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Meeting of the Parliament (Hybrid)

Wednesday 26 May 2021

Session 6



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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 26 May 2021

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

Business Motion

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

The first item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-00123, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a revision to today's business.

Motion moved,

(a) the following revision to the programme of business on Wednesday 26 May 2021—

after

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

insert

followed by Approval of SSIs (if required);

(b) that, for the purposes of consideration of the Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Restrictions and

Requirements) (Local Levels) (Scotland) Amendment (No. 17) Regulations 2021 (SSI 2021/136)

Rules 10.1.3(a) and 10.3.3 of Standing Orders be suspended; and

(c) that the Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Restrictions and Requirements) (Local Levels)

(Scotland) Amendment (No. 17) Regulations 2021 (SSI 2021/136) be considered by the Parliament.—[George Adam]

Motion agreed to.

Topical Question Time

14:02

Lifeline Ferry Routes

1. **Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to address the on-going disruption to lifeline ferry routes served by CalMac. (S6T-00001)

The Minister for Transport (Graeme Dey): We recognise communities' frustration at the current disruption and the impact that it is having. We are doing everything that we can to support CalMac to maximise available capacity across the network and to ensure the timely resolution of the issues.

Since becoming Minister for Transport, I have prioritised the matter. I have already met CalMac representatives and local MSPs, including Dr Allan, and I will be meeting the independent CalMac community board on Friday to hear its views. I am open to constructive and viable suggestions for improving matters.

We are actively exploring opportunities for chartering additional tonnage, including consideration of the suitability of MV Pentalina, to increase resilience across the network. We have also confirmed new investment of £580 million in ports and vessels to support and improve Scotland's ferry services over the next five years.

Alasdair Allan: I welcome the minister to his new role, and thank him for his reply.

As the minister will appreciate, the entire economy of any island depends on its ferry. In recent weeks, I have been deluged by emails from families who are desperate to visit relatives on the mainland, and whose long-booked tickets have been cancelled; from businesses that can no longer get building materials to the islands or export shellfish; and from tourism businesses that are struggling to cope with the news that all bookings are suspended for a fortnight.

MV Loch Seaforth is CalMac's largest major vessel, but she is also CalMac's newest vessel. She should not be experiencing technical issues of such severity. Will there be an investigation into the causes of the faults?

Graeme Dey: I entirely recognise the intolerable nature of the situation for islanders, from individual and economic perspectives. I also realise that people want action rather than warm words, hence the work that is going on to improve matters in the short, medium and longer terms.

With regard to the vessel that is at the centre of the matter, CalMac is, rightly, fully focused on

resolving the issue and getting the MV Loch Seaforth back in service as quickly as possible. In parallel, specialist reports have been commissioned to examine the cause of the issue, and any recommendations will be fully considered. Once the reports are finalised and digested, I am happy to commit to updating members on the outcome of that exercise.

Alasdair Allan: I thank the minister and I appreciate the attention that he is giving to the matter. Although the issues with the MV Loch Seaforth are unprecedented, breakdowns of major vessels on lifeline routes are not, unfortunately. It is now obvious for all to see that CalMac at present does not have enough vessels to run its services with the necessary resilience. What will the Government do in the immediate term to charter additional vessels and to ensure that the next overdue vessel order is placed with a shipyard soon?

Graeme Dey: As I have said, we are actively looking at accessing additional tonnage in order to take care of the immediate future. Activity is also in hand on orders that are due to be placed, with a view to having one in particular—the one to which Dr Allan referred—well in train by the end of the financial year.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): The minister will be aware that part of the reason for the problem is the failure since 2011 to commission sufficient vessels. Is the minister willing to meet me, as a list MSP for West Scotland, to look at how we will address the long-term problem of failure to consult and listen to local communities that was highlighted in the recent Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee report, and at how we make sure that islanders on Arran and the trade unions that represent the CalMac workforce are involved in decision making?

Graeme Dey: As I think I have already indicated, I am willing to work constructively with any MSP who is likewise willing to engage constructively. In the short to medium term, we need a solution that does not involve robbing Peter to pay Paul and which will add to our assets in helping to begin properly to tackle the issue.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I am delighted that the minister has hit the ground running, in having already committed himself to real and long-lasting improvements to Scotland's ferry services. What changes will be implemented to ensure a more responsive and reactive customer focus at CalMac, in order to improve contingency planning in the event of future ferry disruptions?

Graeme Dey: Again, that touches on the answer that I just gave, which was that we need

an emergency plan, if you like, so that when such incidents arise, we can respond in a way that does not—again, as I said earlier—rob Peter to pay Paul. Kenneth Gibson will understand that, because I have been in post for only a few days, it is very much a work in progress, but I give him the assurance that it is all being actively looked at.

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): I am heartened to hear the minister's response, and of the investment in the ferry fleet. I would love to hear a commitment to having a green ferry fleet. Will the minister assure me that in the next five years we will see ferries that are green and will help us to meet our net zero targets?

Graeme Dey: I seem to recall from last week that Green MSPs were very critical of transport sitting in the net zero portfolio, but it is self-evidently there for a reason, because transport is such a large emitter. Everything that we do is with a view to tackling the climate emergency and driving down emissions.

Colleges (Funding and Expenditure)

2. **Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the recent Audit Scotland report, which highlighted that the gap between colleges' funding and expenditure has grown to £54 million. (S6T-00024)

The Minister for Higher Education and Further Education, Youth Employment and Training (Jamie Hepburn): I welcome Pam Gosal to the Parliament and I congratulate her on her new role.

We know that our colleges face significant financial challenges, which have been exacerbated by the pandemic, and we are working closely with them to mitigate the effects of the crisis. Assessing and managing the financial health of colleges is a dynamic process. In its report "Scotland's colleges 2020", Audit Scotland acknowledged that the college sector reported an underlying operating surplus of more than £3 million in academic year 2019-20.

In financial year 2020-21, we allocated the college sector and its learners more than £30 million in additional funding, with the Scottish Funding Council allocating an extra £10 million of repurposed funding. In the current financial year, there is an overall increase in the college sector budget of £33.7 million, which will support the sustainability of the college sector and help mitigate against the effects of the pandemic.

In addition, the Scottish Funding Council will shortly conclude its review of coherent provision and sustainability in the tertiary sector.

Pam Gosal: I thank the minister for his response and welcome him to his role, too.

As we recover from the pandemic, it is clear that Scotland's further education sector will play a critical role in our recovery, as people look to reskill and retrain for a changing job market. However, with Scotland's college sector's deficit apparently set to rise even further in the coming years, the sector is facing the task with one arm tied behind its back.

If the Government is serious about equipping Scotland with the skills that it will need to rebuild effectively—

The Presiding Officer: May we have a question, please?

Pam Gosal: The Government must commit to properly funded colleges. Will the minister commit to full funding for colleges?

Jamie Hepburn: I refer Ms Gosal to my previous answer, when I made the point that, in the coming year, we are providing £33.7 million more to the college sector than we provided last year.

On Ms Gosal's remarks about a deficit in the sector, I urge her to look with caution at the figure that she quoted, which includes many reported costs, such as depreciation of assets, that do not have an immediate cash impact on colleges. I refer her to the point that I made: for the academic year 2019-20, an adjusted operating position of a surplus—a surplus—of more than £3 million was reported.

Pam Gosal: The minister talks about £33 million, but Audit Scotland said that there is a £54 million funding gap.

I remind the minister that there is no single pathway that people, especially young people, choose; different people choose different pathways. University is not right for everyone. When I finished school, it was not right for me; the time that I spent at Cardonald College provided me with a platform from which I could start not only my career but my education journey, which has led to my handing in my PhD thesis this week.

This is not just about my journey. I want everyone out there to have the same opportunities that I had. Will the minister explain how his Government plans to prioritise the college sector and reverse the trend that has resulted in a 35 per cent reduction in college student numbers since his Government came to power?

Jamie Hepburn: I congratulate the soon-to-be Dr Gosal on completing her PhD.

Let me correct the member. She referred to a reduction in student numbers in Scotland's colleges. That is not correct. Despite the Covid-19

pandemic, we continue to exceed the target of 116,000 full-time-equivalent student places. In 2019-20, we delivered more than 117,000 full-time-equivalent student places.

I agree with Ms Gosal's fundamental proposition: there are many different pathways for young people. Ms Gosal will be aware that my ministerial role goes much wider than the tertiary education sector and that I also have responsibility for the developing the young workforce strategy and the young persons guarantee. She—and every member—can be assured that my commitment is that there is no wrong path for a young person as they move onward and into employment and that I will approach my role in that vein.

The Presiding Officer: Before we move on, I say that I would be grateful if questions and responses could be succinct.

Vaccination Status Letter

3. Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): To ask the Scottish Government whether the reported security flaw in the vaccination status letter has been resolved, and whether it will provide an update on the provision and use of vaccine passports for both international and domestic purposes. (S6T-00019)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Humza Yousaf): Yes, it has been resolved. On learning of the security glitch in relation to downloading a vaccination status letter, that option was disabled. A request for a free-of-charge vaccination status record can be made through the freephone Covid-19 status helpline, on 0808 196 8565. As our Covid status certification programme progresses, the letter will be replaced by a digital Covid status certificate, which is likely to include vaccination status and Covid recovery and negative test data.

On international travel, we are working across the common travel area to put in place a fully interoperable digital solution that aligns with the international standards that are being developed by the World Health Organization.

No decision has been taken on using Covid status certificates domestically, and I have ethical, clinical and equalities concerns about their use. In that vein, I will soon host a round table with human rights and equality experts to discuss the issues.

Willie Rennie: When I asked the First Minister about vaccine passports last year, she said that she did not favour them. However, the Government is pressing ahead without a debate in Parliament or proper public consultation. There is no clarity on how vaccine passports will work, whether they will be used and how long they will

be used for. Is the Government making this up as it goes along?

Humza Yousaf: The member clearly did not listen to my answer before asking a second question. We are not pushing ahead. The status letter that I talked about is part of people's medical records. If Willie Rennie is seriously suggesting, as a Liberal Democrat, that people should not have access to that record, he should say so, but that is not what we are doing. People can request that record. We were trying to make sure that there is an option for people to request that status, so that they do not inundate their general practitioners.

I have just said in my answer to Willie Rennie that I have ethical, clinical and human rights concerns about the use of Covid vaccination certificates and we want to deal with those issues on a four-nations basis as best we can. However, I give him an absolute assurance that no decision whatsoever has been made about using Covid vaccination certificates domestically.

Willie Rennie: I always listen extremely carefully to what the cabinet secretary says. It took five minutes for a junior researcher to identify a major security flaw in the system that the cabinet secretary has set up—what system testing was undertaken before it was launched? Was it piloted before it was launched and how can we have confidence that the new system will work? If we do not trust it, why would any foreign Government trust it?

Humza Yousaf: Again, I give an absolute assurance that, having been made aware of the security glitch, of course we are going to debrief with our information technology team—that is happening at the moment. Vaccination certificates have relatively low currency; not many countries require them at the moment and no major airline requires them for entry to its flights. We want to stop people from inundating their GPs, who are already working extraordinarily hard during the pandemic. We will learn the lessons of the security glitch. We have resolved it, so that issue is no longer a problem.

I reaffirm what I have already said to Willie Rennie: I have concerns about the domestic use of vaccination certificates. I will be meeting a number of equalities and human rights organisations very soon and I promise the member that there will be no pressing ahead with Covid vaccine certificates until we resolve those issues, and even then we will have cross-party discussions.

The Presiding Officer: Pauline McNeill joins us remotely.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): Around half of people in Glasgow who were due get a Covid

jab over the weekend failed to turn up. Reports on Monday said that there was a staggering 83 per cent non-attendance at the Hydro in Glasgow. We know that the venue can administer a minimum of 4,000 vaccinations a day and has the capacity to scale up to 10,000. Does the Government understand the reasons for that high level of non-attendance among people in their 30s and 40s at mass vaccination centres such as the Hydro? Is it time to look at having an online registration system for people of all ages? We cannot continue to have that level of non-attendance—it is inefficient.

Humza Yousaf: I agree with Pauline McNeill. After the statistics from the weekend, I am urgently talking to the team about extending the online portal that is available for 18 to 29-year-olds, which has had very good take-up, to cohort 10, which is those who are aged 30 to 39 and 40 to 49. That is being urgently considered as we speak.

Those who did not attend and who we have phone numbers for have been followed up by text message. As we are all aware, there is a considerable problem in the south side of Glasgow in particular. Around two hours ago, I was at the gurdwara on Albert Drive in Pollokshields looking at the walk-in mobile vaccination unit there. We are exhausting every single avenue and using every tool that we have to do everything that we can to bring case numbers down in the south side of Glasgow, and I would be happy to speak to Pauline McNeill and other members across the chamber in more detail about the efforts to do so.

The Presiding Officer: Apologies to those members who we were unable to take. That concludes topical questions.

Scottish Government Priorities

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

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

14:19

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): During the election campaign, my party promised to focus on steering Scotland through the Covid crisis, we set out an ambitious programme to drive recovery and we pledged to give people in Scotland a choice over our future when the crisis has passed. We were elected on a clear mandate, with a record number of votes, to deliver on those commitments, and that is what we intend to do.

We have already started that work. Our most immediate priority is to lead Scotland safely through and out of the pandemic. To that end, we will steer a careful course back to normality. We will support our test and protect teams, we will implement enhanced public health measures when outbreaks arise and we will deliver vaccinations as quickly as supplies allow. We will also work with the business sector, to provide as much clarity and support as possible.

We recognise that, as we come out of the pandemic, there will be bumps in the road, as we are experiencing in Glasgow just now. However, the vaccine roll-out gives us firm hope that we are on the right track. Therefore, over the next three weeks, we will set out our expectations for the stage beyond level 0, as—we hope—we return to a much greater degree of normality.

We will also act now to learn lessons for the future. We have already committed to there being a comprehensive public inquiry and, within our first 100 days, we will establish a standing committee on pandemics. We will also lead a wider mission of national recovery and renewal. I have appointed the Deputy First Minister as Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery, and today he will convene the first meeting of the new cross-party steering group on Covid recovery.

A central part of the Government's programme is to support our national health service. In our first 100 days, we will publish an NHS recovery plan setting out how we will achieve a 10 per cent increase in activity in key services. We are already implementing a 4 per cent average pay increase this year for NHS agenda for change staff. That increase, backdated to December, will be in payslips from next month.

Further, we are on course to open the first three rapid diagnostic centres for cancer. The Dumfries and Galloway centre opened last week and saw its first patient on Monday. Centres in Fife and in Ayrshire and Arran will open in the next few weeks.

As part of our 100-day plan, we are taking steps to permanently end charges in private finance initiative hospital car parks. We will prepare legislation to remove dental charges for care leavers, as the first step towards abolishing dental charges altogether. We will also publish a women's health plan.

During the course of this parliamentary session, we will increase spending on the NHS in Scotland by at least 20 per cent. We will complete construction of the new elective treatment centres and, by 2025, recruit an additional 1,500 staff to work in them.

Over the next decade, we will invest £10 billion in the NHS estate to support the renewal and replacement of health facilities across the country, including the Edinburgh eye pavilion here in our capital city.

One important investment that I can announce today is the £12 million that we are providing to take East Ayrshire community hospital into full NHS ownership, bringing its PFI contract to an early close. We will also increase direct investment in mental health services by 25 per cent over the course of this session, and we will deliver on action to reduce the unacceptable toll of drug deaths in our country.

The pandemic has brought home to all of us just how much we rely on care services and carers. I can therefore confirm that in our first 100 days we will legislate to ensure that all those who receive the carers allowance supplement will in December receive a double payment, worth £460.

Moreover, in our first 100 days we will begin the consultation on legislation to establish a national care service. We intend to introduce that legislation during the first year of this session and expect the service to be operational by the end of it. It will, in my view, be the most important public sector innovation since the establishment of our national health service.

We will also during the first 100 days complete one of the previous Parliament's major legacies. From August, all three and four-year-olds, and two-year-olds who need it most, will be eligible for more than 1,100 hours of free early learning and childcare each year. In this session, we will expand childcare further by developing the provision of wraparound care and after-school clubs.

We will also continue our work to close the school attainment gap. In our first 100 days, we will publish the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development report on Scottish education and start to implement its recommendations. We will provide local authorities with the first instalment of our expanded £1 billion Scottish attainment fund.

We will fund councils for the first phase of our commitment to recruit 3,500 more teachers and classroom assistants. We will begin work to ensure that all children have access to a laptop or tablet and will take steps to remove charges for core curriculum activities and for music and arts education, including those for instrumental music tuition.

We will fund a special £20 million programme of support and activities this summer for children and young people. We will make free breakfasts and lunches available to all primary 4 children in Scotland as the next step towards extending those meals to all primary school children, all year round.

We will increase the school clothing grant and the best start food grant and—before we formally expand the Scottish child payment next year and prepare to double its value—we will provide interim support for eligible children, which will include a £100 payment near the start of the summer holidays.

To support young adults we will, during this session, raise the age at which people become liable for council tax from 18 to 22. We will establish a new grant of £200 a year for care-experienced young people as part of our promise to those with experience of care. We will continue to develop the young persons guarantee, ensuring that every young person has the opportunity of education, training or work. We will fund colleges to deliver 5,000 short, industry-focused courses for young people and we will establish a green jobs academy and set out the next phase of our national transition training fund.

That support for skills and young people is part of our wider mission to create a fairer Scotland. During our first 100 days, we will provide 40,000 digital devices to the households that need them most. We will develop a plan to tackle social isolation and loneliness. We will begin longer-term work to develop a minimum income guarantee. We will also invest the first part of our multiyear £100 million commitment to support specialist front-line organisations tackling domestic abuse and sexual violence.

Throughout this session, we will also support safer communities by investing in our police and fire services and will continue to support good quality affordable housing. In our first 100 days,

we will begin work on a new strategy for the rented sector and a review of student accommodation. We will invest a total of £3.5 billion during this session to support our pledge to deliver 100,000 new affordable homes by 2032. We will continue our work to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping. We will invest a further £1.6 billion and introduce new housing standards to support the decarbonisation of heating.

We will also work with councils, businesses and third sector organisations to improve local neighbourhoods. That will include legislation to support community wealth building and steps to ensure more local procurement. In our first 100 days, we will launch the Scotland loves local campaign to encourage more support for local businesses.

That is just one of the ways in which we will promote economic recovery. During our first 100 days, we will establish a new council for economic transformation. We will support specific business sectors, including food and drink and tourism. We will publish a plan for the safe reopening of cultural venues and performances and we will work with the events sector to support its full resumption.

We will continue to support our digital ambitions. In our first 100 days, we will restart the digital boost scheme and open a new 5G innovation centre in Dundee. We will fully implement the Logan review during this session. We will also complete our investment in the National Manufacturing Institute, continue to promote our vision for trade and increase infrastructure spending. We will also capitalise the Scottish National Investment Bank with a further £1 billion.

We will work to ensure that our recovery is fair. We will promote fair work, including through public sector procurement. We will support women entrepreneurs with £50 million of funding for a women's business centre. We will boost our rural economy through, for example, a rural entrepreneur fund. Over the course of this session, we will help willing companies to pilot a four-day working week as we explore whether the changes in working practices that have been brought about by the pandemic can improve wellbeing and productivity in the long term.

We will also ensure that our recovery is a green one. In less than six months' time, Glasgow is due to host the 26th UN climate change conference of the parties—COP26—the most important discussions to take place in the world this year, so in our first 100 days we will publish an indicative national defined contribution, setting out how Scotland will become a net zero nation by 2045.

We will take further steps to decarbonise our transport network, including, in our first 100 days, beginning the process of taking ScotRail into

public ownership. We will work with local authorities to resume low-emission zones in our cities and we will encourage active travel, which will include a scheme to provide bikes for children. We will also introduce legislation to make bus travel free for young people under the age of 22 and convene a bus decarbonisation task force to remove the majority of fossil-fuel buses from public transport by the end of 2023.

Over the parliamentary session, we will protect and enhance our natural habitats and reduce waste. We will increase woodland creation from 12,000 hectares a year to 18,000 hectares a year. Over this decade, we will invest more than £250 million in peatland restoration. We will ban single-use plastic cutlery, launch a deposit return scheme for single-use drinks containers and introduce a bill to promote the circular economy.

Finally, we will work to seize the economic opportunities that a move to net zero will create. In our first 100 days, we will set out a strategic investment assessment, as we seek to support the offshore wind supply chain. Over the parliamentary session, we will invest £100 million to support the development of hydrogen technologies. We will help companies in high-carbon sectors transition to low-carbon technologies and services. As we do all that, we will stay true to the principle of a just transition, both here in Scotland and around the world.

As I very much hope is obvious from the policy initiatives that I have just set out, the Government is focused on steering Scotland through the Covid crisis and building a sustainable and fair recovery from it.

There are many elements of our vision and our programme that I hope will command support across the chamber. Having talked about what we intend to do, however, I will say a few words about how we aim to do it.

It is often said—and I think that it is broadly true—that among at least some of the parties in the chamber there is more, in a policy sense, that unites us than divides us. Indeed, when the Parliament was established, the hope was that a more consensual and constructive way of working would take root. The promise back then was that the old ways of Westminster would not simply be transplanted here to Holyrood. We may not always have lived up to that, but if there was ever a time to renew that promise, it is surely now.

In Scotland—and right across our world—we have massive challenges to confront and overcome: a global pandemic, the climate emergency, and the need to build an economic recovery that is strong, sustainable and fair. In the face of all that, people across Scotland expect—indeed, I suspect that they demand—a grown-up

and co-operative approach to politics that puts the interests of the country first.

Without any doubt, my party won a substantial mandate in the election. As I have just set out in summary, we have an ambitious policy programme to take forward, but we do not claim a monopoly of wisdom. We want to reach out and find the best solutions to the toughest of problems. Our duty is to co-operate, not in order to find the lowest common denominator, but as a way of raising the bar ever higher.

That is how I will seek to govern in this new session of the Parliament. Indeed, shortly after the election, I met Anas Sarwar to discuss areas where the Scottish National Party and Labour might work together. I am keen to develop those discussions further and I extend a similar offer to other parties across the chamber.

Most significantly, I can share with the Parliament that, since the election, I have had a series of exploratory discussions with the Scottish Green Party about how we might work together more formally in the future. Initially, even though we were not negotiating a coalition, the discussions were supported through the formation of Government facility that is available to all parties during and immediately after an election. Since the new Government was appointed last week, the discussions have been supported by the civil service, at my direction.

I am pleased to advise the Parliament that, at a meeting in Bute house last night, I agreed with the Scottish Green Party that we will move the informal discussions to the next stage. I confirm that the Scottish Government and the Scottish Green Party will enter structured talks, supported by the civil service, with a view to reaching a formal co-operation agreement, if we can.

The talks will focus on exactly what the content, extent and scope of any agreement will be. Any agreement that emerges from the talks will be subject to the necessary approval processes of the Cabinet and each of our parties.

What we hope to achieve is potentially groundbreaking. In the coming weeks, we will seek to agree policy areas in which we would formally co-operate and, within each, identify the shared objectives and policy initiatives that we would agree to work together on. I am confident that those policy areas will include the climate emergency and how we can accelerate our progress to net zero. However, we are keen to identify other issues, too—not just those on which we have a similar outlook but those on which co-operation would be more challenging for both of us.

We will seek to agree a model of joint working in government to support progress in the areas of co-

operation. That could include formal processes of consultation and, in our agreed areas of co-operation, the Green Party's involvement in Scottish Government policy development and delivery. It would also include details of any reciprocal support that the Greens would give to aspects of the Government's legislative, policy and budgetary programmes.

We need to see how much progress the talks can make, and we should not get too far ahead of ourselves today but, as we embark on the process, we set no limits on our ambition. In that vein, let me be clear that, although the outcome is not guaranteed or pre-agreed, it is not inconceivable that a co-operation agreement could lead in the future to a Green minister or ministers being part of the Government.

The key point for today is that we are both agreeing to come out of our comfort zones to find new ways of working for the common good—to change the dynamic of our politics for the better and give meaning to our Parliament's founding principles. What we are embarking on will require compromise on both sides, but it will also require us to be bold. Given the challenges that we face, that is a good thing, and it is also the whole point.

It is worth noting that neither of us does this because we need to; it is not being forced on us by parliamentary arithmetic—indeed, we are taking a risk that the talks will not succeed. However, we are prepared to do this because, if we succeed, the benefits to the country could be significant. By working together, we can help to build a better future for Scotland.

As we look to Scotland's future, one obvious point of agreement between us is that that future should be in Scotland's hands. As we emerge from crisis, a fundamental question must be addressed—who has the right to decide the kind of country that Scotland will become after the crisis is over?

There is a choice of two very different futures. There is the Westminster choice of a hard Brexit that costs jobs, hits living standards and holds back recovery; trade deals that threaten our rural communities; social security cuts that put children into poverty; callous dawn raids; and an increase in nuclear warheads while overseas aid is cut. All of that is against the wishes of most people who live here. Or there is the alternative—not a panacea, but a future in which this Parliament has the full range of powers to shape and build a fairer and more prosperous country. In that future, we are an equal partner with our friends in the rest of the United Kingdom and across Europe.

The path that Scotland takes should not be the choice of any single politician or party; it must be a decision of the people. That is why, once the crisis

is over, people in Scotland should have the right to make that choice. The election result delivered a substantial majority in the Parliament for an independence referendum in the current parliamentary session. There is no justification for the UK Government to seek to block that mandate—to do so would suggest that the Tories no longer consider the UK to be a voluntary union of nations, and it would be profoundly undemocratic.

The question of what powers the Parliament should have will always be debated passionately, but our different opinions on that should not obscure our common desire to make the most of the powers that we have. That task is more urgent than ever. This session of Parliament will be the most important in our devolved history.

The past 15 months have been full of sadness and heartbreak, but they have also reminded us of the human capacity for ingenuity, compassion and solidarity. New vaccines were developed from a standing start, testing infrastructure was established from scratch and people pulled together in ways that would once have been unimaginable. There are fewer changes now that seem unimaginable or unachievable.

The plans that I have set out are unashamedly ambitious. We will tackle the Covid crisis as our immediate priority. We will lead by example in addressing the climate crisis. We will create a national care service to match the post-war national health service. We will widen opportunities for young people. We will build a modern, high-tech economy while staying true to enduring values of fairness and compassion. We will seek a better politics and we will put Scotland's future in Scotland's hands.

Our programme is rooted in today's reality, but it also shows the way to a brighter tomorrow. I look forward to working across the chamber as we get on with the job of delivering it.

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

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): For most of the First Minister's statement, she spoke of the pressing issues facing Scotland right now: finally putting more teachers in our schools; finally delivering on childcare promises; and finally focusing on climate change and the climate emergency. On those issues, there are points where we can agree and work constructively with parties across the chamber. However, ultimately—as always—it comes down to independence for

the Scottish National Party. It was there in the third line of her statement—it took just 15 seconds for Nicola Sturgeon to talk up the prospect of another referendum.

Nicola Sturgeon speaks—*[Interruption.]* Of course we are not going to go back to the old ways of Westminster, unless it suits the SNP. Nicola Sturgeon speaks of bringing people together, and then pushes the most divisive proposal imaginable. That was not a speech to unite Scotland or a statement of the people's priorities; it was regurgitation of the SNP's top priority. It sets up the same old us-versus-them choice, the same bitterness, the same division and the same proposals that the SNP thrives on.

However, this Parliament has a choice. Either we can be a Parliament of action that focuses 100 per cent on people's priorities and gets things done using the powers that the Parliament has right now, or another five years will be wasted as this Government gets more and more distracted as time goes on.

The Scottish Conservatives have set out our priorities: at least 15 bills to rebuild Scotland, spread opportunities across the country and restore power to our communities. Will the First Minister agree to bring forward a right to recovery to tackle our shameful drugs deaths in this country? Will she work with us on a victims' law to put our justice system on the side of victims? Will she bring forward an enterprise bill that delivers economic recovery for every single part of Scotland? Why should any of those pressing issues take a back seat to the First Minister's drive for another independence referendum?

The First Minister: In summary answer to the question that Douglas Ross ended on, I say that, yes, I am happy, as I said in my statement, to discuss all those ideas and suggestions as we finalise—as we will do later this year—our programme for government for the first full year of this new parliamentary session. That invitation is there and the door is open. I hope that we will see parties across the chamber walk through it and work with us. We should not pretend that we do not have differences of opinion—after all, we live in a democracy. Instead, we should be prepared to rise above those differences to work together for the common good. I think that I have made clear today my willingness to do that.

My more general response to Douglas Ross is that we have, of course, just had an election—that wonderful expression of democracy. In that election, I said to the Scottish people that if I was re-elected as First Minister, I would prioritise first and foremost leading us through the Covid recovery and would put forward an ambitious policy programme to drive our economic recovery, and then, when the crisis was over, I would

propose that the people of Scotland got the opportunity to choose our long-term future. My party won that election, and I have set out today how I intend to deliver on the commitments that I made in it, which were so thoroughly endorsed in the mandate that the Scottish people gave us.

Douglas Ross is right that most of my statement focused on what we will do just in our first 100 days, building on the progress that we have made. He mentioned teachers and childcare. Teacher numbers in our schools have been increasing ever since I became First Minister. We have been progressing plans to double childcare. That has been slightly delayed because of Covid, but that promise will be delivered in full from August and we are now moving on to the next phase. That is our focus.

I ask all parties in the chamber to stop re-fighting the election. The people of Scotland had their say and made their decision. Let us debate our differences robustly and in a spirit of civility, but let us come together where we can work on the things on which we can agree in the interests of the people of Scotland.

Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): I recognise the scale of the challenge that our country faces as we come through the pandemic. I am willing to work with anyone in the national interest on issues on which we agree. However, let us be clear: this is not day 1 of an SNP Government; it is day 5,136. Rhetoric is no longer enough—we need action.

It was good to see in the statement the Greens formalising and accepting their long-standing coalition of cuts, but this country needs a bold and ambitious Opposition and a credible alternative, which, under my leadership, Scottish Labour is determined to build.

This Government, too, must be bolder and more ambitious. If the First Minister is serious about focusing on recovery, will she commit, in the first 100 days, to delivering a genuine jobs guarantee scheme for young people and the long-term unemployed; to doubling the Scottish child payment to challenge child poverty; and to remobilising the national health service to confront cancer, which is Scotland's biggest killer? Further, will she take urgent action to avert a repeat of the Scottish Qualifications Authority's exams fiasco?

The First Minister: Anas Sarwar is right: this is not day 1 of an SNP Government; this is the beginning of a re-elected SNP's term of government. The people of Scotland had the opportunity to pass judgment on—what did he say?—5,136 days of an SNP Government, and they re-elected it with a record number of votes. Everybody in the chamber, if they care about democracy, has to recognise that basic fact. However, I want to reach out and work together.

Not long after the election, I initiated a meeting with Anas Sarwar that I thought was constructive, and I look to build on it.

On the specifics that Anas Sarwar asked about, we have already established the young person's guarantee and we are absolutely willing to have discussions about how we build and develop it. Our first budget will set out how we will proceed with the doubling of the Scottish child payment, which is something that we all want to do as quickly as possible. On cancer, the work to remobilise our NHS is already under way. I said in my statement that we have already opened, in Dumfries and Galloway, the first of the rapid diagnostic centres that I committed to during the election, and that two more will open over the next few weeks.

All that work is under way. The Government will get on with it, whether or not the Opposition parties choose to co-operate with us. However, the door is open. Let us genuinely try to do our politics differently. Let us respect differences and debate them vigorously, but, yes, let us come together.

During the campaign, Anas Sarwar made much of wanting a different style of politics. It is now time to prove whether he is prepared to put that into action. He will find my door open and a real willingness for us all to work together.

Lorna Slater (Lothian) (Green): There is no doubt that the decisions that we make in this chamber over the coming years will shape the future of the whole of Scotland, our society and our place in the world. It is our responsibility to get it right, to come together and to take action to secure a fair and green recovery for Scotland. I look forward to our talks progressing.

We need to roll up our sleeves and practise the grown-up politics of negotiation, co-operation and consensus building. A green recovery means jobs; it means leaving no one behind; and it means reducing carbon emissions and restoring our natural environment. We can succeed, but only if we all pull in the same direction.

Does the First Minister recognise that tackling the climate crisis and building a wellbeing economy means leaving our comfort zones and taking ever-bolder action? Will she integrate that objective across all levels of Government decision making?

The First Minister: I want to pick up on what Lorna Slater has said about being bold, taking risks and leaving our comfort zones. The parliamentary arithmetic of the chamber means that my Government could decide to govern alone, as we did in the previous parliamentary session, and the Greens would be justified in saying that they do not want to have any formal co-operation.

However, both parties have decided not to do that, not because we need to but because we think that it could be in the interests of the country.

In doing that, we are taking a risk. I hope that the talks that we are holding go well, but they might not succeed. However, we think that it is a risk worth taking because of the scale of the challenge that we face and the public's expectation of seeing politicians work together where we can.

It is correct that the challenges that we face are huge and have implications for every aspect of what we do. We need to see them in a holistic way. That is why, for example, I have appointed a Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport, bringing together areas in which there is normally tension and recognising the fact that meeting the challenges that we face will take cross-Government action. I am determined to lead in that way.

I welcome the constructive way in which the Greens have entered discussions, which I hope will develop positively. The Greens are to be commended for taking that risk, and I think that the people of Scotland stand to benefit. I very much look forward to progressing our agenda in that spirit.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): We will seek to co-operate as we have done during the pandemic over the past year.

In the election, the First Minister promised—rightly—that she would defer a referendum until the effects of the pandemic were over. By May 2026, will patients wait longer than 12 weeks for their NHS treatment, will young people wait longer than 18 weeks for their mental health treatment, will Scotland no longer have the highest drug deaths rate in Europe, and will the poverty-related attainment gap in schools be completely closed? Will those promises be delivered on before the First Minister presses for a referendum?

The First Minister: Next week in Parliament—certainly in the next couple of weeks—we will set out our plans to remobilise the NHS and get waiting times not just back to where they were pre-pandemic but to where we want them to be. We will also set out more of our plans on closing the educational attainment gap. Everything that I said to the Scottish public in the election is what we now seek to take forward and deliver.

Willie Rennie and I disagree on Scottish independence. However, although we will not pursue a referendum until we are out of the Covid crisis, it is nevertheless the case that the powers and levers that we have in this Parliament and the issues of recovery and what we are recovering to are interlinked—they cannot be separated. In his heart, Willie Rennie does not want Scotland's

recovery to be guided and steered by Boris Johnson any more than I do. If we are to avoid that in the long term, we have to take decisions into our own hands.

Fundamentally, Willie Rennie and I can disagree on independence, but it should not be for us to decide—it should be for the people of Scotland to decide. That is the proposition that we put before people in the election and it is the proposition on which we were overwhelmingly elected.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): The First Minister has outlined an ambitious plan to take Scotland forward, which I welcome. The UK Government has proposed and passed bills including the United Kingdom Internal Market Bill and has launched the levelling up fund and the shared prosperity fund, which shows that the UK Government can undermine Scottish Parliament powers that are set out in the Scotland acts. Given that, will the First Minister outline how UK Government bills will impact on or impede the priorities of the Scottish Government? What action can be taken to prevent an attack on our Parliament's powers?

The First Minister: We have already seen, in the previous parliamentary session, the variety of ways in which the UK Government seeks to encroach on the powers and responsibilities of the Scottish Parliament. That is undeniable and undisputable. We are starting to see the potential implications, including the potential for trade deals that will devastate our rural communities. That is not abstract or hypothetical—it is real. It brings to the fore a key issue, which is that the debate about Scotland's future over the next period is not a debate between a benign status quo and independence, but is a debate about whether we continue to allow a UK Government to take powers away from this Parliament or decide to take more powers into our own hands, so that we can build the country that we want Scotland to be.

People in Scotland have a right to make that decision. Of course they want my focus to be on leading us through the Covid crisis; it absolutely will be, for as long as that is required. However, as we come out of the crisis, the questions about what kind of country we want to be and who makes such decisions are absolutely central to what we recover to and the values that underpin it.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Recently, the Auditor General for Scotland heavily criticised the Scottish Government for

“a lack of clarity and transparency”

on the spending of public money, and he said that much more should have been done to provide value for money and to facilitate the necessary parliamentary scrutiny. What steps has the First

Minister put in process to address the Auditor General's very serious concerns?

The First Minister: We respond to all Audit Scotland reports and we set out the steps that we will take in response to recommendations that are made, which will be the case for that report. Scrutiny of the Government is a key part of the responsibilities of the Parliament. We are, even given the resounding election victory that we have just enjoyed, a minority Government. It is, therefore, incumbent on all of us to work together to make sure that scrutiny is robust. We all have a job to do—the committees of the Parliament, the Opposition parties in the Parliament and us, as a Government—to make sure that we aid that transparency.

On that, as on everything else, I note that the election is over. We all had our say and had the arguments during the election, and the people have decided. In many ways, this is the opportunity for a fresh start to respect the differences between us. I say again: my door is open, and the door of the Government is open, to anybody who wants to come to us with good ideas about how we can make life better for the people of Scotland. I am ready to listen—the question is whether other parties in the Parliament are ready to work in that way.

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): Can the First Minister provide more details on the £100 million digital boost scheme for small businesses and, in particular, the steps that the Government will take to promote digital innovation and digital accessibility, so that we do not lose the momentum on that that has been evident during Covid?

The First Minister: I thank Willie Coffey for his question. Since he is a good and dear friend of mine, I will stay completely clear of the issue of football for the duration of my answer.

On the specifics of the question, we will shortly set out the detail of the digital boost fund and our other funding commitments to improve the digital connectedness and capability of the country. One of the important commitments that we have given—I have mentioned it already today—is to implement in full the Logan review, which will be so important in our realising the economic potential of becoming a high-tech nation.

Also, crucially, we recognise that there is work that we have started that must still be progressed in order to make sure that we close the digital divide. Getting devices and connections to the people who are most in need is critical—we have committed to work to ensure that every young person in our schools has access to a laptop or a tablet. We must ensure that we have the appropriate digital infrastructure and that people

have the skills to use the infrastructure, devices and connections. It is an exciting programme of work that will bring many benefits to Scotland and will—if we do it right—give Scotland a competitive edge in the global economy.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Even before the pandemic, waiting lists for diagnostics and treatment were growing and the SNP's improvement plans were failing to deliver. At the end of 2019, 26,000 patients—a third of all patients—were waiting longer than the 12-week treatment time guarantee, and another 18,000 people waited more than six weeks for a diagnostic test. When the treatment time guarantee was introduced in 2012, 62 people were waiting longer than 12 weeks; now, the number is 62,000. We had an NHS remobilisation plan less than a year ago; now, another NHS remobilisation plan has been announced. What patients want to know is when they will be seen. How much longer will people have to wait?

The First Minister: If Jackie Baillie is seriously saying that a remobilisation plan that was, rightly, published in the very early stages of a global pandemic should not be updated a year into that global pandemic, I am not sure that she will find many people across the country who agree with her. The remobilisation plan, which is for the longer-term recovery of our national health service—it covers the short, the medium and the longer terms, as we seek to put the NHS on a sustainable footing for the future—is a key part of our plans. Humza Yousaf will set out more detail on it shortly.

On waiting times, before the pandemic, our £850 million waiting time improvement plan was starting to reduce the longest waits and to have a positive impact on waiting times. Unfortunately, the Covid pandemic has set back all that, and more. Therefore, the job of work and the scale of the task ahead of us are considerable. That job is partly about building capacity in our NHS—a range of plans to do that are under way—but it is also about redesigning pathways of care. The centre for sustainable delivery in the NHS, which is a relatively recent innovation, will be key to some of that work.

It is a big job of work—not just for the Scottish Government, but for Governments across the world—to get health services back on track and on to a sustainable footing. Few things that we do will be more important than that over the coming weeks and months.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): How will the Scottish Government continue to take forward the actions in the equally safe strategy? Will the First Minister commit to giving serious consideration to the recommendations from Lady Dorrian's review, so that we can deliver

a justice system in which survivors of sexual crimes have confidence?

The First Minister: Yes. Our manifesto—if memory serves me correctly, it was not the only manifesto that did so—committed to taking forward, obviously with appropriate consultation, the recommendations in Lady Dorrian's report. I am very committed to doing that. I hope that it is an area on which we can build significant cross-party consensus.

The equally safe plan is important. One of the key commitments that we made in the election was to a new £100 million multiyear fund to support the specialist front-line services that do so much to help and support people who are affected by domestic violence and sexual violence. I have set out today that we will, within our first 100 days, make available the first of the money from that fund. The organisations across our country that provide that specialist support do a fantastic job, but their services are under pressure. There are often waiting times for access to the services; we are determined to address that.

Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): We did not hear an answer to Douglas Ross's earlier question, so I will ask it again. Despite Scotland's appalling drug-death figures, many people are being denied the help that they need. Therefore, will the First Minister support our proposals for a right to recovery bill, in order to enshrine in law that everyone should have access to the drug or alcohol treatment that they need?

The First Minister: I am afraid that Annie Wells would—if she had listened—have heard an answer to the question.

Yes—I am prepared to discuss that matter. I do not know all the detail of what the Scottish Conservatives are proposing. It is important that we, as a Government, understand the detail of any proposal before we commit to taking it forward. I hope that the Scottish Conservatives can find it within themselves to embrace the areas in which we might find common ground. There is willingness—there is an open door—to discuss that. [*Interruption.*] If Annie Wells would stop mouthing things at me from a sedentary position, we could, perhaps, find some genuinely common ground. I cannot be more positive or fairer than that. It is up to the Scottish Conservatives to choose whether to respond in an equally positive way.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I thank the First Minister for her statement. I appreciate not only the focus on recovery from the pandemic but the clear and bold ambition for the future that is based on finding consensus.

Yesterday, the Social Justice and Fairness Commission that the First Minister established

published its report, which included a call for the extension of the Scottish child payment. I welcome the work in that area that is already under way and the work that will be done over the summer, ahead of its further extension. How many children and families are due to benefit as the roll-out continues, and what impact is that intervention expected to have on child poverty rates in Scotland?

The First Minister: I thank Neil Gray for his question. I think that this is the first opportunity that I have had in the chamber to welcome him formally to the Scottish Parliament. I have no doubt that he will be a really valuable addition to our discussions and debates.

The report of the Social Justice and Fairness Commission, which was an SNP and not a Scottish Government initiative, was published yesterday and contains some fantastic ideas, suggestions and policy initiatives that I hope will find their way into not just the policy programme of this Government—many of them have already done that—but the policy programmes of other parties as well.

At the heart of our efforts to tackle and, in time, eradicate child poverty, which should be our objective, is the doubling of the Scottish child payment. Tens of thousands of children—I do not have the precise figure in front of me—are already benefiting from that and many more will benefit as we extend the reach of the payment next year and then double its value as soon as possible.

That is a really concrete, tangible example of what we can do when we have powers to act here, at Holyrood. Unfortunately, we have a UK Government that is still saying that it will take away the universal credit uplift and potentially make changes that will put more children into poverty. That is the argument for having complete powers over social security here, in the Scottish Parliament, so that we can tackle such problems in a genuinely joined-up and holistic manner.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): Presiding Officer, I extend my good wishes to you in your new role.

I thank the First Minister for her statement. Can she confirm that the commitment on additional teachers and classroom assistants refers to 1,000 full-time-equivalent teachers and 500 classroom assistants? Can she confirm that the local authorities will be given their share of that breakdown as soon as possible, given that planning for next term is already taking place?

The First Minister: I welcome Martin Whitfield to Holyrood and wish him well for his time here.

The additional 1,000 teachers and 500 classroom assistants are part of our overall

commitment to 3,500 teachers and classroom assistants. Those are whole-time-equivalent figures, but the precise balance in each local authority will be for the authority to judge on the basis of need. We will work with local authorities to get the detail of that to them as quickly as possible in order to aid with the planning that is under way. The commitment builds on the additional teachers that were recruited over the previous session of Parliament.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): As the First Minister will be aware, our Clyde and Hebridean ferry services have had to cope with vessel breakdowns and weather-related cancellations in recent days, while having 70 per cent fewer passengers due to social distancing. The result is that islanders struggle to travel and tourists, who are the life-blood of island economies, cannot visit, which impacts on the islands' recovery. Social distancing restrictions do not apply to those who fly to our islands; when can further easing on ferries be expected?

The First Minister: Before I address the question of physical distancing, I note that Graeme Dey, the new Minister for Transport, has just answered a question in the chamber on ferry provision. We recognise how unacceptable the recent disruption has been, and everyone is working hard to address and resolve that as quickly as possible.

On physical distancing, we need to take care as we come out of the crisis, because we do not want to set ourselves back. We are already seeing—as I described them earlier—bumps in the road in Glasgow, and we want to minimise any potential to set our progress back. However, as I announced a few weeks ago, after the election, we are carrying out a more fundamental review of physical distancing, and we will set out the outcome of that review as soon as possible.

That work is about looking in the longer term to the time when we will restore a greater degree of normality and considering whether it is possible to have shorter distances in different environments—or, in some environments, ultimately, perhaps, no distance at all. It is important that we get that work right. It has relevance for ferries, of course, but it has wider relevance, too, and we will publish the outcome as soon as possible.

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): Despite the best efforts of teachers, parents, carers and young people, most pupils in Scotland have lost out on an estimated 16 weeks of classroom lessons over the past year. That disruption follows 14 years of SNP failure and the First Minister's broken promise to make education her number 1 priority. Surely, now is the time to put our young people first. Will the First Minister consider funding all 3,500 new teaching and learning assistant

posts now so that they can make the maximum contribution to helping our young people to catch up and give those who need it most the best chance of success?

The First Minister: Oliver Mundell raises reasonable questions, but his characterisation and assessment of the Government is not shared by the Scottish people. I stand here as a re-elected First Minister with a record number of votes. I suspect that, if the Scottish Conservatives continue to refight the election over and over again, they will end up having the same outcomes.

On the substance of the question, we will consider how quickly we can make available the funding for the 3,500 teachers and classroom assistants. As Oliver Mundell will be aware, the issue is not just about funding; it is about how quickly it is practically possible to recruit teachers. That priority is important for us, and we will take it forward as quickly as possible. In our first 100 days, we will make available the funding for 1,000 teachers and 500 classroom assistants.

More generally, there is a job of work to do to help young people to catch up, not just in educational terms but in social and wellbeing terms. That is why the summer programme that I mentioned in my statement is important, too. The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills will make more details of that available shortly.

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): On the back of our very welcome manifesto commitment to renew every play park in Scotland, will the First Minister give an indication of when funding for that work will start to be distributed? What consideration has been given to providing sensory play opportunities for children with autism?

The First Minister: I welcome Collette Stevenson to Parliament. I am delighted to see her here.

The commitment that we made during the election to make available funding to refurbish all play parks across Scotland was, as I very quickly realised, one of those election commitments that penetrates beyond the political bubble. On the—I think—one day of good weather that we had during the whole election campaign, I was in Queen's park, in my constituency, where many young people were talking about that commitment. That illustrates that, during the pandemic, people have realised how important it is that they get outdoors and that children have good, safe places in which to play. The commitment that we have made is really special and one that we are determined to take forward as quickly as possible.

I will respond to the two questions. We will discuss the allocation of the funding with local authorities, and we will seek to start to make the

funding available within the Government's first 100 days. We will ensure that the importance of sensory play parks is recognised. I remember, a few years ago, opening a sensory play park for children with disabilities in Fife. It was an absolutely wonderful place. We want to ensure that play parks are fully accessible to all children. The point that has been raised is really important.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): I congratulate you on your new role, Presiding Officer.

Just over a year ago, the Government announced that important bills including the good food nation bill, the circular economy bill, a bill to introduce a proper ban on hunting and a bill to reform the Gender Recognition Act 2004 would all be not scrapped but paused due to a lack of parliamentary time caused by the pandemic. Will the First Minister confirm that all those paused bills will be brought before Parliament before another referendum bill is introduced?

The First Minister: All those bills will be brought before Parliament. As is customary, we will set out—on, I think, the first sitting day after the summer recess, subject to the agreement of the Parliamentary Bureau—our legislative programme for the next year in our programme for government. That will set out the timing and the timescales for all our proposed legislation.

I repeat a point that I made earlier. In this parliamentary session, we have already had suggestions from Opposition parties of bills that they would like us to take forward. The door is open if people want to suggest bills beyond those that we are already considering.

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): The First Minister's statement on priorities for the first 100 days rightly focused on tackling child poverty and inequality. One of the raft of measures in that area is the removal of additional charges for core curriculum activities in school subjects such as music, technology, science and home economics. Will the First Minister provide an indicative timescale for when we can expect to see those changes in our classrooms?

The First Minister: As I said in my statement, we will start discussions with local authorities within our first 100 days to ensure that we are taking the necessary steps and providing the wherewithal for councils to do that. Once we have had those discussions, we will be able to set out a firmer timescale for when the charges will be removed. I hope that that will happen soon, in the early stages of this parliamentary session, because, for a variety of reasons, it will be good to ensure that young people can take advantage of music education, for example, without the barrier

of cost, which I know has held some back in recent years.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP):

The First Minister mentioned the first moves to take ScotRail into public ownership during the first 100 days. Can she give any more details of the timescale for that? Is that affected by the UK Government's announcement of the so-called great British railways?

The First Minister: No. We will take forward that commitment as planned. That will require lots of planning and discussions, but much of that is already under way. The timescale aligns with the end of the current contract, of course, which is why it is important to get that work under way within the first 100 days. The Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport will set out updates in due course—indeed, I imagine that he will set out regular updates to Parliament on the progress of that work.

I do not underestimate the challenges that are involved, but I hope that, across the parties, we can celebrate bringing our railways back into public ownership as a really good move and take the opportunity to accelerate the decarbonisation of our railway system as well. We will ensure that Parliament is kept fully updated as that work progresses.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes questions on the First Minister's statement on Scottish Government priorities. I remind members that social distancing measures are in place in the chamber and across the campus, and I ask members to take care to observe those measures, including when entering and exiting the chamber.

Urgent Question

15:16

National Qualifications 2021 (Appeals Process)

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab):

To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the publication of the appeals process for 2021 national qualifications, in light of the Scottish Qualifications Authority missing publication deadlines.

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Shirley-Anne Somerville):

I understand and appreciate that this can be a naturally anxious and stressful time for our young people who are undertaking national qualifications, their parents and their teachers, and, of course, I recognise the additional challenges that Covid has presented in this academic year. However, I offer reassurance that, across Scottish education, people are working hard on behalf of our learners to ensure that they achieve the fair and credible grades that they deserve. The key message to learners is that their grade will be determined by their teacher or lecturer, informed by assessment tasks that they have undertaken in their school or college, and not based on an algorithm or statistical model.

This year, unlike in an examination diet, schools and colleges are in direct control of the assessment process, and teachers have a significant degree of autonomy and flexibility to exercise their judgment to create and conduct assessments in ways that suit local circumstances and take account of the specific needs of learners. They will look across a range of assessments, consider national standards and reach a judgment about the grade that the learner has attained.

At present, the focus of schools and colleges is on ensuring that all our learners get the right and fair result first time. Nonetheless, I appreciate that every approach must allow for appeals, and we must ensure that we get that right and deliver a fair and credible process for that, too. We are working hard with the Scottish Qualifications Authority to do exactly that and, subject to parliamentary business, I intend to make a statement on that to Parliament next week.

Michael Marra: I welcome the new cabinet secretary to her role.

Last week, the now former education secretary promised to pupils, parents and Parliament that that process was on the way. I welcome the fact that we are going to hear about it next week.

The SQA has twice promised the publication of the process, and it has missed both deadlines. Does the cabinet secretary recognise that it is now

less than four weeks to the deadline for submissions from schools to the SQA? If evidence is to be collected for appeals, when will pupils, parents and teachers be able to do that in the absence of a published process?

I do not think that the Scottish Government is in any doubt that a public appeals process is a necessity. Can it be ensured that the process is communicated to teachers immediately, or as soon as possible, and that they are assisted in producing and collecting the evidence to make the system work?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I welcome Michael Marra to the Parliament and to his role as education spokesperson for Labour. I look forward to working with him constructively, I hope, as the First Minister has set out. I believe that we have our first meeting next week on that basis.

Michael Marra is absolutely right to point out to members that we need to ensure that people have faith in the process and that they have an understanding and appreciation of the way in which the decisions have been made and the conclusions that the SQA has reached.

In my original answer, I pointed out the importance of a credible and fair assessment and appeals process, and that is exactly what we intend to provide. That will, of course, be communicated very thoroughly not just to teachers but to young people. We are giving active consideration to how we can support young people through the process, to ensure that they have the maximum opportunity to take advantage of the appeals process and that they are encouraged and supported to do so.

Michael Marra: As we take those constructive discussions forward, we in Labour would ask the cabinet secretary to reflect on the conduct of the SQA during the past year. The latest delays show, frankly, a level of contempt for parents, pupils and teachers across Scotland who are having to deal with the situation. I am very glad that there is a change in tone about this issue from the new cabinet secretary. She is not digging in with statements like those that we have heard recently to the effect that these assessments are not exams. People are sitting exams across the country, and they have a right to have an appeals process put in place.

As part of the discussions next week, I will raise with the cabinet secretary the status of the SQA and whether she thinks that its continued role is tenable, given its repeated mistakes—again and again—over the past year. Some reflections on that would be appreciated.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I am, of course, open to any discussions that Michael Marra, and indeed any other member in the chamber, wants

to have on the SQA or any other part of this process.

This has undoubtedly been a difficult year for young people and for the teachers who have supported them through it. I think that the SQA has worked very hard to ensure that what is in place is fit for purpose and that it has done so in a fair and equitable way. Those are the principles that I have been speaking to the SQA about, and the SQA absolutely shares them and is determined to have them right at the heart of the system.

Will we have lessons to learn at the end of this process? Undoubtedly, we will. I think that we have made clear, during the entirety of our dealing with the pandemic, that we have to reflect on what went well and what we could have done better. That goes for every single part of government. However, everyone—and I include the SQA in this—has worked very hard right across the education sector and with all stakeholders to deliver a system for assessments this year that will be robust and which young people, employers, universities and colleges can have faith in. I hope that we can unite across the chamber, despite the differences that we may have had during the process, to ensure that young people know that we all have faith in the system and in the results that they will get, which will then allow them to go on to the positive destinations that I hope they will go to.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): I welcome the Presiding Officer and the cabinet secretary to their new roles.

It was clear by the end of the last session of Parliament that the SQA had lost the confidence of this institution and of the public as a whole, and I will raise those issues with the cabinet secretary next week. However, what is of more immediate concern is that a large volume of appeals this year now seems inevitable. What has been put in place to ensure that the SQA has the capacity to process those appeals in a timely manner? What discussions have taken place with colleges and universities about the impact that a high volume of appeals and potential delays might have on their admissions processes?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: It will be a pleasure to work with Ross Greer once again and to relive our Yes Scotland days during the referendum campaign, but we might have more disagreements than we did then. I hope not because, as I said to Michael Marra, I hope that we will all work constructively on this issue.

Ross Greer is right to point out that we need to ensure that people have faith in the system to deal with whatever might come up. However, we are initially determined to ensure that young people

get the right grade the first time, so that the appeals process is not the route that people have to go down. The absolute focus for me, the SQA and others is to deliver an assessment process that is supported and gives children and young people the right grades the first time.

I have discussed the capacity of the system with the SQA, as Mr Greer would thoroughly expect me to do. We can go into further details on that during my statement to Parliament next week, if Parliament allows.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): Presiding Officer, I welcome you and the cabinet secretary in your new roles.

Given that there is still a question on issues such as appeals six months after exams were cancelled, halfway through assessments and four weeks from the end of term, will the new cabinet secretary respect the vote that was won by the Scottish Liberal Democrats in February to reform the SQA during recovery?

After weeks of exams, pupils need fast access to mental health support. Can the cabinet secretary guarantee that?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As I said in one of my earlier answers, the SQA and I are looking carefully at what we need to do to ensure that the information that is going out to young people is informative and succinct but detailed where necessary. Part of that information will be about the support that we can give to young people who are going through the process, including in the practical sense of how to go about appealing, and the general support that any young person might require given the difficulties and challenges that many of them have faced this year. I reassure Beatrice Wishart that I am giving the issue active consideration.

Point of Order

15:26

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I would be grateful if Kevin Stewart, the Minister for Mental Wellbeing and Social Care, would apologise to Parliament and correct the *Official Report* following his inaccurate response to an urgent question that was asked last week. The minister, in responding to my supplementary question about whether patients had been risk assessed under health and safety legislation, stated that the unlawful transfer of patients from hospitals to care homes without the conducting of risk assessments had already been looked into by the Mental Welfare Commission for Scotland as part of its report on authority to discharge.

I wrote to ask the Mental Welfare Commission whether that was the case, and here is an extract from its response:

“Our report does not focus on health and safety legislation or the risk assessments you refer to; this is not an area which has been investigated by the Mental Welfare Commission.”

Accuracy matters in Parliament. I am sure that the mistake was inadvertent so, on the basis that the Mental Welfare Commission did not consider the issue, will the minister apologise to Parliament for misleading it and correct the *Official Report*?

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I thank the member for advance notice of her point of order but, as she will be aware, I am not responsible for the accuracy of members' contributions in the chamber. However, the member will also be aware that a corrections mechanism is available to members, and the guidance on that mechanism sets out the steps that a member should take if they realise that they have provided incorrect information, as well as the steps to take if they consider that another member has provided incorrect information.

Business Motion

15:28

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-000124, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

Tuesday 1 June 2021

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by First Minister's Statement: COVID-19 Update

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Health Recovery

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

Wednesday 2 June 2021

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Scottish Government Debate: Economic Recovery

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Approval of SSIs (if required)

5.00 pm Decision Time

Thursday 3 June 2021

12.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Scottish Government Debate: Education

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

Tuesday 8 June 2021

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by First Minister's Statement: COVID-19 Update

followed by Scottish Government Business

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 9 June 2021

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:
Net Zero, Energy and Transport;
Rural Affairs and Islands

followed by Scottish Government Business

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Approval of SSIs (if required)

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 10 June 2021

12.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.30 pm Portfolio Questions:
Health and Social Care

followed by Scottish Government Business

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

(b) that, for the purposes of Portfolio Questions in the week beginning 7 June, in rule 13.7.3, after the word "except" the words "to the extent to which the Presiding Officer considers that the questions are on the same or similar subject matter or" are inserted.—[George Adam]

Motion agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

15:29

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-00125 on parliamentary recess dates, and S6M-00126 on the office of the clerk.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees the following parliamentary recess dates under Rule 2.3.1: 26 June to 29 August 2021 (inclusive), 9 to 24 October 2021 (inclusive), 24 December 2021 to 9 January 2022 (inclusive).

That the Parliament agrees that, between 1 June 2021 and 31 January 2022, the Office of the Clerk will be open on all days except: Saturdays and Sundays, 17 September, 26 November, 24 December (pm), 27 and 28 December 2021, and 3 and 4 January 2022.—[George Adam]

The Presiding Officer: The next item of business is consideration of motion S6M-00128, on approval of a Scottish statutory instrument. I ask John Swinney, on behalf of the Scottish Government, to speak to and move the motion.

15:29

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

The regulations will amend the Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Restrictions and Requirements) (Local Levels) (Scotland) Regulations 2020 to remove a number of restrictions in level 4 on socialising, sport and exercise, to provide individuals with greater opportunities for social, recreational and sporting activity outdoors. Although no area in Scotland is currently in level 4, we need to ensure that the measures remain appropriate if we require to deal with an outbreak in future.

The regulations, which came into force on 12 March and 15 March 2021, also permitted activity for election purposes ahead of the Scottish Parliament election. Although those regulations have not been to committee for formal consideration and approval in advance of this vote, the Government shared draft regulations with the Covid-19 Committee on 10 March for the committee's informal consideration at its session with Mr Russell on the morning of 11 March 2021. No concerns were raised at that session.

We are committed to taking the necessary steps to control the pandemic and to lifting restrictions as soon as they are no longer necessary or proportionate, which sometimes requires swift action. We are also committed to ensuring effective parliamentary scrutiny of our decisions.

Inevitably, parliamentary scrutiny was more difficult, and sometimes impossible, in the run-up to the election. Throughout the pre-election recess, it was necessary to continue making coronavirus regulations. The Covid-19 Committee was permitted to meet during that period if required, but chose not to do so. Now that the Parliament is sitting again and we look forward to the establishment of committees, we will ensure that a process is agreed with Parliament for ensuring effective scrutiny of these regulations.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees that the Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Restrictions and Requirements) (Local Levels) (Scotland) Amendment (No. 17) Regulations 2021 (SSI 2021/136) be approved.

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

Decision Time

15:30

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I propose to ask a single question on two Parliamentary Bureau motions. As no member has objected, the question is, that motions S6M-00125 and S6M-00126, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, be agreed to.

Motions agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees the following parliamentary recess dates under Rule 2.3.1: 26 June to 29 August 2021 (inclusive), 9 to 24 October 2021 (inclusive), 24 December 2021 to 9 January 2022 (inclusive).

That the Parliament agrees that, between 1 June 2021 and 31 January 2022, the Office of the Clerk will be open on all days except: Saturdays and Sundays, 17 September, 26 November, 24 December (pm), 27 and 28 December 2021, and 3 and 4 January 2022.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-00128, in the name of John Swinney, on approval of a Scottish statutory instrument, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Restrictions and Requirements) (Local Levels) (Scotland) Amendment (No. 17) Regulations 2021 (SSI 2021/136) be approved.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Meeting closed at 15:31.

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

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