



OFFICIAL REPORT  
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

# Meeting of the Parliament (Hybrid)

Tuesday 28 September 2021

Session 6



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# Scottish Parliament

*Tuesday 28 September 2021*

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

## Time for Reflection

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

The first item of business is time for reflection. Our time for reflection leader today is the Rev Elsie Macrae, minister of St Andrew's Parish Church, Moffat, which is linked with Kirkpatrick Juxta and Wamphray parish churches.

**The Rev Elsie Macrae (Moffat St Andrew's, Kirkpatrick Juxta and Wamphray Parish Churches):** Let us together take a moment to be still in the presence of God—a moment to reflect on our being as we journey on this earth. Feel free to close your eyes and calm your mind.

Think of someone who is frightened, someone whose whole world has come crashing down, someone who is concerned for their own health or the health of their loved ones, or someone who faces a time of illness but is afraid to share their pain with a friend or neighbour. Think of someone who is hurting inside, someone whose pain simply will not go away, someone who is feeling rejected, unwanted and unloved, or someone who is longing to know compassion, hope and peace.

Think of someone who is challenged—mentally, emotionally or physically—someone who is very much aware that all is not well in their life, or someone who causes despair and hurt to those they love. Think of someone who is broken, someone who set out with high hopes and ambitions, or someone who once had important plans for their future but whose tomorrow is, sadly, covered with clouds of despair.

Think of someone who is weighed down by their sense of responsibility, someone whose employment has lost the joy and fulfilment that it once held, someone who is overwhelmed by the demands of family and friends, someone who is burdened by the pain and suffering that they see all around them, or someone who feels helpless to respond to God's suffering world.

Now take a moment and think about yourself and all that you carry within you. Think about all the things that you must face in the coming days and weeks, and think of the promises of God—to hold, bless and love you all the days of your life. In

this silence, bring your personal concerns to the Lord.

Yes, Lord, hear these, our prayers, in the name of one who was and is to come. Amen.

## Topical Question Time

14:05

**The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):**

The next item of business is topical question time. In order to get in as many members as possible, I ask for succinct questions and responses.

**Lorry Driver and Fuel Shortages  
(Discussions with United Kingdom  
Government)**

1. **Siobhian Brown (Ayr) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with the UK Government regarding lorry driver shortages and related fuel shortages. (S6T-00183)

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

The Scottish Government has repeatedly requested that urgent action be taken on the shortage of heavy goods vehicle drivers. The Minister for Just Transition, Employment and Fair Work wrote to the United Kingdom Government in July to press that issue. We have also said to the UK Government that we want it to move to a 24-month temporary workers scheme to enable us to tackle the deeper issues that are at stake.

Scottish Government officials have maintained regular dialogue with their UK Government counterparts on the issue, which has been exacerbated by Brexit. The Minister for Transport is discussing the issue today with the UK Government's Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Department for Transport.

**Siobhian Brown:** Given the recent comments by the chief executive of NFU Scotland, Scott Walker, who pointed out that

"The whole Scottish food and drink supply chain has been highlighting the crisis and the solutions needed for many weeks now",

does the cabinet secretary agree that the sidelining of Scotland through the temporary visa scheme is yet more proof of the utter disdain with which Scotland's interests are treated by the Tory Government at Westminster?

**John Swinney:** Scott Walker's comments have been echoed in comments by the chief executive of Scotland Food & Drink, James Withers, who has indicated that the measures that the United Kingdom Government announced at the weekend are "too little, too late".

We have indicated for a considerable time—indeed, since the whole debate around the European Union referendum in 2016—that, if we lost access to the free movement of individuals, there would be a significant and negative impact on the Scottish economy. That is exactly what is

happening now because of the options and choices that have been taken by the United Kingdom Government. The damage that is being done to critical and valuable sectors of the Scottish economy, such as the seafood, fish processing and agricultural sectors, is an example of the wilful neglect in decision making by the United Kingdom Government.

**Siobhian Brown:** The Conservative Government has faced repeated warnings that the immigration system would damage important sectors in Scotland, including by leaving our vital social care sector critically short of staff. Although migration powers are still reserved to Westminster, will the cabinet secretary outline what urgent action needs to be taken to fix the migration system so that it works for all parts of the UK?

**John Swinney:** There is a substantial point in Siobhian Brown's question. We are facing acute shortages of labour in a range of sectors in the Scottish economy. Siobhian Brown mentioned the social care sector, which is an important sector in which it is difficult to recruit the necessary number of staff to support the patients and individuals whom we require to support. That is because of the choices that have been made in the implementation of the Brexit agreement and, in particular, the abolition of the free movement of individuals.

We are arguing that the previous European temporary leave to remain scheme should be implemented immediately, to allow European Union citizens to stay and work in the UK for up to three years. That is in addition to the proposals that I set out in my earlier answer on the steps in relation to the recruitment of staff. We need active measures that will overcome the damage that is being done by the abolition of free movement, and we need action to be taken immediately by the United Kingdom Government, recognising that immigration and migration are reserved issues.

**Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):**

The cabinet secretary will be aware that qualifying as an HGV driver is expensive, which prevents many people from entering the profession. Once young people are qualified, they find it hard to get a job because the insurance premiums for young drivers are eye watering. Is the cabinet secretary looking at ways to train young people to become HGV drivers, and is he speaking to insurance companies about the premiums for young drivers, especially in relation to smaller companies that do not have the economies of scale to make those manageable?

**John Swinney:** As Rhoda Grant will know, the Government has a range of financial measures in place to support training and recruitment of individuals. The transition training fund is designed to support individuals with additional costs. It can

support them to gain particular qualifications and to enter particular sectors. That is one of a range of options in addition to the various education and training opportunities that are available.

I will take away Rhoda Grant's point on insurance costs and will explore what the Government can do in that respect. Fundamentally, we must recognise that many of the challenges that we face relate to the acute shortage of labour, which has come about as a consequence of the decisions and choices that have been made around Brexit.

### **Queen Elizabeth University Hospital (Staffing)**

**2. Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to reports of staffing shortages at the Queen Elizabeth university hospital that are leading to health professionals warning about patient safety. (S6T-00184)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Humza Yousaf):** Staffing levels in Scotland's national health service are at a record high, following an increase of 5,000 whole-time equivalent staff in the past year. NHS Scotland's workforce has grown by over 20 per cent under the Scottish Government. Since March 2020, the number of nursing and midwifery staff in NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde has increased by 800.

Nevertheless, I fully acknowledge the extremely challenging circumstances in NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde and across the NHS in Scotland. A range of further interventions are now being actively deployed in the service to support current capacity. That includes provision of additional targeted flexibility, streamlining of recruitment processes and bringing forward of planned recruitment. For example, NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde advises me that it has taken steps to bring on board 670 newly qualified nurses, of whom 573 are already in post. The remaining 97 will start as soon as their registration is processed and complete.

I thank the people who are joining our NHS to support us during this challenging period, and I thank the members of the wider workforce, who have shown extraordinary commitment during the pandemic.

**Sue Webber:** The report from the weekend made for grim reading, and said that 339 warnings of understaffing at the hospital have been logged since 2019. There have, due to staff shortages, been 55 near-miss incidents in which there was potential for a patient to be harmed. Apparently, that is just the tip of the iceberg. One clinician has said that the Datix system, which is used to log such warnings, is complex and that the figure of

339 could easily be doubled. He also said that in some places there are

"Two nurses for 28 patients when there should be six".

Does the cabinet secretary believe that that is acceptable? Will he apologise to the staff who are working under those conditions?

**Humza Yousaf:** I take on board the comments that have been made by Ms Webber and the staff—I read the article that Ms Webber read—on the complexity of the Datix system. However, the system provides incredibly useful feedback for hospital management and for the Government. I encourage staff to continue to report any issues on that system.

As I highlighted in my first answer to Ms Webber, where problems of understaffing have been identified, NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde has taken action. It has recruited 670 newly qualified nurses; some have already started and some are starting in the coming weeks. The Government will continue to ensure that our NHS has record staffing levels.

**Sue Webber:** Workforce planning issues are nothing new and Covid has brought obvious challenges, but staffing has been a problem for quite some time, despite the action that we have just heard about. Last week, the GMB union said that there was already an understaffing crisis in the Scottish Ambulance Service pre-Covid.

In the report at the weekend, a clinician said:

"Nicola Sturgeon reduced the number of nursing training places a decade ago and these people would be skilled now and able to work in the NHS. Warnings were given at the time."

Will the cabinet secretary stop hiding behind Covid to mask the issues that were already present in the NHS, and finally accept that the Government's lack of action has compounded the current NHS staffing crisis?

**Humza Yousaf:** I will deal with some of Ms Webber's inaccuracies. NHS Scotland has the highest staffing levels ever—they have increased by 20 per cent under this Government. In NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, the number of all staff is up: the number of qualified nurses and midwives is up by 9.1 per cent; the number of consultants is up by 46 per cent; the number of emergency medicine consultants is up by 220 per cent; the number of obstetrics and gynaecology consultants is up by more than 36 per cent; and the number of general practitioners is up by more than 10 per cent.

Ms Webber can try all the spin in the world, but it will not detract from the facts. Under our stewardship of the NHS, we have not only record staffing levels but the best-paid staff anywhere in the UK. I stand proudly on the Government's

record of funding and staffing the NHS, in comparison with the record of Ms Webber's party, whose record is of cutting public services, of not being remotely as generous as we have been to NHS staff, and of having more than a decade of austerity.

Forgive me, Presiding Officer: I will not take lectures from the Conservatives on staffing and funding our NHS.

**The Presiding Officer:** I remind members that we are tight for time, so succinct questions and responses would be appreciated, please.

**Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP):** Does the cabinet secretary agree that NHS and other public sector staff have done a remarkable job during the pandemic? Before the election, Sue Webber suggested that public sector staff including nurses should, through salary sacrifice, have their pay cut by 20 per cent to match the position of people who were on furlough. Does the cabinet secretary agree that such a move would seriously undermine recruitment of NHS staff and other key workers?

**Humza Yousaf:** I agree. Incredibly, Ms Webber forgot to mention those remarks when she asked her question; I hope that she will apologise for them. I note that she called salary sacrifice "a policy". I tell members that the Scottish National Party Government will continue to ensure that NHS workers and social care workers are the best paid in the UK. Ms Webber's abhorrent comments about our NHS workers show that the Conservatives say one thing in public but another in private.

#### **Police Scotland (Criminal Record System)**

**3. Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to reports that staff shortages and a new criminal record system in Police Scotland are risking dangerous criminals being left on the streets. (S6T-00195)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Veterans (Keith Brown):** It is true that Police Scotland is investing in new technology to support transformative change away from legacy systems and to provide staff with tools that will improve recording of criminal records. The programme of change has resulted in restructuring and regrading of roles in the criminal justice services division, which has the support of trade unions that represent police staff.

The organisational changes are an operational decision for the chief constable, and when I met Unison earlier today, it confirmed its support for them. It is vital that Police Scotland work closely with trade unions and affected staff to support them through the period of change.

**Russell Findlay:** Police Scotland said that £85.7 million in capital funding in this year's budget was to deliver significant transformative benefits in areas that include information and communications technology, but the Scottish Government provided Police Scotland with at least £30 million less than that. Is that the real cause of the problems?

**Keith Brown:** No. As I have said, the changes that Police Scotland is making are part of driving the efficiencies that we expect from having a single police force.

In financing, the real source of problems is the Tory Government, which has had austerity budgets for 10 years, has not matched the funding for new police officers that we have provided in Scotland and has not matched the pay for police officers that we have in Scotland. That is the structural problem that undermines our ability to fund the police more.

We increased police funding by £60 million last year and by £75 million this year. That shows that this Government is, unlike the Conservatives, committed to supporting its police force.

**Russell Findlay:** I know something about the integrity of police systems, because I reported on Bill Johnstone—an innocent man who was allocated an extensive criminal record on the police computer. He spent more than a decade seeking justice and answers, but doors remained closed. He could not get a straight answer from Keith Brown's predecessor, so will the cabinet secretary today give a clear undertaking to finally provide Bill Johnstone with the full explanation that he deserves?

**Keith Brown:** That is not really related to the question that was put to me, but if Russell Findlay wants to write to me on the issue that he has raised, I will try to respond, to the extent that that is possible.

The question was about funding and support for the police, which we have provided over successive years. We have more police officers here than there are elsewhere in the United Kingdom; there are 32 police officers for every 100,000 people in Scotland, compared with 23 per 100,000 in England and Wales.

We are the Government that supports the police in this country. It would be good if the Conservatives could—instead of trying to undermine the police, the justice system and even the Lord Advocate—get behind the justice system for once.

**Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP):** Statistics that have been published today show that recorded crime in Scotland remains at one of its lowest levels in



nearly 50 years. Can the cabinet secretary outline how measures that are detailed in the programme for government will build on that good progress and help to keep Scotland safe?

**Keith Brown:** The programme for government lays out the fact that we have committed to protecting the police resource budget in real terms for the entirety of this session. We increased the Scottish Police Authority's resource budget for 2021-22 by 5.2 per cent, to over £1.3 billion. That has eliminated Police Scotland's structural deficit for the first time since its formation.

We have committed to introducing legislation in this session to change how imprisonment is used, and there will be consultation on initial proposals relating to bail and release-from-custody law this autumn. That will be underpinned by investment in a substantial expansion of community justice, in supporting diversion from prosecution, in alternatives to remand, and in community sentencing, which evidence shows is more effective at reducing offending.

That is not just about reducing crime; we are determined to protect victims, too. This year, we launch our new funding programme to provide practical and emotional support to victims, survivors and witnesses of crimes across Scotland.

## Covid-19

### **The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):**

The next item of business is a statement by Nicola Sturgeon on Covid-19. The First Minister will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:22

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** I will give an update on the latest Covid situation. As part of that I will recap on decisions made at the end of last week in relation to international travel. I will also announce some additional support to help businesses improve the ventilation of their premises, and I will give an update on the introduction of the vaccine certification scheme, following a discussion at Cabinet this morning.

First, I will cover today's statistics. There were 2,370 positive cases reported yesterday, which was 10.6 per cent of the tests carried out; 1,027 people are currently in hospital with Covid, which is four more than yesterday; and 73 people are receiving intensive care, which is three fewer than yesterday.

Sadly, a further 16 deaths have been reported over the past 24 hours, which takes the total number of deaths registered under the daily definition to 8,551. The number of deaths reported in recent days is a reminder of the grief that the virus continues to cause families across the country. Again, I send my condolences to everyone who has lost a loved one.

On a more positive note, the vaccination programme continues to make very good progress. Over the weekend, the milestone of 8 million vaccinations in Scotland was reached. As of this morning, 4,185,574 people have received a first dose, and 3,832,498 have now had both doses. In total, 84 per cent of the over-16 population is now fully vaccinated, with two doses. That includes 96 per cent of the over-40s, 75 per cent of 30 to 39-year olds and 63 per cent of 18 to 29-year olds. In addition, 71 per cent of 16 and 17-year-olds have had a first dose, and it is important to remember that, at this stage, only a single dose is recommended for that age group.

Those are exceptionally high uptake rates but, as we go into winter, we are obviously keen to push them even higher—and I will return to that point later.

We are now implementing the next stages of the programme. Vaccinations for 12 to 15-year-olds started last week at drop-in clinics. Appointment letters are being sent out from this week to everyone in that age group who has not already been vaccinated. I take the opportunity to

encourage all 12 to 15-year-olds, and their parents and carers, to read the online information about vaccination so that informed decisions can be taken. If there are questions or concerns, I ask that people please raise them with vaccinators when attending appointments.

The programme of booster vaccinations is now under way in line with the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation advice. Care home residents started getting booster jags last week, and from this week, those who are over 70 years of age and those on the highest risk list will also start to get booster jags. People in those groups will be notified of appointments by general practitioners or by letter. People who are on the highest risk list who are immunosuppressed or immunocompromised are being invited separately for a third dose.

The figures that have been reported over the past week show that, although Covid cases remain at a high level, they continue to fall. To put current case numbers into context, in the five weeks between 2 August and 6 September, the increase in average daily cases was more than fivefold, from an average of 1,115 new cases a day to 6,438. Since then, average daily cases have halved to 3,119 new cases a day. The numbers now are below the previous peak of early July. Indeed, in the past week alone, there has been a fall of almost one fifth. The steepest falls—of more than a quarter—have been in the 15 to 19 and 20 to 24 age groups. However, it is important to note that there have been significant declines across all age groups.

It is extremely positive that the overall reduction in cases has happened without the need to reintroduce any lockdown restrictions, which we were, and are, all keen to avoid. We consider that the fall in cases is being driven by a number of factors. A key one is likely to be the increasing level of immunity, which is now relatively high in Scotland. That comes mainly from vaccination, to some extent from infection with the virus, and, in some cases, from both.

I return to my earlier point about the need to drive the already high vaccine uptake rates even higher. The current downward trajectory of cases underlines again the vital importance of people getting vaccinated, if they are eligible. That includes taking up the opportunity of a booster jag when it is offered. Undoubtedly, getting vaccinated remains the single most important thing that any of us can do to help to keep cases under control.

However, other factors are also likely to have contributed to the fall in cases. They include the performance and hard work of those in test and protect, and all the considerable efforts that have been made by individuals, businesses and other organisations to step up compliance with the basic

mitigation measures that remain in place. I am grateful to everyone who has taken extra care in recent weeks in an attempt to halt and reverse the spike in cases, including students and staff at our colleges and universities.

This time last year, we were experiencing a rapid increase in Covid cases—albeit from a much lower base level than is currently the case—which was, at least in part, down to the start of the new university term. However, so far this year, although it is still early in the new term, there has not been an increase in cases coinciding with the return of universities. Indeed, at this stage, it could tentatively be argued that the reverse is true. As I said earlier, cases in the 15 to 24-year-old age groups, which include many students, have actually been falling. That will be due in part to the impact of vaccination; however, I also know how much effort has gone into making student campuses and accommodation as safe as possible, and I am deeply grateful for all those efforts.

In the weeks ahead, cabinet secretaries will continue to engage with different sectors to ensure that we are working together to support strong compliance with key mitigations such as face coverings, hand hygiene, good ventilation and, where possible, continued home working.

The clear evidence of recent weeks suggests that those collective efforts are making a significant difference. If we stick with it, I am hopeful that we will keep a downward pressure on cases as we head into the winter period. I cannot stress enough how vital that is. It is extremely positive that case numbers have fallen significantly, but they remain more than two and a half times higher than they were in early August.

As we move further into autumn and winter, and as people meet indoors for longer periods, there remains a risk that the number of cases could rise again. Of course, hospital admissions and occupancy are already at high levels.

That said, in the past week, we have also seen a slight but welcome reduction in the number of Covid patients in hospital, from 1,107 to 1,027. That is in line with our expectations—we know that the number of people in hospital with Covid usually starts to fall about two weeks after the number of new cases begins to fall.

With the number of cases having fallen further, we would hope and expect that the direct Covid pressure on the national health service will ease somewhat, although we expect that the service will remain under significant pressure for some time to come. We hope that the number of people dying from Covid will start to reduce, too.

However, some context is necessary. Although the slight slowdown in hospital admissions is

welcome, the number of patients in hospital with Covid today—1,027—is still three times as high as it was in late August. Similarly, although there has been a gradual decline in the number of patients with Covid who require intensive care, intensive care unit occupancy is still far higher than it was in late August.

It is worth highlighting that the hospital figures that we report daily represent the total number of people who first tested positive for Covid while in hospital or in the 14 days prior to their admission. The figures have always included people who, although they have Covid, were admitted to hospital for other reasons.

I can advise Parliament that, tomorrow, Public Health Scotland will publish a more detailed analysis that will seek to quantify those admitted to hospital not just with Covid but because of Covid. I am sure that that will be of interest to many. However, any analysis makes it clear that the number of people in hospital with or because of Covid is still too high, and that is putting immense pressure on the national health service.

NHS staff are currently trying to care for hundreds of Covid admissions every week while also dealing with the backlog that has built up during the pandemic and preparing for winter. That is exhausting and stressful for them, and I know that we are all deeply grateful to each and every one of them.

Therefore, it is important to emphasise again that, by all of us behaving in ways that can get and keep Covid cases under control, we are not simply protecting ourselves and those around us but helping those who work so hard in our NHS and protecting their capacity to provide care and treatment to everyone who needs it.

I want to give an update on three further issues. First, last Friday, we confirmed changes to the rules on international travel. From 4 October, the blanket requirement for pre-departure tests for people travelling into Scotland will be removed. People who have been fully vaccinated or who are under the age of 18 will no longer need to provide a pre-departure test result if they are coming from countries that are not on the red list. We also hope to align our policy on post-arrival testing with that of England, although United Kingdom-wide details are still being finalised. As I indicated last week, we are making the changes to the travel testing rules with some reluctance, as we have a concern that the removal of testing requirements could hamper efforts to detect new variants.

We have also considered—as I said last week we would—the practical consequences of not having an aligned UK-wide position. In particular, we have to be realistic about the fact that people who live in Scotland could decide to return here

via airports in England if different rules are in place for Scottish airports. The result of that would be disadvantage to our aviation and travel sector without any significant public health advantage. We must be pragmatic. However, we will not be complacent. I can confirm that we are working with Public Health Scotland to develop additional surveillance safeguards to guard against the risk of new variants. We will set out further details in due course, but I can confirm now that the arrangements will not incur costs for travellers.

The second point on which I want to give an update is ventilation. It is now clear and accepted that good ventilation is an important mitigation against the risk of Covid transmission. Last month, we established an expert group to make recommendations on improving ventilation. I am very grateful to the group, which is chaired by Professor Tim Sharpe from the University of Strathclyde, for all its work so far. In response to the group's initial recommendations, I can confirm today that we will allocate up to £25 million of funding to help small and medium-sized enterprises to improve ventilation. That support, which will include grants, will help those businesses to make necessary adjustments to their premises including, for example, the installation of carbon dioxide monitors or alterations to windows and vents.

The fund, which we expect to start making payments in November, will initially target higher-risk sectors in which people spend significant amounts of time in close proximity to each other, such as hospitality and leisure. We will set out more details of the eligibility criteria and the application process over the next few weeks. However, I hope that the funding package will help many small and medium-sized businesses to make indoor settings safer, especially through the winter months.

The final issue that I want to give an update on is the vaccination certification scheme. Last week, we set out further details of how the scheme will operate, and I can confirm that, later today, we will publish further detailed guidance for businesses, which will demonstrate the proportionate and commonsense approach that we are asking businesses to take. I would encourage businesses to familiarise themselves with the guidance, which will assist them in making the necessary preparations for the scheme coming into force.

I can also confirm that the introduction of certification means that we are able to remove the capacity limits and the associated exemption process that have been in place for stadia and live events. I know that that will be welcomed by event planners and local authorities. The certification scheme will apply, as previously indicated, to late-night venues that are open after midnight with

alcohol, music and dancing; to live indoor unseated events of more than 500 people; to live outdoor unseated events of more than 4,000 people; and to any event of more than 10,000 people.

That means that, once the scheme starts, anyone over the age of 18 who wants to go to a large event or a late-night venue will be required to provide evidence that they are fully vaccinated or evidence that they are exempt. To facilitate that, the NHS Covid status app will go live on Thursday. It will provide a digital record of a user's vaccination status, including a QR code for each vaccination a person has received. It is already possible for any of us to request a paper copy of our vaccination record or to download a PDF from the NHS Inform website.

We have continued to engage with businesses as we have developed the detail of the certification scheme. I understand that many businesses have concerns about certification, and I am grateful to all those that have nevertheless engaged in the discussions so constructively. The Government remains of the view that a targeted certification scheme has a part to play in driving vaccination rates up as high as possible and in providing an additional layer of protection over the winter months as we seek to achieve the potentially difficult task of keeping Covid under control while keeping our economy fully open. Indeed, many other countries are already demonstrating the value of vaccination certification.

It is for those reasons that the Cabinet decided this morning to proceed with the laying of the regulations that will bring such a scheme into operation. However, as I have said previously, we are also determined to listen to and, as far as possible, to respond to the reasonable concerns of business, so that the introduction and practical implementation of the scheme are as smooth as possible.

I confirm that Cabinet this morning agreed a change to our original plans for the scheme's commencement. The new staged approach that we are proposing is designed to help businesses to adapt to the requirement that the scheme will place on them and to give them a period during which they can operationalise and test their arrangements in practice. I can therefore confirm that, after the legal obligation comes into force at 5 am on Friday this week, we intend to allow a further period of slightly more than two weeks, until 18 October, before any business could face enforcement action for non-compliance. That period—in effect, a grace period—will allow businesses to test, adapt and build confidence in the practical arrangements that they will need to put in place to be compliant with the scheme.

As I said, the Government is persuaded that a vaccination certification scheme will help us to mitigate the risk that the virus poses to all of us over the winter. That is why we intend to proceed with it. However, the pragmatic compromise that I have just outlined in relation to a staged introduction of the scheme demonstrates, I hope, that we are listening to business about the practical challenges that they face and that we are determined to work with them to overcome those.

To conclude, as we move for the first time into a winter with Covid circulating but without any significant restrictions in place, we are, I am pleased to say, in a much better position than we might have hoped for just a few weeks ago.

The number of cases has halved in the past three weeks, and we hope that that will be followed by an easing of at least the direct Covid pressure on the national health service. Nevertheless, there is no room for complacency about the potential impact that we might face this winter. The efforts that have been made by so many over the past month to step up compliance with mitigations and to drive up vaccination rates seem to be working. We have, collectively, halted the surge and brought case numbers down.

However—and this is always the more difficult message—the number of cases is still too high for comfort, so it is vital that we do not let up. We must maintain the progress of the past few weeks, and, as ever, that has to be a collective endeavour. All of us have a part to play in keeping transmission under control. Therefore, I will close, as usual, with a reminder of the three key things that we can all do to help protect ourselves and each other.

First, please get vaccinated if you are eligible and have not yet done so. That remains the single most important thing that any of us can do. Secondly, please test regularly with lateral flow devices. They can be ordered through the NHS Inform website or collected from a local test site or pharmacy. If you test positive, are identified as a close contact or have symptoms of the virus, please self-isolate and book a polymerase chain reaction test.

Thirdly, please comply with the mitigations that are still in place. Wear face coverings in indoor public places such as shops and public transport and when moving about in hospitality settings. Meet outdoors if you can. I know that that will get harder as we move into autumn and winter, but outdoor meetings are still safer. When meeting indoors, open windows. Keep a safe distance from people in other households, especially indoors. Wash hands and surfaces thoroughly.

All those precautions really matter. They will help to keep you and those around you safer. As

we can see from the data that I have reported today, they are making a difference. Let us all stick with it and hope to get the number of cases down even further.

**The Presiding Officer:** The First Minister will now take questions on the issues that were raised in her statement. I intend to allow around 40 minutes for questions, after which we will move on to the next item of business. It will be helpful if members who wish to ask a question press their request-to-speak buttons now.

**Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** The First Minister is correct to say that it is vital that people who can get the vaccine do so, and I encourage everyone who can to get their jab.

Despite the falling case numbers that were reported today, Scotland's NHS remains in crisis. The accident and emergency numbers that were published this morning continue a very worrying trend. Given the scale of the challenge in Scotland's NHS, I want first to ask Nicola Sturgeon the same question that I put to her last week at First Minister's question time, which she failed to answer. The Royal College of Emergency Medicine has said that we need 1,000 more acute beds. How many of those extra beds has the Scottish Government now identified? Will the First Minister tell us how many of those extra beds have been delivered?

I turn to other news in the statement. Last week, we called for a U-turn by the Scottish Government on its international travel plans. Scottish National Party ministers stalled and left it so late that many tourism businesses lost out, but it is welcome that the Government has finally agreed to align the rules with those for the rest of the UK.

Today, we do not quite have another U-turn, but the First Minister is clearly conceding that her vaccination passport scheme is still not ready. We could all see that weeks ago. That is why my party will hold a debate and a vote on the matter tomorrow, in which we will call for the scheme to be halted. For weeks, warning after warning from businesses were ignored by the Government. Only now does Nicola Sturgeon finally admit that it is a botched scheme. In a little over 48 hours' time, it will come into force, and yet the Government is still publishing vital new information and guidance on how to administer it. The goalposts have shifted. The First Minister has delayed enforcement by more than two weeks. It is more of the same last-minute, rushed and chaotic planning that we have seen time and again from the SNP Government.

Why did the First Minister not listen to businesses and Opposition parties weeks ago when they warned that the scheme would not be ready? Will a scheme that is legally in force but

not enforced not just add to the confusion? Is it not about time that the Government cut its losses on this shambles of a scheme and scrapped it altogether?

**The First Minister:** Had I listened in past weeks to Douglas Ross, who has opposed every measure that the Government has introduced to try to stem the rise in Covid case numbers, we would not be in the position in which we are now, with falling Covid case numbers; case numbers would probably still be rising. Douglas Ross has stood here and opposed everything from face coverings to continued mitigations. That is a regular feature of the management of the pandemic.

I will take the issue of Covid vaccination certification first. It is because we have listened, and are listening, to businesses that we have today announced a very pragmatic compromise. The scheme is ready and will be introduced on Friday, but businesses understandably want to have a period without the threat of enforcement in which they can ensure that their compliance arrangements are working well and in which they have the time to adapt those arrangements if they think they have to do that. We have done that because we are listening.

I return to the central point. Covid cannot simply be wished away, although I think that Douglas Ross sometimes believes that it can. We must take active measures to get it, and keep it, under control. Vaccination certification is a proportionate and targeted way of doing that, and it is already being used by many countries across the world. Scotland, Wales in a few weeks and even Northern Ireland—although it has not yet moved to a mandatory scheme—are encouraging Covid vaccination certification. As with many things, it might soon be the case that the only part of the UK not to have such a scheme is England, although the Prime Minister has not ruled out having such a scheme over the winter months. We will continue to take the sensible way forward.

I will take Mr Ross's other points in reverse order. He mentioned international travel plans. We did not stall; we did what any responsible Government should do in the face of a pandemic. We carefully considered the balance between the understandable economic imperative of trying to align across the UK and the equally understandable concerns about the risks to public health. We did so in the same way that Wales and Northern Ireland have been carefully considering those things. We have come to a balanced judgment that I think is right. I have been candid in saying that there are concerns but that we will seek to take other steps to mitigate those concerns and to guard against new variants.

The NHS continues to be under pressure. The issue of beds is an important one. There has recently been a slight increase in the number of acute beds. We are trying to ensure that we free up capacity in our NHS, including bed capacity, through the range of measures that we are taking. We are again reducing delayed discharge through support for care packages and moves to care homes. We are working to avoid unnecessary admissions to hospital. The key, and most important, thing that we must do to free up bed capacity in our NHS is to reduce the number of beds that are occupied by patients with Covid, which is currently just above 1,000. That intense work is under way across Government and the NHS.

I am not complacent. We have a hard winter ahead. A and E waiting times are still far worse than we want them to be, but they are better than they were last week. There has also been a very slight easing of the demand pressure on ambulance response times and a corresponding improvement in the past week in the performance of our Ambulance Service. That does not mean that we no longer have difficulties. This will be a challenging winter, which is why the Government and I remain focused on taking steps to support our NHS as it faces up to those challenges.

**Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab):** I send my condolences to all those who have lost a loved one in the past week or throughout the pandemic.

Figures published today show that more than a quarter of A and E patients are waiting for more than four hours. They also show that we have failed to meet cancer targets again. Despite the pandemic, cancer remains Scotland's biggest killer. Missed targets mean that people are diagnosed later, treatments start later and chances of survival are reduced. What urgent action is the First Minister taking to address that?

We also know that the tools to confront the pandemic remain the vaccine, testing and tracing. Despite the on-going challenges, the First Minister's statement did not address the issues affecting the test and protect system. We know that test and protect is not working. We have raised the concerns of staff and have stated the facts about performance week after week. The Government must focus on fixing the systems that it already has, but it is instead fixated on creating a new system.

There remain practical, legal and ethical concerns about vaccination passports. Those comments were repeated this week by the First Minister of Wales, Mark Drakeford. Although the delay to the implementation of vaccination passports is welcome, issues remain. As the First Minister and I spoke about last week, in order to enter the Labour Party conference, people had to

present either a vaccination certificate or a negative test result. I downloaded my PDF this week, but it was incomplete as it failed to include the details of my first jag. I know that others have faced that problem, too.

The app launches in two days' time. Can the First Minister give a cast-iron guarantee that the scheme will work for everyone? If she is determined to go ahead, I plead with her again to please consider the role of testing, because making sure that someone who goes into a venue is negative is still more important than whether they are vaccinated.

**The First Minister:** Again, I will take the issues in reverse order. On the vaccination certification scheme, processes are in place to rectify any situation in which somebody's vaccination record is incomplete. As I have said all along, in any programme of the scale of the vaccination programme, there will be cases of errors being made or things not being as they should be. That is why those processes are in place.

Testing is—and I have always said that it is—a legitimate issue to raise. We have not ruled out including a negative test as part of Covid certification at a later stage. The reason why we are not doing that at this initial stage is that part of the objective of our Covid certification scheme is to drive up vaccination rates as high as we can get them. It is also the case that, although lateral flow device testing is extremely important—I repeat its importance every week—it is self-reported and there are, therefore, deficiencies in it. However, I have said that we will keep that under review as vaccination rates increase and the scheme continues. We will continue to listen to the concerns of business, as we have done today.

On a point of accuracy, the implementation of the scheme is not being delayed. It will be implemented from 5 am on Friday, but we will have a grace period before any business faces enforcement action for non-compliance with the scheme.

On test and protect, I take issue with Anas Sarwar. It is not the case that test and protect is not working. Test and protect is working well and the people who staff it are working incredibly hard. Of course, when case numbers are high, test and protect comes under pressure. There is no doubt about that. However, the efforts of test and protect, along with other factors that I spoke about in my statement, are helping to bring case numbers back under control and to drive them down. I take the opportunity to say a heartfelt thank you to every individual who is working in test and protect across the country. They are doing a real service to people across Scotland.

On cancer, which is a subject of vital importance, the figures today, like all the waiting times figures across our NHS and the NHS in other parts of the UK, remain a challenge. Today's figures show that cancer referrals on the urgent treatment pathway in the last quarter were back to pre-pandemic levels, which is good. On the 31-day standard, the target is being met. That refers to the 31 days from the decision to treat to treatment starting. Ninety eight per cent of cases meet that target, and the median wait is four days. The 62-day target for referral to treatment is and has been more of a challenge, but more than eight out of 10 patients are being seen within that time, and the median wait is 43 days. A range of measures are being taken to improve performance against the 62-day target, and we will continue to focus on them.

On accident and emergency, as I said earlier, there has been a slight improvement this week. We are not complacent and we need to continue to focus on the measures to improve waiting times in accident and emergency. That involves actions right across the NHS, not just in our A and E departments. However, although there is much more to do, I say again that Scotland's core A and E services are the best performing in the UK. That says to me that, although we have more to do, the steps that are being taken are the right ones and we need to continue to focus on them.

**Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD):** The First Minister told Douglas Ross that vaccination passports are being brought in to stem the rise of Covid, but last week Professor Jonathan Montgomery told the COVID-19 Recovery Committee about a festival in Cornwall that chose to require vaccination passports on entry. Despite that measure, 5,000 attendees still caught Covid at the event.

The night-time industry has taken the Government to court, the Scottish Human Rights Commission has expressed grave concerns that it has not seen an evidential base for the scheme, and every Opposition party is opposed to it. The 18-day delay in enforcement is an admission that the Government and businesses are nowhere near ready, and we have evidence that the passports do not even work. Will the First Minister abandon this assault on the right to medical privacy?

**The First Minister:** No, because I want to do everything that is reasonably possible to keep people, and the country as a whole, as safe as possible from the risk of Covid over the winter months.

The point has been made—not just by me but by everybody, because it happens to be a fact—that vaccination does not eradicate the risk of transmission; nobody pretends that it does.

However, it reduces the risk of transmission, and significantly reduces the risk that somebody who gets Covid will become seriously unwell. The figures that Alex Cole-Hamilton has cited for a festival—I am sorry, but I cannot remember its location—would have potentially been much higher without the protection of vaccination. It is an important part of an overall package of measures to reduce the risk that Covid presents to us.

We will continue to work with businesses and to take pragmatic and sensible steps. As I said earlier, we are in a much better position than we could have hoped perhaps only a few weeks ago ever to be in. However, this winter will pose—not just to Scotland but to countries across the world—challenges that are potentially greater than any in our lifetimes. We must therefore do everything that we can to get through those challenges as safely as possible. If Covid certification can play even a small part in that, it is better than facing the risk of having to close certain businesses again over the winter period.

**Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP):** Face coverings remain an important mitigation in the fight against Covid-19. It is vital that staff who are asking the public to comply with the law in their places of work do not face abuse. Does the First Minister agree that any form of abuse, threats or violence that workers face as a result of simply doing their job is completely unacceptable, and will she advise on what steps are being taken to support workers who are in that position?

**The First Minister:** I agree whole-heartedly with Jackie Dunbar on the two interrelated points that she makes.

First, face coverings are an important mitigation against transmission of Covid. Some evidence for that has been published and reported just in the past couple of days. If we wear a face covering, we are helping to protect somebody else from the risk of our transmitting the virus to them and, if they wear a face covering, they are offering us the same protection. I therefore appeal to people across the country to continue with that. I know that it is inconvenient and not particularly pleasant, but it is an important measure to help with that collective protection.

Secondly, it is absolutely vital that people wear face coverings, understand the reasons for doing so, and do not in any way abuse staff who are working in the settings in which face coverings are still required. We have been consistent in that message, and I know that businesses across those sectors are doing a great deal to support their staff.

We should all take the opportunity to thank the staff who are working in those front-line occupations for the job that they are doing and the

contribution that they are making, and we should all recognise that we have a personal responsibility to do the right things to keep Covid under control.

**Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** The Night Time Industries Association Scotland has confirmed that it has instructed its lawyers to start proceedings against the Covid-19 vaccination certification policy. Does the First Minister accept that her Government rushed through these deeply flawed proposals without meaningful consultation? Today, we have heard that the Government is having to extend deadlines and even to give a grace period.

**The First Minister:** No, I do not accept that. It is not consistent or credible for the Conservatives to come here week after week and say, "Listen to businesses and do what they are asking," and then, when we do exactly that, to complain and moan about it.

The measure is a pragmatic way forward and will help with implementation. It is not a delay to implementation; it is a sensible measure to give businesses time, once the legal obligation comes into force, to test and adapt the arrangements that they put into place. The arrangements that will be set out further in guidance, later today, take a proportionate and common-sense approach.

Any organisation or individual in the country that we live in has the right to take legal action. I would never criticise any organisation for doing so if it thinks that it has a basis for that. Obviously, it would not be appropriate for me to comment, but the Government of course thinks carefully about the basis for all the steps that it takes in relation to Covid, and will continue to do so.

I will say one thing about all the steps that we have had to take over the past 18 months and are still required to take, which might be worth all of us—including me—reflecting on in the debates that we have in this chamber. Even if we disagree on the wisdom or otherwise of some of the steps, we are all trying to do the right things for the right reasons—to keep the country as safe as possible from Covid. Perhaps the tone of our discussions would benefit from all of us—including me—remembering that.

**Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP):** A number of my constituents work internationally, as one would expect in a constituency in the north-east. Will the First Minister give an update on the inclusion of vaccinations that are administered abroad in the Scottish vaccination certification system?

**The First Minister:** By the end of this week, people who have had a dose administered in another part of the common travel area and a second dose perhaps in Scotland will be able to

upload their first dose record through the NHS inform website and access their full vaccination record and QR code. For the purposes of domestic certification, we will accept proof of doses from each country in which somebody was vaccinated.

**Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):** The First Minister talked earlier about delayed discharge. Does she accept that many people who are being signposted into care homes do not want or need to go into care homes but are having to, because there is not a care package for them in their own home? Is she aware of the unacceptable and growing waiting list—in Fife, for example—for people who have been assessed to get a care package but cannot get one?

All that will put massive pressure on the NHS throughout this winter. Will the First Minister therefore consider a focused task group to look at what actions need to be taken to address that emergency now? We cannot wait three years for a national care service—we must tackle the problem now.

**The First Minister:** I agree. We are taking a range of actions to tackle the issue of delayed discharge now. Just a few days ago, the health secretary and I were discussing those actions in detail with our officials.

It is partly about increasing the resource that is available for social care, which we are doing and will continue to do in this session of Parliament. It is also absolutely about respecting people's choice. I think that we all agree that, where somebody has no medical or clinical requirement to be in hospital, it is not the best place for them. Supporting appropriate discharge—including where that is to care at home—is therefore really important. However, in many cases, a care home will be the best place for people.

Rightly or wrongly, over the course of the pandemic, some families will understandably have had concerns about their relatives being admitted to care homes. We therefore also need to assure people that care homes are good and appropriate places for people to be. A range of work is under way.

As we have warned for the past two years, we are facing a challenge around the social care workforce, which has in large part been exacerbated by the impact of Brexit, as we are seeing across many sectors. That will continue to be an added challenge in this area over the next months, and possibly beyond that. However, we are taking a range of steps as we build towards the national care service, which the Parliament will debate in full as that process develops.

**The Presiding Officer:** More members wish to ask a question than have already asked one. I



would be grateful if we could pick up the pace; otherwise, regrettably, some members will not be able to put a question.

**Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP):** I welcome the deployment of mobile Covid-19 vaccination units to university campuses and halls across Greater Glasgow and Clyde, such as Murano Street student village in my constituency last Saturday and Glasgow Caledonian University today. I commend the efforts of universities, the NHS and of course students to get vaccinated.

How is the Scottish Government monitoring vaccination levels among our student population, including specifically at large halls of residence, so that we do all that we can to ensure that student communities are as safe as possible?

**The First Minister:** As Bob Doris and other members will be aware, the statistics on vaccination uptake are primarily collected by Public Health Scotland and reported by it and the Government according to age group rather than by employment or education. The high uptake in age groups in which there are likely to be a lot of students suggests to us that uptake among students is high, but we continue to work hard with universities and colleges on a range of measures to help to ensure that students get vaccinated and protection is maximised as the new term develops. Drop-in clinics continue to operate and individuals can arrange appointments at times and locations that suit them.

We are in regular dialogue with Universities Scotland and Colleges Scotland and we have appointed a single point of contact in each health board for higher and further education institutions. We will continue to engage with health boards to support vaccine delivery for international and home-based students.

**Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con):** I have been contacted by a concerned parent who, as a result of the pandemic, was not sure whether her daughter Lilly was allowed to attend a GP's surgery for assistance. Subsequently, her daughter was passed from one practitioner to another, and she faces further health complications as a result.

In the light of reported difficulties with accessing in-person GP appointments, how can the First Minister ensure that people who need help can be seen in person as soon as possible?

**The First Minister:** First, on the individual case, if the member wishes to write to me or the health secretary, we will look into it. It would not be helpful or appropriate for me to comment on the case without having much more detail.

In general, face-to-face appointments with GPs are available. However, it is of course the case that some of the arrangements that were put in place during the pandemic and because of it, including the Near Me service and online and telephone consultation services, will, for some people, be more appropriate. Therefore, it is appropriate that GPs—who are working extremely hard, and we are deeply grateful to them for what they are doing—continue to strike a balance.

Of course we want face-to-face opportunities to increase as we come out of the pandemic and recover from it. We will continue to work with the British Medical Association and with GPs across the country to ensure that that is the case.

**Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP):** Will the First Minister say when the Covid mitigation measures in schools might be reviewed? The measures have an impact on many voluntary organisations, such as Earlston scout group, in my constituency, which cannot meet on school premises. The issue is becoming pressing as winter approaches, which will make meeting outdoors impractical.

**The First Minister:** I assure Christine Grahame and other members that all those mitigations remain under regular review. Indeed, the advisory sub-group on education and children's issues considered the mitigations that are currently in place in schools at its meeting just last week. That consideration included the use of schools for community purposes. We, alongside stakeholders, are considering the group's advice at present and will provide an update as soon as possible.

The mitigations that are still in place are in place for an important reason, which is that at this stage, they are considered necessary to keep the downward pressure on cases.

**Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con):** A Public Health Scotland submission for last week's meeting of the COVID-19 Recovery Committee highlighted a significant disparity in vaccination uptake in relation to ethnicity, with a 20 per cent difference in some groups. What is the Scottish Government doing to encourage vaccination uptake in all groups? What was done to measure the impact of introducing a vaccination passport on such disparities?

**The First Minister:** We continue to work to make sure that uptake is high, not just across the population as a whole but in different groups in the population. The issue to do with potentially lower rates of uptake among our ethnic minority communities has been a consideration all along, which is why we have worked with particular faith groups and taken steps to situate vaccination clinics in places of worship in some parts of the country—I have cited in the chamber the example

of Glasgow central mosque, in my constituency, which has been doing a fantastic job as a vaccination clinic.

It is important to stress that uptake rates across all groups in society are high—and much higher than we might have thought that they would be at the start of the programme. However, there are variations, and we will continue to do everything that we can to level them out and make sure that every group has the highest possible rate of uptake.

Equity and other considerations have been part of the planning of the vaccine certification scheme and will continue to be.

**Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP):** What assurances will be provided to Scottish football fans who live outside Scotland and have received both doses of the vaccine that they will have access to Hampden for the upcoming international qualifying matches?

**The First Minister:** Proof of a full course of vaccination will be accepted at venues for domestic purposes. Proof of vaccination will be accepted from across the UK and from Crown dependencies, as well as from members of the European Union Covid certification scheme. Tourists from other nations—for example, the United States—will need to provide the same proof of vaccination status that is currently accepted for entry into the UK. We want people who are visiting Scotland to be able to go to football matches or night-time venues, but we want to do everything possible to ensure that they, just like Scottish residents, can do so as safely as possible.

**Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green):** I am concerned about the decision to follow the UK Government's approach and end the requirement for double-vaccinated people who are travelling from non-red-list countries to Scotland to take a PCR test on departure. I appreciate the reasons for taking that decision, which the First Minister has set out. However, it will weaken our ability to prevent new variants from entering the country, which could still pose a serious risk to Scotland's Covid recovery.

Last week, I asked the First Minister to provide MSPs with the scientific evidence underpinning any such decision. Will she now do so, and can she provide a timescale for the announcement of the additional safeguards that she set out in her statement?

**The First Minister:** There is no particular scientific evidence beyond what I have said. It is a balanced judgment. I absolutely accept the concerns that Gillian Mackay has set out, and I share many of them. I have tried to be as candid as I can be about the difficulties in making that

judgment and the reasons why we have arrived where we have.

If there is a non-aligned position across the UK, the danger—in fact, the likelihood—is that, simply because of travel patterns, we would end up in a position in which people who were travelling back to the UK would simply route through English airports. We would therefore lose the public health benefit of testing anyway, and in the process we would also incur damage to our own aviation and travel sector. It is a pragmatic judgment.

On the issue of alternative surveillance measures, we are discussing that with Public Health Scotland and looking at potentially asking people who have returned to Scotland to take part in testing on a sample basis. We will set that out as quickly as possible, because it is important that we continue to have good surveillance through PCR testing so that we can also do genomic sequencing. We are very keen to do that quickly. To reassure travellers, I have said that such testing would not come at additional cost to them. We will set out the detail of that as quickly as possible.

**John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP):** The First Minister mentioned funding. How much has the Scottish Government spent on Covid so far, and how much has been received from Westminster?

**The First Minister:** I am happy to put the detail of that into the Scottish Parliament information centre or report it in the normal ways. We have allocated all the Covid funding notified by the UK Government towards our pandemic response.

The most recent formal allocation, in the autumn budget revision, was published earlier this week. The UK Government has confirmed £13.3 billion in additional Covid consequential to support the pandemic response: £8.6 billion in 2020-21 and £4.7 billion in 2021-22. All that has been allocated by the Scottish Government. We have also received an indication of up to £520 million of further support for health, but that is subject to Treasury confirmation and it has therefore not yet been formally added to Scottish Government budgets.

**Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP):** What measures are in place to help tenants who have fallen behind on their rent as a result of coronavirus and may therefore be at risk of eviction?

**The First Minister:** Throughout the pandemic, we have done everything that we can to support tenants in general, and in particular to support any who may be facing the threat of eviction.

Councils have now been allocated £10 million to give grants to tenants who have Covid-related rent

arrears and are consequently at risk of eviction. That brings our total pandemic support to tenants to almost £39 million. That additional money will make a big difference, but we continue to consider all ways in which we can provide practical support.

**Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab):** The legal obligation to present vaccine certification in order to attend large events and nightclubs is still coming into effect at 5 am on Friday. I ask the First Minister the same question that I raised with her two weeks ago. Many of my South Scotland constituents work in England, often for the NHS, so they were vaccinated there. As a result, they cannot automatically access a vaccine certificate from NHS Scotland. Will they be able to do so by Friday? Will their vaccination in England automatically be on their NHS Scotland records by 5 am on Friday?

**The First Minister:** The scheme will recognise people who were vaccinated in other countries, including in the rest of the UK and the common travel area, as long as they were vaccinated with a Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency approved vaccine. Work has been done in partnership with other parts of the UK to ensure that they will be recognised.

As with any aspect of the vaccination programme, I will not stand here and say that no individual will ever face any difficulties, whether in relation to the programme itself or the certification scheme. It would not be reasonable to say that, but there are processes in place to ensure that those things work well and we will continue to support them as the scheme comes into force and develops in the weeks ahead.

**Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP):** Despite, as we have seen, the severe consequences of a Covid case on board a CalMac ferry, earlier this month CalMac stated that compliance on mask wearing had dropped to around 50 per cent on some routes. I continue to hear anecdotal evidence about that. I appreciate that it is not the job of CalMac crews to enforce the law, but what more can be done to make ferry passengers—particularly those who are visitors, perhaps—aware of the law?

**The First Minister:** The recent incidents on board ferries are concerning and they are a reminder—there are many reminders—that the virus is still circulating, so we all need to continue to take care and think about our behaviour and our compliance with those important mitigations.

CalMac is already taking some steps to improve compliance on ferries. For example, it has increased the frequency of passenger announcements on face coverings and it continues to promote adherence to other baseline measures. Our guidance on travelling safely on

public transport is available through CalMac's website and social media channels.

**Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con):** On top of worrying accident and emergency figures and the lowest number of hospital beds for a decade, NHS staffing levels are of huge concern, despite the earlier bravado from the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care. Our amazing NHS Dumfries and Galloway staff are at breaking point, with 212 nursing and midwifery posts vacant—that is 10.3 per cent of posts, which is a record high. Those worrying staff shortages are repeated across Dumfries and Galloway and are getting worse.

We have repeatedly called for an NHS winter plan to be published as soon as possible. Will the First Minister confirm whether a plan will be published and, if so, when?

**The First Minister:** The NHS has been planning for winter, is planning for winter and continues to plan for winter each and every day. There are record numbers of people working in our national health service across Scotland. This Government has presided over increases across almost all professional groups in our national health service and we will continue to support increased staffing over this parliamentary session as we implement the NHS recovery plan.

I concede that it is difficult to recruit right now to health and care services, just as it is difficult to recruit to haulage companies and for agricultural businesses to recruit people to pick fruit and vegetables, for example. The reason for that, which is why it is galling to have that question posed by a Conservative member, is the damage that has been done and is now being felt because of Brexit. A bit of humility on those matters from Conservative members would go a long way.

**David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP):** It has become clear that the travel industry still faces serious challenges on a daily basis. Customer uncertainty is having a devastating impact on our traditional high street travel agencies. My discussions with some of those agencies in the Kirkcaldy area have revealed that although most have reported a healthy number of bookings for next year, the majority have serious doubts about their ability to continue operating until then. What steps can the Scottish Government take to help them through this difficult period and protect local jobs?

**The First Minister:** I recognise the significant challenges that travel agents have experienced as a result of the various restrictions that have been in place over much of the past 18 months. Since the start of the pandemic, we have done everything we can to support travel agents; they have benefited from a range of support including

the travel agent support fund, the strategic framework business fund grant scheme, restart grants, non-domestic rates relief and, through the UK Government—although these are soon coming to an end—furlough payments for staff.

Without further consequential from the UK Government, we do not have funding available right now to direct additional support towards travel agents or others in the travel sector. We are actively engaging with the UK Government on a potential additional package of support specifically for travel agents, but so far we have not received a response. We will continue to press the issue with the UK Government.

**Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** The First Minister will be aware of the enormous strain on the provision of mental health treatment across the country, which has been exacerbated by Covid. The chief executive of NHS Highland has told me that personnel shortages are the problem, not funding, and that she is not happy with the offering in terms of responsiveness and support. Can the First Minister confirm what action is being taken to secure specialist support in the Highlands from outwith NHS Highland before more constituents lose their lives?

**The First Minister:** Edward Mountain is right that funding is vital but, if that funding is not able to secure the recruitment of staff, it will not have the desired effect. A range of support is in place to help recruitment across the national health service and social care, and we will continue to support NHS Highland and other health boards in recruiting the staff they need.

I go back to a point that I made earlier on. It was the case that, across the NHS and social care, and across the economy more generally, many people who came to Scotland from other European countries provided great contributions and support. However, many of them have now been lost to our public services and our economy as a result of the wrong-headed ending of freedom of movement, for which we are all now paying a significant price. I take my responsibility for supporting the NHS to deal with those challenges, but perhaps Conservative members could take that message to their bosses in Westminster and spell out to them in no uncertain terms the damage that Brexit is doing to our national health service and social care across the country.

## Universal Credit

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

The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-01405, in the name of Shona Robison, on keeping the lifeline—a call to the United Kingdom Government to cancel its cut to universal credit.

15:23

**The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government (Shona Robison):** It is a pity that the leader of the Scottish Conservatives is not staying to hear the concerns about the cut that his UK colleagues are going to make to universal credit.

We should not need to have this debate. We should not have to consider the hardship that the UK Government's decision—*[Interruption.]*

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Mr Balfour, that is enough.

**Shona Robison:** Douglas Ross has a vote, of course. Perhaps listening to the debate would help him to make his mind up about how he should vote on these matters.

We should not have to consider the hardship that the UK Government's decision to cut universal credit by £20 per week will cause to 6 million people across the UK. We should not have to debate a cut that will push 60,000 people in Scotland, including 20,000 children, into poverty. We should not need to use the chamber to add our voices to the increasingly urgent calls for the UK Government to reverse that senseless and harmful decision.

Everyone in the chamber is aware of the enormous social and economic disruption of the Covid-19 pandemic. The number of people in Scotland who are in receipt of universal credit has more than doubled since the start of the pandemic, to around 480,000 as of July this year. The UK Government should already have done the right thing. As the Government with the full powers over universal credit, at a time of rising prices and costs and at a time of increasing poverty, it should already have said that it would make the £20 uplift permanent.

**Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con):** Given that it is not included in her motion, will the cabinet secretary outline where the Scottish ministers believe the £9 billion that is needed for that increase to remain permanently in place will come from?

**Shona Robison:** As a Conservative member told me last week, it is about the political choices that are being made. The political choice of the UK Tory Government is not to continue the £20 uplift for the most vulnerable people in our society at a time of rising fuel and food prices. That position is unsustainable.

**Miles Briggs:** The cabinet secretary talks about political decisions. Last week, I lodged an amendment that would have seen a doubling of the Scottish child payment. Was it a political decision that Scottish National Party members chose not to support me in that vote?

**Shona Robison:** As the member knows, we are going to double the Scottish child payment. We are going to give more money to families—the Conservatives are going to take money from Scottish families. This is the fundamental difference: the Scottish Government gives money to families while the UK Tory Government takes money away from families.

Across the UK—it is not just an issue for Scotland—people are facing a perfect storm of the end of the furlough scheme, a hike in national insurance contributions and rising energy and food prices. The cut threatens to compound those issues and deal millions of households a hammer blow of hardship. Analysis from the Scottish Government shows that the cut to universal credit is set to reduce UK welfare expenditure in Scotland by over £460 million by 2023-24. That will be the biggest overnight reduction to a basic rate of social security for more than 70 years.

At the start of the pandemic, the UK Government did the right thing in recognising that the standard allowance of universal credit was not sufficient to live on. The Chancellor of the Exchequer at the time that said that it was intended to “strengthen the safety net” that was available to people.

**Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con):** Will the member take an intervention?

**Shona Robison:** I will not, just now.

Analysis from the Legatum Institute that was published last week shows that the uplift prevented 840,000 people across the UK, including 290,000 children, from being pushed into poverty. A recent report from Citizens Advice showed that, as a result of the cut, more than one third of universal credit recipients across the UK would be in debt after paying just their essential bills.

**Stephen Kerr:** Will the member give way?

**Shona Robison:** I will be happy to take an intervention if the member can answer why he thinks that a third of universal credit recipients

should be in debt after his Government cuts universal credit.

**Stephen Kerr:** The cabinet secretary talked earlier about the right thing to do. All parties across the Parliament can agree that the right thing to do is help people to get off universal credit. The best thing that we can do for people is help them to find work. Does the cabinet secretary welcome the £3.2 billion investment made by the UK Government in doubling the number of work coaches to 27,000?

**Shona Robison:** Does that not just reveal the Tories’ thinking? They do not even recognise that a huge number of people on universal credit are already in work. Does Mr Kerr not even know that? He fails to understand the position—as do so many Tories—that people on universal credit face.

The Legatum Institute’s research highlights the need for the additional money. The chancellor said that the uplift was required

“to benefit our most vulnerable households”.

Those people are no less vulnerable now. If anything, with the rising cost of living and a national insurance hike on the way, they are in an even more precarious position than ever. Once again, on behalf of the Scottish Government and on behalf of the Parliament, I call on the UK Government to reverse the planned cut.

It is not just the Scottish Government and Parliament that have expressed their outrage and alarm at the planned cut. Calls for the lifeline to be kept have come from organisations and individuals from across the political spectrum. The four social security committees and the four children’s commissioners of the UK nations have written to the UK Government, too, standing up for the people they represent and calling for that lifeline to be maintained. From the Conservative Party alone, Baroness Ruth Davidson, Alexander Stewart and all six former work and pensions secretaries since 2010 have called for a reversal. Surely, Tory members do not think that every single one of them is wrong. The Scottish Government has also written to the UK Government on eight occasions throughout the pandemic to ask it to make the uplift permanent and extend it to legacy benefits. The unity from such a diverse range of voices—it is not common—that are urging the UK Government to reconsider should make it clear that this is not a question of partisan politics; it is about doing the economically, socially and morally right thing.

I am certain that colleagues across the chamber will share my grave concerns about the UK Government’s repeated refusal to conduct any impact assessments of the cut’s effects. Most recently, the then Minister for Welfare Delivery confirmed on 17 September that the Department

for Work and Pensions had not analysed and would not analyse the cut's effects; yet the *Financial Times* quoted an anonymous UK Government official confessing that it was well understood that the cut would see homelessness, poverty and food bank usage soar, which we all know to be the case.

It is hard to fathom why the UK Government has chosen to proceed with the cut without properly assessing its impact—so much so that the United Nations special rapporteur on extreme poverty described the cut as “deliberately retrogressive” and “unconscionable”. It is no wonder that he felt that he had no choice but to write to the Prime Minister to call for the cut to be reversed, while he noted that the UK Government's decision to remove the uplift might fail to conform to international human rights law.

Perhaps the most sobering insight into what the cut will mean comes directly from the people who will be affected. Earlier this month, a recipient of universal credit spoke movingly to the Work and Pensions Committee about the effect that the cut will have on his family. He said:

“Before the uplift was introduced we were already on a knife edge to do with food versus fuel. The uplift sent some relief and for that to be removed is going to leave us with that big question again: do I go hungry, do my kids go hungry or do we keep the house warm?”

That is the terrible choice that too many families will face this winter unless the decision is reversed.

I remind everyone that the cut is not inevitable and that it is not happening because it is expected to improve the lives of those who will be affected—we know that it will not do that. A conscious decision has been made to remove support from people who rely on the uplift as a lifeline that allows basic needs to be met and them to live with a modicum of dignity.

The Prime Minister has repeatedly defended the cut by suggesting that taking money away from people who receive universal credit will encourage them to take up work—we have heard that repeated today.

**Stephen Kerr:** That is not what I said.

**Shona Robison:** The member might do well to listen for once. More than a third of universal credit recipients are already in work, and it is, at best, doubtful that placing additional stress and hardship on them will make it easier for them to find and work longer hours.

The UK Government's argument also ignores the estimated 2.7 million people who are not expected to work or who are expected to work more limited hours because of illness, disability or

caring commitments. They deserve to live in dignity, too.

An adequate social security system is needed all the time—not just during pandemics. As such, it is essential to recognise that the payment level of universal credit was not sufficient before the pandemic and stands to be even less so after the cut. Years of a freeze on the UK Government's benefits meant that universal credit had not kept pace with rising living costs, so maintaining the uplift is the absolute bare minimum that the UK Government should do. It should also take the opportunity now to fix the many shortcomings with universal credit that have been well documented for years.

It is neither practical nor sustainable for the Scottish Government to mitigate all the effects of the UK Government's cuts, but we will do what we can within the powers that we have. As we rebuild from the pandemic, we have an opportunity to ground our recovery in changes that will make Scotland a more equal and inclusive society.

In 2020-21, we invested about £2.5 billion to support low-income households, which included nearly £1 billion to support children directly. We made more than £1 billion of additional resource available to help communities through the Covid pandemic and to build resilience in public services, and we continue to provide the support that is needed to help people through the perfect storm that we will face in the months ahead.

In the Parliament, we will go further and take ambitious steps to tackle child poverty, promote social justice and level the playing field for young people from low-income backgrounds and their families.

**Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab):** On that particular point, and on the points about the Scottish Government's responsibility for reducing child poverty, does the cabinet secretary agree that, given all that we will hear today, doubling the Scottish child payment immediately and then doubling it again, to get us on track to meet the child poverty targets, is crucial? Will she also commit to retaining eligibility for the Scottish child payment for the 4,000 families who will lose it if they lose their universal credit?

**Shona Robison:** As Pam Duncan-Glancy knows, we have set out how we will double the Scottish child payment. The doubling of the Scottish child payment is not in doubt and has never been in doubt. We will deal with that and take it forward as part of the budget discussions. I am happy to continue to discuss those issues with Pam Duncan-Glancy.

Regarding the support that we are already providing to families, we have increased the school clothing grant to £120 for primary school

kids and to £150 for secondary school kids, and we are delivering provision of free school meals during school holidays, which will support about 148,000 children and young people. We are also doubling the carers allowance supplement with an extra investment that is forecast to be £21 million, which marks the second time that the Government has doubled that benefit.

We have declared a national mission to eradicate child poverty. While the UK Government is criticised by the Work and Pensions Committee for its lack of targets or strategy for tackling child poverty, the Scottish Government will publish its second tackling child poverty delivery plan next March, backed by £50 million over the lifespan of the plan.

We will double the Scottish child payment to £80 every four weeks as soon as we can in this parliamentary session. In the interim, we have introduced bridging payments of £520, to be paid in both 2021 and 2022, for those who get free school meals due to their families being on low incomes. *[Interruption.]*

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** The cabinet secretary will have to wind up now, I am afraid.

**Shona Robison:** Despite our best efforts, the universal credit cut will undermine much of the positive effect of the Scottish child payment. That is just not acceptable, so I call on all colleagues across the chamber to make their voices and the voices of their constituents heard in a unified call on the UK Government to do the right thing and reverse its decision to cut universal credit while extending the uplift to legacy benefits. I call on Parliament to support the motion in my name.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees, along with opposition parties in the UK Parliament, that the UK Government's planned reduction to universal credit should be reversed; recognises the cross-party efforts of opposition parties in the UK Parliament and the social security committees of each of the four nations' parliaments and assembly in this aim; notes Scottish Government analysis that the reduction of universal credit could reduce welfare expenditure in Scotland by £461 million a year by 2023-24 and push 60,000 people, including 20,000 children, into poverty; agrees that the inadequacy of the payment is just one of many issues with universal credit, alongside the two-child cap and the abhorrent so-called "rape clause", the five-week wait for a first payment, the benefit sanctions regime and the so-called "bedroom tax"; believes that this reflects the UK Government's uncompassionate approach to welfare, which has been challenged by opposition parties across the UK, and acknowledges Scotland's human rights-based approach to social security.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I recognise that the nature of the debate will excite emotions—people feel passionately about this subject. However, I encourage all members to treat one another with respect.

There is a bit of time in hand. If members have a contribution to make, please make it through an intervention and I will give members their time back.

15:37

**Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con):** "Unprecedented"—a word that has been used time and again by politicians throughout the Covid-19 public health emergency. The pandemic has, indeed, demanded that Governments act, and that unprecedented decisions be taken, with unprecedented levels of support being put in place. The United Kingdom Government has delivered one of the most comprehensive economic responses in the world to support families, jobs and businesses. Over this year and last, the UK Government has provided more than £407 billion to support families, jobs and businesses, which is more than almost any other country in the world. That has included protecting around 14 million jobs through the furlough scheme and self-employment schemes.

As part of the pandemic response, UK ministers have delivered £14.5 billion in additional funding to Scottish Government ministers since the start of the pandemic. In responding to the exceptional circumstances of the pandemic, the UK Government increased the standard universal credit allowance by £20 per week. In March this year, the UK Government agreed and announced, in addition, a six-month extension to that uplift.

**Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab):** Does Miles Briggs believe that, with the scrapping of the uplift, the crisis that we have faced is at an end?

**Miles Briggs:** With restrictions now being lifted and with the economy opening up, we must ensure that there is a different focus. That focus must be on a jobs-led recovery in the country—in Scotland and in our United Kingdom as a whole. That is why the UK Government has delivered a comprehensive £30 billion plan for jobs to help to get people back into work.

**Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP):** Even if we leave to one side whether the mythical jobs-based recovery will actually come to fruition, what does Miles Briggs say to people who are on universal credit or working tax credits right now who are not expected to find work, or to find more work, but will see their incomes being slashed at a time when their costs are rising?

**Miles Briggs:** We called for the uplift to be extended during the worst of the pandemic. As to the so-called "mythical jobs" that Neil Gray referred to, the support that has been put in place has helped people to sustain work. That has been critical for many people on low incomes.

We have already seen support being put in place to help people to get back into the workplace. As I was outlining, the £30 billion plan for jobs is absolutely key to that. To date, it has already helped to support more than 69,000 young people into work through the kickstart scheme, thereby giving them the best start in life. Kickstart gives young people who are at risk of long-term unemployment the chance to build their confidence and skills in the workplace, and to gain the experience that will improve their chances of going on to find long-term sustainable work. I hope that that is something that everyone in the chamber wants.

**Pam Duncan-Glancy:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Miles Briggs:** Will I get some time back, Presiding Officer?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Yes, you will get a bit of time back.

**Pam Duncan-Glancy:** Does Miles Briggs recognise that, in the past year, more than 76,000 more disabled people have become unemployed as a result of the pandemic, and that women are more likely to have had to give up paid work to carry out unpaid work. This morning, at the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee, we heard that that can cost £15 million a day. Does the member recognise that the world of work is not the world of work that his party thinks it is, and that it is deeply unequal for many people who live in Scotland and the United Kingdom?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Mr Briggs, I will give you most of that time back.

**Miles Briggs:** Thank you. I share Pam Duncan-Glancy's concerns. We have discussed the matter at the Social Justice and Social Security Committee. Why is it that fewer disabled people in Scotland have opportunities for employment than do those who live in the rest of the United Kingdom? Ministers are scoffing, but they should be answering that vital question.

Although Pam Duncan-Glancy criticises the UK Government for not maintaining the uplift, we do not know what Labour's plans are, other than that it said at the previous election that it would completely scrap universal credit. Therefore, we need to get details from Labour about its real view on the issue.

The restart scheme, which I mentioned earlier, is vital because we need a national mission and a national priority to get people back into long-term employment. The UK Government has invested £2.3 billion to hire and retain work coaches, which has resulted in the number of coaches doubling to nearly 27,000. It was planned that that would be

done by the end of the financial year, but it was achieved in just eight months. The programme gives job seekers the personalised and intensive support that they need to move back into work. *[Interruption.]* I am sorry, I cannot take an intervention. I only have two minutes left and have already taken three interventions.

Since April 2020, 1.6 million people have moved from unemployment into employment through the universal credit intensive work search regime. The UK Government has also invested more than £200 million in the job entry targeted support scheme for people who have been unemployed for more than three months, which will support applicants through provision of skills in curriculum vitae writing and interviews, provide job search advice, and provide tailored support, which is something that we all hope for. The scheme has already helped to support more than 6,000 people in Scotland alone.

We desperately need more training opportunities for the huge number of skilled-job vacancies that exist across many sectors in Scotland today. The loss of more than 100,000 college training places under the Scottish National Party Government has clearly had a hugely detrimental impact on our college sector, as well as on the training opportunities that are available for many people. Making sure that priority is given to training programmes, and the full return of support and delivery of apprenticeship schemes, are also crucial in helping people to get back into work.

Last night, I watched the cabinet secretary on television talking about the growing housing crisis that the SNP is presiding over here in the capital. She said that difficult decisions have had to be taken with the limited budgets that are available. Every Government in every part of the world is finding that to be the case. As a United Kingdom, we face a difficult decade ahead in recovering from the social and economic impacts of the pandemic. The Scottish Conservatives always believe that the United Kingdom's best days are ahead of us, so it is vital that the Scottish Government work constructively with UK Government ministers in pursuit of a jobs-led recovery from the pandemic.

I move amendment S6M-01405.1, to leave out from "agrees" to end and insert:

"welcomes the support that universal credit has provided to half a million people in Scotland throughout the COVID-19 pandemic; further welcomes the decision to extend the temporary £20 per week uplift for six months during the height of the pandemic, as called for by parties across the Scottish Parliament; believes that, with the removal of most restrictions, this is the right time for the uplift to be reviewed; notes that the introduction of universal credit has been a key driver of employment and contributed to employment levels rising to record levels before the



pandemic; further notes that the UK's unemployment rate has now fallen for six consecutive months; welcomes that the UK Government's Kickstart Scheme has already helped 63,000 young people into new positions; notes that UK Government spending during the pandemic has delivered an additional £14.5 billion for the Scottish Government, and calls on the Scottish Government to work constructively with the UK Government in the pursuit of a jobs-led recovery from the pandemic."

15:45

**Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab):** I am proud to open the debate for Scottish Labour. The cut to universal credit is cruel and heartless; in some cases, it could even be deadly. Scottish Labour, as well as our colleagues in Westminster and Opposition parties across the United Kingdom, have been calling for the UK Conservative Government to cancel the cut. I welcome the opportunity to come together with colleagues to send a strong message to the UK Conservative Government that Scotland, and this Parliament, do not support that callous move.

Removing the £20 uplift will reduce social security to the lowest level in decades and will end, once and for all, any pretence about there being a fair and just recovery from the pandemic. Forget all the rhetoric about levelling up—this is simply part of a race to the bottom.

At the outset of the pandemic, the Tory Government rightly recognised that social security levels were simply too low to enable people to afford even the bare essentials. It brought in the £20 uplift, but only for some people, as it did not give the uplift to the millions of people who claim legacy benefits, many of whom are disabled. That is discrimination.

Nonetheless, the UK Government uplifted universal credit because it recognised the poverty that people were experiencing. It must recognise that the situation has not changed. It existed before the pandemic and has been made worse by the pandemic. People will still need the extra £20 a week after the pandemic. The uplift was not a treat; it was a material recognition that people were being left to a life in poverty and, in some cases, they were being left destitute by a failing social security system that has been gutted by the Tory Government.

For millions of people, slashing their money now will be an assault on their basic human rights. The cut has not even taken place yet, but the increase in anxiety is already palpable. Research by the Trussell Trust has found that one in four people believes that they are very likely to have to skip a meal if the cut goes ahead. That is the equivalent of 115,000 people in Scotland.

Removing the uplift will leave people struggling to keep warm, too. The same research found that

the equivalent of 101,000 people across Scotland will very likely soon be unable to afford to pay their heating bills. Just this morning, Citizens Advice Scotland published research showing that nearly 400,000 people have already missed an energy payment because they have found themselves short of money.

We know that the additional £20 a week has been used for essentials and that people use the money in their local economy. Taking it back will do untold damage to people and their communities. It is the last thing that people who are already struggling to make ends meet need.

The Tories would have us believe that there is a choice between encouraging people to work and maintaining the £20 uplift. That argument is not credible. The argument that the Tory Government is removing the uplift because it wants to raise living standards through work does not stand up.

Universal credit, for all its faults, of which there are many—today's motion highlights just some of them—is built to make it easier for those claiming it to get into and stay in work. Taking £20 a week out of people's pockets will leave many without the means that they need to get to work. In fact, the Trussell Trust found that one in five people is unlikely to be able to travel to work or to essential appointments because they will not have the money to do so. Furthermore, the notion that there are swathes of well-paid, secure and unionised jobs, with enough hours to get by, just waiting for people to swoop into, does not hold up.

We support the Scottish Government motion because it is right and necessary that we all stand together to call out this callous decision and the damage that it will do to families across Scotland. However, I want to be clear to both Governments that we need more than words; we need deeds, too. It is imperative that the Scottish Government uses the maximum available resources to address poverty and inequality. I also want it to take real and bold action to end poverty and inequality.

For example, as it stands, 4,000 families are set to lose out on the Scottish child payment when the removal of the £20 uplift kicks in. The Scottish Government has the power to prevent those people from having their pockets hit twice. I make a plea to all parties to bring certainty for those families today.

The truth is that, for far too long, Scotland has been failed twice over—by a callous Tory Government and by a Scottish Government that at times prefers to sit on its hands, or point fingers and place blame. Right now, when it matters most, the Scottish Government is not using the powers or the money that are available to it to take the bold and ambitious action that is needed to tackle the stark poverty and inequality in Scotland.

On the watch of both Governments, poverty has been climbing. If that does not stop, we will not only fail future generations but undo the progress that has been made. I have to say that that progress, especially on child poverty, was made under previous Labour Governments.

We must recognise that, although the cut will be a catastrophe, the prospect of the uplift did not even exist when the Parliament unanimously agreed to set child poverty targets. We must meet those targets—there can be no caveats. Therefore, although I stand alongside the Scottish Government to call out the cruel and damaging cut, I also hold fast to my commitment to push both Governments to go harder and faster on poverty right now.

Scottish Labour, alongside the third sector and faith leaders from across Scotland, has called and will continue to call on the Scottish Government to double the Scottish child payment immediately, and again in a year. It has refused to do that, so far. I say to the Scottish Government that, although it is absolutely right to call out the UK Government's actions, and we must do that, it should also recognise that it, too, must act.

We on the Labour benches will not allow either Government to fail our people—to fail to meet this moment and step up. That is why we will continue to put forward bold ideas. The Scottish National Party Government talks a good human rights game but, as the evidence shows and as I heard in committee this morning, it has not walked the walk yet. It does not put its money where its mouth is.

People were struggling before the pandemic, and the pandemic made things worse, so they are struggling even more and they need action. We must stand here and stand strong against all policies that push people into poverty. We can and must shout loud about how cruel and callous the Tory Government cut is. However, we must do more than that. We must also use the powers of the Parliament in the way in which they were intended, which is to make policy decisions that transform people's lives. The Tories must cancel the cut and the SNP must prove that it, too, will do what it takes to end poverty and inequality, in deeds, not words.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** You must wind up now.

**Pam Duncan-Glancy:** With the stakes higher than ever, it is imperative that we use every possible lever that we have. None of us should rest until we do.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I remind members who are participating in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons. Members

who make an intervention and plan to speak later in the debate will have to press their button again.

15:51

**Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD):** Andrew Bowie has 3,620, David Mundell has 6,050, David Duguid has 6,280, John Lamont has 7,150, Alister Jack has 8,190 and Douglas Ross has 6,110. Those are the numbers of families in those politicians' constituencies who will be directly impacted by the cuts to universal credit. The politicians can stand by and watch that happen to their constituents or they can stand up for them now, make their voices heard and, more important, make their votes count against the cut.

The measure could mean a £1,040 cut to people's income or 22,000 people being plunged into poverty across the UK, according to the Child Poverty Action Group. The £20 is not a treat; it is a necessity for families, whose costs continue to rise. Their costs have not gone down just because the impact of the virus is potentially waning. Their costs are going up and at such a time they need more support, not less.

The Trussell Trust is right to point out that the move could force 82,000 people in Scotland alone to use food banks, one in four people to skip a meal, one in five to be unable to heat their home and one in five to be unable to get to work. That is especially ironic because, apparently, the cut is designed to get people into work. If they cannot get to work, they will not earn any more money than they are earning now.

The Conservatives seem to be concerned about the cost of the £20 rise to the overall Exchequer, but they have also said that work is the best route out of poverty. If they had any confidence in their multibillion-pound so-called work plan, they would not be cutting universal credit, because if all those people went into better-paid work there would not be a demand on universal credit. Therefore, their plan does not work.

The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health has been clear that there is a link between poverty and poor child health outcomes. At the other end of the age scale, Age Scotland is concerned about 106,301 people aged over 50 who are dependent on universal credit. The cut will affect all age ranges.

It is important to recognise that the cut will impact on people who were at the front line of the pandemic, such as cleaners, carers, hairdressers and shop workers. All those people stood up and defended us when we needed people to go out and do their jobs, but the UK Government does not recognise the necessity of providing support for them.

I hope that the Scottish Government responds to Pam Duncan-Glancy's point about the eligibility criteria, because the minister did not respond specifically to it. Four thousand families in Scotland will lose out on the child payment as a result of the change in eligibility criteria. The Scottish Government needs to step up and make up the difference, because it is important that those families do not lose out as a result.

I hope that Parliament comes together. I hope that the Conservatives on the benches opposite me recognise the errors of the policy, and that, if nothing else, they stand up for all those in their constituencies who I mentioned earlier. The Conservatives should stand up, make their voices heard and show that they care.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** We move to the open debate. We have a little time in hand, but I encourage anyone who makes an intervention to do so as briefly as possible.

15:55

**Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP):** How on earth are we here, at this 11th hour, still debating whether the UK Government should keep a lifeline in place or, within days, make the single biggest cut to social security since the second world war and take this form of social security support to its lowest level in 30 years?

It is to the UK Government's credit that it recognised at the start of the pandemic that universal credit was not paid at a sufficient level to live on and so it needed to provide the uplift to avoid social and economic catastrophe. That was little wonder, because universal credit is a shadow of what was initially proposed and has been a cash cow for the austerity cuts meted out first by the Lib Dem-Tory coalition, then even more brutally by the majority Tory Government. In all, £37 billion has been removed from social security and, by extension, from our constituencies by UK Government social security cuts since 2010.

**Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con):** The cabinet secretary has a political choice. You have a choice on Thursday to help carers have certainty for 2025. Will you vote for my amendment on Thursday morning?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Speak through the chair, Mr Balfour.

**Neil Gray:** This is a tale of two Governments. One Government is investing in giving carers additional support that is not available to carers elsewhere in the UK, and one Government—*[Interruption.]*—is cutting social security. *[Interruption.]* It is very clear—

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Mr Kerr, those are enough sedentary interventions.

**Neil Gray:** Thank you, Presiding Officer.

The £20 per week uplift, which we know has made such a difference to people over the past year, has not even made up for all the cuts that I have described, which just goes to show the scale of what has gone before. According to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, even with the uplift in place, families who are unable to find work are getting £1,600 less per year than they would have done in 2011. Families with children are even worse off, receiving around £3,000 less than they would have done 10 years ago.

At the start of the pandemic, there was a recognition that circumstances outwith the control of households in receipt of universal credit were going to impact on them. Those of us who are living in the real world can see a similar storm coming now for people in low-income households. Analysis by the Resolution Foundation shows that four in 10 households on universal credit will see a 13 per cent rise in their energy bills, at the same time as their universal credit support is cut by £20 per week. Then, with the Brexit-induced heavy goods vehicle crisis thundering on, food prices are set to rise by 5 per cent in the run-up to Christmas. Inflation is rising at a record rate, slapping more costs on household budgets, which the UK Government wants to hit again with a national insurance tax rise. UK Government policies are hiking costs and cutting incomes.

How many more hours will the care worker, the delivery driver, the cleaner and the shop worker need to find to make up for the cut? Analysis from the Institute for Public Policy Research shows that a lone parent working 48 hours a week cannot reach a living income unless they are paid more than the real living wage. Those people are our key workers. The Tories were lauding them during the pandemic, but now they are hammering them with cuts to their incomes, forcing them into in-work poverty and to food banks.

What are those who are not even supposed to find work meant to do? Miles Briggs and the UK Government have refused to answer that question. Those who are already struggling with a long-term illness or disability have no means to increase their income through work. They will not benefit from the so-called UK jobs plan, and they have suffered the lion's share of the £37 billion in cuts. People with a disability are already more likely to be in poverty. Now the UK Government will be forcing them deeper below the poverty line.

The Tory amendment does not even stand up to scrutiny from one of their own. The former DWP secretary of state Stephen Crabb gave a commendable speech in the House of Commons a couple of weeks ago. He admitted making a big mistake when he was secretary of state—one that the Scottish Tories want to repeat with their

amendment. That mistake was to believe that cutting social security would increase engagement with the employment market. Instead, it increases in-work poverty, destitution and mental health problems, creating a vicious circle.

When it can choose not to, why is the UK Government choosing to put our fellow citizens through unbearable hardship? The cut will strip support from 10,500 of my Airdrie and Shotts constituents. It will impoverish 60,000 people in Scotland, including 20,000 children. It is immoral economic madness. The campaign to reinstate it—if it is not stopped next week—starts now.

16:00

**Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con):** The £20 uplift to universal credit was just one part of a £9 billion package of social security spending introduced by the UK Government to protect the most vulnerable in our society from the worst of the pandemic. When it was first announced by the chancellor in March 2020, it immediately provided financial relief to families affected by the pandemic and sat alongside other measures such as the uprating of child benefit, guardian's allowance and relief thresholds, and a one-off £500 payment for the recipients of working tax credit. The DWP is not often praised, but it has really risen to the challenge during the pandemic.

An independent review of the UK Government's temporary Covid measures by the Social Security Advisory Committee noted that

"the rapid response on a huge scale by the Department for Work and Pensions ... to support social security and tax credit claimants during the pandemic has been very successful".

It added that the universal credit system performed

"remarkably well under pressure",

with a number of critical successes such as

"rapidly adapting the claims process, suspending conditionality"

and speeding up payments. *[Interruption.]* Not now; I want to make progress.

We cannot escape the fact that the £20 uplift to universal credit, which has already been extended for six months, has always been a temporary measure. As the economy reawakens, the focus for any Government should be to get the country back to work. All UK Administrations face that challenge, but the UK Government is leading the way with its plan for jobs.

The kickstart scheme is just one prong of the strategy, with £2 billion invested and more than 63,000 young people now in kickstart jobs. More than 2,500 young people begin kickstart jobs

every week. That is a remarkable number. *[Interruption.]* Not now. As a result, it is only right that my colleague Miles Briggs has mentioned kickstart in his amendment. It is a great programme and deserves more recognition from members here. *[Interruption.]* No, I gave way last week. I want to make progress today.

There is also the £2.9 billion restart scheme, which provides support worth around £2,000 to more than 1 million long-term unemployed people on universal credit. The number of work coaches has been doubled to 27,000 and £2.3 billion has been invested in recruiting them, and 1.6 million people have moved from unemployment into work since April 2020. The job entry targeted support scheme has been given £200 million and has supported almost 6,000 people in Scotland. A million people in receipt of pension credit have been given a £140 discount on their energy bills. The national living wage has been boosted to £8.91 per hour.

It is easy for the SNP to point the finger of blame when it comes to social security, even if its own system is far from perfect. To say, as many do, that the UK Government has not done enough to support those who need it most is just not true.

The decision to end the uplift in universal credit was not taken lightly by the UK Government—such decisions never are. However, as I have outlined, the UK Government and the DWP have gone above and beyond in standing up for the most vulnerable in our society.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I call Marie McNair, to be followed by Alex Rowley. I ask for speeches of about four minutes. We do not have a lot of time in hand.

16:04

**Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP):** I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate about the need to cancel the Westminster Government's plan to cut universal credit and working tax credit by £20 a week, although I am astounded that we need such a debate. What rational Government that had the true interests of the people at its heart would ever think that, at such a difficult time, cutting this lifeline to many people would be a good idea? The plan lacks compassion, it is cruel, and it will literally take the food out of people's mouths. It will mean that many families will be unable to heat their homes at a time when energy costs are spiralling out of control.

I hope that this debate, along with the pressures from everywhere else, will make the heartless Tory Government see sense and end its plan to make the cut. However, we have certainly got one thing from this debate: it tells the people of

Scotland everything that they need to know about the Tories.

As a member of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee, I can assure Parliament that we are extremely concerned about the cut. We have taken a united four-nations approach with other social security committees to call for its reversal. We heard from the Child Poverty Action Group that the cut will put more than 20,000 children into poverty.

Most people on universal credit are working, are unfit to work or have caring responsibilities. The Westminster Government's attempt to minimise the likely impact of the removal of the £20 uplift has been found to be disingenuous and inaccurate. Thérèse Coffey, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, even suggested that people taking on an extra couple of hours' work would fully mitigate the cut. That is, of course, not true, and it was a shameful attempt to spin away the misery and hurt that the Tories will inflict on our families. Bill Scott, the chair of the Poverty and Inequality Commission, pointed out in evidence to our committee that a person on the minimum wage would have to work for an extra nine hours, because of universal credit's clawback system—of course, that assumes that work is available and that the employee can take it on.

Instead of using such misleading rhetoric—I note that there is more of that in the Tory amendment—we need the Tories to announce that the cut will not go ahead and that families will not have to face impossible choices that will inflict devastating hardship at such a difficult time. We heard in the chamber last week that the Tories were lobbying to have the planned cut reversed, but we see from their amendment that that was just more rhetoric to get them out of a tough corner. I advise them that we will not let them off the hook so lightly. This is a Tory cut, and if it goes ahead, it will hang round their necks for years to come.

While the Tories are lobbying, they should lobby on everything that is wrong with universal credit and shows a lack of compassion and concern—the five-week wait that forces families to choose between waiting for a payment and immediately going into debt, the two-child policy and its despicable rape clause, the removal of the disability premiums that exist in the legacy benefits, and the sanctions regime that penalises many, to name just a few things.

The Tories should also lobby on the benefits cap. The pandemic has led to a 115 per cent increase in the number of people who are impacted by the cap. Most of those families have children, and the benefits cap means that many of them did not see a penny of the £20 uplift.

It is tragic that we need to have this debate in Parliament. It is astounding that, at a time when a perfect storm is heading towards many people in Scotland, the Westminster Government is even contemplating such a cut. We must unite as a Parliament in order to have the loudest possible voice and urge the Tories to think again. Forcing families to choose between heating and eating is an absolute disgrace. The Tories must reverse this cruel plan that will inflict dreadful hardship on many of our constituents.

16:08

**Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):** I rise to speak in favour of the Government's motion and to reject the amendment from the Scottish Conservatives, which ignores the damaging cut to people's incomes and the consequences for the lives of men, women and children if the cut goes ahead, and is completely out of touch with mainstream thinking on the issue across Scotland—and, indeed, across the UK.

The Scottish Conservatives are also out of touch with six previous Conservative work and pensions secretaries, who have all written to the chancellor urging him to drop the proposal because of the damage that it will do to people, including children.

This week, former Prime Minister Gordon Brown said:

“at this point, the government's planned £20 a week cut to universal credit in October seems more economically illogical, socially divisive and morally indefensible than anything I have witnessed in this country's politics.”

Against that backdrop, the Scottish Conservatives have come to Scotland's Parliament to defend a proposal from a Westminster Government that will do serious economic and social damage to thousands of men, women and children up and down Scotland.

Gordon Brown went on to say:

“Austerity has been the theme of the past decade, but this cut is vindictive even beyond austerity. It comes 11 weeks before Christmas and it is being coldly and inhumanely executed in spite of the new evidence, mounting month by month, of worsening hardship and continuing crisis.”

He concluded:

“I have never seen a government act so callously and with so little concern for the consequences of their actions on the poorest in our society.”

That is what the Conservatives are defending today.

It is estimated that, in Scotland, more than 220,000 households with children will have their incomes cut. Those cuts will start as we lead up to Christmas, as fuel bills for gas and electricity rise

and as the cost of food is on the rise—not to mention the on-going problems of fighting a global pandemic.

That all comes as the Conservatives try to con people with talk of levelling up. Instead of levelling up, as they claim, they are doubling down on a losing formula that makes no economic sense whatsoever. If they want to start balancing the books, they could, for example, do what Labour did in 1997 and initiate a one-off windfall tax. They could easily raise £6 billion by imposing a tax on those who have made the greatest speculative gains from the pandemic. A mass of evidence shows that that would be a reasonable thing to do. Instead, they have decided that the most vulnerable people will pay the price.

That has to be the key point in the debate. It is about political choices in difficult times. We can choose to share the burden and to ask those who are the most able in our society to take a heavier share—

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I have to ask you to wind up now, Mr Rowley.

**Alex Rowley:** Alternatively, as the Scottish Conservatives are proposing, we can decide that the lowest paid—those who are least able to meet payments—should have their income cut. That cannot be right. Surely, even at this stage, the Parliament could unite to say, “Don’t go ahead with this—stop this, think again and do what is right for the people of Scotland.”

16:13

**Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP):** Having previously relied on working tax credits to help to feed and clothe my child—despite being in work—the thought of suddenly losing £20 per week and any potential passported assistance fills me with fear. That fear will be striking at the heart of thousands of my constituents across Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley, and many folk will be lying awake at night trying to figure out where they are going to make cuts to the family budget.

Make no mistake, Presiding Officer—I am talking not about putting a bottle of wine back on the shelf but about being in work and deciding whether a child can get new shoes or trousers, as they have kicked the toes out of their trainers and their jeans are at half mast; deciding whether the heating can be turned on as winter starts to bite; and deciding whether fresh food can be bought or whether it will be, “Let’s see what I can make this week from the tinned food from the food bank.”

I can remember having to save in order to afford £1 for the toddlers group, and it breaks my heart to think of other parents having to make that awful

decision—not being able to afford the luxury of a toddlers group that will provide social opportunities for both them and their wee yin. The mental wellbeing impact will be felt severely.

Before I go any further, I put on record that years of savage cuts to social security by successive UK Tory chancellors—some of whom are now changing their minds on the matter—show us that universal credit was never enough, even before the pandemic struck. Removing a much-needed and welcome lifeline as we head into a winter beset with increased fuel and food costs, looming increases to national insurance and the end of the furlough scheme will be absolutely “catastrophic”. Those are the words of the UK Government’s own internal advisers.

If we add to that the bedroom tax, the child cap and the abhorrent rape clause, it almost feels as though to be poor is to be punished. Please remember that 45 per cent of universal credit claimants do not even receive their full entitlement, because they have to pay back a never-ending cycle of debt at source.

As a former Scottish Women’s Aid worker, I want to focus on some key figures. Women are overrepresented in low-paid precarious work with zero-hours contracts. Research by the think tank Autonomy found that some 98 per cent of workers in the UK who take home poverty wages in jobs with high coronavirus exposure are women.

According to Save the Children, more than two thirds of the families that it helped with emergency grants in the past 16 months were one-parent families, 96 per cent of which were led by single mums. Two thirds of those families were in receipt of universal credit.

As we have heard, according to estimates, withdrawing the uplift will move about 60,000 people into poverty, including 20,000 children. It will reduce spending on universal credit and tax credits in Scotland by £460 million by 2023. That is £460 million that will not circulate in our local economies, because—make no mistake—that money goes out as fast as it comes in.

Many of the mums who will face this cut next week will also be worrying themselves sick with the fear of having their children taken from them. That is a real worry that many charities hear from women who fear that their inability to feed and clothe their children will result in social work intervention.

I will finish on the fact that approximately 40 per cent of universal credit recipients are in work. I am sure that I was not the only one who could not believe my ears when, last week, South Scotland Conservative MSP Sharon Dowey implied that the cut to universal credit will be the best way to get people back into work. She repeated that today.

Her colleague Alexander Stewart, however, assured us that the Conservatives are doing all that they can to lobby their Westminster counterparts to keep the lifeline. Which is it? Scotland is watching.

16:17

**Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con):** Scotland has two Parliaments, and the model of devolution works because it is generally understood that some issues are better served when addressed at the local level. However, after 14 years of this SNP Government in power, that theory has been harshly tested and found to be in need of amendment. It remains true that some issues are, indeed, better dealt with at a more local level, but only if it is not an SNP Administration presiding over that level.

As I mentioned, we are 14 years into this Government, and it is fair to say that its record makes for grim reading—so grim, in fact, that it raises the question of how it finds itself in any position to throw stones at Westminster. Perhaps if it spent less time throwing stones and more time on self-reflection, we would have a different story.

On that point, at least one of the clear contributing factors to that woeful record is perfectly evident in the topic of the motion—namely, that the Government is far more interested in fixing and talking about powers that are reserved to Westminster than it is in taking full control of the powers of this Parliament.

Even when it takes a brief break from slugging off Westminster and tries to exercise the powers in its hands, it is woefully inadequate. Back in 2016, social security powers were devolved to this Parliament after many years of promises that more devolved powers were all that stood between the nationalists and a perfect Scotland. Alas, the Government had to learn a harsh lesson—that it takes more than mere catchy slogans and empty promises to govern a country effectively. It even had to hand back control of severe disablement allowance to the DWP because it could not handle it or roll it out in the time that it promised. *[Interruption.]* I will not take an intervention. In fact, it says that it will not be until 2025 that it finally takes full control of those devolved powers.

Quite frankly, the SNP is in a glass house and should not be throwing stones. The reality is that effective governance requires more than empty promises to shake the magic money tree and pay for anything and everything without consequences.

After thoughtful consideration, I think that we should perhaps take a look at the issue. The uplift was extended and perhaps could have been extended for longer. However, I fully support the

UK Government in its pursuit of fiscal responsibility and a future for this country, which is crippled with outrageous debt—left to us mostly by the previous Labour Government.

**Shona Robison:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Jeremy Balfour:** No.

I look forward to SNP colleagues voting for my amendment on Thursday, to make sure that people are protected.

**Shona Robison:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Jeremy Balfour:** No.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Cabinet secretary—please!

**Jeremy Balfour:** I stress the irony of an SNP Government lodging today's motion in the wake of its 14 years in power. All that is left is overpromising and underdelivering. Poverty is up, the attainment gap is wider, drug deaths are out of control and the SNP Government cannot even take control of the devolved social security powers that are needed to fix all those problems. The reality is that, even if more powers were devolved to the SNP Government, it would exercise them as woefully as it has exercised every other power that it has.

I am reminded of a quotation from the late, great Ronald Reagan. The 10 most terrifying words in the English language are, "I'm from the SNP Government and I'm here to help."

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I remind members that it is up to the member who is speaking to decide whether to take an intervention.

16:21

**Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green):** The social security system is the sign and signal of our responsibility to one another. It should be there to help us when we need it most, to support all of us to live well and with dignity in a society that cares. However, for too long, UK Governments have undermined our social security system not only by cutting support but by consistently misleading the public about benefit recipients.

The £20 cut to universal credit that we are debating today is one of the biggest social security cuts ever to be made in British history. Not only that, it is the latest in a long line of cuts that have torn more and more holes in our social security safety net, hitting the poorest families hardest. The benefits freeze reduced incomes as costs were rising, cutting around 6 per cent of overall income;

the abhorrent two-child limit has removed about £2,900 from 18,000 Scottish households; and the benefit cap prevents thousands of Scots from getting the benefits that they should have.

The £20 increase was a welcome reprieve from some of those cuts. Indeed, the Institute for Fiscal Studies described it as

“the first significant real terms increase in entitlements for out-of-work claimants without children in half a century, though earnings have doubled ... in that time.”

The fact that the £20 increase was needed could not be a clearer admission that our social security system had been fatally weakened long before the pandemic came along. The increase was not an act of benevolence but an admission of failure. It was an admission that the system had been so damaged by cuts that it was no longer able to perform its basic function of providing adequate support for people who need help with their incomes for reasons beyond their control.

The Conservative amendment, which we cannot support, displays a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of universal credit, because it focuses heavily on the importance of work. The DWP has argued that the cut will act as a work incentive, but universal credit is not exclusively an unemployment payment, as many millions of recipients are either working or have been assessed as being not required to work. Like the bedroom tax, which tries to force people to move into smaller properties that simply do not exist, this cut, which is being forced on people who cannot work or who cannot work more, is simply inhumane. Also, the cut is not a work incentive if it means that people can no longer afford to use public transport to get to work or that people become ill because they cannot eat well enough.

If the cut goes ahead, it will pull as much as £460 million out of the economy instead of that money being spent in our high streets, supporting local jobs. It will mean that people will skip meals as they face the choice between heating and eating. Independent analysis by the Scottish Parliament information centre suggests that withdrawing the uplift would move more than 50,000 people, including over 10,000 children, into relative poverty at a time when we know that poverty is already unacceptably high.

This regressive cut is symbolic of a UK Government that knows the price of some things but the value of nothing. The cut will temporarily save the Government a few billion pounds a year, but the ripple effects of poverty and the associated societal costs will reach far into the future, adding burdens on future generations. It reflects the stark difference between the UK Government’s coercive approach to welfare and the human-rights based approach that we are trying to build in Scotland. It is symbolic of a Government that ploughs on with

its plans, no matter what evidence is presented to show that they are going to actively harm our society’s poorest people.

We cannot support that. With additional powers, we could do so much more, but, for now, we want that lifeline retained.

16:25

**Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP):** Way before Covid-19 hit, turning to food banks was, unfortunately, a reality for far too many people in all of Scotland’s communities. There were multiple reasons for that, not least the five-week wait to receive universal credit and the DWP sanctions regime. However, perhaps the major reason that people previously struggled on universal credit was the UK benefits freeze. Citizens Advice Scotland has stated that,

“as a result of the benefits freeze between 2016 and 2019, UC has fallen in value over a tenth (11.5%) behind inflation.”

As MSPs, we have witnessed over many years the impact of benefits being too low. The £20 uplift to universal credit and to tax credits has meant that the past year was the only year in which universal credit rose above inflation rates since it was introduced, eight years ago. When the uplift is removed, monthly standard UC allowance rates will drop by between 14 and 25 per cent. Those cuts will push 60,000 people in Scotland, including 20,000 children, into poverty and, by 2023-24, they could have taken £460 million a year from the pockets of those in our country who most rely on social security.

Citizens Advice Scotland found that 74 per cent of people on universal credit said that, if the benefit was reduced by £25 a week, they would not be able to cope. The Trussell Trust’s 2021 report, “State of Hunger: Building the evidence on poverty, destitution, and food insecurity in the UK”, revealed that

“over two fifths of households referred to a food bank”

last year

“were in receipt of”

universal credit. That was with the current £25 uplift, before a penny was taken off those households.

It is not a finely balanced judgment—the evidence is overwhelming. More than 63,000 households in Glasgow that rely on universal credit, and over 400,000 households in Scotland, need the UK Government to listen and to act. They also need the support of the Scottish Conservatives.

Citizens Advice Scotland has



“found that removing the £20 a week increase will result in 58% of these CAB complex debt clients being unable to meet their living costs”.

However, it is the next comment that I would like the Scottish Conservatives to listen to most closely. CAS also found that

“The £20 a week uplift”,

as it currently is,

“has so far reduced the number of CAB complex debt clients unable to meet their living costs by more than a third (38%)”.

That is a really positive statistic—the £20 increase has been a success. It has not gone as far as I would have liked it to go, but it has been a success. It was the right thing to do and so is retaining it.

For some time, I have believed that the motivation for the £20 UC increase was the sanitisation of a creaking UK universal credit system for the many people who had never been involved in the benefits system before and who would have been shocked at the low level of benefits once they were on them. The UK Government moved swiftly to shore up that creaking system by introducing the £20 supplement. Now, the Conservatives hope that, with many of those workers moving off universal credit, the £20 lifeline can be removed.

If it was right to support those who were newly accessing universal credit, it is surely right to continue that support for those who require it for the longer term, including those with additional vulnerabilities, be they lone parents, those with disabilities or many others.

Three Conservative members have mentioned the doubling of the number of work coaches. The Public and Commercial Services Union, which represents work coaches, has said that

“the £20 weekly uplift in UC payments has meant that claimants are better able to engage in job seeking rather than having continuous worries about money.”

Work coaches support the uplift because it helps people back into work. It is the right thing to do. I know that some Conservative members agree with me and with almost every word in my speech. I say to them—Alexander Stewart and others—that they should do the right thing, show some backbone, be principled and defend our constituents against the cut.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I call Carol Mochan. You have a tight four minutes, Ms Mochan.

16:30

**Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab):** On universal credit, I am in full agreement with

Opposition parties across the UK as well as the Governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and the many councils that see the effects of these decisions on a daily basis. The cut is blatant vandalism and will ruin lives—it is as simple as that. It does not make any sort of economic sense, given that it will result in the Scottish economy losing more than £500 million a year.

However, that is far from my mind at the moment. The cut will not ruin the lives of the wealthy, of course, nor the lives of the hundreds of Tory MPs who waved it through, but it will ruin the lives of the worst off in our society—an ignored and belittled group who are repeatedly booted back down the ladder the minute they get their foot on a rung. When the so-called uplift ends in October, it will be one of the most blatant examples of punishing the poor to pay for the mistakes of the rich that we have seen in this country for some time.

The reality is that in a sensible country a meagre increase of £20 during an unprecedented health crisis would be seen as necessary and sensible. In many countries, the level of benefits available to people in need were significantly higher to begin with. The uplift rectified a small portion of the years of stripping away benefits in order to appear to be tough, but pushing people to the brink is not tough—it is a tragedy.

We speak about being a compassionate country and a society that is built on shared values of community and fairness, but that is all just for show if we attack at every turn those who are least able to get by. I know that Tory colleagues will say, as they often do, that what I am saying is evidence of an anti-Tory mindset. Let me be honest: I am anti-Tory—Boris Johnson is destroying not only my region, South Scotland, but the entire UK with decisions such as this cut. It will correctly be seen by the electorate as cruel.

When so many people are living hand to mouth, how can anyone stand by such a decision? It is not what we were elected to do, and the cut will damage families and communities for years to come. Decisions of this nature help to ingrain poverty and push communities that have been suffering for decades into a spiral of poor conditions and decreased wealth from which few ever escape. There is no trickle-down effect in places such as Kilmarnock, Tarbolton and Catrine; there is just the cold hard reality of an economy that does not work for the many. The £20 uplift gave a small respite from that and now we have to tell people that it will go. That is shameful.

Scotland should advocate for a floor under which we will not let people fall; part of that should be adequate benefits, but that is far from the only thing that is needed. The economic fallout from

Covid has been worsened by years of deregulation, moving the ownership of wealth and assets overseas and a complete disregard for any kind of just taxation that addresses historical inequality.

That grand scheme—the £20 uplift—is a small symptom of a much larger plan to engineer a society for the rich at the expense of everyone else, and that is how we should view it. If you believe that a single parent who lost their job due to Covid should be punished while a hedge fund manager with 10 properties in five different countries should flourish, you are articulating a set of political priorities that I find truly abhorrent. History will look on your decision as disgraceful. However, it is not too late to do the right thing and put your name to the opposition of the planned cut—that is all we ask.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** You have to wind up now, Ms Mochan. I ask you to close.

**Carol Mochan:** My last point is that I hope that the Scottish Government will step in and mitigate those plans where it can, because that is also the right thing to do.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I call Emma Roddick, who is the final speaker in the open debate. You have a tight four minutes, please, Ms Roddick.

16:34

**Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP):** Just two weeks ago, the Conservatives intervened in my speech on homelessness to insist that the Scottish Government raise the Scottish child payment, which is a benefit that is linked to universal credit, by £10 a week. Now, here they are insisting on backing a move down south that will remove £20 a week from those same universal credit claims. How can we fight child poverty in Scotland when every increase—every doubling—of the Scottish child payment ends up being sucked into the growing black hole of yet more Tory cuts?

**Pam Duncan-Glancy:** Does Emma Roddick accept that, when we set the child poverty targets in the Parliament, there was no such thing as the £20 uplift, that we set them without caveat and on the basis that we would meet them anyway, and that raising the payment to £20 will not be enough?

**Emma Roddick:** Absolutely. I take Pam Duncan-Glancy's point. I am certainly not against doubling the Scottish child payment in any sense; I am simply concerned that it will have less effect coming straight after the cut.

The introduction of the uplift was a recognition in a time of national crisis that people did not have

enough money to buy essentials. We all know that that is still true today, and we know that the removal of the uplift could plunge tens of thousands of Scottish people, including around 20,000 children, into poverty. There is no justification for that.

Even within the Conservatives' amendment, they claim that the justification for removing the uplift, which was extended to cover the past six months, is that employment has risen for the past six months. Essentially, they are saying that the intervention is working and lifting people out of poverty, so we should remove it. The callous attitude of the Conservatives today in backing a move to take £20 out of the pockets of those who have been hardest hit in the past two years is bad enough in itself, but claiming it as some righteous work incentive is horrific.

Yesterday, the Trussell Trust sent MSPs some very interesting and harrowing information ahead of this debate. Its data show that one in five on universal credit said that the cut would prevent them from travelling to work, one in five would struggle to heat their homes over winter, and one in four—that is, 115,000 people—is likely to have to skip meals.

The Tories are using poverty as a punishment for not working hard enough and ignoring the fact that many in this country cannot work, or are working and are still not earning enough to live on because the UK Government is still dragging its heels on employment rights. More than a third of universal credit claimants are in work and are still below the very low threshold that the Conservatives consider to be worth supporting.

I find the, at best, complete lack of consideration for and, at worst, active and conscious endangerment of disabled people to be absolutely disgusting. Disabled people on universal credit are 50 per cent more likely to skip meals to get by. I am proud that the Parliament is becoming more diverse, and I hope that that will lead to better recognition of the issues that disabled people face, but the Tory amendment does not fill me with a lot of hope for Tory colleagues.

Making the biggest overnight cut to social security in my lifetime and in the lifetimes of most people here, when fuel and other living costs are rising and we are recovering from a pandemic, is as ridiculous as it is morally reprehensible. Today, the Highland poverty action network described it as a “disaster” for those most in need, whom it serves, and it wondered whether there could be a worse time to do it.

The Tories can stand up in the Parliament and defend taking £20 out of the weekly budget of nearly a quarter of a million families with children while demanding that the Scottish Government

give those same families an extra tenner, but they cannot do it with any integrity.

16:38

**Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab):**

This illogical and cruel cut to universal credit should not be taking place. From listening to the Conservatives today and back-bench Conservatives in Westminster, I think that it is clear that they have no idea why it is happening.

We heard Shona Robison quoting the Legatum Institute. That is illustrative. The Legatum Institute is run by a very right-wing Tory peer, is registered in a tax haven, advocates a hard Brexit and is funded by the spoils of Russian chaos in the 1990s. I have doubts that the people who are involved in it really care about the poor in Scotland and across the UK, but they are aghast that their treasured Tory Government is doing what it is doing. That is because they believe that there will be a significant electoral cost to the Tories as a result of what they are proposing to do in a matter of days. If even those people think that it is a bad idea, perhaps Conservative colleagues might want to think again.

The cut is politically incomprehensible. It is economically illiterate, fiscally incredible and morally unconscionable. To take such action now assumes that the crisis is over, but we know that the crisis in our schools, shops, factories and streets and around our kitchen tables has only just begun. It will run for years to come. Miles Briggs must accept that we are only seeing the start of the results of the pandemic.

We must not equivocate—we know the consequences of the cut, which so many members have spoken about so eloquently. We know the pain that it will bring. Let us not pretend that any person who is thrown deeper into poverty by the cut cares whether an extra pound in their purse comes badged with a saltire or a union jack. What matters to them is putting food on their table, being able to switch the heating on and putting clothes on their child's back.

A single mother from Dundee says:

"It's already a struggle for me even WITH the uplift. I'm a single mum of 2, and even with the uplift I've gone weeks with nothing. If they take this money away I'll be down an even bigger hole. I don't have 2 quid to my name."

She is one of 18,000 Dundonians who will be impacted by the cut. The UN's special rapporteur on poverty said:

"For these people, £20 a week makes a huge difference, and could be the difference between falling into extreme poverty or remaining just above that poverty line ... If the question is one of fiscal consolidation to maintain the public deficit within acceptable levels then you should raise

revenues, not cut down on welfare at the expense of people in poverty."

Far too often we end up talking about mitigating harms and propping people up rather than enabling them to lift themselves free. We need an economy that works, which raises wages and provides jobs. Pam Duncan-Glancy is right to describe benefits as enabling the pathway into work. However, over 14 years the Scottish Government has failed to do that and to build the economy that we need. We are far weaker as a country and as a community than we should be.

With the cut, increases to national insurance and rocketing energy bills, low-income families are heading to an unprecedented cost-of-living crisis. It is no wonder that UK Government ministers are briefing that it is going to be a difficult winter.

The list of people and organisations that are squarely against the cut to universal credit is extraordinary. It includes children's rights organisations, anti-poverty campaigners, every single Opposition party and even six previous Tory DWP ministers—as highlighted by Alex Rowley. Neil Gray stood alongside Stephen Crabb, rightly, to argue that the cut makes employment less likely. Willie Rennie made a salient point when he asked the Tories to have confidence in their own jobs plan—we heard about it today—to reduce the claimant count and to save money by getting people into work.

Although the callous cut is squarely the responsibility of the UK Government, we must also consider our responsibilities in the Scottish Parliament. If it is a moral question then that moral quandary lies with us, too.

The analysis of the Child Poverty Action Group is that

"the Scottish Government also has an obligation to progress the realisation of rights in Scotland and a statutory requirement to meet its own child poverty targets."

As Pam Duncan-Glancy has said time and again, those targets were set prior to the introduction of the uplift and pre-pandemic, and they are set to be missed by some considerable distance unless urgent action is taken. We ask the Scottish Government to take that action.

Our pre-pandemic child poverty figure was almost 30 per cent. The immediate doubling of the child payment is a moral imperative—as is doubling it again. Introducing a £40 per week payment would cut child poverty by a third in one action.

The question remains that, if we cannot mitigate child poverty now, in this year of all years, when the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government have more resources at their disposal than ever, and if we cannot put money into

pockets now, when will it be done? Every day that passes is a moral affront. All we can hope is that the UK Government recognises the extraordinary folly of the course on which it is set.

In a matter of days, families will wake to much deepened hardship. We are confronted by the

“fierce urgency of now.”

For those who need all of our help,

“there ‘is’ such a thing as too late.”

16:44

**Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife (Con)):** I am happy to close the debate on the Scottish Conservatives’ behalf. I am not at all surprised that the SNP Government has chosen to use Government time to debate a matter that is entirely outwith the Parliament’s control. Only last week, the Scottish Government proudly reminded the chamber that Social Security Scotland now delivers 11 benefits, seven of which are new, but instead of spending this afternoon scrutinising the Scottish Government’s delivery of the devolved benefits, we have debated the actions of a different Government that is accountable to a different Parliament.

**The Minister for Social Security and Local Government (Ben Macpherson):** Will the member take an intervention?

**Alexander Stewart:** No, thank you—I have a lot to cover.

I take issue with the narrative that we have heard this afternoon—that universal credit has been a total failure and is a stick to beat the UK Government with. That is far from the truth. Universal credit has provided opportunity to people; the reality is that it is vastly superior to what it replaced—many work coaches will say exactly that.

No longer are people saddled with a benefits system that makes claimants poorer for choosing to take on more work. No longer are claimants faced with a confusing patchwork quilt of benefits that can be paid. Universal credit has brought simplicity to the benefits system, as well as a tapered system that gradually decreases payments for claimants.

Those factors must be taken into account; they helped employment to rise to record levels in the months that led up to the pandemic. It is precisely because of those aspects that people have gone into work—[*Interruption.*] No, thank you. I have no doubt that universal credit, along with new schemes such as kickstart and the young persons guarantee, will play an important part in the process, but—[*Interruption.*] Presiding Officer, if I

want to take an intervention, I will say so, but I want to continue.

As well as having helped people into work, universal credit has been shown to be resilient. In the pandemic’s opening months, the system had an additional 2 million new claimants in comparison with the previous months. The system was nearly at breaking point, but it did not break—it continued and ensured that individuals received the support that they required. [*Interruption.*] Not at the moment.

We all know that universal credit needs to be delivered at this time because many people need support. The uplift of £20 a week was followed by a further layer of support throughout this unprecedented time. I was pleased when the six-month extension to the uplift was confirmed in the March budget, following calls from Conservative MSPs for that.

However, it would be remiss of me not to mention, as many colleagues have, the cost of continuing the uplift. Members of other parties tell us that the funding problem is a non-issue, but I am sorry—it is not a non-issue. In the chamber less than a week ago, the SNP social security minister refused to say whether he would permanently double the carers allowance supplement, and the reason for that was that budget considerations were being taken into account.

**Ben Macpherson:** Will the member give way?

**Alexander Stewart:** No, thank you.

In the week before that, SNP members voted down our amendment to call for the Scottish child payment to be doubled in the next financial year. One must assume that budgetary constraints had something to do with that.

It is clear that the SNP Government would like to claim that there is a simple solution, but there is no simple solution to any of this reality. In recent days, a proposed solution has been a reduction in the universal credit taper rate from 63p per pound to 60p per pound. That would still cost about £1 billion, but it would help to support those involved. The taper system of support could also be used to give individuals an uplift; that could be considered.

We have given just some of the reasons why Conservative members called for the Scottish child payment to be doubled in the next financial year. I have sympathy with discussion of both proposals as we go forward.

In response to the contributions from members across the chamber, I would like to speak about what my colleagues have said. Miles Briggs spoke about the unprecedented level of support, with billions of pounds—£14 billion—being given to Scotland to assist and support, jobs-based

recovery, plans to kickstart individuals into the community, long-standing work commitments, restarting schemes and building back. Those are all vitally important. Sharon Dowe spoke about the success of the DWP in taking on millions of new claimants across the country, as well as building back and ensuring that the measures were in place.

Jeremy Balfour talked about the two Parliaments and about the 14 years of the SNP Government and the controls that this Parliament has; he talked about the Government not delivering on those and having to hand back powers.

In conclusion, I have already said that this is far from a simple issue with a simple solution—no matter how loudly members on the opposite benches try to shout otherwise. I have said and continue to say that there should be no grievance. The blame game is not what we should be indulging in. The SNP Government should choose to work constructively with the UK Government to move on from the pandemic, to help people back into work, to help people deliver and to help people throughout the recovery. That is what the people of this country want to happen. I support the amendment in the name of Miles Briggs.

16:51

**The Minister for Social Security and Local Government (Ben Macpherson):** We are living through serious and historic times, and the Conservative Party is about to make a serious and historic mistake that Scotland and the rest of the UK will not forgive. We are still in a pandemic, trying, together, to get through this period, which is not over, as Michael Marra rightly emphasised. We have challenges ahead of us, economically, environmentally and in multiple other ways. We face a perfect storm of cost increases, many caused by Brexit. People are facing rising food prices and rising fuel costs. In such a situation, how could a Government even be thinking about cutting support for some of the poorest in our society—and doing so actively and knowing the harm that that will cause? How can that be right?

We have seen some of our best as a society during this on-going pandemic. People and communities supported each other. Governments stepped up, too. I commend the UK Government for what it did. Sharon Dowe is right: the DWP did a lot of good. Bob Doris talked about that, too. Back then, there was an acknowledgement that universal credit was too little to support people and to allow them to fulfil their potential, so it was increased. Surely if it was not enough then, how can it be enough now if £20 is taken away? How can such a cut be right?

It is always better to give support to someone if they are struggling, rather than letting them fall to the ground and having to pick them back up. That is what social security is all about: it is about ensuring that we come together as a society, for the individuals affected and all the services that support them, and provide the resource to help people. That is what the increase to universal credit helped with. Social security is a collective investment in each other, and that is what we are building here in Scotland. What baffles me is why the Conservative Government is not grasping this opportunity to reform universal credit, instead of cutting it.

For Conservative members to suggest that this issue is not relevant to Scotland or to this Parliament just shows how ignorant they are. Every time a welfare cut from a UK Conservative Government is undertaken, devolved services have to pick up a lot of that damage.

We have years of evidence of what needs to be fixed with universal credit: the five-week wait for the first payment needs to be removed; the debt-inducing advances need to be replaced with non-repayable grants; the two-child limit and abhorrent rape clause need to be scrapped; the sanctions regime needs to be removed; and the benefit cap needs to be lifted. The UK Government should be sorting out those issues, not taking £20 out of the pockets of some of the poorest in our society.

The concepts of levelling up and building back better will mean nothing if the cut is made. Presiding Officer, you can hear how angry we are about what the UK Government is doing, and about how reckless and wrong-headed it is. The UK Government is making a conscious, nonsensical and unnecessary choice. It will take £6 billion out of local economies across the UK. Across the UK, 800,000 people, including 300,000 children, will be plunged into poverty. The cut will take £460 million a year out of local economies here in Scotland, and 60,000 people here, including 20,000 children, will be plunged into poverty. It will be the biggest overnight cut to welfare in 70 years.

As Emma Roddick and Elena Whitham rightly emphasised, the cut will have huge consequences for individuals. It will mean less food and heating for many, and it will cause damage to some of the most vulnerable in our society. How can that be right?

As Maggie Chapman said, the cut will exacerbate in-work poverty, because 175,000 households that are claiming universal credit are working households. It is economically nonsensical and, as Michael Marra rightly said, it is illiterate and illogical, because it will take money out of local economies as we try to recover.

The cut is also unnecessary. The UK Government has many revenue-raising tools at its disposal—it has a full suite of fiscal and monetary powers. As Alex Rowley suggested, it could bring in a windfall tax. It has full borrowing powers. It could use its digital services tax, corporation tax, capital gains tax, inheritance tax or, as Carol Mochan argued, the dividend income tax. Yet, even with all those options available, once again, it has decided to punish the poor by cutting support for the lowest paid and the most vulnerable. How could the UK Government do so at the worst possible time? How can that be right?

Conservative members talked about two Parliaments and two Governments, and it is a tale of two Parliaments and two Governments. We in the Scottish Government will do what we can with what we have, as we have done throughout the past years. As always, Pam Duncan-Glancy's suggestions are taken in good faith, and we look forward to working with her. However, it is not reasonable or acceptable to expect the Scottish Government to mitigate every bad policy decision of a UK Tory Government that Scotland never voted for.

While we are in the UK, it is for the UK Government to be held responsible for its actions and accountable for its decisions. Most of all, it should listen to the people of Scotland. Will the Conservative UK Government listen to the anti-poverty charities? Surely, ignoring them cannot be right. Will it listen to the voices from across political parties, including its own party? Surely, ignoring such widespread criticism and concern cannot be right. Will the UK Government listen to the lessons from history of the dire consequences of not supporting those in need when they need it most? Ignoring those lessons cannot be right. Will the Tory MSPs listen? As Willie Rennie rightly asked, will the Tory MPs listen? To loyally stand by on the issue cannot be right.

I urge Parliament to vote to reject the £20 universal credit cut. I urge the UK Government to listen to the people of Scotland, whom we all, including those on the Conservative benches, represent. I urge the UK Government: for goodness' sake, in such times, do the right thing.

If it does not, we will not forget. If the Scottish Parliament agrees to the motion today but it is ignored and our people suffer, we will know who to blame. In no way can the universal credit cut be right; in no way can it be reasonably or morally justified, especially at this time.

If the Parliament is ignored and our people suffer, we will know who to blame. We will remember who did not speak up—the Scottish Conservatives. We will remember that a Tory UK Government, which Scotland never voted for, wilfully punished those less fortunate at this most

difficult of times and that it did so against Scotland's will. We will remember that, and the people whom we represent will remember that, too.

## Environmental Standards Scotland (Chief Executive)

### **The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):**

The next item of business is consideration of motion S6M-01397, in the name of Michael Matheson, on Environmental Standards Scotland: appointment of the chief executive. I call Màiri McAllan to speak to and move the motion.

17:00

**The Minister for Environment, Biodiversity and Land Reform (Màiri McAllan):** The Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport explained the background to the motion in his letter of 6 September to the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee. The committee had the opportunity to ask questions then but did not raise any.

As was expressed in the letter, the UK Withdrawal from the European Union (Continuity) (Scotland) Act 2020, as an extra safeguard to the independence of the new body, provides for the appointment of the first chief executive of the statutory body Environmental Standards Scotland to be made by ministers with the approval of the Scottish Parliament. The motion proposes the appointment of a suitably qualified and experienced civil servant to the post on a temporary basis, which will allow ESS to make a longer-term appointment.

I move,

That the Parliament welcomes the statutory vesting of Environmental Standards Scotland, the new environmental governance body for Scotland, which will ensure that high standards of environmental governance are maintained, and approves the Scottish Ministers' appointment of Brendan Callaghan as the first chief executive of Environmental Standards Scotland, as required by the UK Withdrawal from the European Union (Continuity) (Scotland) Act 2021, and as communicated to the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee by correspondence on 6 September 2021 by the Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport.

**The Presiding Officer:** The question on the motion will be put at decision time.

## Business Motion

17:01

### **The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):**

The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-01431, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out changes to business this week.

*Motion moved,*

That the Parliament agrees to the following revision to the programme of business for Thursday 30 September 2021—

delete

*followed by* Scottish Government Debate: Scotland in the World – Championing Progressive Values

and insert

*followed by* Scottish Government Debate: Impact of Brexit on Scotland's Supply Chain and Labour Market

*Motion agreed to.*

## Parliamentary Bureau Motions

17:02

**The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):** The next item of business is consideration of two Parliamentary Bureau motions. I ask George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move motions S6M-01432 and S6M-01433, on approval of Scottish statutory instruments.

*Motions moved,*

That the Parliament agrees that the European Union and European Atomic Energy Community (Immunities and Privileges) (Scotland) Order 2021 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (Immunities and Privileges) (Scotland) Order 2021 [draft] be approved.—[*George Adam*]

**The Presiding Officer:** The question on the motions will be put at decision time.

## Decision Time

17:02

**The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):** There are four questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that amendment S6M-01405.1, in the name of Miles Briggs, which seeks to amend motion S6M-01405, in the name of Shona Robison, on keeping the lifeline—a call to the United Kingdom Government to cancel its cut to universal credit, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

**Members:** No.

**The Presiding Officer:** There will be a division.

There will be a short suspension to allow members to access the digital voting system.

17:03

*Meeting suspended.*

17:11

*On resuming—*

**The Presiding Officer:** Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is now closed.

### For

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)  
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)  
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)  
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)  
 Dowe, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)  
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)  
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)  
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)  
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)  
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)  
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)  
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)  
 Lockhart, Dean (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)  
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)  
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)  
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

### Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)  
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)  
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)



Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)  
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)  
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)  
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)  
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)  
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)  
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)  
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)  
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)  
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)  
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)  
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)  
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)  
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)  
 Denham, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)  
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)  
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)  
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)  
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)  
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)  
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)  
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)  
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)  
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)  
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)  
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)  
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)  
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and  
 Lauderdale) (SNP)  
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)  
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)  
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)  
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)  
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)  
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)  
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)  
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)  
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)  
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)  
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)  
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)  
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)  
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)  
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)  
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)  
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)  
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)  
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)  
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)  
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)  
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)  
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)  
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)  
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)  
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)  
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine)  
 (SNP)  
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)  
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)  
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)  
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)  
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)  
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)  
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)  
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)

Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)  
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)  
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)  
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)  
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)  
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)  
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)  
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)  
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)  
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)  
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley)  
 (SNP)  
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)  
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

**The Presiding Officer:** The result of the division on amendment S6M-01405.1, in the name of Miles Briggs, which seeks to amend motion S6M-01405, in the name of Shona Robison, on keeping the lifeline—a call to the UK Government to cancel its cut to universal credit, is: For 28, Against 88, Abstentions 0.

*Amendment disagreed to.*

**The Presiding Officer:** The next question is, that motion S6M-01405, in the name of Shona Robison, on keeping the lifeline—a call to cancel the cut to universal credit, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

**Members:** No.

**The Presiding Officer:** There will be a division.

**For**

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)  
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)  
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)  
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)  
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)  
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)  
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)  
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)  
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)  
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)  
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)  
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)  
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)  
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)  
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)  
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)  
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)  
 Denham, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)  
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)  
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)  
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)  
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)  
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)  
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)  
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)  
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)  
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)  
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)  
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)  
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)  
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and

Lauderdale) (SNP)  
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)  
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)  
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)  
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)  
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)  
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)  
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)  
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)  
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)  
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)  
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)  
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)  
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)  
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)  
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)  
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)  
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)  
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)  
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)  
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)  
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)  
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)  
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)  
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)  
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)  
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)  
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)  
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)  
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)  
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)  
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)  
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)  
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)  
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)  
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)  
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)  
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)  
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)  
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)  
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)  
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)  
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)  
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)  
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)  
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)  
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)  
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

#### Against

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)  
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)  
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)  
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)  
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)  
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)  
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)  
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)  
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)

Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)  
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)  
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)  
 Lockhart, Dean (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)  
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)  
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)  
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

**The Presiding Officer:** The result of the division is: For 88, Against 28, Abstentions 0.

#### *Motion agreed to,*

That the Parliament agrees, along with opposition parties in the UK Parliament, that the UK Government's planned reduction to universal credit should be reversed; recognises the cross-party efforts of opposition parties in the UK Parliament and the social security committees of each of the four nations' parliaments and assembly in this aim; notes Scottish Government analysis that the reduction of universal credit could reduce welfare expenditure in Scotland by £461 million a year by 2023-24 and push 60,000 people, including 20,000 children, into poverty; agrees that the inadequacy of the payment is just one of many issues with universal credit, alongside the two-child cap and the abhorrent so-called "rape clause", the five-week wait for a first payment, the benefit sanctions regime and the so-called "bedroom tax"; believes that this reflects the UK Government's uncompassionate approach to welfare, which has been challenged by opposition parties across the UK, and acknowledges Scotland's human rights-based approach to social security.

**The Presiding Officer:** The next question is, that motion S6M-01397, in the name of Michael Matheson, on the appointment of the chief executive of Environmental Standards Scotland, be agreed to.

#### *Motion agreed to,*

That the Parliament welcomes the statutory vesting of Environmental Standards Scotland, the new environmental governance body for Scotland, which will ensure that high standards of environmental governance are maintained, and approves the Scottish Ministers' appointment of Brendan Callaghan as the first chief executive of Environmental Standards Scotland, as required by the UK Withdrawal from the European Union (Continuity) (Scotland) Act 2021, and as communicated to the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee by correspondence on 6 September 2021 by the Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport.

**The Presiding Officer:** I propose to ask a single question on two Parliamentary Bureau motions unless any member objects.

As no member has objected, the question is, that motions S6M-01432 and S6M-01433, in the name of George Adam, on approval of Scottish statutory instruments, be agreed to.

*Motions agreed to,*

That the Parliament agrees that the European Union and European Atomic Energy Community (Immunities and Privileges) (Scotland) Order 2021 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (Immunities and Privileges) (Scotland) Order 2021 [draft] be approved.

**The Presiding Officer:** That concludes decision time.

**Scottish Ambulance Service**

**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 you are moving around the chamber and across the Holyrood campus.

The final item of business today is a members' business debate on motion S6M-01136, in the name of Jamie Halcro Johnston, on ambulance services across Scotland. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

*Motion debated,*

That the Parliament commends the efforts of hard-working ambulance staff over the challenging period since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic; recognises what it sees as the importance of an effective ambulance service to rural communities and, in particular, to those remote communities in the Highlands and Islands region; considers that issues exist around staffing and recruiting of staff across Scotland; believes that a number of performance indicators for the Scottish Ambulance Service have been missed over this period, and acknowledges the view that there is a need for an effective strategic plan to support the Service to recover as Scotland emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic.

17:20

**Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** I appreciate the opportunity to introduce the debate and I thank all members who supported the motion and made this evening's debate possible.

In recent weeks, there has been a great deal of coverage of the challenges that currently face the Scottish Ambulance Service. The problem does not impact just the more rural parts of Scotland, such as the Highlands and Islands. The case of Gerard Brown, in Glasgow, shocked people across the country. The 40-hour wait for an ambulance, despite the efforts of his general practitioner and family, has rightly been recognised as appalling, and his subsequent death is a tragedy.

Gerard Brown was one of hundreds of people over the past year who were assessed as requiring an emergency response yet were forced to wait more than 12 hours for an ambulance. His GP called the situation, "third-world medicine", and many more disturbing cases have come to light since then.

I hope that in the debate we can recognise the experiences of people across Scotland and acknowledge that there are problems that need more than short-term fixes, because one thing is clear: the underlying problems stretch back much further than just the recent months or even to the onset of the pandemic, and without credible work

on long-term improvements, they will last longer than just this winter.

Last week in this chamber, Jackie Baillie quoted a paramedic who said:

“I am fed up reading and hearing in the news that the pandemic is causing the problems with delays. It’s true that it’s a contributing factor but this has been a disaster in the making for years.”—[*Official Report*, 22 September 2021; c 62.]

Another paramedic told me:

“It frustrates me that Covid is the excuse used to carpet over issues that were already there”.

A constituent wrote to me about his experience a few years ago, when his mother severed an artery in her wrist and bled almost to the point of unconsciousness. It took 30 minutes for an ambulance to arrive. That was not in some remote village but in the city of Inverness, with the ambulance dispatched to Inverness from Dingwall.

Another constituent spoke of their experience when, despite being referred by an out-of-hours GP, they were told that an ambulance might be available in four-and-a-half hours’ time but that there was no guarantee of that. He told me that his wife was forced to drive him, while he was “writhing in agony”, from Aviemore to Inverness, in heavy rain and wind. He had emergency surgery and remained in hospital for nine days. He praised the care that he received from the out-of-hours GP and the staff at Raigmore hospital and said that the only weakness was the Ambulance Service.

Let me be clear. Scottish Ambulance Service crews are remarkable. Their job is to save lives and protect the public. I am proud to have family and friends who work in the service. Unlike many public service workers, they come to people’s homes, streets and workplaces. They are the most front line of front-line staff and certainly among the most key of key workers. We owe our ambulance crews and support staff a huge debt of gratitude and our thanks.

That is all the more reason why the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government must ensure that ambulance crew have the proper tools to do their job.

Paramedics and other staff are under real pressure. Many have been unable to take rest breaks during long shifts. Unions have pointed to low staff morale and enduring fatigue. There is the risk of a mental health crisis in our Ambulance Service.

Scotland has always, by necessity, led the way in public medicine. The Highlands and Islands Medical Service is often cited as a forerunner of the UK-wide national health service. Our lower population density and relative remoteness has often been cited as a justification, at least in part,

for the additional devolved funding that Scotland enjoys relative to other parts of the United Kingdom.

However, the reality is quite different. Increases in funding in England have not led to similar increases in funding in Scotland. There has been a trend under the current and previous Governments towards similar healthcare spending in Scotland and England. In April, the Institute for Fiscal Studies pointed out that, at the start of devolution, healthcare spending in Scotland was 22 per cent higher than healthcare spending in England. Today, it is only 3 per cent higher. That is a tightening of funding by successive Administrations in Edinburgh that entirely fails to recognise the costs of delivering public services in this part of the United Kingdom.

There have always been unique challenges in providing ambulance cover in our rural and island communities. On the Orkney mainland, there is likely to be only one ambulance active at any given time. How long it will take a crew to reach a person is simply a question of who is in front of them in the queue and where the call-outs are on the islands. An elderly constituent in Orkney fell and was forced to wait two and a half hours with a bleeding head wound for an ambulance to arrive.

There are real difficulties in other places. It is well over three hours by road from the west of Skye to the nearest major hospitals, in Fort William and Inverness. However, we continue to see threats to local health facilities in more rural areas.

I have spoken many times in the chamber about Dr Gray’s hospital in Elgin and the downgrading of its maternity services. The alternative for many prospective mothers will be either Inverness or Aberdeen. Extensive travel to access services not only places a huge strain on patients and delays in emergency treatment; it redirects valuable ambulance resources to patient transport.

When the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care presented his eagerly awaited NHS recovery plan in August, there were only two mentions of the Ambulance Service. We had to wait until last week to see something approaching a recovery plan for that service. Again, the service was not seen as a priority by Scottish National Party ministers. The plan was forced on them by the growing crisis.

Thankfully, in Scotland, we benefit from an additional safety net. The British Army and a number of other bodies are called in to assist. *Scotland on Sunday* reported at the weekend that, in the first half of this year alone, more than 3,000 calls were diverted from Scotland to control rooms in England under mutual aid provisions. That, and the additional funding that has been mentioned,

are welcome in the short term, but they will not bring transformational change or greater resilience to the service for the future. We have seen pressures not only directly on our Ambulance Service but on call centres, in our accident and emergency departments, in our general practices and on local NHS services. Although some of the current crisis is symptomatic of wider failings and circumstances brought on by the pandemic, ministers have been slow to accept that those have largely exacerbated, rather than created, the problems. We must recognise that simply pulling back from the current crisis is not good enough.

It is welcome that the First Minister has, finally and belatedly, been forced to accept that there is a crisis in ambulance provision in Scotland, and it is welcome that the cabinet secretary is here today in recognition of the seriousness of the situation to listen to concerns that are being raised. I hope that he will take those concerns seriously and will recognise the feelings of MSPs and our constituents' concerns.

This evening, we will hear the voices of patients and ambulance staff. For too long, those voices have not been heard by the Government. It is unfortunate that it has taken issues of such a magnitude for them to be amplified. I hope that ministers are at last really listening.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I call Christine Grahame. You have up to four minutes, please, Ms Grahame.

17:28

**Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP):** I see that the clock is now operational.

I congratulate Jamie Halcro Johnston on bringing this important members' business debate to the chamber. It follows a statement from and questions to the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care, a debate, and questions to the First Minister on the performance of the Ambulance Service.

I know that we all agree that any issues that arise, particularly during the extended and continuing pandemic, in no way reflect on the men and women of the Scottish Ambulance Service.

Since the statement, questions and debates, measures have, of course, been taken by the Scottish Government. Funding of £20 million has been announced to deliver the assistance of more than 100 military personnel—88 drivers and 15 support staff; around 100 second year paramedic students to help in ambulance control rooms, which I will come to later; and more hospital ambulance liaison officers at the busiest A and Es. They are to increase from 11 to 20 to help to

ensure the timely admission of patients at A and Es because of the knock-on effects on ambulances arriving. There will be additional help from the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service in the form of volunteer drivers as well as from the British Red Cross and private transport companies, where clinically appropriate. To go back to call centres, there will be additional senior clinical input in ambulance control rooms to assist and speed up decision making on mental health, addictions, falls, breathing difficulties, high-intensity users, and trauma.

During the recent statement, we learned that, in August this year, only 21 per cent of calls were actually emergencies. Ambulance personnel are being called out for what one might term lower-level medical issues. That includes social issues: for example, someone sleeping rough, or passing out drunk or through drugs. That can take up a great deal of a crew's time as they either take the person to A and E or try to find someone to look after them while they are in that state, because both the police and the Ambulance Service have a duty of care to that person and cannot leave them somewhere unattended. Sometimes, that can take up hours of a crew's time. It is a complex mixture, which puts the service under pressure at any time, but more so during Covid.

I understand that staff are frustrated about wasting time at call-outs that should not have happened. That is why I raised with the cabinet secretary the issue of the information technology triaging system, which, in my view, needs to be refreshed to match the current circumstances. I understand that it was designed a couple of years ago and is highly automated. Call handlers—who are not at fault—run through questions, and the system tells them what to do next, based on the response. We need to revisit that, given that only 21 per cent of those call-outs are emergencies. Arriving at A and E must also take longer, because of the Covid processing of patients, tying up ambulance time as the ambulance is cleaned and as case notes have to be documented at that time and transferred into the system.

There will be regional variations. I cannot speak for the Highlands and Islands but, to date, I have not had any emails about cases in my constituency of Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale. That may change after the debate.

The pandemic means that the Government and the public must look afresh at what we require of a modern ambulance service. There is a duty on the public to behave responsibly. Of course someone must call an ambulance, without hesitation, in an emergency. That is defined by the Scottish Ambulance Service as:

“Loss of consciousness ... Cardiac arrest ... Heart attack ... Stroke ... An acute confused state ... Chest pains ...

Breathing difficulties ... Severe bleeding that cannot be stopped ... Severe allergic reactions ... Severe burns or scalds ... Major trauma, such as a road traffic accident or fall from a height”.

That can be checked out, if in doubt, on the SAS website. However, it may be that other medical advice should be sought first, such as from a general practitioner, pharmacist or optometrist.

I thank Jamie Halcro Johnston for raising again what is an important issue, and I add that much of what I have said came also from a paramedic.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Edward Mountain is joining us remotely.

17:32

**Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** I thank my colleague Jamie Halcro Johnston for securing a debate on a subject that is so important, especially in the Highlands and Islands. We all know that every minute counts when it comes to attending a life-threatening situation. That is even more the case in the Highlands and Islands, where rural communities face long journey times to A and E—more than two hours, in some of the more remote areas. Ambulance crews’ ability to respond quickly is therefore, more often than not, what makes the difference between life and death.

During the pandemic, we relied heavily on our hard-working ambulance crews, as never before. As we faced the worst pandemic and health emergency in generations, they rose to the challenge, as did all the other front-line staff, and faced it with true grit and determination. However, the challenge that they faced has been made so much harder by the SNP Government, which has presided over an ambulance waiting time crisis.

It is always convenient for SNP members to blame all their failures on either Brexit or the pandemic, but it is simply not true. Those without selective amnesia will remember the shortage of ambulance provision in the Highlands and Islands region that I highlighted back in 2017. At that stage, there was insufficient ambulance cover for not only Skye, but Lochaber and Caithness. Shortages were addressed with sticking-plaster solutions such as the single crewing of ambulances, and it was not until 2018, when the GMB union threatened to take industrial action due to the lack of emergency ambulance cover in Caithness, that the Government almost woke up.

That shortage of emergency ambulances had a knock-on effect. During the same period, I had to assist care homes that had to organise their own patient transport due to the lack of ambulance cover to take patients to hospital. Our Ambulance Service has been overstretched for far too long and the situation has reached breaking point, with

the average waiting time for ambulance crews now being up to six hours. That is shocking.

Let us put that into context and see what it means in an individual’s case. I quote a constituent who contacted me. They collapsed at home having a mini stroke, called for an ambulance and were told to wait for a call back. When that call eventually came, they were told to make their own way to accident and emergency because no ambulances were available. They wondered what they were expected to do: pop outside and wave down a taxi or perhaps even jump on a bus? Thankfully, that was not needed, because a friend was called, jumped to and took them to the hospital.

That is not where we should be. There are insufficient ambulances and not enough staff. There is nowhere for the Government to hide and no one is to blame but itself, because the crisis started well before the pandemic and Brexit.

The ambulance crisis is putting people’s lives at risk, especially in the Highlands, where there are much greater distances to travel. I am pleased that, following the Scottish Conservatives’ call, steps have been taken to bring in the Army and the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service to alleviate crew shortages. However, what we need in the Highlands, and what the Ambulance Service in the Highlands needs, is a long-term plan. That takes leadership and vision. Sadly, both seem to have evaded the SNP Government over the past 14 years.

17:36

**Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab):** I thank Jamie Halcro Johnston for bringing the debate to the chamber.

The people who work in our Ambulance Service deserve our admiration and gratitude for the work that they do every day in responding to emergency situations—even more so for what they have done over the past 18 months of a global pandemic, when they have experienced pressure like never before. They have worked throughout lockdowns, putting others before themselves, and their contribution to our efforts to get through the pandemic cannot be overstated.

However, our thanks are nowhere near enough and do little to address the Government’s fundamental failure to properly provide health and emergency services. The problems that we see today in our Ambulance Service are not down to our workers but are down to Governments and ministers lacking the political will to intervene, invest and focus on issues that impact people’s daily lives.

The debate rightly considers our Ambulance Service workers' positive contribution, but the situation that the service finds itself in now is serious. It predates the pandemic and reflects the Scottish Government's inability to address issues with purpose in order to protect the services that thousands of people rely on every day.

Jamie Halcro Johnston's motion notes the importance of having a well-connected Ambulance Service that serves rural communities such as his, in the Highlands, but the same is true in the South Scotland region, where ambulance waiting times can be lengthy, particularly for our rural communities. That adds to the existing problems that the Ambulance Service faces in other areas.

As I mentioned in a speech on ambulance services last week, neither expectation management nor improving media coverage should be the Government's priority. Neither of those is acceptable for the woman from Ayr who waited four hours for an ambulance last month or for the families who have felt powerless as loved ones have waited as long as 40 hours. Those are personal stories and individual tragedies, such as that of Rebecca Stevenson from Paisley, who, aged 85, sadly died after waiting eight hours for an ambulance. It should not have taken that much for the Scottish Government to sit up and listen.

People are not asking for much. They are asking their Government to focus on the matters at hand—to address the fundamental issues in our health and emergency services, to deliver ambulance services that support incredibly hardworking staff and to ensure that there is confidence across our communities that they will be well served in emergencies.

I will support the Scottish Government in its efforts to resolve the issues that our Ambulance Service faces, but I will not sit back and accept commitments of investment that will take years to make any changes. The situation can by no means be rapidly sorted—indeed, several years of mismanagement have ensured that—but, with the political will and with the correct investment, focus and urgency, it can be turned around.

Underfunding, understaffing and a lack of resources have led our Ambulance Service to the difficult position that it now finds itself in. Workers have gone way beyond expectations during the pandemic, and the strain on them has been significant. It did not have to be this way, and it must not be this way again.

This evening, we are here—rightly—to highlight the importance of our Ambulance Service and its incredible workers, but that will do the service, its workers and our communities little good if we do not hold to account the people who are

responsible for the serious issues that the Scottish Ambulance Service faces.

I will support the Scottish Government in its efforts to deliver change, but no more time can be wasted. The situation is urgent, and urgent action is needed because lives depend on it.

17:40

**Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD):** I, too, congratulate Jamie Halcro Johnston on securing the debate. Indeed, I recall holding a similar debate about a year ago. On that occasion, my aim was to build cross-party support for a campaign to pay student paramedics during the course of their studies. Although sympathetic, the minister at the time was not for budging, I recall. Earlier this month, however, those starting their paramedic course will have received a grant for the first time. I therefore encourage Mr Halcro Johnston not to take whatever the cabinet secretary has to say shortly as the Government's final word on the matter.

The crisis that our ambulance service is currently facing has rightly been the subject of much debate in the Parliament over recent weeks. That is understandable, especially when we see the Army and firefighters being brought in to help. The case around capacity is one that I have been making in relation to Orkney for some time. Having a single ambulance to cover the whole of Mainland and linked south isles is simply not enough. That lacks resilience. Figures that I obtained from the Scottish Ambulance Service show that the Orkney Mainland was twice left with no ambulance cover at all in 2019 due to a lack of staffing. That is on top of the 168 occasions when the ambulance was called out and was therefore unavailable to respond to other incidents.

That lack of resilience and sometimes cover has many consequences. It puts additional stress on hard-working ambulance crews, who are doing their best to keep their community safe but are denied the tools that they need. It puts doctors in an invidious position, as they feel that they need to respond out of hours, often to incidents for which they are not properly trained. Ultimately, it puts the public in Orkney at greater risk.

Since I first started raising the issue, I have been told repeatedly of the need to await the outcome of the demand and capacity review. The Scottish Liberal Democrats recently secured the review document through a freedom of information request, and it makes for worrying reading. In response to publication of the review's findings, ministers have insisted that they are committed to recruiting around 450 more ambulance staff. Whether that is new staff and additional money remains unclear, but what is clear is that it is long

past time that Orkney had the staff to operate two ambulances not just for a few hours a week and not just on the basis of existing staff volunteering to work overtime, but all of the time.

Like so many of the issues that our health and care services face right now, the lack of ambulance capacity in Orkney predates the pandemic, and there is now a perfect opportunity to address that long-standing need. Whether or not ministers choose to do so will be the true measure of the Government's commitment to rebuilding and of the priority that it attaches to post-pandemic recovery.

I thank Jamie Halcro Johnston again, and I give the cabinet secretary fair warning that, as with the funding for student paramedics, this is not an issue on which I intend to take no for an answer.

17:43

**Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West) (Con):** I thank my colleague Jamie Halcro Johnston for securing this important debate.

The problems in our Ambulance Service have struck a chord with the nation, following the 40-hour wait that led to the tragic and unnecessary death of Gerard Brown in Glasgow. As usual, for those of us who represent rural constituencies in the north-east or the Highlands, it takes a tragedy in the central belt before anyone sits up and takes notice. This shocking story has been an all-too-familiar tale for too long and for too many of us—and there are too many failures to list here.

There are also many who have suffered in silence or whose accounts are languishing in a ministerial inbox. Bill Ritchie waited an hour while having a heart attack before a single-crewed ambulance arrived, only to have to call another unit with two crew members to take him to hospital. He survived, but others have not.

Susan Donald's 81-year-old father waited seven hours in agony after falling and breaking his hip. He died three days later in hospital. Pam Anderson, a care home manager, got an ambulance but—again—there was only one employee in the vehicle. A two-crew team drove 30 miles from Tomintoul to take her, but Pam died on the way to Aberdeen. The ambulance in Braemar was removed in 2007 and the community is still waiting—14 years later—for a replacement. That is 14 years of SNP Government failure. The local SNP councillor resigned from the party in disgust, and I credit Geva Blackett for her principled stand and lead on the issue locally.

Emergency vehicles should not be despatched with single crew members. NHS Grampian and the Scottish Ambulance Service work round the clock to keep the north-east safe, but they have been

failed by the lack of rural ambulance provision in Deeside and elsewhere. If two people have the same urgent care needs, the person in a rural area will not get the same level of service as someone in an urban area. That is unacceptable.

Ambulance delays are the worst on record, but the delays have underlying causes. Although others raise the issue of patient flow through A and E and admissions to hospital, our rural emergency provision has far more fundamental flaws that need to be addressed. In the north-east, we are fortunate to have Helimed 79, the second of Scotland's charity air ambulances. However, charity seems to be the only route left for rural communities.

Other solutions that have been put forward in Braemar include piloting a joint protocol similar to the one in Victoria, Australia, which enables better use of the fire service and upskills their co-responders; fundraising for a helicopter emergency landing pad; making sure that co-responders are properly booked on to the Scottish Ambulance Service system; fundraising for a 4x4 ambulance to replace the existing co-responder van; and basing an advanced practitioner in Braemar to support primary care and respond to emergency calls. I hope that, after the tragedy and the continuing failures, the cabinet secretary will finally do the community the courtesy of looking into those options. However, I am still awaiting a response to my letter of February.

To see the health secretary grinning front and centre at a photo opportunity when he has had to call in the British Army to cover his incompetence insults those families whose tragic stories have been recounted today. It is plain to everyone here, and to the families of those who have died or who have seen their lives irrevocably changed, that solving this crisis is not the health secretary's priority. Those heartbreaking stories of people dying and suffering in agony while waiting for an ambulance must be a wake-up call to the SNP Government, but the truth is that it remains asleep at the wheel.

17:47

**Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** I, too, thank Jamie Halcro Johnston for bringing this important issue to the Scottish Parliament. We have heard from the south of Scotland, the Highlands and Islands, which I represent alongside Edward Mountain, and Orkney in the northern isles about the range of issues that are affecting constituencies and regions across Scotland.

I have raised the issues at the national level at First Minister's question time, but I want to use this opportunity to raise some of the concerns that I



have received from constituents in Moray. I say to Christine Grahame that she is extremely fortunate not to have had a single email or piece of casework about delays for her constituents—*[Interruption.]* I say in all sincerity that she is extremely fortunate, because some of the emails and contacts that I have had from constituents have been harrowing. In a moment, I will go over just one of those cases.

Jamie Halcro Johnston was right to highlight the issue with transfers. I would not be doing my job as a representative of the Highlands and Islands, which includes the Moray area, if I did not take the opportunity to mention the downgrading of the maternity unit at Dr Gray's hospital. The report on that by Ralph Roberts has now been delayed until November. Will the cabinet secretary give a firm commitment that, as soon as the report hits his desk, he and his ministers will meet local campaigners and representatives to discuss the issue? We need the full consultant-led maternity unit at Dr Gray's to be reintroduced.

On the issue with transfers, I was in that situation earlier this year. I had to wait in Dr Gray's with my wife, who had just been told that she could not be treated locally through the stages of labour. She was ready to be transferred to Aberdeen, but we had to sit and wait and wait as her labour progressed, and as she got more uncomfortable and needed more and more support. However, we could not even leave the hospital, because the ambulance was not available. Ultimately, it came, several hours after it was first called for, and she had a very difficult journey to Aberdeen, because her labour had progressed all the time that she was waiting.

I will briefly mention the case of another Moray family. They have asked not to be named, but they asked me to explain the details of their case to show how difficult the situation is. The case involves a woman who was 31 weeks into pregnancy and who had tested positive for Covid. She was able to remain at home for some time, but her symptoms got worse, so she had to go to hospital to be looked after—originally to Dr Gray's and then through to the Aberdeen maternity unit. There were delays in getting her from Dr Gray's to Aberdeen. The ward at Aberdeen expected her far sooner, but it took four and a half hours before she arrived and was taken through.

That is, however, not the most troubling aspect of her case—I say to Christine Grahame that this is one example that I have been unable to get my head round. At one point during her stay at the Aberdeen maternity unit, she required a scan and had to go from the unit to Aberdeen royal infirmary and, because she was Covid positive, she had to get an ambulance. I know that Covid complicates things but, according to Google Maps, going from

the maternity unit at Aberdeen to Aberdeen royal infirmary is a four-minute journey. She was not able to eat in advance of her scan and, after she had received it, she had a five-and-a-half-hour wait for an ambulance. That was to take a woman who was 31 weeks into pregnancy from Aberdeen royal infirmary back to the Aberdeen maternity unit, which is a four-minute drive. That is unacceptable. Pauline Howie from the Scottish Ambulance Service replied to me last week agreeing that it was not acceptable.

Cabinet secretary, none of those examples is acceptable—*[Interruption.]*

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** The member cannot take an intervention, as he is about to conclude.

**Douglas Ross:** We have heard so many experiences from across Scotland of people who are not getting the service that they deserve. I hope that we hear from the cabinet secretary the resolution to many of the issues that we are seeing right across Scotland.

17:52

**The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Humza Yousaf):** As is customary, I thank Mr Halcro Johnston for this evening's debate. Although we have had discussions, statements, debates and questions to the First Minister, it is important that Parliament keeps reiterating the issues that are faced by our NHS and Scottish Ambulance Service.

Although there has been a fair bit of debate, along with discussions and questions, around the Scottish Ambulance Service over the past couple of weeks, it is fair to say that the particular issues that members have raised in relation to rural, remote and island communities have perhaps not had quite that airing. It is therefore helpful that Jamie Halcro Johnston lodged the motion. Although I do not agree with all of it—I will come to that in a second—much of it focuses on issues of great importance to those rural, remote and island communities.

Before I go into the detail, I will address some of the points that members right across the chamber have made. Specific issues were raised that affect remote and rural communities. We just heard from Douglas Ross in relation to the issues around Dr Gray's. I am not surprised that he raised that issue, as I know that he raises it at every opportunity that he gets, and rightly so. I also note the good cross-party campaign on that. He has my assurance that, when the report from Ralph Roberts lands on my desk, I will meet community campaigners and cross-party MSPs, MPs and any other elected members who have an interest.

I thought that Liam McArthur was going to give Jamie Halcro Johnston the lesson that people should always trust the Scottish Government. I am afraid that that did not quite pass Mr McArthur's lips, but I am pleased that we worked not only with him but with the fantastic campaign for paramedic bursaries to launch that scheme earlier this year. The scheme will make a big difference to recruitment to, and retention on, the course.

On the specific issues on Orkney, I speak to the chair of NHS Orkney fairly regularly—for example, we spoke a few days ago at the end of last week—and I will continue to raise those issues.

**Liam McArthur:** I echo the cabinet secretary's comments in relation to the student paramedic campaign.

In his conversations with the chair of NHS Orkney, I am sure that, if the subject was touched on, she would have reinforced with him the importance that NHS Orkney attaches to increasing staffing in the Ambulance Service. At the moment, the demand is falling on out-of-hours GPs who, as I said in my remarks, are finding themselves dealing with situations for which they are not trained.

**Humza Yousaf:** The member is right: Meghan McEwen has raised those issues with me, and I promised to take a look at them again. Equally, I am happy to look at the issue about Braemar that Alexander Burnett raised and at other local issues that members raised during the debate.

I reject the assertion that the Ambulance Service was not performing well pre-pandemic. Of course there were issues—I do not doubt that for a second—and of course there were cases in which the wait for an ambulance was too long, which members will have raised with my predecessor. However, I am afraid that I cannot agree with the assertion that the Ambulance Service was not providing a good service pre-pandemic. I could provide lots of figures, stats and detail in that regard, but I will not do so as I have a lot of points to make.

**Jamie Halcro Johnston:** Is it the cabinet secretary's target to return the Ambulance Service to the standard that it was at pre-pandemic, or is he looking for more improvements, given the concerns that constituents, people who work in the sector and other organisations have raised about performance pre-pandemic?

**Humza Yousaf:** It is the latter. We want to do better than we did previously. However, I do not agree with the assertion that the Ambulance Service was performing poorly pre-pandemic, albeit that there were challenges.

I also do not agree with the assertion that a number of members made that the Government

has not funded the Ambulance Service. Staffing and investment in the Scottish Ambulance Service have increased greatly under this Government; since 2006, there has been a 62 per cent increase in staffing. Carol Mochan said that there has been chronic understaffing, but that is the position that we inherited, and the Government has improved on it. Paramedic staffing is up by 26 per cent, ambulance technician numbers are up by 48 per cent, and even before the current challenges we had invested an additional £20 million to help to recruit 300 additional staff. I repeat: that is to recruit additional staff and not just to replace staff because of staff turnover. Liam McArthur asked about that.

That is not to say that the current challenges, which members rightly raise, do not deserve immediate action, and I make no suggestion that that is the case. They absolutely deserve such action, which is why the Government has set out significant measures. Christine Grahame provided detail of those measures. It is not just about the excellent service that the Army is providing—I again thank the Army for being so responsive, so quickly—and the excellent additional support that the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, volunteers, the British Red Cross and private taxi companies are providing. As well as that, we have the additional recruitment and increased investment in control centres, with clinical leads being placed in our control centres and the appointment of hospital ambulance liaison officers.

**Christine Grahame:** Will the cabinet secretary give way?

**Humza Yousaf:** I was just about to come to the member's point about information technology. I am happy to take an intervention.

**Christine Grahame:** The dreadful cases that we are hearing about must be of concern to all of us. We must also be concerned about the fact that 79 per cent of calls in August were not emergencies. Paramedics are turning up to places where they should not be, when they should be dealing with cases such as those that have been described in the debate. Can the cabinet secretary give more detail on how the system operates across various regions and say why crews have been sent out to cases that were not emergencies? That is another issue that we must consider carefully. Seventy-nine per cent of calls in August were not emergencies.

**Humza Yousaf:** I am happy to provide members with details of different categories of call-out. Calls are judged by the level of acuity, from high acuity right through to low acuity.

When I talk about the pandemic exacerbating challenges—that is the phrase that I tend to use; I do not say that the challenges emerged because

of the pandemic—I mean that we know that people who have not presented to GPs or hospitals are now coming to ambulances first; they are sicker and have more complex needs and are taking up more hospital beds.

That takes me to the point on which I will end. It is of course right that, in today's debate, we concentrate on the Ambulance Service, but there has to be an understanding that this is a whole-system issue—and I think that all members understand that. That is why the Government is acting, from investing in primary care at the front door to doing our best to mitigate and solve the issues to do with delayed discharge at the back door and investing in social care.

I reiterate the point that I have made several times over the past two weeks. I thank our hard-working ambulance staff for everything that they have done and I give them an absolute assurance that the Government will continue to invest to ensure that the Ambulance Service is well staffed for the challenges ahead.

*Meeting closed at 18:00.*



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