authorities the powers to use, but they do not have to use them. I hope that Finlay Carson appreciates that local authorities should have the powers to address issues of concern within their areas.

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): Does the cabinet secretary agree that the devastating impact on housing stock in certain areas of the Highlands and Islands due to the high density of short-term lets needs to be urgently addressed?

Shona Robison: We know that, in certain communities, particularly tourist hotspots, high numbers of short-term lets can reduce the number of available properties and make it harder for people who work in the area to find homes to live in—a matter that I hope is of concern to members across the chamber. That is why we are taking action on short-term lets. We consider that the regulation of short-term lets—including legislation that allows councils to establish short-term let control areas, which came into force in April—and our proposals to license short-term lets will strike the necessary balance between the concerns that communities have raised and the wider economic and tourism interests.

We are also increasing the number of affordable homes. We are proud of having delivered more than 103,000 affordable homes since 2007, and we have committed to delivering 110,000 more by 2032.

Emma Roddick will note that Highland Council proposes to use a short-term let control order for the Badenoch and Strathspey area.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I am keen to use control areas for the east neuk of Fife to protect full-time residents and workers, and I am concerned that the argument over the licensing scheme might be holding that up. I am interested in the Association of Scotland's Self-Caterers' idea of having a registration scheme, which I know the Government is against. Will the cabinet secretary reconsider its opposition to that, so that we can get cracking on implementing the control areas?

Shona Robison: Let me repeat: councils have had the power to establish short-term let control areas. The legislation for that came into force in April this year. City of Edinburgh Council is already looking at making the whole of Edinburgh a control area, and, as I said, Highland Council is looking at establishing a control area for Badenoch and Strathspey. It might be good for Willie Rennie and Fife Council to discuss the east neuk as well. It is a particular power that will be used by local

authorities in the areas in which they decide to use it, in consultation with local people and, of course, ministers.

The idea of having a registration scheme has been discussed at length, and we do not believe that it would give the same protections, particularly given the need to have common safety standards across all short-term lets in Scotland. That is why we are bringing in a licensing scheme. We will make sure that it works for communities and that it will not be onerous for those who provide short-term lets.

Mental Wellbeing (Schools)

7. Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it will assist schools to support the mental wellbeing of pupils. (S6O-00197)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Shirley-Anne Somerville): The mental health and wellbeing of children and young people is an absolute priority for the Government. We continue to support our local authority partners with £16 million in funding to ensure that every secondary school has access to counselling services. The mental health in schools working group has overseen the development of a professional learning resource for school staff, which was published in June, and guidance to support whole-school approaches to mental health, which was published in August. Those resources help school staff respond to the range of mental health and wellbeing concerns that young people might experience.

Gillian Martin: In Finland, the Government is rolling out a policy that will give people who present with mental health issues access to non-clinical community support within four weeks. In addition to the early intervention of school counsellors, has the Government any plans to increase the use of social prescribing and befriending services or the use of computerised cognitive behavioural therapy as part of the strategy to assist young people with their mental health?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I thank Gillian Martin for her recognition of the need for a range of support mechanisms wider than counselling to be in place in schools.

Of course, schools and education authorities already have in place a wide range of resources to support children and young people. Those resources include, but are not limited to, telephone helplines, the seasons for growth programme, bereavement programmes, educational psychology support, virtual and telephone counselling, advice lines, family support, links to children and adolescent mental health services,

and youth work, among others. The work that I set out in my earlier answer complements those approaches, which are already in place in schools and educational authorities across Scotland.

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): Last weekend, I visited Mikeysline in Inverness, which is an organisation that is dedicated to supporting young people's mental health. The staff highlighted how critical early intervention is, but the Government has consistently failed on that when it comes to its mental health strategy. Will the Scottish Government carry out any consultation or analysis to consider the effects on children's long-term mental health of repeatedly isolating them due to Covid-19? Will it tell the Parliament what plans it has to utilise early intervention as a means of avoiding such effects becoming more serious?

Shona Robison: I can point to a number of actions that have been and will be in train to support early intervention. One example is the get into summer programme, which was very successful across Scotland. It was funded by the Scottish Government and provided by local authorities. Within the wider mental health transition and recovery plan, we have set up the mental health recovery and renewal fund to transform services with a renewed focus on prevention and, indeed, early intervention, exactly as the member has suggested we should.

First Minister's Question Time

11:59

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is First Minister's question time. I intend to take constituency and general supplementary questions after question 2, so members wishing to ask such supplementaries should press their request-to-speak buttons during question 2. I will keep a note of members who press their buttons and may take further supplementaries from those members if we have any time in hand after question 7. Members wishing to ask a supplementary to questions 3 to 7 should press their buttons during the relevant question.

Accident and Emergency (Waiting Times)

1. Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands)

(Con): On Tuesday, Public Health Scotland revealed that 1,000 fewer people were admitted to accident and emergency this week compared with the same week two years ago, but the number of patients waiting for more than half a day to be seen at A and E is now 10 times higher. Covid has made things worse, but there are bigger longer-term issues in Scotland's health service. The Government failed to properly resource our ambulance service, it reduced the number of hospital beds and it did not plug the gaps in Scotland's national health service workforce. Which of those decisions taken before the pandemic does the First Minister regret most?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): First, and perhaps most important, since the Government took office the number of A and E consultants working in our national health service has increased by 242 per cent. That is the investment in our national health service, and in the workforce of our national health service, that the Government has supported and will continue to support. Our accident and emergency departments are working under intense pressure, as is the NHS as a whole. That pressure has been considerably exacerbated because of Covid.

The figure that we saw last week of just over seven in 10 people being seen within four hours in A and E is not good enough. It is important to put that into context, because health services across the United Kingdom, Europe and the world are struggling with that pressure in similar ways. If we look at the last month for which full figures are available, performance in our core A and E departments in Scotland against the four-hour target was 79.5 per cent. That compares with 67.7 per cent in England and 60.7 per cent in Wales, so we clearly see pressure right across the UK.

For our part, we are supporting actions to allow our accident and emergency departments to address that pressure and improve waiting times. That includes, for example, work to enhance discharge processes, the redesign of urgent care, the opening of additional bed capacity, strengthening links with social and community care to maximise the community response and enhancing evening and weekend working.

We will continue to invest in staff and the NHS overall, and we will continue to support the reforms that allow patients to flow through the national health service more quickly than is the case at the moment. I would hope—although we are not complacent about this, given the pressures that we are facing—that we will start to see some improvement in the A and E waiting times in the weeks ahead.

Douglas Ross: The First Minister says that she is not complacent about it, but she spent her whole answer dismissing the fact that people are waiting more than half a day to be treated in A and E and that the number is 10 times higher now than it was two years ago, before the pandemic. We got the usual tactic from the First Minister of saying, "Look at what is happening in Wales. Look at what is happening in England." Nicola Sturgeon is Scotland's First Minister and she was Scotland's health secretary, and I would like her to take some responsibility for what is happening in Scotland's health service.

Nicola Sturgeon is hiding behind Covid, but it is not all down to the pandemic. Since 2015, more than 850,000 people have waited longer than the four-hour target time at A and E. Why has that happened? From 2015 to 2020, the number of staffed acute beds in Scotland has dropped by more than 2,500. The First Minister has finally agreed that the NHS is in crisis, but we need action now. The Royal College of Emergency Medicine said that we need 1,000 more acute beds. How many of those extra beds has the Scottish Government now identified?

The First Minister: First, I do not think that anybody listening to my answer would have heard me dismiss the pressure that the NHS is under in any way, shape or form.

The reason for my giving some context is that Douglas Ross seeks to give the impression that the situation is simply unique to Scotland, and all because of the Scottish National Party. Our national health service is under pressure because of a global pandemic. It is important, not least in the interests of those who are working hard across our NHS, that we see that wider context as we take action to support them and improve performance.

We are, of course, continuing to ensure that we invest in staff in our health service. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Douglas Ross did not refer to this point in his follow-up question, but I said that there has been a 242 per cent increase in A and E consultants since the Government took office. The NHS's budget and staffing across the NHS generally are at record levels. There is work to do to redesign how patients are cared for, which is why the redesign of urgent care is so important. That redesign will ensure that patients get the care that they need where they need it, and that our A and E departments and the most acute parts of our NHS can deal more quickly with those who need that aspect of care.

On the subject of hospital beds, we saw a change in the profile of bed numbers way before this Government took office, as lengths of stay in our hospitals decreased. Again, that picture is replicated across the whole of the UK. Most recently, we have actually seen a slight increase in the number of acute beds that are operational across our health service. The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care is meeting with the Royal College of Emergency Medicine today, and I discussed with officials yesterday how, for example, we will free up additional bed capacity through increasing the pace at which people who no longer need to be in hospital are discharged to more appropriate settings.

A range of work is under way in these challenging circumstances to ensure that we support the NHS, and I will continue to focus on that work every single day to support those who work so hard on the front line.

Douglas Ross: In both her answers, the First Minister talked about the A and E consultants statistic. Clearly, one of her many media advisers told her that that statistic was a zinger and that she should use that answer for anything about A and E waiting times. The statistic gives little comfort to the 850,000 people who have waited longer than the target time that she and her Government set for people to be seen in A and E.

The crisis is happening throughout the NHS. Capacity is down across the board. Let us just take one alarming example. The country was shocked when it was uncovered that 200,000 women were excluded from Scotland's cervical cancer screening programme. Tragically, lives were lost as a result. Of all the services that should return to pre-pandemic levels, that is a vital one. However, new figures show that the number of cervical cancer screenings is a third lower this year compared with the same period in 2019, which cannot possibly all be blamed on Covid. Why have cervical cancer screenings dropped so dramatically, when the NHS is supposed to be remobilising?

The First Minister: First, before I come on to the important issue of cervical cancer screening, I want to complete the answer on A and E, as Douglas Ross went back to that point in his last question. If Douglas Ross did not want me to state the fact that A and E staffing has increased substantially under this Government, he should not have asked me why we had not invested in A and E staffing. I am simply making the point that we are investing in staffing and capacity in our NHS.

I said clearly in my first answer that the waiting times in our accident and emergency departments are not good enough. According to the most recent weekly figures, around seven out of 10 people have been seen within four hours. That statistic is not good enough, which is why we are taking the range of actions that I set out in my initial answer to support staff and improve the situation. I hope that we will see improvements in that area over the coming weeks.

I say again that the figure is not good enough, but, to give the context, we continue to have the best performing A and E anywhere in the UK, even in these difficult circumstances. That suggests that the actions that we are taking—although they need to go further—are helping to support those who deliver that care on the front line. We will continue to do that in probably the most difficult circumstances that our NHS has faced since its establishment.

On cervical screening, the Minister for Public Health, Women's Health and Sport has now made two statements to Parliament on the error, which goes back many years and pre-dates this Government, that led to some women being wrongly excluded from cervical screening. She has set out the audit work that has been done and the steps that have been taken to rectify the error, so that women in those circumstances are seen and we make sure that they have been provided with appropriate follow-up care. It is important that we continue to see that work through to give women the reassurances that they need.

That work is important, and I do not want in any way to underplay its significance. However, there are clearly wider issues around encouraging women to come forward for screening, whether for cervical screening or breast screening, or for any of the screening programmes.

Covid has had an impact on people coming forward for routine healthcare, including the screening programmes. We had a relatively short period during which our screening programmes had to be paused. They are now operational again, and we want the numbers coming through those screening programmes to increase even beyond where they were before the pandemic. That is why we will continue to focus on screening

and the importance of early diagnosis. We can all help by getting clear, loud and consistent messages across to women and to others who are eligible for screening that they should come forward for those appointments because the programmes are open and they are extremely important.

Douglas Ross: The First Minister's answers all add up to a Government that is reacting to circumstances, not one that is in control of them. The Government is scrambling about putting sticking plasters over each new crisis instead of planning to stop them in the first place. It reacts only when disaster strikes.

We are short of hospital beds. We are short of front-line staff. We are short of leadership from the Government. The First Minister is once again hiding behind Covid and, as we have heard today, deflecting attention to the rest of the United Kingdom. Is it not the case that the pandemic has completely exposed her Government's poor record on running Scotland's NHS? Is it not the case that the crisis that has spiralled during the past few weeks has shown how ministers are constantly behind the curve? Is it not time that the First Minister and her health secretary finally got a grip of events?

The First Minister: I have two points to make about the pandemic. First, anybody who stands up in the chamber and tries to pretend that the pandemic has not had an extremely significant impact on all of this is insulting people's intelligence and lacking any credibility.

Secondly, in the midst of a global pandemic, it is important that Governments respond to circumstances, that they adapt and that they are flexible. That is what this Government has done and will continue to do. I make no apologies for making sure that, when there is a need, we provide extra funding and take new initiatives to help the health service cope with an unprecedented set of circumstances.

Of course, it is true that our NHS was under pressure before the pandemic, but Douglas Ross does not want to look at the progress that was being made then in tackling exactly those problems. For example, if we look at the waiting times improvement plan, which was published in October 2018, we see that the number of out-patients who were waiting for their first appointment had reduced by 21 per cent in the 18 months up to March 2020, just before the pandemic struck. The numbers who were waiting for more than 12 weeks had fallen by more than 32 per cent. The number of patients who were waiting for more than six weeks for a key diagnostic test had reduced by more than 25 per cent. More in-patient treatments were being offered and more patients were being seen.

The point that I am making is that there were challenges and that those challenges were being addressed. Real progress was being made.

Douglas Ross: No, they weren't.

The First Minister: Douglas Ross says, "No, they weren't". I have just given him evidence of the fact that they were. For the past 18 months, we have been in a global pandemic. We are still in that pandemic and it is creating the most extreme of circumstances for our NHS. Therefore, in common with Governments everywhere, we will continue to take action to support the NHS. We will focus on that job each and every single day.

Ferries

2. **Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab):** Last week, the health secretary told the public to think twice before calling an ambulance. This week, islanders on Islay and Colonsay were told to travel on Scotland's ferries only if it was necessary. Their service relies on a 36-year-old ship that is stuck in a dry dock, undergoing repairs. Scotland's ancient CalMac fleet urgently needs to be replaced.

It should therefore have been welcome news that a contract to build ferries for Scotland's island routes is progressing to the next stage, except that the Scottish yard did not even make the shortlist. Instead, the contract will be awarded to a shipyard in Poland, Romania or Turkey. I applaud the Scottish Government for protecting shipbuilding jobs, but it is a pity that none of those jobs is in Scotland. Can the First Minister explain to us all how it is that a Scottish yard that supports Scottish jobs, and which is owned by the Scottish Government, failed to even make the shortlist to build Scotland's ferries?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Before I come on to the issue of ferries, I will address another point. Anybody in this country who needs an ambulance should phone for an ambulance. I am clear about that and the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care is clear about that. Obviously, if somebody needs a part of the health service that does not require an ambulance, they should phone NHS 24 or another part of the health service. It is not helpful for people in the chamber to misrepresent the position when people's lives are at risk.

On ferries, let us not lose sight of the fact that the Scottish Government has protected shipbuilding jobs here in Scotland. Without its intervention, Ferguson's would not still be open and operational, and there are hundreds of people who are currently employed at Ferguson's who would not be employed there. That is the protection of shipbuilding jobs that this Government has delivered.

In addition, of course, such procurements are bound by rules and regulations that Anas Sarwar is aware of.

Ferguson's is on a journey back to recovery. Its focus right now—as the Opposition has regularly called for it to be—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Colleagues, I would very much like all members to be able to hear the First Minister. Thank you.

The First Minister: I suspect that the members concerned do not want to hear what I am saying because they do not want to hear what this Government has done to protect shipbuilding jobs in Scotland.

The focus of Ferguson's is on completing the two ferries that are currently delayed. I hope that the work that is under way at Ferguson's will equip the yard to compete for new orders and new contracts in the future, but let us not lose sight of the fact that, without the Government's intervention, there would be no Ferguson's shipyard and the hundreds of jobs that are currently dependent on it would not even exist.

Anas Sarwar: The First Minister says that the company that she owns is “on a journey”, but people want ferry journeys—that is what the Government needs to address.

Saving the yard is one thing, but sustaining it is another. Launching a ferry with painted-on windows—really? Is that the best that we can hope for from the Government?

The truth is that the failure to deliver the ferries in question is the result of complacency and ineptitude on the part of the Scottish National Party Government. That a Scottish Government-owned company cannot win a Scottish Government contract to build ships is a national scandal that is now an international humiliation. The Government has no strategy to expand services, no fleet to meet Scotland's needs and no plan to fix the problem. The model is not working, it is not fit for purpose and it must be replaced.

There are 15 ferries in the fleet that are over their original 25-year life cycle, which means that there are more than enough projects to keep Ferguson's in work and even to expand our industry here in Scotland, if only it was run properly.

Therefore, I ask the First Minister to raise her game, to stop wasting taxpayers' money, to halt the tender process, to scrap Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd and to stand up for Scottish jobs.

The First Minister: Maybe Anas Sarwar should raise his game and find one iota of consistency. Had we followed Anas Sarwar's advice, we would

not have saved Ferguson's from closure. Back in 2018, he warned about

“a risk that it might appear that decisions are being made for political or other reasons, not purely financial or economic reasons”,—[*Official Report, Public Audit and Post-legislative Scrutiny Committee, 29 November 2018; c 7.*]

so I suspect that he would not have saved Ferguson's.

We will continue to support the shipyard and the workers there, and we will continue to do everything to make sure that it is in a position to compete for and win contracts in the future, and to do that—of course—within the law and the constraints around procurement that apply. I say to Anas Sarwar that a closed Ferguson's—which is what would have happened if he and his party had been in charge—would not have been able to compete for or win contracts. We have kept Ferguson's open and we will do the work to ensure that it is a success.

Anas Sarwar: I am not sure that using quotes is safe ground for the First Minister.

Nicola Sturgeon likes to quote a long list of excuses. Let me quote her at First Minister's questions in 2005, talking about ferry contracts at Ferguson's:

“The First Minister must raise his game. Will the work go to Poland or will it go to Port Glasgow? ... Instead of cowering in a corner in case someone in Europe gives him a row, he should take the decision and make it clear that, if it is challenged in court, he will defend it. That is called standing up for the national interest.”—[*Official Report, 16 June 2005; c 18051 and 18053.*]

That was Nicola Sturgeon talking about the national interest when in opposition, but in government she puts Scottish jobs at risk. She delivers jobs for China, which provided steel for the Queensferry crossing, and jobs for Indonesia, which supplies wind turbines, and now jobs for Turkey, Romania or Poland to provide our ferries. To quote Nicola Sturgeon again, what is it going to take to make her

“come down on the side of a Scottish industry, a Scottish shipyard and Scottish jobs?”—[*Official Report, 16 June 2005; c 18052.*]

Is it the case that the only thing the SNP is good at manufacturing is a grievance?

The First Minister: It is a sure sign that the Labour Party is in deep trouble when its leader talks about the Queensferry crossing. That is desperate stuff.

I did say that to Jack McConnell. Back then, Ferguson's was on the brink of closure and Jack McConnell was not prepared to do anything about that. I lead a Government that saved Ferguson's from closure. If Anas Sarwar had gone on to quote Jack McConnell's answer, he would have found

that Jack McConnell told me that what Anas Sarwar is now asking for would have broken the law. A bit of consistency is required.

This Government has saved Ferguson's. There are hundreds of jobs at Ferguson's that would not exist but for this Government. Compared to Labour, which stood by and let the industry go to the wall, this Government has a track record of standing up for industry and for manufacturing jobs across the country.

The Presiding Officer: We will now take supplementary questions.

Parades Commission

James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP): The First Minister will have seen the reports last week of the disgraceful anti-Catholic singing during the Orange Order marches throughout Glasgow, including in my constituency. At least three of the routes involved marching past Roman Catholic churches, which caused great distress and concern to the members of those parishes and the wider church in Scotland.

Given those events, will the First Minister consider the creation of a parades commission, similar to that in Northern Ireland, to take a non-partisan and independent look at the number and routes of such parades? Anyone old enough to remember the annual battles at Drumcree will verify the difference that the commission has made in Northern Ireland.

There were also shameful reports of Glasgow city councillors receiving death threats when any possible restriction of Orange Order parades was discussed. I am in no doubt that, just as in Northern Ireland, a parades commission would go a long way towards taking some of the heat out of the discussion of parades. I am sure we can all agree that, if those parades are to go ahead, they should do so in a way that least threatens and intimidates those of another faith or opinion.

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Regarding James Dornan's proposal for a parades commission, I am happy for the Government to give that further consideration. I have already asked the justice secretary to consider what further action could be taken to maintain the important balance of rights between peaceful procession and freedom of speech and the ability of people to go about their daily lives without feeling unsafe or facing harassment. I will ask the justice secretary to consider the possible creation of a parades commission as part of that.

It is important to stress that peaceful public assembly and freedom of expression are fundamentally important rights. I know that we are all committed to upholding them. It is also a fundamental right for any person or community to

go about their daily business without fearing for their safety. I know that members will join me in unequivocally condemning all the instances of anti-Catholic bigotry that we have recently seen on our streets. There is no place for that in a modern Scotland, and we must all show zero tolerance towards it.

I confirm that we will give the specific proposal consideration and will report back to Parliament in due course.

Vaccination Passports (Evidence)

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): In today's meeting of the COVID-19 Recovery Committee, the panel of experts indicated that the case for introducing vaccination passports has yet to be demonstrated in the public domain and that there has been no effective engagement with those who will be most affected by their introduction. Given that the Scottish Government has assured the committee and Parliament that the evidence does exist and will be published, will the First Minister say when that is likely to happen?

The First Minister: The regulations and supporting evidence will be published over the coming days—next week—before the introduction of the scheme. This morning, we have published a paper that sets out further details.

We see from countries across Europe that vaccination certification schemes can play a part in helping to stem the transmission of Covid, and I believe that they will play a part here. No single measure is going to control the virus on its own, so we need a range of targeted measures to keep transmission under control while keeping our economy open, and that is what vaccination certification is intended to do. We have engaged extensively across business interests and, indeed, with other stakeholders, and we will continue to do so up to and beyond the introduction of the scheme.

Nobody wants to be in a position of having to impose any measures to deal with an infectious virus, but unfortunately that is the position that we are still in. I think that having proportionate and targeted measures is the right thing to do to keep people safe over the winter period.

Libraries (Funding)

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): Today, across Glasgow, many people cannot access libraries to get books—which I know the First Minister enjoys—because the libraries, like many other leisure venues, are closed. What assessment has the Scottish Government made of the financial shortfall that is being experienced by Glasgow Life and other sport, leisure and library

providers? Will the First Minister commit to giving the city the money that it needs to get the venues open and functioning again?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Across the city of Glasgow, the vast majority of libraries are open and available to people. A small number of libraries are not open, and there are reasons for that, which I know the council has set out. We indicated the provision of some further financial support to councils to get and keep libraries open, given the strong recognition of their importance in communities.

On the wider issues around funding for local government, we are entering the budget process and the Scottish Government will set out the budget for the next financial year in early December, as was confirmed this week. We will have discussions across the chamber about the budget, as we always do, and we will have discussions with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities about the local government settlement. We will, as we have done every year, in difficult financial circumstances, be as fair to local government as we can possibly be.

Of course, any member and, indeed, any party has the ability to come to the finance secretary and say where they want to see more money allocated. All that I would say is that, if they want to do that, they also have to say where they think that money should come from. That offer is open to parties across the Parliament.

Long Covid (Employment)

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I refer to the joint agreement that was signed by the Scottish Government and organisations such as the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, the Scottish Trades Union Congress and the Institute of Directors, which states that no worker should be penalised if they are off work following medical advice relating to Covid-19. I have a constituent with long Covid, and she is being pressured by her employer. Does the agreement apply to people who have been diagnosed with long Covid?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Yes. In principle, of course it does. I am not going to comment on individual cases, because people's circumstances will be different, but I would say that the principles behind that statement should apply to anyone with any health condition. Nobody should feel pressured to go to work if their health says that it is not right for them to be at work. That applies in relation to people who have suffered from Covid and, given the nature of long Covid, it absolutely should apply to those suffering from that condition as well.

City of Culture Status (Borderlands Bid)

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries)

(Con): This week, we learned that Scottish National Party members of Dumfries and Galloway Council are threatening to oppose a joint bid with Scottish Borders Council, Carlisle City Council and Northumberland County Council to win city of culture status for the Borderlands region. It is not entirely clear why that is their position, other than the fact that the bid would involve both English and Scottish councils. Will the First Minister confirm whether she will support such a cross-border bid for the Borderlands? If so, what support can the Government make available to the bid team as it moves forward?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I will happily look at what the situation is. Often, claims that perhaps do not bear all that much scrutiny are made by the Conservatives in the chamber about the views of SNP councillors or councils. However, I do not know exactly what the circumstances are in this case, and I am happy to look into that.

I have been an enthusiastic supporter of the Borderlands initiative, so I slightly regret some of the undertone of the member's question. Nothing could be further from the truth. It is important that we take all opportunities, particularly in these circumstances, to support culture and cultural initiatives. I will be happy to have a discussion with the council, or to ask the relevant minister to do so, about what support might be available from the Scottish Government to support any bid.

There will sometimes be differences of opinion on such things, but let us try to get behind any reasonable bid and, for goodness' sake, shy away from any claims about some of the motives behind why people might be taking a particular position.

Prestwick Airport

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab):

Yesterday, the First Minister visited Prestwick airport, where the elephant in the room was the future of the airport itself. The chief executive of Edinburgh Airport has said that Prestwick is "doomed". More than six months after a preferred bidder was chosen, can the First Minister tell us whether the sale of Prestwick is going ahead? If it is, when will that happen? Will that sale guarantee the existing jobs and the full repayment of the £40 million of loans?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): It was very good to visit Prestwick yesterday, and it was actually quite a good news day—Prestwick airport set out the next details of its spaceport bid. I was visiting Spirit AeroSystems, which has just opened a new innovation centre that is obviously a very important part of the aerospace cluster there. It

was a good news day in Prestwick, which is a part of the country that is very close to my heart.

It is the Government's intention to return the airport to the private sector, and that has always been the case. Obviously, the process of doing that has been impacted by Covid. We will set out further details of that in due course.

Finally, I make a point that I made to Anas Sarwar in relation to Ferguson's. It was right that we kept Prestwick airport open, and it was right that we invested to protect the jobs and the economic activity there. Those are often the things that Labour calls on us to do in the abstract, but, when it comes to putting our money where our mouth is, metaphorically speaking, Labour is just full of criticism. This Government, again, is the one that, time after time, actually stands up for jobs and industry.

Free Ports

3. Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): To ask the First Minister whether she will provide an update on the Scottish Government's work with the United Kingdom Government to create free ports in Scotland. (S6F-00271)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): The green port model is an adaptation of the free port model that places a strong emphasis on fair work and the move to a net zero economy. The Secretary of State for Scotland wrote on 6 September to confirm that the UK Government would not support green ports for Scotland and would not accept our proposals for higher labour or environmental standards as part of its free port model. All mention of green ports was to be avoided and reference to payment of the real living wage by employers benefiting from tax incentives was not to be permitted.

Fair work and net zero are central tenets of Scotland's future economy and we are simply not prepared to see those commitments watered down by the Tory UK Government, so we will now progress plans to develop a green port model that is tailored to Scotland's economy, workers and communities.

Sharon Dowey: The SNP refused to acknowledge the benefits of any kind of port in Scotland for a long time. As a result of the Scottish Government's refusal to work co-operatively with the UK Government, it would appear that funding is available for only one Scottish green port, due to the increased operating costs of that model. Can the First Minister confirm whether there will be only a single green port in Scotland? If not, where will the additional funding for the remainder come from?

The First Minister: We will continue to develop and set out our proposals on green ports.

The issue was not about the SNP not being prepared to see advantages and benefits; we were simply not prepared to compromise on fair work or the environment. If, as I am sure is the case for the member, the Tories want to see the free port model go ahead in Scotland, the question has to be: what objection could they possibly have to fair work and environmental conditions being built into it? Perhaps that gives the game away.

There is another aspect. It was crucial, obviously, that Scotland would have a fair allocation of funding to help to establish ports, but actually the UK Government's recent offer failed even to provide an equivalent to what it is making available to free ports in England.

If the UK Government had been serious, all those issues could have been addressed, but that was up to the UK Government. We will continue to take forward our plans for green ports, with fair work and environmental progress absolutely at their heart.

The Presiding Officer: I call Pam Gosal.

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): I am sorry, Presiding Officer. My light went on, but it is for a supplementary question later on.

Low Incomes (Support)

4. Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what action the Scottish Government is taking to support people on low incomes. (S6F-00283)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): We have taken a wide range of actions to support people who are on low incomes, investing around £2.5 billion just last year, including nearly £1 billion that is targeted at children.

We are putting money in the pockets of hundreds of thousands of low-income families through Scottish child payments and bridging payments. That is an investment of around £130 million this year. Around 500,000 low-income households will receive a one-off £130 pandemic payment by the end of October, which is an investment of £65 million. We have increased the value of the best start foods payment and the school clothing grant, and we will double the December payment of the carer's allowance supplement. In addition, we have guaranteed the Scottish welfare fund budget at £41 million and committed a further £83 million for discretionary housing payments.

Marie McNair: Scotland is facing a perfect storm with surging energy prices, the end of furlough and the biggest cut to social security since the 1930s. The United Nations special rapporteur on extreme poverty has condemned the £20 universal credit cut as a move that

breaches international human rights law and is likely to trigger an explosion of poverty. Does the First Minister agree that the only way to protect the most vulnerable in society from devastating Tory policies is to become an independent country?

The First Minister: Yes, I believe that having control over tax, welfare and all the levers that other countries have at their disposal would be better for Scotland. That would, of course, be possible only if Scotland became an independent country.

On the immediate term, Marie McNair is absolutely right when she talks about a perfect storm. There are significant worries about energy inflation and food inflation over the winter months, and those threaten to plunge more and more already low-income families into poverty.

Against that backdrop, for the United Kingdom Government to even consider the removal of £20 a week from some of the poorest families in our country is unthinkable; it lacks any basic morality. If the UK Government was not prepared to reconsider before, it should surely do so now. It would be indefensible to take that money literally out of the mouths of children and to plunge more families into poverty. Given what many people will face this winter, I argue that it is essential for the UK Government not just to keep that payment but to look at additional payments—as this Government has done through our pandemic payments—to help people to deal with, for example, rising energy costs. That is what we should be getting from a UK Government with any concern for the poorest in our society.

Police (Spitting on Officers)

5. **Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con):** To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's response is to reports that incidents of spitting on police officers increased by 15 per cent in 2020-21, compared with the previous year. (S6F-00284)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): It is utterly unacceptable for police officers or staff to be attacked or abused in any way, and I fully support the actions of the police and our independent prosecutors and courts in dealing robustly with perpetrators. Our police officers have been protecting the public throughout the pandemic. It is disgusting that some people have chosen to attack officers by spitting or coughing at them. Police Scotland has reaffirmed its commitment to tackling assaults, including through the chief constable's assault pledge. The pledge promises to reduce the impact of violence, improve the safety of officers and staff, and provide appropriate support when assaults occur.

Jamie Greene: The phraseology that the First Minister has used is absolutely correct: the attacks are disgusting and vile. The rising trend should worry us as well. It is no surprise that 6,500 work days were lost last year due to our officers being attacked or assaulted. That is a rise of more than 400 days on the previous year.

The Scottish Police Federation recently wrote a letter to the Criminal Justice Committee, the content of which could not be more damning. It said:

"Police officers have throughout this pandemic felt neglected and unsupported by government. The impact on officer morale of that abandonment should not be underestimated."

We have rising levels of assaults, rising levels of sick days and, now, rising criticism from the front line. We can surely do something about that. We propose doubling the maximum sentences for assaults on emergency workers. Will the First Minister back us on that? Is it not about time that we sent a clear message to our front-line workers that we in this Parliament—

The Presiding Officer: A question, Mr Greene.

Jamie Greene: The question is, will the First Minister back the proposals? Let us send workers the message that we have got their backs.

The First Minister: I am very happy to consider any sensible proposal. Of course, sentencing is a matter for courts and judges. Judges retain, even in respect of short sentences, the discretion to pass the most appropriate sentence, based on the facts of the case, which includes a custodial sentence if they decide that the alternatives are not appropriate. Statistics show that the proportion of people who are given community sentences for convictions under the Emergency Workers (Scotland) Act 2005 has actually remained very similar over the past 10 years. Nonetheless, we will consider any reasonable proposal.

This Government has supported the police throughout the pandemic, and we will continue to do so. Again, I express my deep gratitude to the police for everything that they have done in these really difficult circumstances. During our time in government, we have maintained the number of police officers above the level that we inherited, while we have seen numbers of police officers decline considerably in other parts of the United Kingdom. We will continue to support our police in all possible ways. I will end where I started, by thanking the police for what they do and condemning, in the strongest possible terms, anybody who chooses to abuse or attack our police officers.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): As we all know, police officers have served their country during the pandemic in people's homes; in

accident and emergency departments in hospitals; and on our streets, working alongside other dedicated public service teams. As we have heard, they are exposed to significant risks in their jobs.

Has the First Minister questioned the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation clinicians on why police officers were not a priority for vaccination? I appreciate that, in the past, she has said that it is a matter for them. However, I wonder whether it is time to question why they would not be a priority for the booster programme. That decision should perhaps be reconsidered in the light of the exposure to risk, and so that we are clear as a Parliament, and as a Scottish Government, that we stand up for serving police officers who are facing those risks.

The First Minister: With regard to the vaccination programme so far, the JCVI has set out its rationale. The benefits of the vaccine are obviously greatest for those who are at greatest clinical risk, which is why the prioritisation approach that was taken was based on greatest clinical risk and on age, which is associated with clinical risk.

With regard to the overall programme, all police officers will have had the opportunity to be vaccinated, and any police officer who was in any of the higher clinical risk categories would have had the priority that flowed from that. It was important that we deployed the vaccine programme in the way that would best reduce the overall harm from the virus, and that is what we, in common with other Governments across the UK, have done.

These issues are possibly even more relevant to the booster programme, because the efficacy of the booster jab will be increased if it is given at the right time after a second dose. That is why the JCVI has recommended a six-month gap. It is important that we follow the best clinical and expert advice, and that we, as politicians, do not try to substitute our—understandable and often legitimate—political considerations for the clinical advice that will determine the order in which people are vaccinated so that the overall programme has the biggest impact on keeping the country safe.

Energy Price Increases (Engagement)

6. **Fiona Hyslop (Linlithgow) (SNP):** To ask the First Minister what engagement the Scottish Government has had with the United Kingdom Government and energy providers in light of the reported increase in wholesale prices. (S6F-00282)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I am particularly concerned about the impact of rising

costs on consumers who are already struggling with pressures on household finances. While the increased default tariff cap reflects underlying increases in prices and will provide some protection for consumers over the coming price-cap period, many households will be badly affected by price rises.

We engage frequently with the United Kingdom Government, the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets, energy suppliers and third sector bodies to discuss the energy system overall. The Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport has spoken with Ofgem's chief executive to raise our concerns, which build on wider worries about the effect of high transmission charges in Scotland. He has also met a range of suppliers and consumer groups.

We have also written to the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, highlighting our views and pressing for long-term solutions to maintain our energy resilience. In my view, it is vital—as I said a few moments ago—that the UK Government urgently considers financial support for low-income households in order to prevent fuel price increases from plunging more people into poverty this winter.

Yesterday afternoon, I convened a meeting of the Scottish Government's resilience committee to discuss all those issues. We will continue to meet regularly to ensure that the Scottish Government—even though most of these matters are reserved to the UK Government—is doing everything possible to help those who are impacted.

Fiona Hyslop: This week, the UK Conservative business secretary, Kwasi Kwarteng, has admitted that it could be a very difficult winter, with rising energy bills and the cut to universal credit. What assurances, if any, has the First Minister had from the UK Government that people will not be forced to choose between heating and eating this winter?

The First Minister: That will be the stark choice that many could face if appropriate action is not taken. I would not say that we have had any assurances from the UK Government to the effect that those choices will be avoided. We will continue to press for those assurances.

As we have been discussing in the context of the national health service, for all sorts of reasons and in different ways, the period ahead will be more difficult than any winter that most of us can remember. It is incumbent on all Governments—including the Scottish Government—to support people through the winter. Where issues are reserved to the UK Government, as many of the energy cost issues are, it is incumbent on the UK Government to do everything that it can to help, too.

I have already referred to two appropriate things that the UK Government can do: it can not go ahead with the cut to universal credit and it can consider additional financial support for low-income households to give them specific help with energy cost rises. We will continue to press the UK Government to do those two things.

Endometriosis (Diagnosis)

7. Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what steps are being taken to ensure that women who have endometriosis are diagnosed within a year. (S6F-00287)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Reducing the time for endometriosis diagnosis to under a year is a key aim in the women's health plan. Work on that is already being undertaken by the national health service centre for sustainable delivery, which is developing a pelvic pain pathway, starting with endometriosis.

Over the past year, the Scottish Government has funded Endometriosis UK to carry out research to identify the challenges to diagnosis in primary care and the implementation of the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guideline on endometriosis.

It is an important priority for many women across the country and we are committed to seeing real improvements in that area.

Rhoda Grant: The women's health plan sets out a goal to reduce endometriosis diagnosis from eight years to less than a year in this parliamentary session. However, there is very little detail on how the Government plans to reach that goal, especially in remote rural areas, where proximity to services poses a unique challenge. Campaigners in Caithness are calling for a review of all women's services, including in relation to endometriosis, to highlight the challenges that they face. Will the First Minister listen to those campaigners and review women's services in areas where there is a greater distance from such services, such as Caithness?

The First Minister: I am happy to consider that. We are listening and have listened on the issue. We are the first country in the United Kingdom to publish a women's health plan. The plan sets out more than 60 different actions to ensure that women get the best possible health response throughout their lives.

A recent report from the UK all-party parliamentary group on endometriosis made some recommendations that we will consider further—they are already being considered in the context of the women's health plan.

The particular target for endometriosis diagnosis is very challenging. Right now, the average time for diagnosis is more than eight years. It is right that we set a target to bring that down to under a year. A range of things have to be done to achieve that. I referred to the work that the centre for sustainable delivery is doing around the pelvic pain pathway, which is an important part of getting the interventions right, as is doing more to understand some of the barriers to diagnosis in primary care.

We will report regularly on progress on all the actions in the women's health plan, and on that point in particular.

The Presiding Officer: Several members want to ask supplementary questions on this issue. I regret that we are already over time and are impinging on the next item of business, so that will not be possible today.

I would like to enable more members to put questions to the First Minister during First Minister's question time, but the length of some earlier questions and responses means that that is not possible today. I urge members to ensure that their questions and responses are as succinct as possible.

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders Awareness Day

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

The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-01089, in the name of Siobhian Brown, on fetal alcohol spectrum disorders awareness day, 9 September. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

12:51

Siobhian Brown (Ayr) (SNP): I thank everyone who supported my motion to recognise international fetal alcohol spectrum disorders awareness day on 9 September, allowing for it to be debated. Fetal alcohol spectrum disorders, commonly known as FASD, deserve national attention and awareness.

In my motion, I pay recognition to the work that is done by Oshay's, an organisation in my constituency of Ayr that provides support, advice and guidance for parents and carers of children who are affected by FASD. Oshay's was founded by Maryellen and Billy McPhail. The McPhails have been fostering for more than 20 years and have looked after more than 50 foster children during that time. Over the years, the McPhail family has been shocked to learn of the prevalence of FASD—in children in care in particular—and about the lack of resources for affected families and foster families. The story of the Oshay's charity, however, is one that spreads hope: the hope that those with FASD can lead a thriving and fulfilling life with the right support in place.

I will tell you the story of Taylor, Maryellen's and Billy's son, who was given an FASD diagnosis as a baby. At the time, that was quite rare—it came about only because the doctor noted the mother's alcohol dependence on the baby's medical notes. Clinicians told the McPhails that Taylor would never walk, talk or sit up. Taylor, supported by Maryellen and Billy, had other ideas and surpassed all those milestones. To cut a long story short, he is now in mainstream education.

Taylor proved, in part, to be the inspiration for the charity. When he was nine years old, he wrote a book about an octopus called Oshay. In the story, Oshay the octopus was invited to a party but was worried that his tentacles would get stuck on the slide. All his friends lent him their socks to

wear, which meant that Oshay could be just like everyone else, go down the slide and enjoy the party. That story, written by Taylor, shows how we want Scotland to treat those who are like Oshay. The answer is not to try to make the person fit in but to make the surroundings fit the person—and then everyone can enjoy the metaphorical party.

How common is FASD? It is estimated that around 4,500 people in Scotland have Down's syndrome, around 44,000 have autism and around 37,000 have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. It is estimated that close to 285,000 people in Scotland could have FASD.

We must look at ways of reducing occurrences of FASD—through education and raising awareness—and of offering resources and support to those who are already affected. Similar to the fantastic work that has been done to make Scotland more autism friendly, I urge the Scottish Government to implement an FASD strategy to address prevention, diagnosis, support, engagement, awareness and training across all sectors: public health, medical, education, social work, criminal justice, the third sector and housing.

Today I will highlight diagnosis, support and prevention. Members will already know that FASD is caused by exposure to alcohol in the womb. Without a fully developed liver, the fetus is unable to filter out the toxins that are passed freely through the placenta into the bloodstream. One in seven babies experience significant alcohol exposure in Scotland. What is not commonly known is the suggestion that 99 per cent of cases of fetal alcohol spectrum disorders are left undiagnosed.

People with FASD experience problems with thinking, speech, social skills, timekeeping and memory. The condition often exists alongside autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and mental health problems. It is not just a brain issue; it can also affect facial features, limbs and height. All those factors together mean that the condition requires sophisticated diagnosis and treatment, with research showing that an early diagnosis can make a massive difference. A 2017 study on doctors across the United Kingdom found that only 31 per cent of general practitioners said that they had had in-depth education on FASD.

It is very welcome that the Scottish Government has been funding the fetal alcohol advisory and support team since 2015. That small team, which is based in Ayrshire, has become the national hub for providing training, research and consultations on FASD. It offers assessments for children and provides support and mediation in schools for parents and carers.

FASD usually comes with overlapping social issues, and 50 per cent of individuals end up in

prison, psychiatric hospitals or drug treatment facilities. An FASD diagnosis is 28 times higher in those settings than in the general population. Those with FASD are more likely to experience homelessness, unemployment and dependent living, with such experiences leaving them to face additional issues such as addiction: 35 per cent have drug and alcohol problems, and 23 per cent have received in-patient care for mental illness.

When it comes to ways to support those with FASD, we must consider a multistrand plan of action. That means looking at poverty, domestic violence, mental health and safe and secure housing. The Scottish Government has taken considerable action to raise awareness of the dangers of drinking while pregnant and to train health practitioners on how to educate women. Since 2016, we have increased screening of alcohol intake while pregnant, with midwives being encouraged to record instances of alcohol use on a mother's health records. I am led to believe, however, that that is not recorded on the baby's medical record in many cases. That is key to ensuring a correct diagnosis of FASD, especially in the care system, and that means that it should be on the child's records, not just the mother's.

About 80 per cent of children in care have FASD, and it can be easy for society to demonise biological mothers. It is important that, when pregnant, the mother feels that she can be honest about her alcohol use. If it is an addiction, it is not easy to stop. We must remove the stigma for those seeking help. We must educate society on the dangers of alcohol to an unborn baby—the ones we know about and the ones we are hearing about today. We must inform mums to be. We must treat people with compassion. Most of all, we need to recognise the support and help that children, young people and adults with FASD need.

12:59

Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP):

First, I thank my colleague Siobhian Brown for leading this debate, and I extend to Alcohol Focus Scotland my gratitude for its work in providing ongoing information and support to those who are affected by fetal alcohol spectrum disorder.

Our country's relationship with alcohol is at times fractious and troubled, and tackling harmful patterns of consumption undoubtedly represents one of the most significant public health challenges that we face today. It can be a difficult and sensitive issue to address, given that we all know people whose lives, families and communities have been impacted by the effects of harmful alcohol use.

Despite that awareness, however, fetal alcohol spectrum disorder is often described simultaneously as the most prevalent and the most invisible neurodevelopmental condition in Scotland. It is often misunderstood and misdiagnosed, and its effects are diverse and can lead to a wide range of both mental and physical issues, including a reduced capacity for learning and understanding behaviours.

As a teacher, I have witnessed at first hand FASD's limiting nature. For children who are affected by the condition, the already intimidating school environment can be incredibly difficult to navigate. Sadly, developmental problems with social skills and communication and the requirement for additional educational support place these students at greater risk of exclusion and bullying, an experience that they will likely carry for the rest of their lives. The limited knowledge and expertise of teachers at times in managing and accommodating children with FASD represents a further obstacle in the efforts to create a constructive and inclusive learning environment.

Thankfully, as we are here to remind and inform people, FASD is preventable. It is crucial that we promote recognition of the dangers that are attributed to drinking alcohol at any stage of pregnancy and do so in a way that does not seek to penalise or condemn women. Our focus should remain firmly on the education and the health of the population, while taking care not to stigmatise FASD, as that would only deter individuals from seeking the help or treatment they need.

I am therefore pleased that the Scottish Government has remained committed to its 2018 pledge to increase support for the children and families affected. Since 2018, with the provision of over £395,000 to the fetal alcohol advisory and support team, the Government has launched a successful FASD hub, through which essential tiered support services and vital lifelines are offered to members of the public. I also want to highlight the creation of a free FASD learning resource on the NHS Education for Scotland website, which includes valuable guidance for educators as well as helpful resources for parents and carers.

I hope that we can continue to promote and increase awareness of this condition, so that no child is born suffering what are avoidable consequences. I firmly believe that, by championing campaigns such as #NoAlcoholNoRisk and supporting the sustained development and expansion of services designed to help families across Scotland, we can improve our children's physical and mental wellbeing and provide them with the high quality of life that they deserve.

13:03

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): I commend Siobhian Brown for bringing this important issue to the chamber.

As we have heard, fetal alcohol spectrum disorders can cause children to have a range of issues as a direct result of alcohol consumption during pregnancy. We must continue to raise awareness of the condition to ensure that mothers understand the dangers of drinking while pregnant and the impact that it can have on their unborn child.

I was not aware of FASD until my mid 20s and, as far as I am concerned, education is one of the best ways for people to learn about having a happy, healthy pregnancy. Given that three in every 100 babies in the United Kingdom are affected by FASD and that roughly 45 per cent of pregnancies are unplanned, educating young people might be one way of reducing the number of children born with this condition.

I know that we do not have enough time to discuss the subject in more depth today, but another way of approaching this is to continue to tackle the binge-drinking issue that we have in Scotland. As we know, binge drinking has been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, causing real concern for health boards, experts and organisations that offer advice on FASD.

Although FASD is completely preventable, Alcohol Focus Scotland and other organisations have suggested that it is a cause for concern, because no amount of alcohol is safe for pregnant women or women who are planning a pregnancy.

I agree with Siobhian Brown and other members that we must do more to support children and adults with FASD. Although there is a wide range of benefits and support networks to help families with the condition, because FASD goes undetected for quite some time, many try to cope without talking to organisations that could assist them. Again, turning to my earlier point about education, if teachers and childcare professionals were trained to spot symptoms of FASD, families might be helped to understand what support is available to them.

During Ms Brown's opening contribution, she spoke passionately about the area that she represents, the excellent work that is being carried out by the Ayr-based Oshay's FASD organisation, and told the wonderful story about Taylor and Oshay the octopus, which gave us an insight into people who live with FASD. That is why it is so important that we continue to talk about the condition.

I will continue the narrative by talking about the work that NHS Lanarkshire carried out in the run-

up to FASD awareness day, which took place on 9 September. As part of its campaign, NHS Lanarkshire released figures from Alcohol Focus Scotland, which revealed that around 29 per cent of adults were drinking more than before Covid-19 restrictions were introduced. In addition, younger adults were more likely to report an increase in the frequency and quantity of alcohol consumed.

NHS Lanarkshire took to social media to raise awareness, but also to target those who were more likely to become pregnant or who were trying to conceive, and provided details of who to contact for support. Although that campaign was positively received, more work needs to be done to make the neurodevelopmental condition better known.

Various groups, including Alcohol Focus Scotland, have called on the Scottish Government to introduce mandatory alcohol labelling, to increase awareness of the risks that are associated with drinking. Most of the warning labels on bottles are not satisfactory at present, with many having only a small picture with no information or explanation of why people should not drink while pregnant.

Alcohol Focus Scotland argues that providing helpful messaging on labels will provide information and advice at the point of purchase, which will help women make a choice that is healthy for their unborn child.

Once again, I thank Siobhian Brown for bringing the issue to the chamber and I hope that, by raising awareness, more can be done to support pregnant women, and families who live with FASD.

13:07

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): I too thank Siobhian Brown for bringing this important debate to the chamber to mark international FASD awareness day which, as we have heard, fell on 9 September. It is vital that the Parliament has an opportunity to talk about the issue, raise awareness and call for continued action to support interventions, reduce the prevalence and impact of FASD in Scotland and support those who live with it.

As colleagues have done, I thank Alcohol Focus Scotland for its informative briefing ahead of the debate and for its continued work to raise awareness and campaign for solutions.

As we have already heard, it has been estimated that around 3.2 per cent of Scotland's young people live with FASD and, as Siobhian Brown said, when we compare that to other conditions such as autism, the figure is quite stark. A study in my region suggests that prevalence is higher than previously thought, with as many as

40 per cent of babies showing signs of exposure to alcohol in the second trimester and one in seven showing signs of exposure to high and frequent consumption.

People who have FASD are affected throughout their lives: 90 per cent experience mental health problems, 79 per cent experience unemployment, 60 per cent have disrupted school experiences, 43 per cent have their education disrupted, 35 per cent have been imprisoned as adolescents, and 23 per cent have needed in-patient psychiatric care. Life expectancy for people with FASD is tragically short, at just 34 years, with many deaths attributed to addiction, misadventure or suicide.

Those stark figures point to the need for renewed action. It is incumbent on us all to act, for example, on the calls by Alcohol Focus Scotland and other bodies to move to a mandatory system of labelling on alcohol, which Meghan Gallacher alluded to in her remarks. Those warnings have to be clear, because 28 per cent—over a quarter—of women in the UK are unaware of the current health advice from chief medical officers that no amount of alcohol is safe to consume during pregnancy. More must be done to compel alcohol companies to label products appropriately, so that the risks are made clear by health information and advice at the point of purchase.

It is important that we do not demonise women or stigmatise FASD, as Kaukab Stewart alluded to. Interventions such as labelling must sit alongside better community support and education, particularly during pregnancy. We know the difference that a strong, supportive relationship with a trusted professional can make, and I acknowledge the work of GPs, nurses, midwives and social workers in this area. I hope that the minister will pick up on some of those areas in closing.

As I draw my remarks to a close, I would like to call for better support for those who are living with FASD, particularly those who are young and care-experienced, because we know the challenges that are experienced particularly by that group. If we seek to keep the promise, which we all want to do, we must deliver.

Adoption UK, through its FASD hub in Scotland, has made clear the need to improve diagnosis and support, sitting alongside work on prevention. It calls for a published, FASD-specific strategy that covers awareness raising; diagnosis and support services; and individual plans and lifelong support for all children who are diagnosed with FASD, which address home life, education, mental health and access-to-work support and resources. It also calls for individuals who have a diagnosis of FASD to be given a multidisciplinary support plan that acknowledges their needs and those of their

parents, carers and wider family, and includes access to relevant and required support services.

We must continue to raise awareness of FASD and do all that we can to support prevention, diagnosis and support, in order to save and improve life.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Rona Mackay, to be followed by Brian Whittle. He will be the last speaker before the minister winds up.

13:11

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): I thank my colleague Siobhian Brown for bringing this important debate to the chamber so that we recognise international FASD awareness day, and for highlighting the great work that is being done in her constituency. It is my pleasure to speak in the debate.

As Siobhian said, an estimated 285,000 children, young people and adults throughout Scotland could have fetal alcohol spectrum disorders, which are lifelong and life-changing neurodevelopmental—I mean neurodevelopmental conditions. Amazingly, however, less than 1 per cent of them have ever been formally diagnosed and properly supported. Even more startling is the reality that FASD is preventable but, sadly, is not often prevented.

Around seven years ago, I was a member of a children's panel in the east end of Glasgow. I was fortunate to attend a lecture by—I think—Dr Jonathan Sher of the Queen's Nursing Institute Scotland. I apologise if I have confused him with someone else, but I am pretty sure that it was Dr Sher. His knowledge on the subject is beyond compare. He told panel members that many of the children who were referred to us would be suffering from FASD. Much of their behaviour and many of their issues related to having the condition, but many of them were undiagnosed. That made immediate sense to me, and it shone a light on many of the young people whom we saw and the day-to-day difficulties that they faced due to having been exposed to alcohol in the womb.

I also remember that he spoke about the advice that was given to pregnant women at the time, which was that they limit their alcohol intake. He said, however, that the only way to be sure that a child would not be affected by FASD is to avoid drinking entirely, because every person's body processes alcohol differently. It might have a low impact on one person but be devastating for another. His message was that the only way to avoid giving a baby FASD is to drink no alcohol at all.

In Scotland, we want to give every child the best start in life, and our policies reflect that. However,

some children are denied that best start before they are even born. FASD is a family of complex conditions arising from exposure to alcohol at any stage of pregnancy. It affects the child's physical and mental health and capacity to learn, and it is the most common but unrecognised neurodevelopmental condition in Scotland. It can cause learning disabilities, speech and language difficulties and many other issues, which members have outlined today.

Early diagnosis and support for people with FASD is crucial to avoid the range of issues that they commonly encounter. It is estimated that 90 per cent of those who are affected experience mental health problems in later life. A large number experience unemployment and imprisonment, and many need in-patient psychiatric care.

Last November, the Scottish Government and NHS Education for Scotland launched an excellent FASD e-learning resource that is accessible to anyone. It explains what FASD is, how to prevent it and what support is available.

In 2017, Adoption UK conducted a survey of nearly 3,000 adopters, and looked at a range of issues. It reported that 70 per cent of respondents said that they were not warned when they adopted that their child could be at risk of having FASD. Furthermore, 85 per cent have not been told since they adopted that their child might have FASD and 35 per cent have considered that their child might have FASD.

The survey reported that 55 per cent of children waited two years or longer for their FASD diagnosis and that 78 per cent of parents whose children were diagnosed with FASD did not feel that healthcare professionals are knowledgeable about the condition or its various presentations. As other members have said, Adoption UK recommends improved diagnosis and improved support for people who are living with FASD through the introduction of a dedicated multiyear national strategy for treatment and prevention, combined with increased awareness raising of the risks that are associated with drinking during pregnancy.

In conclusion, I say that FASD is a condition that is entirely preventable. Prevention is not about stigmatising or shaming women; it just requires women not to drink for the entirety of their pregnancy. In what we are facing today, with the scourge of the global pandemic still prevalent, surely that is not too much to ask, in order to ensure that our children get the best start in life.

13:16

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): Thank you, Presiding Officer, for letting me sneak into the

debate at the last minute. I thank Siobhian Brown for bringing this important debate to the chamber. She highlighted the impacts that a diagnosis of FASD can have on a person. They include increased likelihood of custodial sentences, early death—which Paul O'Kane talked about—homelessness, unemployment and a higher level of mental illness

I have a personal interest in the condition because I was approached by a couple of foster parents to work with their adopted son and daughter, both of whom have had diagnoses of FASD. I have such fondness for those parents, and respect for what they do in taking on children who have the condition.

I want to offer a positive take on the subject and talk about the impact of giving children who have the condition the opportunity to participate in the benefits of sport. Members knew that I would get sport in there, somewhere.

I have worked with one young man for several years. He is nothing but a ball of fast-twitch muscle fibres and his outlet happens to be sport. The question is this: if he did not have that outlet, where would that energy go? If you met the young man, you would say that he was very active. He is very energetic and he laughs and smiles a lot, but he has an outlet. The benefits of sport, including self-discipline and the structure that it brings to his life, are immense. He has become an international athlete and has had the opportunity to travel, which has helped him to develop as an individual. He is now studying at college, which tells its own story, which is very similar to the story that Siobhian Brown told.

However, Covid has had a specific impact on people with such conditions, because that disciplined structure and support has been unavailable. When I managed to get back to seeing my athletes, I saw that the impact on him was much more marked than it was on the rest of the squad. He obviously had a love of doughnuts—that is how I would like to put it. That is something that we need to consider.

I am, as you know, a big believer in giving kids the opportunity to participate. It does not have to be in sport; it can be music, art, drama or whatever. Covid has had a big impact on vulnerable kids while they have not been able to access such opportunities.

The system needs to consider how to maintain support from childhood to adulthood in fostering situations, because support drops off dramatically when children get to a certain age.

FASD is a preventable condition; as Siobhian Brown said, we need to consider how to prevent it, in the first instance. It is a health issue, and we

need to start with the consideration that Scotland has an unhealthy relationship with alcohol.

I once again thank Siobhian Brown for bringing the debate to the chamber, and I thank the Deputy Presiding Officer for letting me sneak in.

13:20

The Minister for Mental Wellbeing and Social Care (Kevin Stewart): First, I pay tribute to Siobhian Brown for bringing the motion to the chamber. I thank members for their consensual approach to the debate on this extremely important issue, and pay tribute to the McPhails and their work, which Ms Brown described today. Taylor's book on Oshay the octopus will now definitely have to be on my reading list, and Ms Brown can maybe help me source a copy of it.

Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder or FASD, which is caused, as members have said, by prenatal alcohol exposure, is one of the most common neurodevelopmental conditions in Scotland, but it is also one of the lesser-known ones. It is in respect of those simple facts that I find myself whole-heartedly in agreement with today's motion. We must all do more to promote awareness of the dangers of alcohol consumption during pregnancy but also to support those with a diagnosis of FASD. We must do our level best to destigmatise the situation of some of the folks who have alcohol problems, and to get them to the right help. We should also be supportive of the pregnant women in our lives, whether they be partners, family members or friends.

No safe amount of alcohol can be consumed during pregnancy. The advice from the chief medical officer for Scotland is clear—"no alcohol, no risk"—and the Scottish Government has set up a range of work to help support that message. Our 2018 alcohol framework demonstrates that we are committed to improved health messaging on alcohol. We have committed to press alcohol producers to put health information on physical product and packaging labels, and we will be prepared to consider a mandatory approach in Scotland if progress is not made. That action will include consideration of pregnancy warning labels.

Positive progress has, however, been made as alcohol consumption in Scotland in 2020 remained at its lowest level since 1994, and reduced levels of alcohol consumption across society can lead to a reduced prevalence of FASD.

Prevention and early intervention remain vital in respect of reducing the impact of FASD. However, it is also vital that children and young people with a diagnosis can access the right support with regard to health, social care or even sport, as Mr Whittle mentioned.

To best ensure support to those whom FASD impacts, we have funded the fetal alcohol advisory and support team since 2018 to deliver training nationally, which improves the knowledge of professionals who work with individuals with FASD, and the Royal College of General Practitioners to produce an e-learning module on FASD for GPs and the wider healthcare community in primary care.

Furthermore, we provided Adoption UK Scotland with over £526,000 since June 2019 to establish FASD hub Scotland, which provides a foundation on which awareness of FASD can be further promoted, as well as a dedicated helpline, and support and advice to parents, carers and children whom FASD has impacted. It is notable that, on FASD awareness day earlier this month, Adoption UK called on Governments across the UK to replicate the success of FASD hub Scotland.

In addition to our FASD-specific offerings, the Scottish Government has published principles and standards of care through a new national neurodevelopmental specification for children and young people. The new specification aims to ensure that children with neurodev—I am doing a Rona here—neurodevelopmental profiles, including those with FASD, receive more support than is currently available.

That offering will sit alongside the child and adolescent mental health service—CAMHS—and will benefit from the recently announced £10.83 million of funding to support service provision through phase 2 of our mental health recovery and renewal fund. Specifically, £5.25 million of that funding is being allocated to NHS boards to build professional capacity to support children and young people with neurodevelopmental support needs.

Furthermore, we are at an early stage in relation to the wider autism, learning disabilities and neurodiversity bill that we committed to in the latest programme for government, with part of that being the creation of a commissioner. We are putting resources in place to allow us to start consulting on what people would like to see from it. The bill has arisen from discussions around autism and learning disabilities in particular, but consultation on the bill will include other neurodevelopmental support issues such as FASD. As with every piece of proposed legislation, working with individuals with lived experience, and with organisations, will be at its heart. I encourage interested parties to get involved in those discussions when we begin them early next year.

Our proposal to develop a national care service also provides significant potential to better ensure that those who are impacted by FASD can access

the social care support that they need and deserve.

I record my thanks for the opportunity to take part in the debate and for the thoughtful contributions of all colleagues across the Parliament. Although FASD remains a significant lifelong condition affecting an individual's mental and physical health, it remains preventable, and early diagnosis and tailored interventions can improve outcomes for children.

In Scotland, we have a solid foundation on which to build our level of support in respect of FASD, through work with Oshay's and other organisations like it. The Government remains committed to continuing to take forward this important area of work.

I thank Ms Brown once again for bringing this important debate to the chamber.

13:28

Meeting suspended.

14:30

On resuming—

Point of Order

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

Good afternoon. I remind members of the Covid-related measures that are in place, and that face coverings should be worn when moving around the chamber and across the Holyrood campus.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con):

On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I seek your guidance. Yesterday, during the debate on ambulances, Fulton MacGregor stated the following:

“the local authority in North Lanarkshire is made up of a Labour and Conservative coalition.”—[*Official Report*, 22 September 2021; c 72.]

I am a serving councillor in North Lanarkshire. There is no coalition, unlike here, where there is a formal agreement between the Scottish National Party and the Green Party. The Conservatives in North Lanarkshire Council will work with any party for the benefit of the people in North Lanarkshire. Mr MacGregor knows well all that I have just said. He must be aware that he is guilty of misrepresenting the facts.

Members of the public expect elected members to be factual when making their contributions inside and outside the chamber. I would therefore be grateful for your guidance on how the *Official Report* can be corrected at the earliest opportunity.

The Presiding Officer: I thank the member for advance notice of her point of order but, as she will be aware, I am not responsible for the accuracy of members' contributions in the chamber. Although the point of order mechanism has been used to raise questions about the accuracy of contributions, such questions are not, in fact, points of order.

Members themselves are responsible for the accuracy of their contributions. It is not a matter for the chair to rule on, but the member will be aware that a corrections mechanism is available to members, and the guidance on that mechanism sets out the steps that a member should take if they realise that they have provided incorrect information, as well as the steps to take if they consider that another member has provided incorrect information.

Portfolio Question Time

Rural Affairs and Islands

14:32

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The first item of business this afternoon is rural affairs and islands portfolio questions. I remind members that questions 3 and 5 are grouped and that I will take any supplementaries on those questions after both have been answered. If a member wishes to ask a supplementary question, please press the request-to-speak button or indicate that in the chat function by entering the letter R during the relevant question.

Brexit (Food and Drink Industry)

1. Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden)

(SNP): To ask the Scottish Government when it last discussed with the United Kingdom Government the impact of Brexit on Scotland's food and drink industry. (S6O-00183)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): Impacts of the exit from the European Union on Scotland's food and drink industry are raised frequently in meetings between the officials of respective Governments. The Scottish Government is clear that the United Kingdom Government must make emergency changes to the immigration system to combat acute post EU exit skills and labour shortages.

This week, I met Victoria Prentis, the UK minister of state at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, to further raise the need for the UK Government to address immediately the disruption and labour shortages caused by EU exit. That followed a similar meeting that the Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, External Affairs and Culture, had with the Secretary of State for Scotland just last week.

Rona Mackay: My constituency of Strathkelvin and Bearsden has a large number of food and drink retailers who are feeling the brunt of Brexit consequences, like the rest of Scotland. Does the minister agree that the UK Government was warned about the damaging consequences to our world-leading food and drink sector, but went ahead with Brexit regardless and is entirely responsible for the difficulties being faced by retailers and consumers today?

Mairi Gougeon: Absolutely. The Scottish Government repeatedly warned the UK Government about the damage that would be caused by its hard EU exit. It is astonishing that it was so recklessly pursued in the middle of a pandemic.

The food and drink sector in Scotland is a major contributor to our economy. In 2018, it generated turnover worth approximately £15 billion, and added £5.6 billion in gross value added.

Scottish businesses are being burdened by EU exit red tape, which is making it harder for our exporters to ship Scottish goods to Northern Ireland and to the rest of the EU. In addition, last week, it was announced—unilaterally, with no consultation or discussion with devolved Administrations—that import checks would be delayed. That was met with anger by industry, which has been forced to prepare for ever-changing deadlines that put our exporters at a specific disadvantage. The UK Government needs to re-engage in good faith with the EU to find pragmatic solutions to the challenges that businesses across Scotland face.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): Last week, the cabinet secretary said that plans for a border control post at Cairnryan were on hold because of uncertainties over funding. I would have thought that funding would have been agreed before the proposal was announced. What contingency plans will now be put in place if new checks are required from January? Will the cabinet secretary give an assurance that no food and drink business that transports goods across the Irish Sea will experience additional delays as a result of the decision not to go ahead with the control post?

Mairi Gougeon: The member makes a point about costs as though that has been entirely within our control, rather than simply being the nature of the situation in which we have found ourselves in dealing with the UK Government. We absolutely regret the decision that the UK Government announced last week to delay UK border checks. It was taken without transparency and without any discussion with, or warning to, the devolved Administrations that it directly affects.

We are, of course, working on contingency plans, because we will have to make import checks at some point. We are currently considering what our options will be in that regard and whether to choose to operate different arrangements for Scotland, instead of waiting until the July 2022 deadline, given that sanitary and phytosanitary standards policy is devolved to Scotland. This is another area in which Scottish food and drink businesses and our exporters are being put at a specific disadvantage because of decisions taken by the UK Government.

Inshore Fisheries (Activity Cap)

2. Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government when it will begin consulting on a cap on fishing activity in inshore waters. (S6O-00184)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): A cap on inshore fishing activity is one of the measures that were outlined in the recent co-operation agreement with the Scottish Green Party. Those measures will help to ensure that Scotland leads the way on marine environmental protection, will enhance our reputation for providing quality sustainable seafood and will position us well to deliver a green recovery.

Early preparatory work is already under way, and we will consult as soon as is practicable. We will, of course, ensure that all stakeholders are encouraged to take part in the consultation, including our regional inshore fisheries groups.

Dr Allan: Given the importance of fishing to my constituency, can the cabinet secretary say anything about the likely timescales involved, or give an assurance that an islands community impact assessment will be carried out before any changes are introduced?

Mairi Gougeon: The Government will test the potential impact of capping activity in inshore waters so that the needs of our island communities are specifically considered. We will engage with our island-based regional inshore fisheries groups, as well as all other relevant stakeholders, throughout the process. As part of the process, all the relevant statutory assessments will be undertaken, including an islands community impact assessment. We will look to do that early in the process so that it can help to shape our policy as it develops.

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): How will the Scottish Government consider NatureScot's advice regarding the impact of mobile fishing on maerl beds and other habitats when it establishes the cap on fishing activity in inshore waters?

Mairi Gougeon: We want to base our decisions on the best scientific evidence that is available. In looking at capping activity in inshore waters and in going through the process of designating highly protected marine areas, we will engage and consult thoroughly to make sure that any designations that we make or any decisions that we take on such matters are based on the best available scientific evidence.

Crofting Legislation

3. Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I refer members to the reference to crofting in my entry in the register of members' interests.

To ask the Scottish Government for what reason it did not commit to introducing a crofting bill in its programme for government. (S6O-00185)

Mairi Gougeon: The programme for government is largely a one-year delivery programme, which does not include all the activity that the Government plans to undertake over the full parliamentary session. Therefore, although crofting reform has not been included in the current programme for government, work will be undertaken during this parliamentary session, as stated in our 2021 manifesto.

Donald Cameron: In the 2016 programme for government, the SNP promised to deliver a new crofting bill later in that parliamentary session. That did not happen. In this year's programme for government, there was no reference at all to a new bill, leading to the Scottish Crofting Federation describing the Government's approach to crofting as "jaundiced", given that it had failed to deliver what had long been promised.

Will the Minister confirm whether the SNP-Green Government still intends to introduce a new crofting bill, whether that will be introduced during this session of Parliament and, specifically, when it will be introduced?

Mairi Gougeon: I can confirm that. That is what was stated in our manifesto and we fully intend to take that forward and to implement it. Mr Cameron and other members will understand that we were unable to introduce such a bill during the previous session. As was the case for a number of other pieces of legislation that could not proceed, the work that had to be undertaken in relation to the exit from the European Union and the impact of the pandemic affected the workings of the Parliament. We committed to a crofting bill in the manifesto. I have explained why it was not in the PFG and its exact timing is yet to be discussed by the Cabinet as part of the future legislative programme. We made the commitment in our manifesto and we fully intend to introduce a bill.

Crofting Reform

5. Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what steps will be taken over the current parliamentary session to deliver crofting reform. (S6O-00187)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): I reiterate that our 2021 manifesto contained a commitment to

"reform the law and develop crofting to create more active crofts".

Through the Crofting Commission's development officers, work has already begun on implementing actions contained in the Scottish Government's national development plan for crofting, including bringing more crofts back into active use. We will continue to modernise crofting law during this parliamentary session and that will be timetabled in due course.

Paul O’Kane: I thank the cabinet secretary for her answer and note her previous answer to Donald Cameron. The Scottish Crofting Federation has expressed bitter disappointment that the crofting reform bill has not been included in the programme for government. Donald MacKinnon, the chair of the federation, described it as “galling” that neither the bill nor any actions specific to crofting were included in the programme. The working group on the bill, which is the voice of crofters and communities, was disbanded when the Government abandoned the process. Will the minister clarify the Government’s position on the progress of the bill and will she reconvene the group as soon as possible in order to explain her decisions to stakeholders and to re-engage on these important issues?

Mairi Gougeon: I understand the frustration that the member expresses. I met the Scottish Crofting Federation and other stakeholders when the issue was raised. I made a commitment then and have made one again here today to follow through on our manifesto, which stated our intention to modernise crofting law. We will look at how that will be done, and what bodies will be established to look at that, as we progress and introduce the bill.

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): In 2014, the crofting law sump report identified 17 high-priority areas, and the 2017 report on crofting by the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee reinforced that. It proved difficult to action those reports. I have heard what the cabinet secretary has said today. Will she give an assurance that those areas will be dealt with by the end of 2022, or will she dither and delay as her predecessor did?

Mairi Gougeon: I completely reject Edward Mountain’s comment. This is not dither and delay. I have explained why the legislation could not be taken forward in the previous session of Parliament, just as happened with other pieces of legislation at that time. As I said in my previous answers, we will bring out a timetable in due course. We have committed to modernising crofting legislation in this session of Parliament.

Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Through a Scottish land fund development application, theIslay Development Initiative has secured 264 acres of Cornabus forest. A range of options, from affordable-to-buy housing to woodland crofts, is being scrutinised. Will the cabinet secretary outline what support the Scottish Government currently gives to new entrants to crofting?

Mairi Gougeon: The Scottish Government is proud of our crofting heritage and is committed to continued investment in crofting. The Government provides croft businesses with more than £40 million every year. Alongside the pillar 1-type

payments, a range of support is made available through the croft house grant scheme, the crofting agricultural grant scheme, the crofting cattle improvement scheme, help with vet bills and access to the Farm Advisory Service. To give an idea of just some of the sums that have been involved in that, I note that, since 2007, we have approved croft house grant payments of over £22.8 million, which has helped to build or improve over 1,055 croft homes, and that since 2015 over £15 million in crofting agricultural grant scheme funding has been approved, helping over 3,000 crofters with their businesses. That represents about 85 per cent of all eligible applications being approved.

Brexit (Labour Shortages)

4. **David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with the United Kingdom Government regarding the reported labour shortages being faced by food producers in Scotland following Brexit. (S6O-00186)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): The decision to leave the European Union was, of course, taken against the wishes of the people of Scotland. We are already seeing in retail and other essential sectors of our economy supply chain pressures that are attributable to the loss of freedom of movement.

The Scottish ministers have written to the United Kingdom Government 19 times requesting meetings and further discussions on the impact on Scotland of its points-based immigration system, with little meaningful response. Subsequently, I and my fellow Cabinet members have written to the UK Government to highlight the impacts of existing labour and skills shortages on the food and drink industry, and we have asked for immediate action. *[Interruption.]* As recently as last week, the Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, External Affairs and Culture met the Secretary of State for Scotland and further emphasised how issues with the UK immigration system have exacerbated skills shortages in Scotland.

The Presiding Officer: I ask that conversations are not continued in the chamber while the cabinet secretary is responding. Thank you.

David Torrance: On-farm labour and haulage driver shortages are leaving broccoli and cauliflower growers with losses of between £10,000 and £90,000 every day. Recent comments from the managing director of the Fife-based East of Scotland Growers highlighted the emotional toll that the on-going labour shortages are causing for Scotland’s food producers. Does the cabinet secretary agree that the UK Government must act now and take all necessary

measures to ensure that the sector can get the employees it desperately needs?

Mairi Gougeon: I absolutely agree. It is heartbreaking and shocking that so much good food is going to waste. That should not be happening. The figures that we have seen from East of Scotland Growers are staggering and I sympathise with the businesses involved. This just demonstrates further the disastrous effect that leaving the EU has had on Scotland.

We will continue to liaise with producers and the trade bodies to mitigate the effects where we can, but I say again that it should not be the responsibility of the Scottish Government to continually mitigate and mop up the mess that has been left by the UK Government's bad decisions. We see that happening time and again, whether in our food and drink industry, social security or other areas. We deserve better in Scotland. We can do better and we need the levers of power to enable that to happen.

Agriculture Reform Implementation Oversight Board (Recommendations)

6. Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): To ask the Scottish Government when the agriculture reform implementation oversight board will publish its recommendations on future agricultural policy. (S6O-00188)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): On 13 September, I co-chaired the first meeting of the agriculture reform implementation oversight board. The board is committed to working at pace to agree a national test programme of funded measures to assist in reducing livestock emissions by the time of the 26th United Nations climate change conference of the parties—COP26. The package, which will be based on the recommendations of the farmer-led groups, should be implemented by the spring of next year.

In the longer term, we expect the board to support the work to bring forward a new agriculture support system. In particular, the board's work will support a consultation next year to inform the introduction of a Scottish agriculture bill in 2023.

Liam McArthur: The board's establishment is welcome, if long overdue. As the president of NFU Scotland said,

"the time for talking is over"

and now is the time to deliver. Farmers in Orkney and across Scotland urgently need clarity on future funding and regulation in order to be able to plan ahead, but they also need reassurance that the circumstances in different parts of the country will be reflected. Can the cabinet secretary confirm

that the board will be tasked with ensuring that any policy changes reflect the specific needs of island farmers and crofters? Can she guarantee that on-going support for new entrants will form part of the new regime?

Mairi Gougeon: I am happy to give the member the reassurance that he is looking for. That is exactly why the implementation oversight board has been established in the way that it has. Geographical representation—ensuring that we have representation from Scotland's different geographies and land types—is considered to be vital. Any considerations in relation to our islands and other parts of Scotland will be taken into account and factored into the process.

We have committed in our manifesto to look at a new scheme for new entrants, so I give that commitment again.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): The clock is ticking and rural Scotland is losing patience with this Scottish National Party Government. After numerous boards and working groups, the cabinet secretary's Government has failed to publish the farming and food production future policy group's report and give clarity on the replacement for the agri-environment climate scheme. Farmers need answers now, so when will the Parliament see the first draft of the new agriculture bill?

Mairi Gougeon: We established the board to drive forward and deliver the recommendations of the farmer-led groups. We have had the first meeting of the board, which was positive. Everybody on it is looking to do exactly the same thing. We have set out the ambitious timeframes in which we expect to deliver a package of recommendations. We are very much getting on with that job: delivering what we set out in our manifesto and delivering for agriculture in Scotland.

Snares

7. Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government whether it plans to ban the use of snares to capture wild animals. (S6O-00189)

The Minister for Environment, Biodiversity and Land Reform (Mairi McAllan): We currently have the most robust legislation in the whole of the United Kingdom to regulate the use of snares. However, I understand the concerns and why some people would wish to see snares banned on animal welfare grounds. Snaring is reviewed every five years under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and the next review is due to be completed by the end of this year. I will consider recommendations from the review and take further action if necessary.

Pauline McNeill: OneKind, the League Against Cruel Sports and the Scottish Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals have continually called for an outright ban on the use of snares in capturing wild animals, and I would argue that action by the Scottish Government is imperative. Britain is one of only five European countries where the use of snares is still permitted. It is archaic, indiscriminate and cruel. Why is banning the use of snares not specifically listed in the review of animal welfare legislation if the Government is as committed to animal welfare legislation as it claims to be?

Màiri McAllan: As I explained, the terms under which snaring is reviewed are set out in the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. The act requires reviews to look at the conditions around identification, the regularity with which snares are checked and record keeping. However, as I said, I am listening to the concerns of those who would like to see snares banned on animal welfare grounds and I will consider whether this year's review should look at other aspects. I would be happy to engage with the member on that.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): A recent Royal Society for the Protection of Birds report put the UK at the bottom of the G7 league table for how much biodiversity it has left, although it noted that Scotland had the highest level of biodiversity intactness of all UK nations. Does the minister agree that the Scottish Government can be rightly proud of its comprehensive efforts since 2007 to protect Scotland's wildlife?

Màiri McAllan: [*Inaudible.*] that Scotland should be ranked highest of the UK nations for biodiversity intactness. However, we know and have already been clear that a lot of work still needs to be done.

Our December 2020 statement of intent set out our ambitions on biodiversity, which include a commitment to increase the percentage of Scotland's land that is protected for nature to 30 per cent. We are also leading the Edinburgh process as part of the 15th United Nations conference of the parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity and we will set out an updated biodiversity strategy in autumn 2022.

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): Does the minister recognise that snaring is a vitally important land management tool that enables land managers to protect livestock and ground-nesting birds effectively, particularly in scenarios in which other methods of control, such as shooting, are not practicable? What is the minister's preferred method of control?

Màiri McAllan: I do not personally have a preferred method of control. I recognise that, as with all matters to do with animal welfare and

wildlife, and land management on the other side, we need to take a balanced approach.

As I have set out, we will undergo a review as part of statutory rules under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. I will consider whether the terms of the review are sufficient with regard to the position in Scotland on the use of snares.

Agriculture (Fruit and Vegetable Sector) (Support)

8. Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide additional financial support for the fruit and vegetable agricultural sector, in light of the losses incurred as a result of labour and logistics issues. (S6O-00190)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): The position that our vital fruit and vegetable sectors have been put in is a result of United Kingdom Government decisions on Brexit, and it should be the UK Government that funds the costs of its actions. Without changes from the UK Government, our industries will continue to suffer. Therefore, we will continue to make representations to the UK Government. We will also work with stakeholders to explore ways in which we can help the situation.

As I stated in response to earlier questions, the Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, External Affairs and Culture met the Secretary of State for Scotland on 16 September to raise again the need for the UK Government to address immediately the disruption and labour shortages that have been caused by Brexit. I met the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs minister, Victoria Prentis, with other devolved Administrations to discuss the same issues, because the matter is critical for all nations.

Willie Rennie: I heard the cabinet secretary's earlier answers and I understand the frustration regarding the reckless actions of the Conservative Government. However, the sector is important for the Scottish economy, so it is important that the Scottish Government does all that it possibly can. If I heard a hint from the cabinet secretary that she is prepared to consider financial support, I would welcome that, because it will be important that we keep capacity in the sector strong if the sector is to double by 2030. Could I hear a little bit more? Will the cabinet secretary provide financial assistance?

Mairi Gougeon: I come back to what I said to Willie Rennie in my response to his first question. We work closely with industry and we would like to assist in whatever way that we can.

However, the most critical issue right now is labour and we need to solve that problem. As I said, we have contacted the UK Government on a number of occasions in the hope of addressing the

problem, but we have had very little response from or engagement with UK ministers. The Scottish Government should not have to continually clean up the mess that has been made by the poor decisions of the UK Government. It should be up to the UK Government to compensate and make up for losses that have been suffered as a result of its decision making. We will continue to do what we can within the powers that we have to assist industry.

Point of Order

14:57

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Today and yesterday, it has proved incredibly difficult to follow parliamentary business on the BlueJeans app, because it does not appear to work properly. It failed significantly this morning during the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee meeting, and I could hear only 40 per cent of today's questions and answers—indeed, I did not hear the answer to the question that I raised.

Presiding Officer, could you help those of us who are unable to attend Parliament in person to follow parliamentary business by ensuring that the technology works for us? I regret to say that, at the moment, it does not.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Thank you, Mr Mountain. I am obliged to you for sharing with me the technological difficulties that you have been experiencing. I will certainly ask for a review of the circumstances that are causing them. We will take the issue away and treat it with the utmost seriousness, and we will report back to you in due course.

Decarbonising Scotland's Transport

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

The next item of business is a statement from Graeme Dey, on decarbonising Scotland's transport.

15:00

The Minister for Transport (Graeme Dey): The climate and nature emergencies are the starkest issues facing humanity. For Scotland to address them appropriately, it will require all of us, across the Parliament and wider society, to work together to transition to net zero and achieve the ambitious emissions targets that were set by Parliament in 2019. Given that transport is our biggest emitting sector, that is where some of the biggest changes need to be made.

Today, we have published a report on "Decarbonising the Scottish Transport Sector", which details the findings of research conducted by Element Energy on behalf of the Scottish Government. It is the first sector-specific research that has been undertaken since the document "Update to the Climate Change Plan 2018-2032: Securing a Green Recovery on a Path to Net Zero" was published in 2020.

The report's findings show how challenging it will be to decarbonise transport, because it is a derived demand—where people live, work, learn and access goods and services are all key to the need to travel. It will take action across Government and society to reduce the need to travel and promote more sustainable modes of transport.

The programme for government set out how we will confront the twin climate and nature emergencies to deliver a fairer, greener Scotland, and the report helps to show what that future could look like. The good news is that there is a way for transport to do its share of the heavy lifting, but it will require radical behavioural change.

Technology offers many solutions and, in some areas, development is forging ahead at pace. The Government is helping to put Scotland at the forefront of innovation, investment and careers in the green revolution. Last year, we established the hydrogen accelerator at the University of St Andrews. It will increase the speed and scale of hydrogen transport deployments in Scotland by providing expert advice on technology assessments, business models and opportunities

to connect research with application. However, the report makes it clear that technology alone will not enable us to achieve the transformational change that is required.

As the UK Climate Change Committee has stated clearly, demand for travel also has to be reduced. The research shows how reductions in car journeys are key to achieving our aims. The Government has been clear that the predominance of private car use, in particular single-occupancy journeys, cannot be overlooked. That is why, working with local government partners, we have committed to reduce car kilometres travelled nationally by 20 per cent by 2030. I hope to outline measures to achieve that later this year.

The research shows why our 20 per cent commitment is necessary, and it is now time for us, collectively, to deliver on that commitment. When legislation on the discretionary workplace parking levy passed through Parliament in the previous session, the dogged resistance to it from some members sat uneasily with their simultaneous calls for action to save the planet. The time has come for such contradictions to end. Actions must match ambition, for the benefit of our environment and our wellbeing. This Parliament voted for world-leading emissions reduction targets, and it must now support the tough choices that are needed in order to meet them.

The benefits for communities when they are less dominated by cars are well known. They include improved air quality; better public health through greater exercise, due to more active travel; reduced economic and social impacts of congestion and accidents; and improved areas of civic space for recreation and children's play. The burden of change cannot be left to the poorest members of our society—it requires action from all of us, for all of us. Indeed, the report is underpinned by the just transition principle that all sectors, and all users, must do their share to pay for the costs of the transition. That may mean expecting more from some in changing their behaviour, in particular those who create the most emissions through their travel choices.

Transforming transport offers the opportunity to create a greener, fairer Scotland, with an inclusive transport system and affordable, accessible public transport enabling better access to local services, leisure opportunities and jobs. However, there is no one-size-fits-all solution. We recognise the challenges associated with rural and remote communities, and with areas in which there is no alternative to the car. That is not to allow anyone off the hook, but to recognise that we will require local and regional, as well as national, solutions. We will continue to work with partners nationally

and locally to identify what works best, but the pace of that work needs to pick up.

In setting out what is required to meet our ambitions for transport decarbonisation, the report validates some of our policy decisions, including the 2030 date for phasing out the sale of new petrol and diesel cars, supporting the swiftest possible transition to zero emissions buses, removing the need for new petrol and diesel heavy vehicles by 2035, and decarbonising Scotland's railways by 2035. Those are vital components of the pathway.

However, to return to the key finding of the report, it is clear that technology alone will not be enough to meet the challenge. We need to start making different choices and behaving differently if we are to meet our 2030 emissions target. For everyday journeys, particularly within and between urban areas, walking, wheeling and cycling must become the default choices, alongside a major increase in the use of public and shared transport. Young people are already leading the way on that; we all need to follow their example—they are showing us the future that we all need to get to.

To support that aim, from 31 January 2022 we will provide nationwide free bus travel for Scotland's young people aged under 22. That will benefit around 930,000 young people and build on our comprehensive package of funding, legislation and support to make travelling by bus a more attractive and default choice. People will change their behaviour only if they are supported and enabled to do so. Buses are particularly important in that.

We are also investing in infrastructure. By 2024-25, we will be spending at least £320 million or 10 per cent of the total transport budget on active travel; we are providing better information on transport options through mobility as a service; and we are supporting the development of 20-minute neighbourhoods where residents can meet their day-to-day needs within a 20-minute walk of their home.

Scotland can and will do its bit, but we will require others to help facilitate the actions that are needed. The report's findings make it clear that there is a range of reserved and internationally regulated areas in which focused action is required. We are aware that we need to disincentivise car use to encourage people to make more sustainable choices. However, the most direct levers here—fuel duty and vehicle excise duty—are reserved, which means that we need the UK Government to play its part and use its powers to support us in that endeavour. The UK Government must also work with us on such issues in a way that respects the constitutional settlement, and we implore the Government to engage meaningfully. A true four-nations approach

that allows for the needs of communities the length and breadth of the UK is a necessity.

The report makes it clear that, on aviation, the scale of the challenge before us means there are no easy solutions. The research suggests that without a reduction in aviation demand, the transport sector will not be able to achieve its emissions envelope for 2030. We will need good, direct air connectivity in the future, not least to support inbound tourism and sustainable economic growth, but demand will have to fall. That is the message of the research.

In Scotland, air connectivity provides a vital link for remote communities to access essential services, and is crucial for our tourism sector, and trade, particularly in the export of key Scottish products. Decarbonising aviation will be challenging, but there are early and encouraging signs of progress. Just last month, the first ever hybrid-electric flight in the UK took off from Wick and landed at Kirkwall airport. That is an example of the work that is under way at the sustainable aviation test environment in Orkney. Led by Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd, the project has created the UK's first low-carbon test environment for aviation. There has to be a strong element of international effort in all of that.

Later this year, we will launch a public consultation to develop an aviation strategy for Scotland. That consultation will acknowledge the need to reduce the environmental impact of aviation. We intend that our aviation strategy will have decarbonisation and cutting emissions at its heart. However, at the same time, we cannot put Scotland at a global economic disadvantage—there are still substantive economic and social benefits from aviation.

The Scottish Government could have rejected the findings of the research, simply noted them or set them aside and ignored them. That would have been incredibly foolhardy. We cannot shy away from the difficulties set out in the report if we are to ensure that emissions from transport are cut so that we might meet our statutory climate change targets. We cannot exclude any sector from that work; we must look at all the sectors individually and collectively to determine the best way to decarbonise how we travel.

With the 26th United Nations climate change conference of the parties—COP26—just over a month away, the report makes clear the scale of the challenge ahead of us. We are committed to cutting emissions in transport at an unprecedented pace, and transforming how we all get around in the future. I urge members of all parties to work with us constructively to achieve that transformation.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The minister will now take questions on the issues raised in his statement. I will allow 20 minutes for questions. Members who wish to ask a question should press their request-to-speak button or put an R in the chat function if they are joining us online.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): I thank the minister for advance sight of his statement. There was very little in it that was new, although the report makes for interesting reading.

The Scottish Government wants half of diesel buses to be replaced by low-emissions buses by 2023. Bus operators tell me that that target has no chance of being achieved. How, therefore, was that date arrived at, if not on the back of a cigarette packet?

There are problems with getting the charging infrastructure in place. One operator that I have spoken to is using diesel generators to charge electric buses. You could not make it up. What is the minister doing about the infrastructure issue?

Rural buses travel longer distances. That makes charging electric vehicles even more challenging. Will there be any additional support to help rural operators with that?

The report mentions the further issue of getting new buses built. It calls on the Scottish Government to work with bus builders across Europe. That does not excuse using taxpayers' money through the Scottish ultra-low-emissions bus scheme to buy buses that are built not in the UK nor even in Europe but—probably subsidised—in China. What will the minister do to prevent that from happening again?

Graeme Dey: It is always good to hear Graham Simpson's glass-half-full approach. I will deal with as much as I can in the time that I have.

At the core of the issue is the work of the bus decarbonisation task force. If Mr Simpson had the privilege of attending that, he would see what a constructive forum that is when it comes to the input from bus operators, bus manufacturers and financial providers who are supporting the work that is going on. Energy providers are also involved.

I recognise that he is right to point to the challenge surrounding the target. It is a challenging target. However, we are ambitious about what we are trying to achieve. The work is creating jobs, because the overwhelming majority of the buses that have been supported by Scottish Government funding are built by Alexander Dennis Limited, which I will have the privilege of visiting next week.

I pick up on his point about rural buses, which is a good point. That is being discussed in the task force and a separate work stream is currently

being developed to look at the needs of rural providers and the smaller bus operators that cannot get the economy of scale of double-decker buses. Some work is being done on that point at the moment.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): I thank the minister for advance sight of his statement. With COP26 just over a month away, the report is a reminder of the challenge that is before us. Public transport must make a substantial contribution to meeting our net zero ambitions but, frankly, public transport under the Scottish National Party Government is a joke. The total number of annual bus passenger journeys is down 120 million a year since the SNP came to power.

Will the Government therefore finally give councils the resources that they need to reassert public control over local bus services, and help them to provide the routes and fares that people and communities want? Why has it not taken stakes in the private bus companies that it has had to bail out? Does the minister not agree that the Scottish Government has to be bolder on concessionary travel for our young people and extend free bus travel not just to under-22s but to all Scotland's under-25s?

Finally, how can the Minister for Transport seek to justify how his massive cuts to ScotRail services will encourage more people to leave the car at home and take the train?

Graeme Dey: There was an equal predictability about some of that as well.

On ScotRail, we could rehearse yesterday's embarrassment of Labour calling for spend, spend, spend, with no hint of where the money was going to come from, in the middle—

Neil Bibby: He sounds like a Tory—

Graeme Dey: I have to say to Mr Bibby that he sounds like a 1970s Labour MP. Some of the stuff that we are hearing from the Labour benches is quite ridiculous. [*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Okay, let us listen to the minister's response.

Graeme Dey: Where I have common cause with Mr Bibby is on the issue of bus usage. He is right that we need to drive that up. There is a real challenge there. Buses are going to be key to getting the poorer elements of society on to public transport. We need to do a lot more work in that space and to be innovative. That is why the solution involves the bus partnership approach and not just councils. The bus partnership approach offers a great deal of potential on that issue.

On the issue of free bus travel for under-25s, we can of course continue to consider extending free

bus travel, but there is a bigger-picture issue about how we get people on to buses, and that will require a great deal of thought.

Regarding ScotRail, we face some immediate short-term challenges where we need to stabilise, because of the financial challenges of the pandemic, but the commitment to public transport in the medium-to-long term remains.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): The minister used the phrase “radical behavioural change” in his statement. Of course, there has been radical behavioural change because of the Covid pandemic. Does he think that we can build on that in some way as we go forward?

Graeme Dey: In the short term, we may get some assistance for what we need to achieve, but we will need to see how work and travel patterns settle down before we fully understand them. Much uncertainty has been generated by Covid in relation to transport. With future trends, behaviours and commercial considerations, it is difficult to forecast what is required. We know that we have a certain number of challenges over the next eight, nine or 10 years that we will have to rise to. We will have to cotton on to the travel patterns that emerge quite quickly, in some cases anticipating them based on what we have seen during the pandemic, in order to stabilise things and to get ourselves in shape so as to develop the capacity to build on that, for both rail and bus.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): The UK Climate Change Committee suggests that, to help achieve that behaviour change, we need 30,000 electric vehicle charge points in Scotland by 2030. There are currently 2,558 public charge points. Transport Scotland says that we need more than 4,000 new public charging stations each year over the next decade. I see nothing in the report to answer that challenge. Can the minister help me out here? Is there an EV charge point plan to show that the minister’s actions will match his ambitions?

Graeme Dey: Indeed, and it is evolving. *[Laughter.]* I am sure that the public looking in on this realise that this is a very serious issue, yet petty party politicking is dominating this.

On the issue of EV charging points, there is a point in the process at which we cannot continue to use public money to fund everything. Private sector money is already being brought forward. There has been an announcement in relation to a major company involving 50,000 points, I think it is, across the UK.

The role of Government is to ensure that any additional EV charging networks are in the right place and available to everyone, be that in a rural setting or in a tenement setting in Leith. It should not simply be the easy option that is taken by

those who are providing the facilities, whatever sector they are in. That work to ensure the stability of supply is on-going. *[Interruption.]* There very much is a plan.

Fiona Hyslop (Linlithgow) (SNP): One of the major challenges to the decarbonisation of transport is how we introduce and scale up the use of hydrogen, particularly in trains, buses and, potentially, shipping. What progress can the minister report in how the Scottish Government is driving that forward?

Graeme Dey: When we talk about opportunities, hydrogen is very much at the heart of it, and it has a lot of potential. The Scottish Government has already invested more than £15 million in hydrogen transport demonstration projects to develop the tech and the business models. I mentioned the hydrogen accelerator at the University of St Andrews earlier, and I had the pleasure of visiting the hydrogen train that is under development at Bo’ness. I should have said earlier that ferries have a lot of potential in net hydrogen terms.

We will continue to work with transport, energy and other sectors to identify pathways towards the introduction of hydrogen at scale across the network. We have a hydrogen action plan being developed for publication later this year, which will outline in detail what we intend to do over the coming five years to recognise that potential.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): Does the minister acknowledge that the Government’s plans for the electrification of our railways exclude many parts of the network, including the stretch from Girvan to Stranraer? There are genuine fears over what that means for the long-term commitment to routes that are already facing significant cuts in services from next year. Surely we need a long-term commitment to a rolling programme of electrification going up to 2035 and beyond, until we get 100 per cent electrification of the network.

Graeme Dey: I welcome that question from Colin Smyth, who is absolutely right. That is what we are setting out to achieve.

I am a little concerned to hear what the member says about Girvan, so I will look into that and get back to him. As far as I am concerned, there is a plan to deliver across the network. Decarbonisation will not simply be in the form of out and out electrification. In some locations, it will involve hydrogen and, in others, it will involve battery storage. Currently, 75 per cent of passenger journeys are on electrified and decarbonised lines. Of course, the aim is to get to 100 per cent, and to get freight at the heart of the railway. I undertake to get back to Colin Smyth on that point.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): To what degree will Scotland achieving its targets be dependent on policies that only the UK Government can deliver and on international agreements?

Graeme Dey: We are constrained by current devolution. We require urgent action on a number of key areas that remain reserved. The lack of meaningful engagement on, for example, fuel duty has been disappointing, although we will continue to press the UK Government on that.

As Audrey Nicoll pointed out, the issue is also about international agreements. We need an international policy approach. COP26 presents an obvious opportunity to achieve that, but other dialogue that is specific to sectors such as aviation and shipping is going on. We need an approach that globally recognises the challenges that we face on transport, although I reiterate that Scotland is very much ready to play its part.

One final point with regard to the UK Government is that I intend to write to UK Government ministers to draw their attention to the report that has been published today, highlighting to them the urgent attention that needs to be given to reserved areas and requesting meaningful engagement with Scotland on those matters.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): After years of missed climate targets and with emissions from transport unmoved since 1990, now is the moment for the Government to rapidly accelerate measures to decarbonise transport, which is the biggest polluter in Scotland. The minister has said twice that demand for aviation must fall if transport is to play its part in meeting Scotland's climate targets. Why then does the Scottish Government continue to hold a contract with Heathrow in support of a third runway, when that contract is designed to deliver 75,000 more flights to Scotland from London and, with that, 600,000 tonnes of extra emissions? Now that the Scottish Government has said that aviation demand must fall, will it cancel that contract?

Graeme Dey: There is no doubt that we will have to accelerate measures but, as I said in my statement, there is a balance to be struck with aviation, given the important role that it plays in the country's economy.

On the issue of Heathrow, the Government is in the process of developing an aviation strategy with all parts of the aviation sector. We will reflect on everything that goes into that in terms of connectivity and the challenges that it poses, and we will produce a strategy that will reflect Scotland's future needs and our need to respond to the climate emergency.

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): Clearly, cutting aviation emissions will be challenging while trying

to sustain connectivity. What role can technology and decarbonisation play in that?

Graeme Dey: The member is right that they are challenging objectives, but it is essential that we undertake to meet them. We should be inspired rather than intimidated by the long-term challenge. I want to offer a bit of reassurance in the context of aviation connectivity. As I think I said last week, Transport Scotland's aviation team is doing a lot of work to restore connectivity. Where it is doing that, it is seeking to ensure that cleaner and greener aircraft are involved as a starting point. For example, we had the recent announcement by WestJet that all our connectivity with Canada in 2022 will be in the latest-generation aircraft, which will significantly reduce emissions compared to 2019.

There is a lot more going on in the aviation sector, not least in your neck of the woods, Presiding Officer, where there are some very heartening developments on electric flight.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You will find that that happens a lot, minister.

Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con): The upcoming rapid expansion of electric vehicles, although welcome, has the potential to increase levels of non-exhaust emissions, owing to the increased vehicle weight exacerbating tyre and brake wear. Will research be carried out on how electric vehicle uptake might impact on non-exhaust emissions?

Graeme Dey: I acknowledge that Maurice Golden has raised that matter with me in written parliamentary questions over recent times. The answer to his question is that nothing should be ruled out now. We clearly have some policies that have been acknowledged as being appropriate, but there will be others that we need to develop, so I am happy to commit to seek further information on that and to engage directly with him on it.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): For years, Greens have highlighted how the relentless growth of aviation is wrecking the climate, so I warmly welcome that major shift from the Scottish Government, which is a recognition, based on science, that aviation demand will have to fall if we are to have any chance of meeting climate targets. Does the minister agree with me that domestic mainland flights often undermine demand for intercity rail services and that that must be factored into the forthcoming aviation strategy?

Graeme Dey: All things should be factored into the aviation strategy, including the opportunity, as it arises, for low-emissions fuels, which are being developed globally. I understand that, across the world, there is a target for 10 per cent of flights to

use those fuels by 2030, as well as an ambition to go further.

I hear what Mark Ruskell says about domestic flights, but rail is not available to everyone. A number of members represent islands and, for people who live on an island, ferries or aircraft are the only means of connectivity. The example that is being developed in Orkney—with, initially, hybrid, then electric flight—is an opportunity and shows ambition on the part of the Government to decarbonise our domestic aviation sector.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you. I will get back to you on the low-emissions ferries later.

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): The minister will be aware that, in the last climate change bill process, Opposition parties were keen for the Government to go further and faster, and there was support across the chamber for the groundbreaking statutory targets that were set in the legislation. What message does the minister think that the sector-specific research provides for the Opposition?

Graeme Dey: The same message that it sends to the Government—that it was a collective decision to set those targets, and we have a collective responsibility to achieve them. The Parliament set the targets, the Parliament recognised that transport was a very significant emitter and we will need to have some grown-up dialogue about how we tackle it. As I said earlier, sitting here voting for challenging targets and then, in no time at all, supporting measures that completely fly in the face of them, is hypocritical, to say the least.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): The report stipulates that, by 2030, all 3,800 buses that were manufactured prior to 2015 must have been scrapped or repowered if we are to meet the 2030 targets. I press the minister further on a clear commitment to link the opportunities with Scotland's manufacturing industries, so that we reap the benefits. Just two years ago, the Caley railway works in Springburn closed, while the Scottish Government stood by, glaikitly doing nothing. Can the minister now commit to building all those buses in Scotland and restarting train building, in the way that the Welsh Labour Government has done in Wales?

Graeme Dey: One does not wave a magic wand and, suddenly, manufacturing capacity emerges. That will not happen in the real world. However, we have demonstrated very clearly our commitment to Scottish industry with the work that has gone the way of Alexander Dennis on the bus front. We are also doing a lot of work on the opportunities that exist in retrofitting buses. [*Interruption.*] I hear Graham Simpson chuntering

from a sedentary position, so I repeat for him the fact that the overwhelming number of buses—more than 200—were manufactured in Scotland. Surely even he can find it in his heart to welcome that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes questions on the ministerial statement. Before we move to the next item of business, I will allow a short time for members on the front benches to change places.

Carer's Allowance Supplement (Scotland) Bill: Stage 1

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-01318, in the name of Ben Macpherson, on the Carer's Allowance Supplement (Scotland) Bill at stage 1.

I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak button now, or to put an R in the chat function if they are joining us online.

I call Ben Macpherson to speak to and move the motion. You have around 10 minutes, Mr Macpherson.

15:30

The Minister for Social Security and Local Government (Ben Macpherson): I welcome the opportunity to open the debate on the general principles of the Carer's Allowance Supplement (Scotland) Bill. I begin by recognising and thanking the thousands of unpaid carers across Scotland, who make a remarkable contribution to our society.

As part of our wider commitments across Government, we are committed to supporting carers to protect their health and wellbeing, so that they can continue to care, if they wish to do so, as well as have a life of their own alongside caring. Across Government, we are committed to a variety of actions to support carers. For example, we introduced a £1.4 million holiday voucher scheme, which will provide thousands of vouchers for short breaks and days out to carers, people with disabilities and families on low incomes. The Carers (Scotland) Act 2016 introduced the right for all carers to an adult carer support plan or a young carer statement to identify their personal outcomes. We also recently accepted the recommendations of the independent review of adult social care, many of which are designed to improve carer support.

We recognise the added pressures that carers have had to deal with as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. Many carers had to step in to provide care for disabled people that would normally have been provided by statutory services, such as schools and day care centres. As a constituency MSP, I have had casework on that issue and have seen at first hand the challenges that it has presented to families and individuals. Those challenges are why we delivered extra support to unpaid carers in receipt of carers allowance by increasing the amount of carers allowance supplement in June 2020, as part of the wider package of Scottish Government

support to help mitigate the impacts of the coronavirus pandemic.

It has been three years since we gained the legislative powers to introduce social security benefits. When the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018 was passed, our first change was to introduce the carers allowance supplement. That has improved the incomes of more than 90,000 Scottish carers. It increased carers allowance by 13 per cent, and eligible carers in Scotland received £690.30 more support last year than carers in the rest of the United Kingdom. *[Interruption.]* Of course I will take an intervention.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Pam Duncan-Glancy.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): Thank you, and apologies, Presiding Officer—I should have said, “Will the minister take an intervention?”

I appreciate that the doubling of the supplement has been welcomed by a number of organisations and carers, but what will the Government do for the almost 1 million people in Scotland who care, and who have undertaken considerably more caring roles in the past year, but who do not qualify for any financial support?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, we have quite a bit of time in hand, so I can give you back that time.

Ben Macpherson: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

Pam Duncan-Glancy raises a very important question that orientates around the introduction of Scottish carers assistance, which I will come on to later in my speech.

As I said, carers in Scotland who were in receipt of carers allowance received £690.30 more last year in comparison with carers in the rest of the UK. Carers in Scotland who have been continuously in receipt of carers allowance and carers allowance supplement since September 2018 will have received over £2,270 more than carers in the rest of the UK. Through our social security powers, we invest more than £350 million a year in supporting carers through carers allowance, the carers allowance supplement and the young carer grant.

Although the first coronavirus payment was part of a much wider package of support for unpaid carers, stakeholders have continued to call for a second payment to help carers with the strain that many have felt and continue to feel as a result of their enhanced role during the pandemic. That is what the bill is all about.

Section 1 of the bill seeks to increase the amount of the carers allowance supplement to be paid in December 2021. If Parliament agrees, a

payment of £462.80 will be made in December to all carers allowance supplement recipients, instead of the planned £231.40. That is a further investment of around £20 million by the Scottish Government, taking the Scottish Government's investment across the two coronavirus carers allowance supplement payments to around £40 million, all of which comes from our own budgets.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I have raised this point previously both in committee and in the chamber. Given what many of our constituents have faced, as the minister has highlighted, does the Scottish Government support an extension of carers allowance for up to six months after a bereavement? Is the Scottish National Party Government willing to take that forward and outline a timetable for it?

Ben Macpherson: Like Pam Duncan-Glancy, Miles Briggs raises an important point, which is related to how we consider the support that is available for carers in Scotland in the round as we develop Scottish carers assistance. Again, if I may, I will come on to that shortly.

Sticking with the content of the bill as introduced to Parliament, I am pleased to note that the Social Justice and Social Security Committee has welcomed that proposed payment in its stage 1 report. The increased payment would not only help to mitigate some of the negative impacts of the virus on carers' finances and wellbeing, but help carers to continue to provide vital caring roles at a time when health and social care services are stretched, as we know.

The Government also recognises that the pandemic has demonstrated a need for greater flexibility in how we support carers when society faces significant changing circumstances, such as those that face us now. That is why the bill includes a power to enable ministers to bring forward regulations, which, if approved by Parliament, could increase the amount of the carers allowance supplement for a future period.

It is important to note that, as we continue to balance the Scottish budget, challenging decisions will have to be made regarding any new policy suggestions that we receive, to ensure that any new changes are affordable. However, as we are seeking to do through the bill, the Scottish Government will work to provide additional support to unpaid carers where and when we can. That is why, although I am here to talk about the bill that is before us, it may be helpful—this relates to the interventions from Pam Duncan-Glancy and Miles Briggs—to reiterate our broader commitment to improving carers allowance, particularly as that was raised during evidence taking at stage 1 and in the committee's stage 1 report.

We are working with carers and stakeholders to develop a replacement benefit for carers allowance, known as Scottish carers assistance. We are carrying out a detailed options analysis and we will consult in the coming winter—the period ahead—on proposals for the delivery of Scottish carers assistance. It is important that we take adequate and appropriate time to get it right, as carers allowance has some of the most complex links with United Kingdom Government benefits of all the support that is being devolved under the Scotland Act 2016. We need to ensure that we can protect the existing support that carers rely on.

We are continuing to make good progress towards the launch of Scottish carers assistance. Due to the impacts of the pandemic, both the Scottish Government and the Department for Work and Pensions, which is integral to our work to transfer delivery of carers allowance, have had to work on a new timetable for delivering Scottish carers assistance. We are about to commence feasibility work with the DWP in the next quarter, which will give us a much more detailed understanding of what needs to be done and how long it will take.

Our aim is to begin the build of Scottish carers assistance in the new year and we anticipate that it will take a minimum of 18 months, given the complex interactions between carer benefits and the reserved benefits system. We will, of course, continue to keep Parliament updated as that work progresses.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I thank the minister for taking another intervention.

We recognise that it could take up to 18 months to build Scottish carers assistance, that we are far from out of the pandemic and that, as we have heard from members across the chamber, we are likely to face one of the most difficult winters we have had in a long time, including for health and social care services. It is therefore likely that unpaid carers will continue to face considerable hardship in the short and medium term. On that basis, will the minister commit now to doubling the carers allowance supplement for at least the 18 months until the build starts?

Ben Macpherson: We are committed to doubling the December payment if the Parliament is able to pass the bill in the rapid timescale for which we are aiming, including getting it through stage 1 today. We will then go into a budget process. If Parliament passes the bill, there will be the power to make changes in the next financial year, should that be the will of Parliament. Of course, such changes will have to be part of the budget considerations for the next financial year.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): Will the minister give way?

Ben Macpherson: Do I have time, Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We have a bit of time. I can give it all back to you.

Willie Rennie: I want to press the point a bit further. Pam Duncan-Glancy is right to say that many support and respite services are not back up and running again, because significant problems exist with staffing and getting those services ready. Things will not be any easier for carers over the next year. Why can the minister not commit now to providing more finance for next year?

Ben Macpherson: As I stated a few moments ago, we have to go through a budget process. Particularly in light of the current pressures on families and on household budgets, the Government is focused on getting to people who are in receipt of carers allowance not just the 13 per cent increase that it has delivered for a number of years but the additional payment, and doing that as quickly as it can. I am grateful to Parliament for agreeing the expedited timetable for the bill, so that we can get that money into the pockets of families in good time for the festive period.

I put on record my thanks to the Social Justice and Social Security Committee for leading the work on the bill to date, and to all those who have contributed to that expedited process. I am pleased to note the support that has been expressed for the bill and its aims. I commend the general principles of the bill to Parliament.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees to the general principles of the Carer's Allowance Supplement (Scotland) Bill.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We have a bit of time, so I will be able to give time back to any members who take interventions. I call Neil Gray, on behalf of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee; you have around seven minutes.

15:42

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I understand that this is the first non-emergency stage 1 debate of the parliamentary session. It is also my first opportunity to speak in my capacity as convener of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee. Before I share our specific findings on the general principles of the Carer's Allowance Supplement (Scotland) Bill, I know that colleagues in the chamber will want to join me, as they did the minister, in agreeing that it is fitting that we pay testament today to the hard work of unpaid carers and acknowledge the impact of the pandemic on them.

Carers deserve recognition and support for the tireless work that they do to provide care for family members, friends and neighbours, which is why I am pleased to see support in Scotland going further than it is elsewhere and going some way to recognising the contribution that carers make.

The issue goes to the heart of one of the Parliament's key principles—to ensure that all people are treated fairly. Although timing for our consideration of the bill has been tight, we as a committee have received powerful testimony from more than a hundred carers about their experiences. I take this opportunity to thank all those carers for finding the time to engage with us. The committee wants to ensure that it hears how the policies that it considers have a real-life impact.

Those carers' testimonies are not an easy read, as they show in some cases the sometimes damaging impact that their caring responsibilities can have on their own health and wellbeing. We were told about the 24 hours a day, pressure-cooker nature of caring work. Carers shared with us that they were at breaking point after 16 months of caring during a pandemic, with no let up. The pandemic has placed significant demands on unpaid carers' financial, physical and mental health and employment. It has resulted in a lack of opportunities for carers to take breaks from their responsibilities, with the reduced availability of respite services adding further stress and pressure to their roles.

I turn to the provisions of the bill. It will come as no surprise to the chamber that the committee welcomes the move to provide an increase in the December payment of carers allowance supplement, in recognition of the extra burden that the pandemic has placed on them.

Although we support the doubling of the December payment to £462.80, our stage 1 report highlights some specific issues that were raised during the evidence that we received regarding the specific remit of the bill and looking beyond. Although we acknowledge that significant work is being done by the Scottish Government to support carers, we must also give voice to the evidence that we heard and hope that ministers will consider their views.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): Will Neil Gray highlight in his speech whether the Scottish Government will consider making the double payment permanent?

Neil Gray: I will come to that shortly. We did receive evidence in that regard. We received some submissions for the amount proposed for the cash payment in December 2021 to be higher, and some submissions also wanted the increase to be made permanent rather than a one-off.

Arguments to support that view drew comparisons between the level of CAS and what it would cost to provide a similar level of paid care.

Some of the people who shared their views with us also expressed concern that the level of carer benefits was too low to lift carers out of poverty. We believe that it is vital that carers get the support that they need and we would appreciate the Scottish Government giving due consideration to the evidence that the committee received during its inquiry that argues for additional CAS payments to be made in future years, using the regulatory power contained in the bill. We recognise that allowing carers to know their incomes over the longer term would assist them in managing their finances.

We heard from the minister that the Scottish Government intends that the new Scottish carers assistance benefit will improve financial support for unpaid carers, and we were pleased to hear that there are plans for consultation on the new benefit. The committee looks forward to engaging with the Government on the options proposed. In our report, we call for the Scottish Government to publish a timetable for the delivery of the new benefit, including the date for its introduction. The minister has set out the reasons why the Government is working to a new delivery timetable for Scottish carers assistance. We hope that he will be able to confirm to the committee soon when the new benefit will be in place.

A second area of concern that was raised with the committee was that only a small minority of carers are eligible for carers allowance or the supplement. According to Carers UK, there were around 729,000 unpaid carers in Scotland before the Covid-19 outbreak, and that figure might have risen by around 400,000 at the height of the pandemic. Approximately 91,000 carers are expected to get CAS in December 2021—around 10 per cent of all carers in Scotland.

While eligibility for CAS is wholly dependent on eligibility for the UK carers allowance, we hope that the Scottish Government's plans for its new benefit will consider issues such as expanding eligibility, increasing the level of benefit and recognising those unpaid carers who have more than one caring role. I appreciate the comments that the minister has already made in that regard.

The design and introduction of the new Scottish carers assistance will be crucial for supporting carers' wellbeing and preventing carers from being trapped in poverty.

The third issue that was raised with us was about the take-up of benefits by those who are entitled to them. We heard about the need for the application process for benefits for carers to be as clear and as straightforward as possible, as carers

were often deterred from claiming carers allowance, particularly when they had been in receipt of universal credit. The complexity of the system could be particularly off-putting for people when carers allowance interacted with their other benefits.

We asked the Scottish Government to set out how it will monitor and evaluate whether the steps taken to promote the December 2021 payment have been successful in ensuring high uptake by those carers who qualify for it. I am pleased that, in his response to our report, the minister has referred to working on estimates of take-up in the Scottish Government second benefit take-up strategy.

The final area that I wish to highlight is the bill's proposal to use regulations under the affirmative procedure rather than primary legislation to increase the amount of CAS paid in the future. The committee received a variety of views on the level of parliamentary scrutiny that future increases to CAS should be subject to. Although some recommended that all social security regulations should be super-affirmative, others suggested that changing the amount of payment ought to require little scrutiny.

Ultimately, we believe that there is wide interest from stakeholders in the increased CAS payment being proposed by the Scottish Government. We therefore consider that it is important that the Scottish Government ensures that the regulation-making powers in the bill be subjected to a suitable procedure to allow robust scrutiny to take place, and also to ensure that the plight of carers continues to be highlighted and considered.

The committee feels that our work to ensure that the right support is provided to carers has only just begun and we look forward to working with the Scottish Government to ensure that its new benefit for carers delivers. The committee is pleased to support the general principles of the bill and recommends that the Parliament agrees to them.

15:49

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I start, as others have done, by thanking Scotland's unpaid carers, especially our young carers, for everything that they do to provide care and love to people across Scotland.

According to Carers UK, there were up to 729,000 unpaid carers in Scotland before the Covid-19 outbreak. The organisation now estimates that, at the height of the pandemic, that figure had risen by around 400,000. It is also believed that there are 45,000 young unpaid carers in Scotland. It is important for all of us to reflect on the fact that, across the country, 1.1 million of our fellow Scots are undertaking an

unpaid caring role for a family member or loved one.

I have always believed that unpaid carers are the backbone of our social care system, and they often go unrecognised. I hope that today's debate gives the Parliament an opportunity to recognise what they do. It is important that Governments, and we as a Parliament, do all that we can to help unpaid carers. We can and we must support them in that way.

The Scottish Conservatives support the doubling of the carers allowance supplement, which was a welcome measure that was included in the manifestos of all parties in the Parliament. We also want more progress to be made on how we support Scotland's carers, especially its young carers. We understand the reasons that were given for the expedited timetable for consideration of the bill, and we have worked constructively to ensure that unpaid carers will receive the double payment if the bill is agreed to at stage 1 this evening and proceeds through stages 2 and 3 of its consideration.

The Social Justice and Social Security Committee heard a number of concerns on issues related to the allowance, some of which Neil Gray outlined. One issue was to do with only a small minority of carers being eligible for CAS. There was a desire for that to be changed so that more unpaid carers could be supported. It was expected that around 91,000 people would benefit from CAS in December, which represented around 10 per cent of all carers in Scotland.

Many of the responses that the committee received discussed concerns about the qualifying rules for carers allowance, including the inability of young carers to get the young carers grant if they were already in receipt of carers allowance at the time that they applied for the young carers grant. I understand that around 4,000 payments of the young carers grant have been made to young carers across Scotland since October 2019. That payment has been welcomed by the 16, 17 and 18-year-olds who have received it and who are in receipt of disability benefit for an average of 16 hours of care a week.

Eligibility and uptake are important issues, and I hope that the minister will work with parties across the chamber and the committee to consider some of the reforms to entitlement to the young carers grant that have been proposed, especially those that relate to qualifying for CAS.

The Scottish Conservatives also support early action to extend payments for carers after a bereavement, as I said earlier, and a new support package for carers who—as is often the case—have had to give up work to care for a loved one. We want that to be progressed at the earliest

opportunity and, today, we have written to the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government on the issue.

It is vital that we recognise that carers should be able to access support beyond financial support. Carers Scotland emphasises the importance of considering the needs of carers as a whole and not just their financial needs. That includes the impact on their lives and their wellbeing while they undertake caring roles.

The number 1 thing that carers have stressed throughout the inquiry that the committee has undertaken has been the need for breaks and respite packages to be restored. Many carers have had no breaks whatever over the past year, and addressing that must be a priority. As Willie Rennie said, it is absolutely critical that carers have the opportunity for a break and for respite care to be provided. I appeal to ministers to redouble their efforts to consider how they can deliver that and to update the Parliament on progress.

Access to vital healthcare services is an important issue that has been raised with the Social Justice and Social Security Committee and the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee. Carers often put caring for a loved one ahead of their own health and mental wellbeing. Improvements need to be made in providing access to healthcare services for carers across Scotland.

The Scottish Conservatives welcome the bill, which will allow unpaid carers to receive a double payment of carers allowance in December; that is important to all members. Scrutiny of the bill has also provided an opportunity to highlight many of the other areas in which we need to see improvement. The passage of the bill in the committee has given us an opportunity to hear those voices. Unpaid carers are the backbone of our social care system. It is only right that they receive the additional payment to mitigate the financial impact of the pandemic. The carers allowance supplement is a welcome step forward in providing that support and the Scottish Conservatives will support the bill at decision time.

15:55

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): The bill that is before us today seeks to put more money in the pockets of unpaid carers at the earliest opportunity. As someone who uses care, both paid and unpaid, I cannot stress enough how important the care that is provided by both paid and unpaid carers across Scotland is. I place on record my thanks for the years of support for me and for millions of people around the country.

Scottish Labour recognises the contribution that unpaid carers make to society every day, especially in this most difficult of years. We wholeheartedly support the general principles of the bill and we will support it today. We have been clear that Scotland's estimated 1 million unpaid carers need us to go hard and fast to tackle the poverty that they face, and the bill is a step towards doing that.

It will be no surprise to some that unpaid carers need more than supplements. They need certainty, financial stability and a minimum income that recognises their value and their contribution. The reality is that carers do not often have a choice about whether to care. They are taking on responsibilities in the absence of a social care system that fully meets either the needs of those they care for or their own needs. They step up and step in when there is no one else to do so. This year, an estimated additional 400,000 unpaid carers have done that when social care has been withdrawn and, in many cases, has not been reinstated.

Doubling the supplement is welcome but does not go far enough. It is worth remembering that the payment is being made to recognise the additional caring responsibilities that many people have been forced to take on during the pandemic. Carers I have spoken to have told me that they have been working 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and 90 per cent of them have said that they have had to do so without a break.

Before the pandemic, carers were caring without proper recognition, and many were also struggling to make ends meet. The carers allowance is currently set at the equivalent of about 15 hours of work paid at the living wage rate. One carer noted that they get just over £10 a day for caring full time for their partner. That is below poverty pay. The cost of living for many families with disabled people is far higher than that for families without, and those families represent half of all people who are living in poverty. The supplement does not do enough to tackle the poverty and inequality that carers across Scotland face, much of which existed before the pandemic.

That is why I am frustrated by the constraints on our freedom to amend the bill. The time for effective scrutiny is limited. Consultation with carers has been powerful but not as widespread as it might have been. More than that, Scotland has had the power to fully reform the carers allowance since 2018. Many years later, I would like to have been debating a bill that does that.

Scottish Labour would like to have seen a bill that addresses the underlying entitlement issues. As things stand, only one in 10 of Scotland's carers receives the allowance. The eligibility criteria must be revised to ensure that all

Scotland's carers are recognised. I expect the Scottish Government to do that when it moves to develop carers assistance in Scotland, and I ask it to do that soon. I asked the minister when he thought that that would happen and he said that it would be after the safe and secure transition, which could be in 2025. I do not believe that carers can wait until then.

I am also disappointed that the Government has not sought to use the mechanisms that it has now to increase eligibility for the carers supplement that it administers today. Furthermore, the bill as drafted commits to an increase in the carers allowance only in December 2021. We already know that the effects of the pandemic will continue far beyond that date. We also note that caring responsibilities will not disappear as we begin our journey out of the crisis but are more likely to increase.

The carers who have shared their experiences with me have highlighted the detrimental impact of the pandemic on the wellbeing of those whom they care for, and, in many cases, that impact will be long lasting. It is clear that the impact of the pandemic, and the responsibilities of unpaid carers, will remain long after we have begun to move on from the darkness of the past year.

All of this is happening against the backdrop of a system that was already at breaking point. The support that was available to carers before the pandemic was already lacking, and much of that support has now been removed altogether.

The bill includes a power for ministers, by regulations, to increase the supplement again in the future, as we have heard this afternoon. I ask the Government again whether it recognises that the need for an increase is likely to remain beyond the December payment and whether it will commit now to keeping the uplift and giving carers the certainty that they need, at least until it has reformed eligibility for and reviewed the adequacy of carers assistance and until payments under the renewed system have begun. Carers need that certainty. If the Government will not do that, Scottish Labour will seek to amend the bill at stage 2 to extend the date for the increase and ensure that carers continue to receive it.

The bill will provide a welcome measure, albeit a temporary one, to ease the financial pressures on carers. We will support the bill today, but it by no means addresses the wider inequality that carers in Scotland face, which I believe we all want to address. Scottish Labour will continue to push the Government to go faster and do everything in its power to support unpaid carers.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): Ms Duncan-Glancy, will you bring your remarks to a close, please? Thank you.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I will finish where I started, by thanking again the army of unpaid and paid carers out there—and in here today—without whom I would not be in this place. I say thank you to each and every one of them for all that they do.

16:01

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): If, at stage 2, Labour lodges an amendment of the type that Pam Duncan-Glancy mentioned, the Liberal Democrats will support it. The need for carers has been recognised during the pandemic, and it is not over. We need to make a commitment now to continuing to provide the necessary support for carers. I say to the minister—if he is listening—that the reason for that is simple: the uncertainty for, and the strain on, carers is considerable, and this Parliament could do a good job by removing some of that uncertainty and committing to making the payments next year.

The minister says that the matter will be part of the budget negotiations, but, given that the Government makes other commitments to spending many years in advance, why can it not make a commitment in this area? I will take an intervention from the minister if he wants to clear up that point.

Ben Macpherson: The important thing to recognise is that the bill will give us the power to consider what we do in future years. We do not know where we will be next year. We may be in a position whereby there is a need to reconsider the amount of support. The bill will provide flexibility in legislation for us to consider the circumstances in future years and seek to support unpaid carers through any additional supplement that the Parliament agrees to.

Willie Rennie: We are not talking about massive sums of money. The amount is reasonably significant, but it is not massive. However, it means an awful lot to the people who receive it. Why can the minister not remove the uncertainty and give them a bit more comfort? We know that it is going to take a long time for services to be back up and running, even when the pandemic is over. We will therefore support Labour's initiative if the Government does not move to make such a commitment.

We need to look at the matter in the longer term. The underlying entitlement needs to be addressed, because at present there is a massive gap between the number of unpaid carers in Scotland and the tiny number who receive the allowance. Given that we require them to provide 35 hours of care a week, the amount is equivalent to £2 an hour. The increase is not enough to take them out of poverty. We will have to look at the financial commitment that we make if we are going

to address the fundamental problems that carers experience.

I am frustrated that, during the pandemic, the services that are available for carers have vanished for many people. I understand that the pandemic is here and that we need to protect vulnerable individuals, but it is as if Covid is the only thing that counts. There are many other things—health harms, social harms and mental health harms—that count as well, and we need to consider all those things in the round. I want those services to be back up and running as quickly as possible. I know that that is not the minister's responsibility, but we need him to put pressure on his colleagues to make that change. In addition to providing the financial support, getting those services back up and running again would make a tremendous difference.

Two years ago, I was invited to do something by Amy Newton, who has multiple sclerosis. She gave me a pair of goggles and put weights on my hands and legs, and she sent me shopping with a list. I was exhausted for the rest of the day and my head was thumping with it. That gave me a small insight into that woman's endurance. We owe her, the hundreds of thousands of people like her and their carers a proper level of support.

Today starts that process, and I commend the minister for that, but we need to go so much further.

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

16:05

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to speak in this important debate.

For far too long, unpaid carers have been given a raw deal by the social security system. Their essential, compassionate and unquantifiable contribution cannot be overstated. I take this opportunity to praise the staff and volunteers of Carers of West Dunbartonshire and Carers Link East Dunbartonshire for providing an outstanding level of support to carers in my constituency.

During the 14 years that I had the privilege of being part of the nursing team at St Margaret of Scotland Hospice in my constituency, I saw at first hand how caring, attentive, and compassionate unpaid carers are. That was at the time of greatest need—at the end of life—and the unwavering, unconditional love and support that they showed always filled me with respect and admiration.

That is especially true when we consider the contribution of unpaid carers during the Covid-19 pandemic. The love and support that they have given to those they care for has been a lifesaver to

many, especially at a time when those people have not had full access to other services. That is why I welcome the intentions of the bill.

As a member of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee, I can advise that we received powerful testimony from carers and others about the impact that Covid-19 has had. The evidence about the emotional and financial impact was clear. Carers said that the doubling of the carers allowance supplement in December will be very welcome at such a challenging financial time. It is a no-brainer that we should continue to provide that additional amount as Covid-19 pressures continue. Members should contrast that approach with one that removes the £20 uplift from universal credit—a cut that will put thousands of carers into poverty.

The evidence that the committee received also made it clear that wider reform to the available support is essential. We must not let carers down when it comes to that much-needed reform, as they have been let down for far too long. Since 1976, when the invalid care allowance was introduced, successive UK Governments have refused to align the amount that is paid with other earnings replacement benefits. Those UK Governments had years and years and numerous opportunities to correct their mistakes and the broken promises made to carers, but they refused to do so.

I am pleased that in Scotland we have acted to do that with the carers allowance supplement. It put carers on a par with others, which was long overdue. When we have the safe transfer of carers allowance cases to Social Security Scotland from the DWP, we should continue apace with the changes that carers are calling for. We must devise a new system of carers assistance that does not discourage claims, and one that more ably responds to the real-world demands on carers in Scotland.

The current system deters carers from claiming, penalises them for working or studying and turns its back on disabled carers and older carers. Powers over take-up are reserved to Westminster, but that issue also needs to be addressed. The underlying benefit rules mean that many disabled and pension-age carers see no gain from claiming. The carers allowance supplement has altered that position in Scotland, so we need to get the message out that it is worth while applying.

The remaining reserved policy hinders our take-up message because of the conflict that the UK benefits system creates for disabled people who are in receipt of the severe disability premium. A disabled person can lose the severe disability premium if their carer claims carers allowance, so that approach puts financial conflict into the relationship between the carer and the person

they assist. That obvious deterrent to claiming must end if we are to fully maximise the support on offer to carers.

We must get it right when setting the new carers assistance scheme for Scotland. We must not just listen to carers before taking no action on concerns raised, in the way that successive UK Governments did. I look forward to this Parliament instead recognising the massive contribution that unpaid carers make, and then being able to hold our heads up as we create an effective and compassionate system of support: one that brings the step change that is needed to properly recognise and support carers in Scotland.

16:09

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): As we have heard, unpaid carers are the secret heroes of our social care system. We owe them an enormous debt of gratitude for the power of work that they carry out every day, often going without any thanks or recognition. We in the Conservatives believe that it is only right that unpaid carers receive this additional payment to mitigate the financial effects of the pandemic.

The bill allows for the second additional payment of the carers allowance supplement to be paid in December 2021, and gives ministers the power to increase any future payment of carers allowance supplement at their discretion.

The pandemic has undoubtedly exacerbated the issues that unpaid carers face. I have heard first hand from parents of children living with autism in my constituency. I want to highlight how important it is that they are fully supported. During the pandemic, respite was cancelled, therapy appointments were postponed and the usual routines that many autistic children require were lost. Many parents experienced some of their lowest lows. One mother broke down in front of me when she told me about her autistic daughter and her husband, who had recently been diagnosed with cancer. This was just after Christmas and she was concerned about how she would support herself, her child and her husband.

I really want the bill to deliver for my constituent and her family and for everyone around Scotland, but it is by no means a magic bullet. There is a systemic issue that, so far, the SNP has failed address. However, we are making progress, so I want to be positive.

From being unable to obtain child and adolescent mental health services appointments for additional support needs support to having to pay to obtain a private ASN assessment—sometimes, such assessments are not even accepted in local authority systems—it is an uphill

battle. I want the SNP Government to deliver on the devolved benefits. I worry that full implementation will be slow to come to fruition and that, ultimately, problems will be compounded for people who are already facing extreme difficulties.

We see concerns in submissions to the Social Justice and Social Security Committee. In particular, I draw members' attention to feedback from a parent who, given her circumstances, will miss out. She said:

"EVERY carer should get it. I am a carer for someone who has High functioning Autism. I don't get the Carer's Allowance Supplement, why? I have MS I can't work so I live on benefits. I don't get Carer's Allowance Supplement but I do get the carers on my ESA. How is that fair?"

It is clear that issues in the bill must be addressed if it is to be fit for purpose. If that involves more collaboration between the UK and Scottish Governments, that is what has to be done to support these individuals.

Ben Macpherson: We talked a little bit about the development of Scottish carers assistance and considerations around eligibility for that. Does Rachael Hamilton believe that the UK Government should also consider eligibility criteria for carers allowance for the whole of the UK?

Rachael Hamilton: Looking at the examples that I am giving, I believe that we need to look at a system that works and addresses the overall support package, whatever it might be. If it takes a conversation between Ben Macpherson and his counterpart in the UK Government to highlight the issues, that would be an important thing to have. There have been hundreds of submissions to the committee that have raised issues not just about the carers allowance supplement but about access to other things that would make a positive change in people's lives, so that they do not break down and cry in front of me.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I appreciate that you took the intervention, but time is moving on.

Rachael Hamilton: Sorry—I will draw to a close, but it is important to address these things.

In short, the Conservatives will support the general principles of the bill at decision time, but we should be mindful that we need delivery. There have been a lot of broken promises from the SNP Government, so scratching the surface is not good enough. There are wider issues at play.

16:14

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): As a new MSP this session and a member of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee, I could have easily let myself get overwhelmed by the fact that we started

scrutinising our first piece of legislation at the committee's first meeting. However, as it is a bill that is aimed at supporting carers through what is an extremely difficult time with multiple pressures, I am just glad to be involved, and I am keen to ensure that the money gets to where it needs to be as soon as possible.

It is an inescapable fact that, most of the time, the work of carers goes unnoticed by those outwith their care and their families. Care is often a thankless, all-consuming task, so I am glad to hear members from all parties choosing today to publicly recognise the work of carers and thank them for all that they do.

Another inescapable fact is that over the pandemic many people have lost the ability to leave their home to go to work, and many careers have been impacted while people have been staying at home and trying to balance care responsibilities with work commitments. We know that care is a gendered issue, with Carers UK estimating that two thirds of unpaid carers are women. When the economic impact of unpaid care carried out by women in the UK is an estimated £77 billion a year, an additional £21 million of investment seems a bit small, but it means more than 230 quid extra in the pockets of individual carers in Scotland this winter. When budgets are so tight in the context of a perfect storm of irresponsible universal credit cuts, the end of furlough and rising fuel prices, that is surely something worth celebrating.

We also need to recognise that this is the second time that the Scottish Government will have doubled the carers allowance supplement—a benefit that it brought in because the UK Government's carers allowance is the lowest amount of all the working-age benefits. We are once again looking at a tale of two Governments: one that prioritises supporting carers, with the carers allowance supplement being the first benefit that the new Social Security Scotland took forward, and one that places carers right at the bottom of the list of those who are valued.

That change of direction by Scotland not only puts money straight into the pockets of carers, but, as we have heard, has an impact on their wellbeing. It helps them to feel recognised and valued by the state, which is a concept that is blatantly absent from the UK Government's approach, and which is particularly important as we consider the impact of the pandemic on the mental health of carers across the country.

As my colleague Pam Duncan-Glancy pointed out, many carers do not choose caring—they do it out of necessity. The Scottish Government's tact, in stark contrast to the approach that I outlined earlier, bodes well as we move towards implementing a national care service that will put

carers and the people whom they care for at its heart.

In the Social Justice and Social Security Committee, we have spent a lot of time listening to insightful contributions from witnesses, and I am very aware of the argument that more needs to be done. However, the bill has a specific scope and its aim is a good one: to provide extra money for carers at a time of increased pressure. Let us let a good thing happen and support the general principles of the Carer's Allowance Supplement (Scotland) Bill, which, as I can hear today, has good support from members across the chamber.

16:17

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to speak in the stage 1 debate, and to follow Emma Roddick; I echo her call for public recognition for the work that carers do.

I also echo the support of my colleague Pam Duncan-Glancy and the Scottish Labour Party for the principle of the bill. Who could not agree that Scotland's carers need a payment, and that it should be in their bank account as soon as possible?

I welcome the regulations to provide for future CAS payments to be higher than the calculations that were made under the Carers (Scotland) Act 2016. However—there is always a however—I share the Social Justice and Social Security Committee's concerns about certain aspects of the bill, which it set out clearly in its stage 1 report.

Unpaid carers provide invaluable support to their loved ones and to our society, and they have done so for years, often having to step up where our struggling care system has failed. Of the estimated 1.1 million carers, only 91,000—less than 10 per cent—are eligible for carers allowance. Consequently, the supplement—the one-off income increase for which the bill allows—is a bit of a sticking plaster to cover a gaping wound. I echo the words of those who contributed evidence to the committee in concluding that the payment is, in itself,

“not sufficient to lift carers out of poverty”.

Carers Scotland estimated that for every day of the Covid-19 pandemic, unpaid carers saved the Scottish Government £43 million with the care that they provide. As a contributor of evidence to the committee said, the supplement should be doubled permanently, because if the Government had to pay outside agencies to do the work of carers, it would cost a lot more. The same contributor also felt that carers are completely undervalued and forgotten about. The fact that someone who is a carer holds that view is a deep

indictment of the top echelons of Scottish society and those sitting in Government.

In the short time that has been given to me, I want to concentrate on just a couple of matters. The first is the removal of services through the pandemic, particularly respite services. I echo the minister's point that carers should have a life of their own and I agree with the committee convener about the great importance of respite.

I will quote from an entry in the Scottish Parliament lobbying register, published on 23 August, which sums it up perfectly. Family Fund's entry states that it lobbies to

“seek improved access to meaningful breaks from caring for unpaid carers, including parent carers of disabled and seriously ill children and young people and to advocate for a rights-based approach to achieve this, specifically for unpaid carers to have enforceable rights that guarantee them access to the breaks they need to safeguard their own health and wellbeing.”

That is not an unrealistic request.

The second issue relates to who can claim the young carer grant when there are multiple siblings in a household. It is an apparent race to claim—a race between caring siblings. There cannot be a Solomon's judgment on the young carer grant decided by who gets to the computer first. Siblings who care do so equally and they do so with love. They all deserve to be supported equally. I hope that the Scottish Government will address that issue in the near future.

The Government does not propose to increase the young carer grant in the same way as the supplement, which means that young carers are caring more, but without the additional recognition of an increased grant. Young and student carers are four times more likely to drop out of university—and because of their studies, they cannot claim the carers allowance.

The first step is excellent and will get the support of the Labour Party. We will wait to see the next steps.

16:22

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I thank the committee for its short but comprehensive report. As others have done, I offer my thanks to all carers.

I welcome the carers allowance supplement, although it has reminded me—as if I needed to be reminded—of the complexity of the UK benefits system. To claim carers allowance, a person has to spend 35 hours a week caring for a disabled person who must be in receipt of certain disability benefits, such as attendance allowance. However, the twice yearly payment of the supplement is in

advance of the introduction of Scottish carers assistance, which is on the cards.

Notwithstanding its limitations, the carers allowance supplement puts an extra £700 per annum into the pockets of carers. That is in contrast to the 33,000 carers in Scotland who will lose £20 a week following the cuts to universal credit—that is almost £1,000 a year. I was interested to see that Ruth Davidson opposes that cut. That is what happens when someone leaves this parish—they grow wings.

There is another rule of which I was not aware because I am not a benefits expert. Who is? The overlapping benefits rule disallows people from carers allowance. That matters if someone is a particular sort of carer. For example, for a pensioner in receipt of state pension, which is just above the carers allowance threshold, the rule prevents that person from getting the allowance and, as it follows that the additional payment in Scotland is piggybacking on that, they also do not get the carers allowance supplement. That is unfair.

I want to see that injustice addressed when we get the other benefit that is coming up—Scottish carers assistance. That will be an opportunity to cure some of the system's ills. However, although I am very sympathetic to more money going to carers, I know that there is no money tree—I wish that there were. We have to know how we can pay for things and not make promises that we cannot pay for.

It is crystal clear, although members will not necessarily agree with me, that the UK benefits system is so complex that we would never choose to start from this point. It is extremely difficult for the Scottish Parliament to wedge its own benefits into another system. It would be far better if the benefits system were in the powers of the Parliament, so that we could integrate it, make it fair and undo the unjust complexity that prevents many people from getting benefits—even people who are entitled to benefit do not claim it, because the system is so bewildering.

Finally, I put on record my thanks to all carers: the young—as has been mentioned, many of them are very young indeed—and the old. Regardless of whether they receive carers allowance, their dedication mainly comes from love—love, duty and responsibility—and takes the burden away from the state. They deserve the money to back them up, and they deserve respite, too.

16:25

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I am pleased to pledge the Scottish Green Party's support for the bill, and I echo the

thanks to unpaid carers that has come from previous speakers.

Before the pandemic, it was estimated that there were around 800,000 unpaid carers in Scotland, the majority of them women. We have heard this afternoon that that figure now stands at over 1 million people.

Let us do the maths. The average unpaid carer does 26 hours of care a week. The Scottish real living wage is £9.50 an hour. That means that 1 million unpaid carers are doing unpaid care worth £12.8 billion.

The Fraser of Allander Institute said earlier this week that, according to its sample of carers, the support delivered by each unpaid carer saved the taxpayer £114,000 per year. That is 1 million people who are providing incredible and loving care to a family member or friend, saving us money but going under-recognised.

They, too, feel that way. According to a Carers Trust Scotland survey that was conducted this summer, 36 per cent of people caring unpaid for family members or friends feel unable to manage their caring role; almost three quarters of unpaid carers have not had any breaks from their caring role during the pandemic; and only 23 per cent are confident that the support they receive with caring will continue following the end of the pandemic. That makes the modest extra payment being made through the bill welcome—“like winning the lottery”, according to one respondent to the national carer organisations survey on the bill. Another said that it would allow them to send gifts to their kids,

“which would be really difficult otherwise.”

They continued:

“It sounds like luxuries but it makes the winter look bearable.”

Those responses show just how little support carers allowance currently offers. Welcome though it is, therefore, the extra supplement that we are discussing is a tiny tweak to an unfair and inadequate system. Of those 1 million unpaid carers, about 90,000, as we have heard—less than 10 per cent—currently receive carers allowance, and only those carers will receive that supplement.

Some of the more than 90 per cent who do not receive carers allowance provide many hours of care yet fall short of 35 hours and so get nothing. Yet more will fall foul of the overlapping benefits rule, and some will lose out because they want to work just a few more hours a week.

Those who care for more than one person receive, at present, no additional support or recognition. Submissions to the committee's

evidence sessions on the bill relayed the sad story of a person who cared for 10 years for their elderly mother and father who suffered from dementia and other illnesses. When their father died, they had to reapply in respect of their mother, as not a single hour of their loving care for her had ever been formally recognised.

That is the result, quite frankly, of decades of neglect of carers allowance by both Labour and Conservative UK Governments. However, it does not need to be that way. The Scottish Parliament now has powers to totally transform social security for carers. We can simplify the rules and widen the embarrassingly narrow eligibility criteria. We can increase the amount that is paid—which, even with the supplement, is still shockingly low—and we must do that, because, at the moment, we are expecting carers to live off less than some members would happily spend on a restaurant meal.

The new social security system was founded on the principles of dignity and respect, but paying carers support at that rate does not allow them to live in dignity; nor is it respectful. The forthcoming consultation on carer's assistance is a real chance to create a fairer deal for carers. It must look at every option for improving support for carers and be genuinely open to hearing what carers have to say about how support can be improved.

Greens will support the bill today, but we do so in full recognition that the extra supplement is only the first step—and a small one—towards a fairer social security system for carers.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Jeremy Balfour, who is joining us remotely. He will be followed by Rona Mackay, who is also joining us remotely. Mr Balfour, you have up to four minutes.

16:29

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): I begin, as others have done, by thanking unpaid carers in Scotland. Like my colleague Pam Duncan-Glancy, I, too, benefit from having someone unpaid who cares for me on a daily basis. Without their help and without the help of carers across Scotland, our country would be in a far worse position. It is right and proper that they are fairly supported so that they can continue to look after those who most need it. It would be unfair for them to be providing such a vital service and not to have at least some form of payment. I therefore believe that the carers allowance is an incredibly important scheme to provide such help, and I fully support it. I also believe that the carers allowance supplement is a great way of getting money into the hands of those who really need it. During difficult seasons, the last thing that carers should have to worry about is money.

In that vein, I come to today's debate. I entirely endorse the move for an extra payment to be made to carers this December. December is always a squeeze financially, but coming through these uncertain times, it will potentially be even more so this year. That is why I think it is a good idea to provide extra help to carers in the form of the extra payment. However, it is worth considering whether we should extend the extra payment every year until the new Scottish carers allowance is in place, hopefully by 2025. I am afraid that I do not accept the minister's explanation of why such a provision cannot be in primary legislation. After all, we pay payments such as the personal independence payment and attendance allowance on an annual basis. We know that that will have to be budgeted for, and we do that. If the political will is there, it can happen. If the Government does not move on this point, it is my intention to lodge amendments at stage 2 to ensure that that happens. The great thing is that it is something that we can do here in this Parliament. Too often, the SNP-Green coalition Government criticises the UK Government for not doing things; here is a chance for this Parliament, which has the power, the authority and the ability, to enact this crucial policy. We need to find the will.

Another issue that was picked up by the minister concerns the scrutiny of regulations. The Social Justice and Social Security Committee will need to consider that at stage 2, and perhaps the whole Parliament at stage 3, but I would be interested to hear the minister say, in his summing up, whether he believes that the regulations should be subject to the affirmative or super-affirmative procedure.

16:32

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): Carers are the unsung heroes of our nation—no one could disagree with that. Without them, society would grind to a halt. That is why the double payment of the carers allowance supplement this winter, in recognition of the additional pressure that carers face as a result of the pandemic, is so vital and so necessary.

Improving support for carers was one of the Scottish Government's first priorities with its new social security powers, and it is little wonder. The immense contribution that is made to our society by people who care for family, friends and neighbours simply cannot be overstated. If Parliament passes the bill at stage 1 today, it will be the first step for more than 91,000 carers in receipt of the carers allowance supplement, receiving an extra £231.40, which doubles their December payment to £462.80. That extra investment, forecast to be £21 million, will mark

the second time that the Scottish Government has doubled the carers allowance supplement.

The past 18 months have been tough for everyone in different ways as we cope with this devastating pandemic, but carers' roles, which are difficult at the best of times, have been even more challenging, with many of them taking on additional tasks and facing the higher costs of looking after people who are staying at home to prevent the spread of coronavirus.

Carers Scotland has estimated that the economic value of the contribution that is made by carers in Scotland is £10.8 billion per year in normal times. The "Unseen and undervalued" report from Carers UK indicates that that increased during the pandemic, with unpaid carers providing £43 million worth of care per day in Scotland. That is astonishing. The report, which was published in October last year, looks at the on-going impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and is based on the experiences of current and former carers. It found that four in five unpaid carers—81 per cent—were providing more care than before lockdown.

As we have heard from others, respite care is crucial. It has always been important, but what we have been through brings a new focus to it. In the midst of the pandemic, I was contacted by carer constituents who were desperate for a break, but of course, due to the pandemic, that was not possible. My heart went out to them, and I could not imagine what they were going through.

In this year's budget, the Scottish Government has invested an additional £28.5 million for local carer support, bringing the total investment in the Carers (Scotland) Act 2016 to £68 million per year. I am delighted that that includes a £1.4 million holiday voucher scheme to provide those vital short breaks. The 2016 act introduced a right for all carers to an adult carer support plan or young carer statement to identify each carer's personal outcomes and needs for support.

The supplement increases carers allowance by around 13 per cent and is available only in Scotland. That really tells its own story. Doubling the supplement is a good news story, but Westminster tells the very bad news story. While we are increasing payments to those who need it, the Westminster Tory Government is cutting benefits by removing the £20 universal credit supplement in the middle of winter, in the middle of a pandemic. If ever we needed an illustration of a tale of two Governments, that is it.

Let us recognise the invaluable and vital work that is being done by thousands of carers throughout Scotland by agreeing to the bill at stage 1. They deserve nothing less.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the closing speeches. I call Paul O'Kane to close for Labour.

16:36

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): In closing for Scottish Labour, I begin, as colleagues in the chamber have done universally, by paying tribute to carers across Scotland. Throughout the debate, we have heard powerful stories about the lives of carers in every community, in a diverse range of families and in a range of caring settings. As with all our debates on the issue, it is key that we reflect carers' voices and that they are central to our considerations. They are real people—not abstract numbers or financial calculations.

As my colleague Pam Duncan-Glancy said in her characteristically powerful opening speech, the debate is about people who take on caring roles to enable others to live their lives to the full. We have heard about the serious challenges that carers face, which I will come on to in a moment.

We in Scottish Labour agree that the payment is needed by Scotland's carers and should be in their bank accounts before Christmas, which is why we will back the principles of the bill at decision time. However, we have concerns, as my colleagues have outlined. We share, based on evidence from carers and carer organisations, the Social Justice and Social Security Committee's concerns about certain aspects of the bill, as set out in its stage 1 report. In that regard, I note the contribution from the committee's convener, Neil Gray.

Martin Whitfield said that the one-off increase is "a sticking plaster to cover a gaping wound",

and I think that there is something in that. Those who contributed to the committee's report concluded that it is not sufficient to lift carers out of poverty. That is because a third of carers are struggling to pay utility bills, 47 per cent have been in debt and half are struggling to make ends meet and are cutting back on food and heating as a result. Colleagues, including Maggie Chapman, spoke about those issues and the painful decisions that have to be made. We believe that the bill must increase the supplement on a permanent basis until the new benefit—carers assistance—is introduced.

As we have heard, Carers Scotland has estimated that, every single day of the Covid pandemic, unpaid carers have saved the Scottish Government £43 million through the care that they have provided. Carers feel undervalued and forgotten about in the midst of this unprecedented situation. The Scottish Government has promised to introduce carers assistance, the new benefit that will replace carers allowance, by 2025, which

means that Scotland's unpaid carers will have to wait years.

Ben Macpherson: The Government has said that we are working towards full case transfer before 2025, but I point out, just for clarity, that we intend to introduce Scottish carers assistance for new applications long before 2025.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr O'Kane, I can give you back your time.

Paul O'Kane: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

I thank the minister for that clarification. I am sure that carers will welcome it and will want to engage with it fully.

Overnight, 392,000 people have become carers because of the pandemic. We are now 18 months in, and unpaid carers are exhausted and overworked, and they feel underappreciated. This afternoon, we have heard a lot about people not being able to access respite services in the normal way and feeling that they do not have the right support at the right time.

Pam Duncan-Glancy and Willie Rennie stated that although the bill provides a one-off increase and includes a power to make future payments of the supplement, further increases are not guaranteed; Pam Duncan-Glancy's intervention to the minister showed that we do not yet have confirmation of what further increases will look like. She highlighted constraints relating to the bill, including in relation to our ability to amend it, to the time that has been allowed for scrutiny and to consultation of the wider group of carers that we all want. That is why Scottish Labour will seek to lodge amendments at stage 2, as has been outlined, and will continue to engage with carers on the issues that are important to them. I welcome Willie Rennie's support for that.

Although the measure is positive, it is temporary, so we must look at how we more widely support carers who are stressed, burned out and feel undervalued and who are—sadly, as we have heard all too often—ignored. It has been the most unimaginable 18 months for them. Many have had little or no access to respite services, many are still battling to have day services and support packages restarted, and many feel that they simply have not had a break. Some carers have even said that the only respite that they have had is when they have been hospitalised themselves. That is completely unacceptable.

As we debate measures such as the bill, and as the Government consults on the national care service, we must hear what carers tell us will make a real and meaningful difference. Carers want a plan for how services will be reinstated to pre-pandemic levels. They want assurances that, where they exist, smaller and targeted specialist

services will be protected and supported, and that where such services have closed, alternatives will be provided.

As we heard from Miles Briggs and others, young carers want to know how they will be supported to return to learning, having juggled online learning and caring responsibilities, and how they will be supported financially to return to university, college or school.

In closing, I say that although the bill is a welcome step that will put more money into the pockets of carers, there is much more to do, so Scottish Labour looks forward to working with carers to get them the right support at the right time in the right place, because that is what they deserve.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Alexander Stewart to wind up the debate for the Conservatives. Mr Stewart—you have a generous six minutes.

16:42

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Thank you, Presiding Officer. I am grateful for the opportunity to close the debate on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives.

It has been said that unpaid carers are the backbone of our social care system. I wholeheartedly agree with that statement, and I also pay tribute to young carers.

The doubling of the carers allowance supplement in December will provide a meaningful financial boost to many who have suffered financially during the Covid-19 pandemic. Throughout the debate, we have heard in detail about the benefits that the legislation will bring for unpaid carers across Scotland, who have endured significant financial burdens over the past 18 months.

Multiple organisations, including Carers Scotland, Carers Trust Scotland and Citizens Advice Scotland, have detailed the extent to which individuals suffered during the periods of lockdown. Research by Carers Scotland has shown that 80 per cent of Scottish carers reported that the needs of those they care for have increased during the pandemic, and half of carers say that that has had a major impact on their health and wellbeing. The fact that so many carers have faced additional hardship is only made worse by the fact that they have had to endure the pandemic and provide care during that time. As we have heard, Carers Scotland estimates that, across Scotland, the number of carers has increased by 400,000 during the pandemic.

Christine Grahame: Does Mr Stewart agree with Ruth Davidson that the £20 per week cut to universal credit should be reversed?

Alexander Stewart: Like many of my colleagues, I am still lobbying and having discussions with our colleagues at Westminster. Personally, I have some real sympathy with that proposal, so I will continue to lobby and to make that view heard by members of our other Parliament.

Given all of that, it is clear that the decision to provide additional financial support to our unpaid carers is not only justified but necessary. It is perhaps disappointing that the Scottish Government did not see fit to carry out more consultation on how best to provide that additional support. Nevertheless, it is reassuring that care sector stakeholders welcome it, as was heard in evidence to the committee.

Although my Scottish Conservative colleagues and I welcome the doubling of the carers allowance supplement, that only makes it more disappointing that the SNP's delivery of devolved benefits in other areas has left much to be desired. Only last week in this chamber, I highlighted the fact that it will take the SNP Government nine years to take full responsibility of the welfare powers that were devolved to it in 2016.

Ben Macpherson: Does the member acknowledge the significant achievement that the Scottish Government has made, and the contribution that it is making in communities throughout Scotland, by bringing in seven new benefits, which are among the 11 benefits that Social Security Scotland now delivers?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You can have your time back.

Alexander Stewart: The minister rightly applauds himself, but we have been waiting decades for information and processes to come forward. [*Interruption.*] I want to continue my speech.

For Scotland's unpaid carers, too, the SNP is failing to properly capitalise on the welfare powers that it already has. We have proposed a raft of measures to improve the carers allowance, such as ensuring that those in receipt of the benefit continue to receive it for six months after bereavement. That would provide carers with much more time to readjust compared— [*Interruption.*]—I have a lot to cover, and I would like to make some progress.

We would also like to see the current means test replaced with a tapered system that would gradually reduce entitlement to the carers allowance, and we believe that entitlement should be extended to carers who are in full-time

education, who are less able to support themselves through part-time work compared with other students. All those measures are within the gift of the Government, and it can choose to move towards them if it wishes.

There have been many contributions to this afternoon's debate, and I would like to highlight some of them. The minister, Ben Macpherson, talked about the challenges, which are many and varied. However, progress needs to be made—he is well aware of that.

Miles Briggs talked about young carers, of whom there are 45,000 in Scotland. We need to ensure that they are protected and supported as much as they can be and that they can receive healthcare so that they are able to support the vulnerable people whom they are caring for.

As always, Pam Duncan-Glancy made a strong contribution. She made some very strong points about carers often having no choice but to do what they are doing. They step up, stand up and support.

Willie Rennie spoke about the uncertainty that carers experience. It is a valid point that it will take time for services for carers to be completely reinstated as they were before the pandemic. We will be watching to see what happens with regard to that.

Rachael Hamilton talked about respite for carers of individuals with autism and the support that they require to ensure that they and their families can get by.

Jeremy Balfour spoke about providing for an extension of the extra payment in the bill and about scrutiny. Those, too, are vital points, because we must understand what we are attempting to do and what implications it will have for people in the caring sector.

The bill is an example of the Parliament working in exactly the way that it was intended to. It is about devolved Scottish welfare powers that are supported by—and, indeed, made possible by—the broad financial shoulders of the United Kingdom. Therefore, the Scottish Conservatives will, of course, support the general principles of the bill at decision time. It shows, once again, the progress that can be made through the work of both Parliaments.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Ben Macpherson to wind up for the Scottish Government. If the minister could take us to decision time, that would be great.

16:49

Ben Macpherson: I thank all the members who have contributed to this important debate. It is

clear that there is cross-party support for the bill, which I very much welcome, and that we all recognise and appreciate the remarkable role that carers across Scotland play, day in and day out, and have played during the pandemic. We also recognise the impact that the pandemic has had on them. Pam Duncan-Glancy, Marie McNair and Rachael Hamilton all spoke powerfully on those points, based on their own or their constituents' experiences.

I emphasised at the start of the debate, as I and other ministers have done many times before, that the Government is committed to building a social security system based on the principles of dignity, fairness and respect, which Parliament committed to in 2018. As part of that, the bill intends to offer further support to carers across Scotland who have been under additional pressure as a result of the pandemic. Through the legislation, we intend to make sure that we pay that additional amount in December, so that families have that resource for the festive period.

The first payment of the carers allowance supplement was made by Social Security Scotland back in 2018, and it increases the carers allowance by around 13 per cent. The payment that was made in June last year, and the payment that we envisage making in December, therefore provide an increase on top of an increase to the existing level of carers allowance.

Neil Gray: I thank the minister for giving way; I will make the point that I would have made if Alexander Stewart had given way in the considerable time that he had. Will the minister expand on how Scottish carers assistance and, right now, the carers supplement provide considerable extra support to carers in Scotland compared with elsewhere in the UK? Will he also outline the challenges of building the new Scottish carers assistance based on the very low baseline level of policy and financial resource that is received by the Scottish Government from the UK system that it has inherited?

Ben Macpherson: Neil Gray makes important points. As I mentioned in my opening remarks with regard to the additional amount, the increased payment that we envisage in the bill would mean that carers in Scotland will receive £694.20 more than carers south of the border this year. It is important to think about that in the context in which the UK Government is imminently planning to cut universal credit by £20. It really is the tale of two Governments.

Rachael Hamilton: Does that not prove that the Scottish Government is taking an entirely Scottish approach? It has the powers. It has had the carers allowance powers since 2016 and we are now in 2021. Does the minister not believe that that is the

intention that the Scottish Government wants to achieve?

Ben Macpherson: I do not want to be overly party political, but it is interesting to reflect historically. Three parties are lobbying us today to do more things, when not so long ago they did not want the Scottish Parliament to have powers over social security—but there we are.

Just for clarity, it is important to recognise that, within the fiscal framework, when the Scottish Government provides social security provision that reflects what the UK Government provides we receive a transfer of resource for that from the UK Treasury. However, anything additional that we do, such as the £20 million that we plan to spend as part of the bill, has to be met from our budget. That is us going above and beyond and doing the right thing, and it is important that people understand how it relates to the wider scenario.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: No one would expect that we would not consider the cost of something that we are creating here. However, we have heard a couple of times from across the chamber about there not being a magic money tree. That does not help the unpaid carers out there right now who literally said to us, "Love won't pay the bills." They really need the Scottish Government—both Governments, frankly—to get on with putting more money in their pockets, using all the powers that we have.

In his answer to my colleague Paul O'Kane earlier, the minister said that he would try to bring forward Scottish carers assistance before 2025. I urge him again to do so as quickly as possible and to use all the powers that the Parliament already has.

Ben Macpherson: I am happy to undertake that we will bring in Scottish carers assistance as quickly as possible. Pam Duncan-Glancy and others have said in the debate, quite rightly, that we need to do more. The Government wants to do more and is moving at pace to do so. In three years, we have delivered 11 benefits, seven of which are new. That is an example of using the powers, making a difference and building an agency that gives a positive contribution in communities across Scotland, and we will continue that work.

For awareness and clarity, it is important to recognise that the work on the bill is taking place alongside the on-going development of Scottish carers assistance, which I will come to in a moment. We are committed to providing extra support for people who care for more than one disabled child, and we are considering how best to extend that support to those who care for more than one disabled person of any age.

Other members have mentioned, and it is important to emphasise, that the bill is not the place to consider the future of carers allowance. That matter is for Scottish carers assistance, and there will be further opportunities to consider the application process and eligibility rules as we develop it. The process will include questions around full-time education that Mr Whitfield rightly emphasised; questions around underlying entitlement that Christine Grahame rightly emphasised; and 15 options, as part of an options analysis, on which we intend to consult for proposals for Scottish carers assistance this winter.

The integral engagement that we have to have with the DWP impacts the process of the transfer of carers allowance, and we are grateful for the on-going constructive engagement between our officials and the input from UK ministers on the matter. We will commence the feasibility work for Scottish carers assistance with the DWP in this quarter, as I mentioned in my opening remarks.

Our aim is to begin to build the systems to deliver Scottish carers assistance in the new year. We anticipate that that process will take a minimum of 18 months, given the complex interactions that I mentioned between the carer benefits and the reserved benefits system. We will keep Parliament updated on that work. I reiterate that we intend to bring forward the payment as quickly as possible—before 2025—for new applications.

Jeremy Balfour asked me specifically to cover the point that he raised around scrutiny procedures for the enabling power, and I want to do so in my remaining time. During the development of the bill, we considered the use of the affirmative procedure, which is appropriate given the nature of the provision and the fact that its use involves modification of primary legislation. It is therefore appropriate that the Scottish Parliament be afforded the higher level of scrutiny of any Scottish proposal by Scottish ministers to increase the amount of the payment of the Scottish carers allowance supplement for a particular period.

Of course, the Scottish Commission on Social Security plays a really important role in providing a detailed level of scrutiny of draft social security regulations, which are often complex. However, given that the changes that can be made under the regulations are limited in this instance to increasing the level of the supplement for a specific period, or periods, we do not consider that the further enhanced level of scrutiny that SCOSS provides is necessary in this case.

There has been widespread stakeholder support for the bill. For example, the chief executive of the

Voice of Carers Across Lothian—VOCAL—said that the organisation believes that

“the carer’s allowance supplement is a positive step towards valuing the role of carers as equal partners in care and recognising their crucial contribution to Scotland’s economy”

and others have provided supportive comments through the process of stage 1 evidence and in the public domain.

I am really pleased that there is such widespread support in the chamber for the general principles of the bill. I note the points that members have made in good faith through the debate to support carers in our communities, and we will consider those points together through stages 2 and 3.

I thank all members for their contributions in scrutinising the bill so far, which underline our collective commitment to improving support for unpaid carers across our country as a priority through our social security powers. I look forward to working with colleagues to further progress the bill and Scottish carers assistance in due course.

I commend the motion in my name and hope that the Parliament will allow the bill to proceed to stage 2.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):
That concludes the debate on Carer’s Allowance Supplement (Scotland) Bill.

Carer's Allowance Supplement (Scotland) Bill: Financial Resolution

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of motion S6M-01211, on a financial resolution for the Carer's Allowance Supplement (Scotland) Bill.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament, for the purposes of any Act of the Scottish Parliament resulting from the Carer's Allowance Supplement (Scotland) Bill, agrees to any expenditure of a kind referred to in Rule 9.12.3A of the Parliament's Standing Orders arising in consequence of the Act.—[*Ben Macpherson*]

Parliamentary Bureau Motion

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of Parliamentary Bureau motion S6M-01331, on committee membership.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that—

Sue Webber be appointed to replace Annie Wells as a member of the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee;

Alexander Stewart be appointed to replace Tess White as a member of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee;

Tess White be appointed to replace Alexander Stewart as a member of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee;

Maurice Golden be appointed to replace Sue Webber as a member of the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee.—[*George Adam*]

Decision Time

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There are three questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that motion S6M-01318, in the name of Ben Macpherson, on the Carer's Allowance Supplement (Scotland) Bill, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees to the general principles of the Carer's Allowance Supplement (Scotland) Bill.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-01211, in the name of Kate Forbes, on a financial resolution for the Carer's Allowance Supplement (Scotland) Bill, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament, for the purposes of any Act of the Scottish Parliament resulting from the Carer's Allowance Supplement (Scotland) Bill, agrees to any expenditure of a kind referred to in Rule 9.12.3A of the Parliament's Standing Orders arising in consequence of the Act.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-01331, in the name of George Adam, on committee membership, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that—

Sue Webber be appointed to replace Annie Wells as a member of the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee;

Alexander Stewart be appointed to replace Tess White as a member of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee;

Tess White be appointed to replace Alexander Stewart as a member of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee;

Maurice Golden be appointed to replace Sue Webber as a member of the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee.

Meeting closed at 17:01.

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

Published in Edinburgh by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP

All documents are available on
the Scottish Parliament website at:

www.parliament.scot

Information on non-endorsed print suppliers
is available here:

www.parliament.scot/documents

For information on the Scottish Parliament contact
Public Information on:

Telephone: 0131 348 5000

Textphone: 0800 092 7100

Email: sp.info@parliament.scot



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba