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Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 2 November 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 this afternoon is time for reflection. Our time for reflection leader today is the Rev David Coleman, who is eco-chaplain at Eco-Congregation Scotland.

The Rev David Coleman (Eco-Congregation Scotland): We are ringing a lot of bells, this week. It is a traditional call to worship and a challenge for injustice and evil. Let us presume that I have your attention. What bells can we ring with words?

I am a Christian minister of good news. However, in Christian scriptures, good news frequently takes the form of warnings that we heed to our joy, or neglect at our peril. The urgent warnings of climate science are nothing if not God given. Today, I am attending the 26th United Nations climate change conference of the parties—COP26—in Glasgow.

In the Parliament, you can see on the walls of the chamber representations of the people of Scotland who have elected you and whom you serve. However, that is not the limit of your calling; there are all those who are without votes or the ability to vote—for example, children, people who are imprisoned by illness and those who despair that their vote has no contribution to make. They, too, are the common concern of every human being who claims to love their neighbour. They include refugees, who are and have been vital to shaping Scotland all the way back to St Mungo's foundation of the city of Glasgow, where nations have come together so wonderfully and so imperfectly.

By excluding such guests—those incomers; those unenfranchised equals in God's sight—we would be diminished and impoverished in every spiritual and other way. Whether they are fellow citizens or not, fellow humans command our respect and love.

In Parliament, you have attended to many issues of inclusion: for example, equality in the right to marry, defence of racial and gender identities, and more. I hope that, if the chamber were ever to be changed, that admirable wall with

the figures would receive special attention to your evolving vision, so that, as you meet, you are confronted not just by an elephant in the room but by the thousands of endangered species and habitats, looking you in the eye.

In Christianity—and, I am delighted to affirm, far from uniquely or exclusively—love of God and love of neighbour are never in competition but are always mutually authenticating. Because of the lead that has been given globally by spiritual leaders such as Pope Francis and, just as importantly, by the 500-plus local grass-roots congregations of Eco-Congregation Scotland, which COP26 has brought unprecedentedly closer to other faith groups, there is a reclaiming of the permission to see the earth and all its creatures as neighbours and partners, the neglect of whose care and love objectively endangers the justice and wellbeing of all. *[Applause.]*

Topical Question Time

14:03

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

I seek your guidance in relation to rules 3.1.3 and 7.2.1 of the standing orders, in light of the fact that I lodged a very similar question to that which is due to be raised during the next item of business. This is not the first time that I, as a constituency member, have seen that a question that relates to the communities that I am very proud to represent has been allocated to another member.

I understand the need for all members to be treated fairly, and I have a great deal of personal respect for Colin Smyth, who is, rightly, championing an issue that affects the whole of the South Scotland region. However, the choice to select another member limits my ability to scrutinise the Government as fully as I might have wished.

I would welcome your clarification, without reference to the particular instance, of whether there has been a departure from the previously established convention—if not a rule—whereby constituency members are, when balancing many relevant considerations, seen as having a direct locus and interest in matters relating to their constituency.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I thank Mr Mundell for his point of order. Selection of questions is entirely a matter for me. I assure Mr Mundell that there is no “rule” such as the one that he described. Mr Mundell will, of course, have the opportunity to put a supplementary question to Mr Smyth’s question

Flooding

1. **Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what support it is providing to businesses and residents affected by recent flooding. (S6T-00241)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery (John Swinney): I express my sympathy to those who have been affected by the recent severe weather, and I pay tribute to the first-class response by local authorities, emergency responders and the public, in dealing with the significant impact. The increasing frequency and severity of those events provides stark evidence of the impacts of climate change and the pressing need for a positive outcome from the 26th United Nations climate conference of the parties—COP26.

Reducing flood risk is a priority for the Government, so we will continue to support authorities to deliver actions that protect our communities. We continue to fund the Scottish Flood Forum, which works with communities to build resilience and support those who are affected by flooding. The forum is currently helping individuals and businesses who have been affected by the recent flooding in Dumfries and Galloway and the Scottish Borders.

In addition, we are working in co-operation with the United Kingdom Government to ensure that flood insurance remains widely available and affordable through the Flood Re scheme, which was launched in 2016.

Since 2008, we have made available funding of £42 million each year to local authorities to invest in flood protection measures to help to reduce the risk of flooding to households and businesses. We are also investing an additional £150 million in flood risk management and £12 million in coastal-change adaptation over the next five years, as part of the green recovery from Covid-19.

Colin Smyth: The cabinet secretary will be aware that hardly a community across my South Scotland region was untouched by the flooding last week. Hawick declared a major incident, the river at Whitesands in Dumfries burst its banks yet again, and two footbridges across the river in Annan were washed away.

Given the scale of the devastation, I had hoped that we would hear about more direct support from the Government at this time. Surely, as a minimum, the Government should be activating the Bellwin scheme? In addition, we should be going further, given that the scheme simply reimburses local councils for some costs above a threshold for what is incurred in clean-ups.

In 2016, the cabinet secretary announced support for flooding, which included provision for payments of £1,500 to affected households and businesses, as well as support for infrastructure repairs. Will he consider support that is similar to that which he has announced in the past, and will he consider funding for reinstatement of infrastructure, such as replacement of the two bridges that were lost in Annan?

John Swinney: The Bellwin scheme was activated by the Government on Friday. The point that Mr Smyth raised with me is clarified by the announcements that were made by ministers. He is correct that the provisions of the Bellwin scheme compensate local authorities for additional costs that could not have been foreseen.

Discretionary scheme funding of the type that we had in 2016 is an issue that the Government can consider. I will visit the area in Annan tomorrow, where I will see for myself some of the

issues that Mr Smyth has raised with me. I will have the opportunity to discuss with local stakeholders any issues that arise in relation to specific discretionary support of the type that Mr Smyth mentioned.

Colin Smyth: I hope that the cabinet secretary will go beyond the Bellwin scheme when he visits, because the threshold is £750,000 in Dumfries and Galloway and £260,000 in the Borders. We therefore need more support.

In relation to last week's flooding, it is particularly heartbreaking that some of the communities that were hit had either started flood protection schemes, such as Hawick, or had schemes that were not yet under way, such as Dumfries. Unfortunately, we know that the allocated capital funding for flood protection schemes is already oversubscribed for the next five years. In the case of Dumfries, there is no funding available, even although that is a priority scheme.

Will the Government therefore urgently review the funding that is available for flood protection schemes? We simply cannot go on like this, with residents and businesses being devastated by flooding time after time.

John Swinney: I acknowledge the seriousness of the point that Mr Smyth has raised. As his question highlighted, the nature of flood prevention scheme funding is such that it inevitably involves significant investment in certain local authority areas that is not required to be sustained. Therefore, the way in which we have agreed flood funding with local government is that, in essence, we combine the funding to support individual projects. A prioritisation exercise is undertaken, which includes the Scottish Environment Protection Agency, on the schemes that merit the strongest action.

Mr Smyth is correct to say that the Hawick scheme is at an advanced stage of development. I am thankful that the existing arrangements there were able to withstand the enormous pressures of the flood incident last week.

We will consider the resources that are available for flooding. That is a material issue as we wrestle with the challenges that climate change is throwing at us. The Government will engage constructively on such questions.

The Presiding Officer: I call Christine Grahame.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): Presiding Officer, I am afraid that I have had to move seats because my microphone did not appear to be working.

The River Tweed and its tributaries that flow through my constituency lead to Tweed Green, in Peebles, which is always vulnerable to flooding. Will the Deputy First Minister advise Parliament of the effectiveness of existing flood protection measures upstream to reduce the flow, such as on the Eddleston Water project?

John Swinney: In the work that is undertaken on schemes of that type—I do not want to make a sweeping generalisation although, having said that, I am about to do so—the more water that can be retained in the upland environment, the better it is for lower-lying areas such as Tweed Green, in Peebles, which Christine Grahame mentioned. I am thankful that the flood banks in Peebles were able to withstand the pressures on them last week.

The measures that are taken further up water courses are essential in holding back waters in a flood incident, so that they can be dispersed in a more leisurely fashion, over a longer period. It is the intensity of water flow that can cause the problems that we see in places such as Peebles, Hawick and places that Mr Smyth mentioned. The design of such schemes is intended to address some of those questions.

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): When I visited Annan on Friday morning, I met a community that was in shock. The bridges there served as vital links and memorials, and were part of people's lives. Another bridge, between Irvington and Kirkpatrick Fleming, is at risk. As the Deputy First Minister knows, Dumfries and Galloway Council is a small rural authority. Will the Scottish Government commit to providing emergency funds to allow those vital crossings to open as soon as possible?

John Swinney: One of the purposes of my visit to Annan tomorrow is to hear at first hand about the challenges that the local authority and the community in Annan are facing. I entirely understand the sense of shock that will be prevalent in the community as a consequence of the incidents. I also acknowledge the importance of the crossings to which Mr Mundell referred.

We will discuss the issues with the local authority tomorrow. Mr Mundell understands that there are complex issues with which we must wrestle; I give him the undertaking that the Government will engage constructively.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): Will the cabinet secretary join me in thanking Dumfries and Galloway Council, including the D and G virtual operations support team and the emergency services, for their response in addressing the more than 80 reported incidents across D and G?

I welcome the Deputy First Minister's visit to Annan tomorrow. Will he commit to continuing to

engage with the community to hear what it wants, and to working with the local authority to ensure that flood defence schemes across the whole of Dumfries and Galloway are fit for purpose and can protect communities from severe impacts of flooding in the future?

John Swinney: I associate myself with the remarks about the local resilience partnership not just in Dumfries and Galloway but in the Scottish Borders, both of which, based on the Scottish Environment Protection Agency's forward intelligence from forecasting, were stood up, notwithstanding the significant pressures on emergency services just now because of preparations for and operation of the 26th United Nations climate change conference of the parties—COP26. Full operations were put in place by the local resilience commanders in Dumfries and Galloway and the Borders. A lot of support was in place. I am thankful that the very significant precautionary activities that were stood up were not required in Hawick, on that occasion.

We will engage further with the relevant local authorities and communities about the steps that will be taken. I look forward to discussing some of the questions with the community in Annan tomorrow.

I also say to Emma Harper that any work to prioritise schemes is informed by the best advice that SEPA can provide for us. There will be an exercise to determine which schemes will progress. Those matters are always complex. I assure her that we will continue to engage with the issues that she has raised about Dumfries and Galloway.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): The cabinet secretary is underplaying the situation. The water level in Hawick reached 2.9m, just short of the 3m defence, and water came precariously close to the village of Newcastleton. I agree with Colin Smyth about the need for future funding. Having spoken to the community in Newcastleton in the aftermath of the horrendous rainfall, I was alerted to the fact that SEPA's tracking of water levels lagged one hour behind. That is unworkable in a rapidly changing flood event.

Given the complications that were caused by the recent cyberattack on SEPA, what action is the Scottish Government taking to ensure that SEPA has the necessary tools to monitor disastrous flood events effectively, and to ensure that places such as Newcastleton are prioritised during future flooding?

John Swinney: I am trying to be as helpful as possible, but I take exception to Rachael Hamilton's point; not a single word that I have said

today is "underplaying" the significance of the situation.

Several assessments were made of the situation in Hawick. During the course of a couple of days last week, I saw the available running data about the expected height of the River Teviot. It did not reach the predicted level. If it had, there would have been significant incursions into properties, which is why 500 homes were evacuated. Thankfully, that situation did not arise.

SEPA's forecasting work is full and comprehensive. The impact of the cyberattack on SEPA has been well documented. SEPA has been completely open about how the issue was handled, and responders were informed about the challenges.

There will be a continuing need for us to look at all the available data. Tributaries must be observed as well as main rivers, so that we have the best and most accurate information to enable us to make plans to evacuate properties and protect human lives such as were put in place in Hawick. SEPA and the Scottish Borders Council made those judgments with the best of intentions; I congratulate them on the way in which they engaged with their local communities.

Prisons (Drug Use)

2. Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to reports that six prisoners overdosed on drugs in two days at HMP Shotts. (S6T-00245)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Veterans (Keith Brown): I am aware of the concerns raised by recent incidents at Shotts prison and am receiving daily updates from the Scottish Prison Service to monitor the situation. I have had lengthy discussions with officials and with the SPS, including the interim chief executive.

The use of illegal drugs in prisons cannot be tolerated and the Prison Service has a comprehensive range of robust security measures in place to prevent contraband entering our prisons.

I am pleased to confirm that, in addition to that and after the necessary detailed operational consideration, a decision has been taken to implement the photocopying of general correspondence. That change requires a prison rule change, which will allow members of the Criminal Justice Committee—including Mr Findlay—to consider the statutory instrument. I hope that the amendments required to the prison rules will be laid later this month. They will be subject to parliamentary scrutiny.

The SPS continues to seek innovative technological solutions to detect, deter and reduce

the availability of contraband entering our prisons to ensure the safety of staff and those within its care. I am sure that Mr Findlay will want to commend the SPS for that action and will welcome the intention to bring forward amendments to the prison rules.

Russell Findlay: The decision to finally agree to our repeated calls to stop prison drugs mail is welcome, but long overdue.

Prison officers are deeply disturbed about another aspect of drug-soaked mail. When detector machines return a positive result for drugs contamination, Police Scotland is informed. However, Scottish Prison Service staff say that the police rarely collect those items. I have a letter from the SPS explaining its policy: the drug-soaked items are stored, then handed to prisoners upon their release from custody. Officers are angry and worried; they feel complicit in what they describe as “state-sponsored drug dealing”. Can the cabinet secretary explain that extraordinary policy and take steps to bring that, too, to an immediate end?

Keith Brown: As with the photocopying of prisoners’ mail, legal and other factors have to be taken into account before measures can be taken. Prisoners have rights—regardless of whether Mr Findlay likes it—and certain processes have to be gone through in relation to prisoners’ mail.

On the point that Mr Findlay raises, I do not believe that it is right to call prison officers drug dealers, even to make a political point. However, it is a serious issue. As I am sure that he knows, given that he has had correspondence with the interim chief executive, it is being taken very seriously and has been discussed with the police.

I think that I am right in saying that the interim chief executive has offered to meet Mr Findlay to discuss these matters so that he can get a better understanding of them. I encourage Mr Findlay to do that. As always, I am happy to meet him to discuss the issue further.

Russell Findlay: I will take the cabinet secretary up on the offer of a meeting. I hope that he also agrees to meet prison officers at Shotts who have extended an invitation to him to meet them.

The drugs crisis in our prisons is also hitting the national health service hard. Two weeks ago, NHS Lanarkshire declared a code black due to critical occupancy levels in hospitals and some cancer treatments have been postponed. However, those same hospitals are treating at least 10 Shotts prisoners, some—if not all—of whom are in intensive care. All of those prisoners needed an ambulance at a time when our ambulance service is also under extreme pressure. Will the cabinet

secretary apologise to the NHS workers for his part in contributing to that wholly avoidable crisis?

Keith Brown: Once again, it is a very serious issue and we take it seriously, as does the Scottish Prison Service. However, it is worth pointing out that when Mr Findlay, like his colleagues, continually uses words such as “chaos” and “crisis” to make a political point, he is undermining the work of the SPS and the prisoner officers who are looking after large numbers of serious organised crime inmates, especially in the institution to which he refers. Those prison officers do a very difficult job.

Of course, we do not want to see drugs getting into the prison system. However, like any jurisdiction in the world, we struggle, because as soon as we close one loophole, some criminals will be able to find another one. We have to try to stay ahead of that. Unlike Mr Findlay, I commend the Scottish Prison Service and the prison officers who have committed to redoubling their efforts to ensure that we keep drugs out of prisons.

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): When someone undergoes a drug overdose, it is vital that every effort is made to engage them in treatment and support. What is the cabinet secretary doing to ensure that all those who have been affected are being provided with effective follow-up care after they have been discharged from hospital?

Keith Brown: The member will be aware that a substantial amount of work is being carried out, including a new process that has been set up by the Scottish Prison Service to try to treat people who have issues with drugs in prison. That is helped by not having drugs in prison, which is where some of the effort is focused. We have established a strategic risk and threat group, which looks at the on-going threat of drugs entering the prison system.

The Scottish Prison Service has a duty of care to the prisoners, some of whom will have had a pre-existing addiction to drugs before they came into prison. We have to ensure that we deal with that. There is engagement with the health service right across the prison estate to ensure that people receive the treatment that they need during their prison sentence.

If the member seeks any further information I would be more than happy to provide it to her.

Covid-19

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is a statement by Humza Yousaf, who will give a Covid-19 update. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of his statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:24

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Humza Yousaf): I will be providing the update to Parliament on the latest Covid-19 situation today. In giving the update I will provide an assessment of the current course of the pandemic, an update on the pressures on the national health service looking ahead to the winter, a report on the progress that we are making in delivering the vaccination programme and an update on the changes to the rules around international travel. I will also be giving an update on the risks of transmission in and around the 26th United Nations climate change conference of the parties—COP26.

First, though, I will report on the most recent statistics. Yesterday, 2,010 positive cases were reported, which is 13.5 per cent of all tests that were conducted. There are 932 people in hospital with Covid, which is one more than yesterday, and 63 people are receiving intensive care, which is five fewer than yesterday. Sadly, a further 26 deaths have been reported over the past 24 hours, which takes the total number of deaths registered under the daily definition to 9,189. I send my condolences to everyone who has lost a loved one.

More positively, the vaccination programme continues to make good progress. I confirm that 4,320,370 people have received a first dose, 3,910,253 have had both doses and 36,759 have received a third primary vaccination. In total, 88 per cent of the over-18 population is now fully vaccinated with two doses. That includes 96 per cent of over-40s, 77 per cent of 30 to 39-year-olds and 68 per cent of 18 to 29-year-olds. In addition, 76 per cent of 16 and 17-year-olds and 55 per cent of 12 to 15-year-olds have had a first dose. For most people in those age groups, a single dose only is recommended at this stage.

Cases remain much lower than the previous peak around the start of September, but the decline in new cases has halted in recent weeks and, at around 2,500 new cases per day, it is still at a level well above previous lows. There are early signs that case numbers may increase again hereafter, so the situation remains precarious.

As would be expected, the Scottish Government continues to explore all options for how it will

respond to the evolving pandemic and we will not hesitate to strengthen the protective measures that are in place if it proves necessary to do so. The uncertainty and risk that we face as winter progresses mean that now is certainly not the time to relax our approach. We all need to redouble our efforts to adhere to the protective measures that are in place and follow the appropriate guidance.

Over the past week, cabinet secretaries have been engaging closely with business and sectoral organisations right across the country as part of our continuing conversations to encourage compliance with the existing measures and guidance. Our appeal to everyone is: please wear face coverings when required; ventilate indoor spaces wherever possible; wash your hands and surfaces regularly; use lateral flow device tests regularly; and book a polymerase chain reaction test if one of those shows up positive, if you have symptoms of Covid or if you are identified as a close contact of someone who has tested positive.

Please also continue to give your contact details when visiting pubs and restaurants, and show your Covid certificate if you are visiting a venue where that is required. The Covid certification scheme was introduced on 1 October and has been enforceable by law since 18 October. I am grateful to the businesses that have worked so hard to comply with the scheme. Critically, please continue to work from home wherever possible—that continues to be an important way of reducing transmission. I know that they are not easy, but it is vital that those efforts continue to help us to control the transmission of the virus.

The entire health and care system is currently under considerable pressure. Right across the country, hospitals are at or close to capacity. The social care system is also under pressure and is reporting an increase in the number of people requiring care packages. The continued high number of cases means that the national health service remains under more pressure than at any time during its 73-year history.

As of today, Covid-related hospital occupancy—the number of patients in hospital with Covid at any given time—is 932, compared with 917 a week ago. Hospital admissions also remain high. There were 632 people with Covid being admitted to hospital in the latest week and admissions to intensive care units have also increased over the past month.

That means that NHS staff are dealing with significant numbers of Covid patients alongside providing other patient care, while also preparing for and responding to wider winter pressures and dealing with the backlog of care that has built up in earlier stages of the pandemic. Essentially, our health and social care services have already been

dealing with demand that is usually experienced only in winter for many months.

Facing those challenges, health and care staff on the front line continue to give their all to keep us safe, and I take this opportunity to reiterate my appreciation and gratitude for their enduring efforts.

Pressures are, however, likely to intensify during the winter. Bonfire night is this week, and protests and demonstrations are taking place and will continue to take place during COP26. Scotland rightly has a strong tradition of peaceful protest and demonstration. However, I take this opportunity to encourage everyone to think very carefully about their behaviours and their impact on services, as well as the risk of spreading the virus to others.

Of course, people should seek urgent medical help when it is needed. However, if a health-related matter is not critical or life threatening, the advice of clinicians remains for people to call NHS 24 or contact their general practitioner, pharmacy or local out-of-hours service.

We know that, with people meeting indoors more often as it gets colder, there are more opportunities for Covid to circulate. We are also approaching the winter flu season, which could put further pressure on the NHS. We are therefore working closely with health boards as they deal with those pressures.

I have announced today an additional package of winter support backed by a further £10 million to bring in a range of measures to get accident and emergency patients to the right care as quickly as possible. That includes the deployment of physiotherapists and occupational therapists at A and E units to help to triage and treat patients who would otherwise wait to see nursing staff. That will prevent people from being admitted to hospital unnecessarily.

The new funding will provide more specialists on hospital rotas, such as social care workers and allied health professionals, and extended opening hours for pharmacy and diagnostic services such as scanning and ultrasound, in order to speed up referrals. It will also help to support extra staff for peak public holidays.

That is over and above the £300 million package of measures, which is largely focused on social care and supporting the reduction of delayed discharges in order to create more capacity in our acute and community hospitals.

We are working closely with boards and health and social care partnerships to support and implement improvements. A discharge without delay improvement programme is rolling out right across Scotland, which aims to improve flow

through hospitals and reduce the level of delayed discharges. Work started recently with five health board pathfinder sites, including NHS Lothian, prior to that national roll-out. All health boards continue to work closely with their health and social care partnerships to develop alternative care pathways that support hospital discharges, including the use of interim care options.

Vaccination remains one of our most effective public health interventions against the pandemic. The first phase of the programme delivered more than 8 million Covid-19 vaccinations in 10 months. With Covid boosters, flu vaccines and jabs for new groups having been added, we now need to deliver roughly the same number of vaccines—7.5 million—over the autumn and winter period alone. That is a mammoth undertaking that started ahead of the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation providing advice on boosters.

Our approach has sought to reduce the need for people to attend multiple appointments by maximising the availability of scheduled appointments and ensuring the efficient vaccination of people against both Covid-19 and seasonal flu. This is a huge job for our NHS and we have asked the people of Scotland to help us where possible by coming to appointments, and rescheduling where necessary.

It is important to bear in mind that, by the time the JCVI offered advice on the booster programme, a large number of people were already eligible for their vaccines. Nonetheless, we started delivering boosters a week after receiving that advice, and we have been continually ramping up activity since then to ensure that we deliver a consistently high number of vaccinations.

I am delighted that, since 6 September, we have delivered over 2 million vaccines, including almost three quarters of a million Covid-19 boosters. To illustrate the sheer volume that is being delivered, I note that, in the week ending 24 October, almost 488,000 vaccinations were administered. That is more than we have achieved in any week since the programme began back in December last year.

We are therefore confident that we continue to be on track. We will offer vaccines to what were JCVI groups 1 to 5—covering those who are aged over 70, those who are clinically extremely vulnerable, and front-line health and social care workers—by the end of this month, and to the remaining groups, including everyone over 50, by early next year.

Every part of the UK is working at pace through the priority groups, and letters are now being sent to those who are aged between 60 and 69 and people with underlying health conditions. They are being invited to appointments at their local

community clinics, which have been running since late October and will continue throughout November. Our approach will continue to prioritise the most vulnerable by protecting those appointments for those key groups.

We also intend to move towards a system that enables online self-booking. The portal for adults aged 50 to 59, those aged over 16 who are unpaid carers, and household contacts of the immunosuppressed will open from mid-November. That will allow those groups to book booster appointments online.

We know that the autumn and winter programme is the biggest and most complex that it has ever been. That is why a guide has been included on the NHS Inform website to help individuals to understand whether they are eligible for a flu vaccination, a Covid booster or both and how and when they will be invited.

We continue to ensure that our delivery model is person centred and meets the needs of local communities, tailoring our approach by learning from what works. As the First Minister outlined last week, we are also urgently exploring how we can quickly increase capacity, for example by establishing additional clinics, particularly at evenings and weekends. Given the record volumes of vaccines that are already being delivered, we need to augment our dedicated workforce. That is why we are supporting NHS boards to identify, recruit and train additional staff, including healthcare students and staff in primary care such as GPs, GP practice staff, dentists and pharmacists. I also thank our armed forces for agreeing to support our vaccination effort by complementing our current workforce.

By being vaccinated and boosted, we can protect each other and help our NHS through another exceptionally busy winter period—in fact, the busiest winter period in the NHS's existence, I suspect. That will allow us to ensure that a sustainable service is in place for the future.

I will now update members on recent changes to arrangements for international travel. The final seven countries have been removed from the international travel red list, which means that travellers to the United Kingdom from those destinations will no longer have to stay in a hotel to quarantine for 10 days on arrival. The decision was made on a four-nations basis and took effect at 4 am on 1 November. It affects arrivals from Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Haiti, Panama, Peru and Venezuela.

The red list policy nonetheless remains in place but, at this time—with the delta variant dominant across the world—we do not consider that any countries meet the very high risk threshold to be on that list. The situation will be monitored closely

and reviewed regularly. If the situation demands it, we will not hesitate to reimpose restrictions on international travel to safeguard the health of our citizens and protect Scotland's recovery. Some managed quarantine capacity will stay in place in Scotland to enable us to react to any change in risk assessment that would see a country being added quite suddenly to the red list.

That is a further sign of the success of the Scottish Government's vaccination programme and it will enable the travel and tourism sectors to take another step back towards normal operation. In addition, vaccination certificates from a further 35 countries and territories will now be recognised to allow quarantine-free travel to Scotland. That list will be reviewed regularly.

The UK Government unilaterally announced on 15 October that fully vaccinated travellers returning from non-red-list countries would be able to take lateral flow device tests with photo verification instead of PCR tests for their day 2 tests from 24 October. For practical reasons, as the First Minister previously outlined, we have aligned with those changes and that came into force from 4 am on 31 October. Wales also confirmed that it would align from 31 October; I understand that Northern Ireland is still to confirm that.

Travellers have been able to book the tests from the list of private providers on the gov.uk site from around 5 pm on Friday in advance of their arrival into Scotland. They cost between £20 and £30 per test compared to £55 to £65 for a PCR test, which makes it cheaper for people who are returning from international travel. If an individual receives a positive result, they are required to follow it up with a confirmatory PCR test that can be booked on gov.uk or by calling 119.

As we are all aware, COP26 is under way in Glasgow. We are working tirelessly to ensure that it is delivered safely and successfully.

The next fortnight is a critical moment for Scotland and, indeed, for the world as we look to see hard commitments on reducing emissions, climate finance and promoting international and intergenerational fairness that supports the people who are most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change.

The Scottish Government has been working closely with the UK Government and partners in Scotland, including Glasgow City Council, Transport Scotland, NHS Scotland and Police Scotland—and with the United Nations, of course—to ensure the successful delivery of the COP26 summit. Covid-19 continues to present significant challenges to staging this unique event. The scale and worldwide draw of COP26 poses risk of spread of Covid-19 both among delegates

and to or from the local population of Scotland and the UK. A comprehensive and exceptional package of mitigation measures has been put in place to ensure that the event can be delivered safely, helping to protect the welfare of everyone involved and the wider community. In addition to vaccination, measures include a robust testing regime, contact tracing, hygiene measures and ventilation.

Health boards have planned and prepared for the COP26 event, and various arrangements, including additional staff, are in place to support delegates and other visitors while maintaining and protecting key health services. The UK Government, as the event organiser, has put in place measures to manage access to the blue zone. Once people are inside the site itself, managing queues is the UN's responsibility. However, we are liaising, alongside the UK Government and Glasgow City Council, to encourage the UN to put in place additional measures to avoid queues such as were seen in media reports yesterday and, to a lesser extent, today. Of course, although public health measures can mitigate the spread of Covid-19 to an extent, there remains a risk that COP26 could increase the spread of the virus. That is why Covid-19 continues to be closely monitored by all relevant agencies and why the Scottish Government will be closely involved in operational decisions during the event.

Vaccination is allowing us to live with far fewer restrictions and mitigations than at earlier stages in the pandemic, and case numbers are much lower than in August and early September. However, they are still high and, as we head into winter, there are some factors that could drive them up further. Hundreds of people each week are still being admitted to hospital with Covid and, as I have said, our NHS is under intense pressure. We must therefore remember that, however much we all wish otherwise, the virus has not gone away. Covid remains a real threat and we all need to play our part in helping to keep the virus under control. For that reason, I will close with a reminder of the three things that we can all do to help protect each other.

First, please get vaccinated if you are eligible and have not yet done so, which includes going for a booster jab when you are invited for that. It is never too late to get vaccinated and it remains the single most important thing that any of us can do. Secondly, please test regularly with a lateral flow device, which can be ordered through the NHS Inform website or collected from a local test site or community pharmacy. If you test positive, are identified as a close contact or have symptoms of the virus, please self-isolate and book a PCR test.

Thirdly, please comply with the mitigations that are still in place. Wear face coverings in indoor public places, such as shops, public transport and when moving about in hospitality settings. Wash hands and surfaces thoroughly. Meet outdoors if you can. I know that that will be increasingly difficult as we get into the depths of winter, but we know that outdoor environments are safer. When meeting indoors, open windows and do anything else that you can to improve ventilation. Try, where possible, to keep a safe distance from people in other households. Those precautions do make a difference and will protect you and the people around you, and help to ease the burden on our NHS. Thank you, once again, to everybody for all your efforts.

The Presiding Officer: The cabinet secretary will now take questions on the issues raised in his statement. I intend to allow around 40 minutes for questions, after which we will move on to the next item of business.

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): Today's statement comes against a backdrop of spiralling crisis in our NHS in Scotland, with A and E waiting times the worst on record and the level of cancer diagnosis at stage 1 the lowest since 2012. Yes, Covid is part of the problem, but it cannot be used as the excuse. Fewer operations are going ahead now than when the country was in lockdown in March. Our front-line staff deserve far better than lumping all the blame on Covid. We are burning out and need more help.

Why has that happened? Why is our NHS in crisis? The problem is that the health secretary is always a step behind and always announcing funding after the problem starts. The British armed forces' support is fantastic, but the Government asked for it too late. It is great that the Government has listened to my ideas about long Covid, but it could have listened to those proposals in June.

The extra funding is welcome, but it has been announced in dribs and drabs and is not part of a fully fledged and comprehensive plan. When the NHS recovery plan and the winter plan were published, we warned that they barely scratched the surface. If we had a proper NHS recovery plan and a proper winter plan, and if the health secretary anticipated any issue ahead of time, Scotland's NHS would not be in crisis and our front-line staff would not be overwhelmed to the point that we are now.

Even today, the health secretary has announced an extra £10 million to get spiralling A and E departments under control only after weeks of the worst A and E waiting times on record. That money was announced to get the health secretary through the statement and not to get our NHS through the hardest winter on record.

That is the public relations-first approach that we have come to expect from the health secretary—it is all soundbites, not strategy. Such an approach might be applauded in ministerial ivory towers, but not on our hospital wards and not in our GP surgeries. Photo opportunities come first, when what our NHS really needs is a plan that sees and fixes problems.

The Presiding Officer: Mr Gulhane, can we have a question, please?

Sandesh Gulhane: Absolutely. I have only one question. Does the health secretary seriously believe that the knee-jerk plans that his Government has outlined to support Scotland's NHS are good enough?

Humza Yousaf: I hate to break it to Dr Gulhane but

“it is all soundbites, not strategy”

is a soundbite. He would do well to steer away from remarkably personal attacks—I am used to them from him and his party—and concentrate on the issues, because personal attacks will not get us anywhere.

Dr Gulhane will not get me or the First Minister standing here and saying that the A and E performance is what we would expect. I have consistently said that, if anybody suffers as a result of the A and E performance and, as a result of the pressures that we face, does not get the service that I expect them to, I not only regret that but apologise for any suffering that has been caused.

If we listen to Dr Gulhane, we hear the suggestion that there is not a pandemic or that we can somehow magic away the pandemic's effects. The 18 months of direct and indirect effects of the pandemic have resulted not just in pressures on our NHS in Scotland but in pressures that are shared by health systems across not only the UK but Europe and the world.

As I continue to say, our A and E performance is not where I want it to be, but Dr Gulhane did not mention the monthly statistics that came out today. They show that our performance is not where we want it to be, but it is at the highest level in the entire UK—the figure is almost 10 percentage points ahead of A and E services in England and almost 16 percentage points ahead of A and E performance in Wales. That is of no comfort to somebody who has to wait for 12 hours in an A and E department in Scotland, but it simply shows that such problems are shared across the UK and are not unique to Scotland.

We have not sat around. We have invested an additional £40 million in our Scottish Ambulance Service and we have provided an additional £300 million for our winter programme. The First

Minister announced an additional £482 million to address Covid pressures. I announced an additional £10 million in July, and we announced an additional £12 million to help health boards with the pressures that we face.

I will continue to work hard with health boards to do everything that we can, to leave no stone unturned and to deploy every tool that is in our armoury in the fight against the virus and in what will be an extremely challenging winter. I will leave Dr Gulhane to make personal attacks from a sedentary position.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Our thoughts and condolences are with those who have lost a loved one.

Week after week, the First Minister or the health secretary assures us that there is a plan to support the NHS and that winter planning is under way, but the facts do not lie. This week's A and E waiting times are the worst ever to be recorded. Thousands more people are waiting hours for help, and staff report that the people they see are sicker than before.

Restoring capacity in the NHS is key, but that cannot happen if Covid is left to circulate at dangerously high levels. Last week, the seven-day case rate was double what it was at this time last year, and the vaccination programme is at nowhere near the pace that it needs to be at. At the end of last week, almost 900,000 people had received their second dose more than six months ago but had still not received a booster jab, and 218,000 people are still waiting for their second dose of the vaccine. There are fewer vaccination centres and fewer vaccinators, and elderly people are queuing in the cold for hours on end. In Edinburgh, drop-in vaccination clinics have apparently been suspended because of COP26, which is happening 50 miles away, along the M8 in Glasgow.

What modelling has been done of the expected spike in Covid cases following COP26? Will the cabinet secretary publish the actual numbers? What arrangements are in place to prevent our hospitals from being completely overwhelmed as a result? When will there be some much-needed urgency around the delivery of second and booster doses to the hundreds of thousands of people for whom protection is waning and whose jags are still overdue?

Humza Yousaf: I thank Ms Baillie for raising a number of important questions. I will try to cover them all, if I can. I agree with her characterisation of the current situation with the pandemic in terms of getting the Covid numbers under control, and we are working whole-heartedly, day and night, to do what we can to control transmission. Of course, it would be helpful if we could get support from Ms

Baillie for some of our initiatives, such as the certification scheme. I know that her Labour colleagues in Wales support such a scheme. We all share in the endeavour of trying to control Covid-19 transmission.

However, I cannot agree with Ms Baillie's characterisation of the vaccination programme as "sluggish"—it is not. I can hear her shouting, "It is!" from a sedentary position. It seems that the Opposition is desperate to malign our vaccination programme. Nonetheless, we have given more than 8 million vaccinations—Scotland has the highest total proportion of its population vaccinated of anywhere in the UK, and we have been praised for the pace at which we have managed to vaccinate 12 to 15-year-olds, to the extent that other Governments have—rightly—copied our model.

I just announced in my statement that, last week and in the week up to 24 October, a record number of vaccinations—flu and booster—were administered. Never before in a vaccination programme in the history of this country have we delivered almost 500,000 vaccinations—and that is, to quote Ms Baillie, "sluggish". That is a mischaracterisation.

With regard to some of the problems and issues that Ms Baillie raised, I note that, when you deliver 500,000 vaccines in the space of seven days, there can be issues. I am always happy for members to write to me about any problems that they face. There have been some localised problems, and I note the problems that Ms Baillie has raised previously. I say to her and other members that, if they get inquiries from constituents who want to know when they are eligible for a booster or flu vaccine or when they can expect their appointment, they should let those constituents know that the best thing that they can do is go on the NHS Inform website. There is a guide available online—people can click to enter their age and their eligibility criteria, and it will tell them when to expect a letter or when the online portal is likely to open, which will be in mid-November for those who are aged between 50 and 59 and for unpaid carers aged 16-plus.

On modelling around COP26, we undertake modelling and forecasting regularly, but there are a number of unknowns, given that it is the first time that we have hosted an event of this significance in the midst of a global pandemic. We are keeping close to our clinicians in that regard, and we are using the modelling to work on our winter plan for the weeks and months ahead. The core of that plan is to invest in social care and to discharge as many people from hospital as we safely can into care and community settings. That will take some time, for the reasons that I have previously outlined to the Parliament—for

example, it takes time to recruit 1,000 staff in bands 2 to 4. However, I am confident that, as we get into winter—and into the flu season, in particular—we will be able to make progress in that regard.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): The situation is not safe. Waiting times, such as the ones that were announced this morning, are actively putting people in danger. As has happened already, they could prove fatal.

This morning, we also learned that 250,000 operations have already been lost to the Covid pandemic, meaning that the ripple effect of the current health crisis could rumble on for many years to come. That is not the fault of the staff, who have been handed the crisis by a Scottish National Party Government that has seen manifest failures in matters such as workforce planning and resourcing. Will the cabinet secretary today commission an independent review into all unnecessary deaths that have been caused as a result of the waiting times crisis?

Humza Yousaf: I will provide some context to what Alex Cole-Hamilton says. He is right to say that, through its direct and indirect consequences, the pandemic has resulted in much of the pressure. However, in terms of staffing, the Government has a good record. We have record numbers of staff in our NHS, and they are the best paid in the entire UK.

We also have record investment in our NHS, and we will continue to invest in it. As we get to 9 December and the Scottish Government's budget at the end of this year, budget negotiations with other parties will, no doubt, begin in earnest if they have not done so already.

On the issue of a public inquiry, investigation or review, the Scottish Government has said that we will have a public inquiry into all matters related to Covid-19 and we are working on the remit of that review. If Alex Cole-Hamilton thinks that the issue that he has raised should be part of the remit, the Deputy First Minister, who is leading on the matter, will look forward to discussions with or correspondence from him in that regard.

Later this afternoon, the Deputy First Minister and I will meet families who have been bereaved by Covid, along with their representatives, and people who have had family members moved into care homes during Covid.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): Will the cabinet secretary provide an update on whether Novavax trial participants who are living in Scotland will be offered a full course of an approved vaccine?

Humza Yousaf: I thank the member for her question, which was also raised by Douglas Lumsden last week.

Having discussed the matter again with the UK Government, the Secretary of State and my officials here, I can confirm that, following discussions between clinical trial teams and the JCVI experts, clinical trial participants who have had Novavax, Valneva or Medicago—which are the non-authorised vaccines in terms of Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency approval—can discuss the possibility of getting additional doses of a deployed vaccine with their principal investigator. Principal investigators will discuss the matter on an individual basis and, with agreement, will arrange for the deployed vaccine to be administered. In short, trial participants can receive the vaccination again if that is appropriate and agreed with their principal investigator.

Some people who have corresponded with me and the First Minister have suggested that we could look to take a more proactive approach, and we are currently considering that.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): It is a fundamental right to be able to worship freely without intervention by the state. It is not a fundamental right to go to a crowded nightclub or bar. Yet, here in Scotland, people can attend a rugby match with 60,000 and sing and shout, or go to a crowded dance hall or club and shout and sing. Meanwhile, religious communities partaking in communal worship are forced to wear masks. Can the cabinet secretary tell me what the scientific basis is for such a disparity, given that it is far more important that people are able to worship freely than attend a sports event or nightclub? When will that double standard be rectified?

Humza Yousaf: We recognise the importance of the fundamental right of people to come together to worship, which is one of the reasons why we never applied the certification scheme to places of worship. The other events that the member mentioned, such as large-scale football or rugby matches, large-scale concerts and late-night venues, all come under the eligibility criteria for the certification scheme, so there is an additional element of protection.

On the member's question about face coverings, we review regularly—we are required to do so by law—all the protective measures that are in place, such as the mandatory requirement to wear face coverings in most indoor settings, including, as the member rightly said, places of worship.

The measure will continue to be monitored and kept under review. After a recent review, during which there was careful consideration of all the

current evidence and all the available options, ministers determined that the regulations on face coverings remain proportionate and should not change at present.

At this stage of the pandemic, many of the more intrusive restrictions have been lifted, but the virus and the harms that it causes have not gone away. Although vaccination has significantly weakened the link between cases and serious health harms, that link has not been completely broken. Therefore, it is important that places of worship, alongside many other indoor settings, continue their good practice to reduce the spread of the virus.

We are grateful to faith and belief communities for their important role in protecting their congregations and enabling everyone, particularly those at higher risk, to access worship safely. However, I take the member's point, and I give him an absolute guarantee that the measures are kept under regular review.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): The removal of the final seven countries from the international travel red list is welcome news for the travel industry and for Scots who are looking to be reunited with their families. Will the cabinet secretary say what work is under way across the four nations to ensure that we continue to monitor how the virus develops? The last thing that we need is a new strain undoing the success of the vaccination programme.

Humza Yousaf: Rona Mackay raises a very important point. When we announced the change and our alignment with the UK Government's policy in that area, the First Minister said that we were doing so for practical reasons. However, she retains a concern around the importation of new variants of concern.

We have conversations regularly on a four-nations basis. I usually meet my health minister counterparts weekly. However, tackling the virus is a global effort and it is important that engagement also takes place internationally. We are seeking to explore what more we can do to ensure that there is protection against any known—or, indeed, unknown, at this stage—variants of interest.

Testing ourselves regularly is an important part of the protective measures that we have in place, so we should continue to do that. I give Rona Mackay an absolute assurance that discussions about the importation of any variant of concern take place regularly across all four nations.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): A constituent of mine fell ill with Covid in March 2020. It is now November 2021 and my constituent continues to suffer from long Covid, with no long-term care plan for his recovery, as was promised in a Scottish Government paper that was published in

September. He is living from sick line to sick line. When will the Scottish Government give national health service care providers the appropriate resource and guidance to help people with long Covid?

Humza Yousaf: First of all, I am very sorry to hear about the suffering of Paul Sweeney's constituent. Constituents of mine have come to me suffering from long Covid, too—in fact, someone with the condition came to my surgery the Friday before last. I therefore recognise much of what Paul Sweeney said.

I have also met a number of long Covid patients, such as Pamela, whom I met in Eastwood health and care centre a number of weeks ago and who told me just how good the holistic service is that she has been receiving.

During that visit, I announced £10 million of additional funding for our health boards and other partners to support those suffering from long Covid. Later this month, I will meet a range of organisations that advocate on behalf of those with long Covid, so that we can refine some of the finer details of how the additional £10 million of funding can be spent.

I take in good faith Paul Sweeney's comment that there is a lack of support for his constituent. If he would like to present me with the details of his constituent's case, I would be happy to see how we can ensure that they get the appropriate support that they require.

Siobhian Brown (Ayr) (SNP): There have been reports of menstrual disorders among a small number of people who have been vaccinated. I am concerned that that may act as a deterrent on the uptake of vaccines or, when the time comes, booster jabs. Although the benefits of being vaccinated far outweigh the risks, what assurance can the cabinet secretary give that the MHRA is continuing to monitor such reports to guarantee that there is confidence in the vaccines and to ensure that the roll-out of the vaccination programme continues to be a success?

Humza Yousaf: I think that I got the gist of Siobhian Brown's question, although I could not quite hear the beginning of it. There is an MHRA process in place to flag up when side effects occur in the vaccination programme. Indeed, they are not just flagged up, but followed through and discussed with clinicians.

As Siobhian Brown said, the benefits of vaccination far outweigh the risks of side effects. If anybody is concerned about a particular risk, they should speak to their vaccinator. The vaccinators are well-trained and equipped to deal with any inquiries that come their way, and arrangements can usually be made to accommodate people if we know that they have particular health risks or

concerns. Please get vaccinated; it is the single biggest thing that we can do, collectively, to help to control transmission of the virus.

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): As the cabinet secretary will know, members of the armed forces have been stepping up across the country to answer calls to help with the ambulance crisis and the backlog in booster jabs. NHS Ayrshire and Arran is one of three health boards that have requested assistance. However, unlike other health boards, NHS Ayrshire and Arran is the only one to request military help with general services on top of their additional duties. NHS Ayrshire and Arran refused to comment as to why that help is needed and what the military personnel will be doing. Can the cabinet secretary shed any light on that situation and assure me that NHS Ayrshire and Arran is the only health board where military personnel are performing general duties, rather than those that were agreed previously?

Humza Yousaf: As Sharon Dowey probably knows, the request from NHS Ayrshire and Arran is now with military joint command. At this stage, it would be inappropriate for me to give further details of the number of personnel involved and what duties they will be performing. That is partly because it is not my decision; it is a decision for the military—the armed forces and services—to determine once they have received the request. Once we get confirmation from the armed forces about what additional capacity they are able to provide, I promise Ms Dowey that I will ensure that the information is made public and provided to her. I can assure her that I speak regularly to the chairs and chief executives of our health boards, including at NHS Ayrshire and Arran, whose interim chief executive I spoke to yesterday on these very matters.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): A 72-year-old constituent with underlying health problems, for whom six months had passed since her second vaccination, had not received a booster appointment from NHS Lothian, so she phoned the helpline as advised. She made several calls. She was told that there would be a letter; that there would not be a letter; that she had attended her appointment and her case was closed; that she was not on the system; and that the system was down so she should phone back the next day—however, when she did so, she was told that she would not get an appointment. I am not blaming the call handlers, but will the cabinet secretary confirm with NHS Lothian what training and support call handlers have received to ensure consistency and accuracy?

Humza Yousaf: Christine Grahame has raised an important point. I reference my answer to Ms

Baillie, who asked a similar question: there have undoubtedly been localised problems. Some of those problems have been in NHS Lothian. I and my officials have spoken to NHS Lothian and we are confident that most of, if not all, those issues should now be resolved. The advice is for people to wait for their appointment letter. If that letter has not come and they are over 70, contacting the vaccination helpline should assist them.

I know that there were some localised problems and issues in NHS Lothian. We are administering record numbers of vaccinations and such problems will happen from time to time. It is right that members raise them in the chamber, as Christine Grahame has done. I make this offer to every member whose constituents experience challenges: if members wish to come to me directly as well as going through the local health board, I am always happy for me and my officials to follow those matters up.

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): Figures published today by Public Health Scotland revealed that from April to December 2020 the number of people being diagnosed with breast, colorectal and lung cancers were, respectively, 19 per cent, 25 per cent and 9 per cent lower than would have been expected. While diagnoses of breast and lung cancer have begun to return to pre-pandemic levels, colorectal cancer diagnoses are still well below their previous levels.

It is clear that we must encourage people to come forward when they have worrying symptoms, but there is a risk that the well-publicised pressures on the health service might discourage them. What urgent action will the Scottish Government take to ensure not only that people who have symptoms seek help but that services are able to deliver a timely diagnosis when they do so?

Humza Yousaf: I thank Gillian Mackay for a really important question. She will be aware that colorectal cancers are among the most challenging, hence the 62-day pathway and why we ensure that additional funding goes to such cancers.

I spoke to the Scottish Cancer Coalition yesterday and reaffirmed our commitment to provide further funding. There has already been further funding for the cancers that were mentioned and, in particular, for colorectal cancer. I will write to Gillian Mackay with further details of the additional investment.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): As we are now approaching winter, when more people will congregate indoors, where coronavirus and other viruses such as flu are more transmissible, will the cabinet secretary provide assurance that there are adequate resources in test and protect

Scotland to cope with increased demand? Will he reiterate how important it is to continue to regularly self-test using lateral flow tests, which are free of charge?

Humza Yousaf: As I said in my statement, testing ourselves regularly is incredibly important. It is one of the most significant measures that we can take as individuals to help us to control transmission of the virus. There are good stocks of LFD tests. The First Minister's announcement yesterday of additional investment to help with Covid pressures included £120 million for test and protect, so there is adequate resource in place. I reiterate and reaffirm what Emma Harper said: testing ourselves regularly is incredibly important and I encourage everybody to do it.

Fiona Hyslop (Linlithgow) (SNP): Some of my constituents who have underlying health issues would normally get their flu vaccination during the autumn and winter period. As appointments for the Covid-19 booster and flu vaccinations are being combined, constituents have to wait until six months have passed since their second Covid-19 vaccination dose before receiving their flu vaccination at the same time as the welcome Covid-19 booster. Some constituents have contacted me because that might mean that they will wait until January for their essential flu vaccination and, for immunocompromised individuals, waiting until January might be too big a risk. Will there be an opportunity for such people who are concerned about flu to receive their flu vaccination in November and December separately from the Covid booster?

Humza Yousaf: In short, yes. If there are circumstances in which that is not happening, I am more than happy to look into them. It is important to say that I would have expected many people who are immunocompromised to have already been called forward for their third dose, which is not to be conflated with the booster dose. If they have not yet been called forward, I am keen to hear from them.

Appointments are being scheduled according to clinical need. That is why we have the JCVI priority list, which is based on clinical need and age. It will take until mid-January for everyone to be offered their vaccination, but people who are offered it in mid-January will not be those who are at the highest level of clinical need.

On the scenario that Fiona Hyslop articulates, if there are immunosuppressed or immunocompromised people who have not been offered their flu vaccination and are worried about waiting, they should of course contact their health board. If Fiona Hyslop would like to raise any constituency cases with me directly, I will be more than happy to liaise with the health board.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): Public Health Scotland reported last week that Covid restrictions led to a massive 3.5 million fewer dental treatments last year. Restrictions still significantly limit the capacity of dentists to provide as wide a range of treatments as usual. I am receiving an increasing number of complaints from constituents that they cannot receive a certain treatment on the NHS without an unbearable wait and that they are being told that they can get the same treatment with no wait—often from the same dentist—if they go private. Does the cabinet secretary accept that that two-tier system will get worse if the Government ends emergency funding for the sector, because the need to maximise private treatment income will increase further?

Humza Yousaf: I find the situation that Colin Smyth outlined to be unacceptable, as I think we all do. If somebody goes to see a dentist and is told that they will have to wait for weeks or months unless they move on to a private plan, which will mean that they can see a dentist the next day, that is unacceptable. I would raise such a situation with representatives of the dental sector.

We have recently announced some additional funding for the dental sector. I know that the British Dental Association did not necessarily agree that this is the right way round, but I certainly believe that we need to tackle the backlog before we can get into issues to do with the long-term reform and overhaul of the dental sector, including the dental fee structure. We may have to do all of that, and we will consult the BDA and others, but it is necessary to respond to the current backlog that the member's constituents and mine are all facing.

I am more than happy to provide the member with more detail, if he wishes it, of what funding we have provided for the dental sector. We will continue to provide investment and funding in order to clear those backlogs as quickly as possible.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): The cabinet secretary knows that there was a lot of scaremongering before the vaccination certification scheme was introduced about two weeks ago. Will he update us on how it is going?

Humza Yousaf: Significantly, it is going very well. We have had more than a million downloads of the app, and many downloads of the PDF and requests for paper copies. The member will have seen and read the feedback from those who have been attending football matches, which has been exceptionally positive, and, although I know that there are those in the night-time industry who are still opposed to the scheme, I suspect that, like mine, his inbox is not full of messages from people who were unable to get into their local late-night

venue or nightclub. That suggests that the scheme is working very well.

Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): NHS workers across Scotland are bracing themselves for the winter ahead. At Paisley's Royal Alexandra hospital, there is a reported chronic shortage of staff across all departments. The fear is that even more front-line medics will be lost to sickness because of the extreme pressure of the working environment that they are in. Will the cabinet secretary tell RAH staff and the people of Renfrewshire whether he is confident of protecting their services this winter?

Humza Yousaf: I am certainly confident that we will work with NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde and with all health boards across the country to do what we can to protect their services.

Russell Findlay is absolutely right to recognise that our NHS staff are extremely tired. They have been working exceptionally hard over the past 20-odd months during the pandemic. I say to him that we have increased our funding from £8 million to £12 million for the wellbeing of staff. That includes the provision of things such as free hot drinks and food on the wards but also psychological interventions, access to the National Wellbeing Hub and other wellbeing support. Wherever I can increase that funding for wellbeing, I absolutely will.

Mr Findlay is also correct in suggesting that the best way of protecting the wellbeing of those who work for us is to try to mitigate, as best we can, the worst effects of what will be an extremely challenging winter. Even so, I have to be upfront and honest and say that, even given all those interventions, this winter will be extremely challenging.

Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): I have been contacted by constituents who have children who are eligible for the Covid vaccine because they have underlying health conditions or disabilities or because they live with someone who is shielding. There seems to be a little confusion, as some of those young people have not received an appointment for a second vaccination and they have struggled to make one online. Will the cabinet secretary provide clarification as to whether that group should be receiving a second dose—and, if so, how best they can get an appointment?

Humza Yousaf: Again, if there are particular constituency cases that Gillian Martin or any member would like me or the local health board to look at, I ask them please to get in touch.

In general, most 16 to 17-year-olds who do not have other underlying risk factors, such as having an underlying medical condition or being a young unpaid carer, are eligible only for a first dose, as

per current JCVI advice. Forgive me, as I do not think that I said this in answer to Jackie Baillie's question: we are awaiting further advice from the JCVI on second doses for that group and on boosters for the rest of the population. We keep in regular contact with the UK Government, which is the recipient of that JCVI advice, and we will of course consider that advice when it is issued.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): The cabinet secretary was told by the Government's own experts that pupils should not have to wear masks in schools, yet he disregarded the advice. The Government's own draft guidelines, which were published on 8 October, said the same, and he disregarded those. Will he tell the chamber what study has been done on the impact on children and young people's mental and physical health because of his decision to force pupils to wear masks all day? What measurement must be satisfied for that directive to be removed?

Humza Yousaf: As a step-parent of a 12-year-old, I take exception to the insinuations in Mr Kerr's question. To suggest that the Government is wilfully ignoring medical advice is completely incorrect. In fact, the reason why we have retained the current regulations and kept baseline mitigations in place in relation to face coverings in schools is because of the advice that we have received from the chief medical officer; it is precisely because of the advice that has been received.

When the expert advisory sub-group met and gave its recommendation, we were of course in a period of declining cases. Once we had considered that advice and spoken to the appropriate stakeholders, including our own clinicians within the Government, cases stopped declining and began to plateau, and we have seen a recent rise in cases.

That protection is there to protect young people as well as those who work in schools. I promise Mr Kerr, not just as the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care but as a parent of a 12-year-old who has just gone to high school, that I do not wish those baseline mitigations to be in place for a second longer than they have to be. *[Interruption.]* Although he may shout that we should ignore it, we will continue to take the advice of the chief medical officer. I encourage Stephen Kerr to also listen to clinicians in that regard.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): As the flu vaccine is being delivered along with the third dose of the vaccine, what guidance is available for GP services to support them to direct patients who received both doses of their vaccine abroad and therefore are not necessarily on the register for the flu vaccine roll-out?

Humza Yousaf: I was looking at that issue before I came down to the chamber. In short, there is advice on the NHS Inform website that takes people to the appropriate advice or link that they need to follow if they have been vaccinated with one or both doses internationally and outside of the common travel area.

We work closely with health boards which, in turn, work closely with GPs and—perhaps more appropriately here—vaccinators in a community setting on the guidelines on what to do if they are approached by somebody who has been vaccinated internationally with one or two doses. I am confident that the appropriate information is available. However, to reiterate what I said in previous answers, if any member feels that there is a case that is not being treated appropriately, I am more than happy for them to contact me with the details directly.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the statement on Covid-19 update. There will be a brief pause.

Sustainable Procurement and Fair Work Practices

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 moving around the chamber and across the Holyrood campus.

The next item of business is a debate without motion on a progressive approach to sustainable procurement and fair work practices. I invite those members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons now. I call Richard Lochhead, Minister for Just Transition, Employment and Fair Work, to open the debate.

15:24

The Minister for Just Transition, Employment and Fair Work (Richard Lochhead): I thank the Parliament for the opportunity to discuss the Scottish Government's fair work policy and our recent announcements, including on mandating the real living wage in our contracts. I have no doubt that today we will discuss not only Scotland's journey towards becoming a fair work nation by 2025, as our current consultation proposes, but some of the issues that have been to the forefront throughout the Covid pandemic and that relate to people's employment circumstances and experiences in the workplace. We meet against the backdrop of the 26th United Nations climate change conference of the parties—COP26—and some of those issues are extremely relevant to the just transition and how we make our way towards Scotland's net zero target of 2045.

Fair work is central to our economic strategy. As employment law is currently reserved to Westminster, the Scottish Government is unable to improve statutory rights and protections for workers directly through legislation. In the absence of those employment powers, we are doing all that we can to promote fairer working practices across the labour market and we are committed to using all the levers that are available, through our public spending and every relevant policy agenda, to promote fair work and to make it the norm to go beyond the minimum statutory employment rights and protections.

We have maintained our fair work focus during the pandemic. We made opposition to fire and rehire and support for flexible working criteria in our fair work first policy, to increase security and opportunities for workers. In August, we launched a living hours accreditation scheme for Scotland, which acknowledges that, in addition to paying the real living wage, it is essential to address the

frequency and number of work hours. That is critical to tackling in-work poverty.

In its publication "Fair Work Framework 2016", the Fair Work Convention said:

"Fair work is work that offers effective voice, opportunity, security, fulfilment and respect; that balances the rights and responsibilities of employers and workers and that can generate benefits for individuals, organisations and society."

I take this opportunity to thank the convention for its invaluable work in advancing the fair work agenda, which is a priority for the Scottish Government and many members of this Parliament.

We are committed to the framework and have always made clear that the Scottish Government will lead the way on fair work. Our 2019 publication, "Fair Work Action Plan: Boosting productivity by developing Scotland as a world-leading Fair Work Nation", laid strong foundations for the implementation of our approach and set out the key levers that we have committed to use, to set a clear example as an employer and through our substantial investment in services for the people of Scotland and support for Scotland's business community.

In the face of significant uncertainty due to Brexit and Covid-19, the Scottish Government is resolute in its commitment to making fair work the norm for workers throughout Scotland and to achieving more inclusive and sustainable growth. We are responding to a number of issues that employers and workers currently face, such as labour shortages. Through the development of a working with business action plan, we are focusing on employability, skills and fair work principles, to address labour shortages.

As I said, we meet against the backdrop of COP26. Key to our strategic approach is a just transition and the aim to create high-quality green jobs across the country as we transition to net zero. COP26 is good opportunity to re-affirm and share our commitment to delivering a greener, fairer economy in Scotland, while learning from the experiences and approaches of many other countries. As minister for a just transition, I will head to COP26 after leaving the chamber today, to participate in my first in-person event on the matter, and I have a full diary over the next two weeks. It is great to see, in Glasgow this week, the interest in fair work and a just transition from across the global community.

Fair work will be central to our new, 10-year national strategy for economic transformation, to put us on the path to meeting our 2030 climate targets and restoring our natural environment while raising workplace standards. We must ensure that the new jobs are good jobs, which

comply with high workplace standards and pay fair wages—that is true across the economy and it is especially important in sectors that are vital to the effort to reach net zero, where a lot of public investment will be targeted.

Let me give an example of how fair work can contribute to a just transition. Recently, we announced a £1.8 billion programme of investment in energy efficiency and renewable heat solutions for Scotland's housing stock, and we will introduce fair work first criteria as a condition of public contracts that relate to the spend, in a way that is relevant and proportionate and that demonstrates how public money can ensure that green jobs are also good jobs.

We were pleased to inform Parliament that, as part of our continued driving forward of action on fair work and with immediate effect from 14 October, the Scottish Government will mandate payment of the real living wage in our contracts. That announcement and our recently extended fair work first criteria support our vision—shared with the Fair Work Convention since 2016—for Scotland to be a leading fair work nation by 2025.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): Does the minister welcome the rise in the national living wage, which was announced in last week's budget and which meets and exceeds the promise of the Scottish Government's fair work pledge?

Richard Lochhead: I welcome it as a step forward, but it does not go nearly far enough. I will return to that subject later in my speech or in my closing remarks.

We are now consulting on how we will progress our vision for fair work and we encourage a wide response. People in Scotland have until 23 December to respond to our consultation.

The Scottish Government's commitment to fair work aligns with the right to just and favourable working conditions, including remuneration, established in the United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Our commitment is demonstrated in our national performance framework and is underpinned by the Fair Work Convention's framework. It is a testimony to our determination on that that the Scottish Government was the first in the United Kingdom to achieve living wage accreditation.

Fair work is good for business and workers and is good for our economy. In line with the Fair Work Convention, the Fraser of Allander Institute recognised in 2016 that treating workers fairly will help to create more diverse and inclusive workplaces where workers have greater security of pay and contract and can develop their skills and have an effective voice in the workplace. It can improve wellbeing and motivation and enable employers to recruit, grow and retain skilled

people. All of that increases productivity and innovation and creates value.

As part of our landmark agreement with the Scottish Green Party, by summer 2022, and within the limits on devolved competence, we will introduce a requirement on public sector grant recipients to pay at least the real living wage and to provide appropriate channels for effective workers' voices, such as trade union recognition. We will engage with unions, businesses and others to agree the detail of that conditionality to ensure that it is proportionate and effective in delivering the real benefits that we all want to see.

We are working across Government and with industry to embed fair work. We are working with the construction sector to develop a construction accord in line with Scottish Government priorities, which is due to be agreed this year and will comprise a shared vision for the industry, including a strong commitment to fair work practices that will help create more diverse and inclusive workplaces. That shared vision for the industry will include a strong commitment to fair work and will support delivery of our strategy for affordable housing and other key projects.

Members will be aware that significant work is also under way to progress fair work in adult social care. The fair work in social care group has developed a set of recommendations for minimum terms and conditions, reflecting the fair work principles now being taken forward collaboratively with key stakeholders. Since 2016, we have provided funding to ensure that adult social care staff delivering direct care are paid at least the real living wage, which is currently £9.50 per hour and is about to rise. We have already provided £64.5 million for that purpose this year, and last month we committed to provide additional funding of up to £48 million to uplift the hourly rate for those workers to at least £10.02 per hour from 1 December this year. That significant funding in this year alone recognises the incredible contribution of our social care workforce and is a significant step towards delivering our commitment to embed fair work in social care.

I turn to our announcement on mandating the real living wage in our contracts. Not having control over employment legislation, we continue to use public procurement to drive fair pay. Under the Procurement Reform (Scotland) Act 2014, public bodies have been required to demonstrate their living wage policy in procurement strategies and to report on success since 2016. That legislation, supported by guidance and engagement, has helped to ensure that more than 90 per cent of Scottish Government suppliers have committed to paying at least the real living wage in our contracts.

We have established that it is now possible to require payment of the real living wage to workers on public contracts where fair work first practices, including payment of the real living wage, are relevant and proportionate to contract delivery by UK-based workers.

The Scottish Government now mandates payment of the real living wage in our contracts and we encourage the rest of the public sector to follow suit. We believe that business will appreciate that clarity as it levels the playing field for those wishing to bid for public contracts, removing the risk that businesses that pay their workers the real living wage will be undercut by those that do not.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): If the policy is such a success, why was it not delivered years ago, when many members were begging the Government to deliver it?

Richard Lochhead: Our legal advice is always being updated. As a result of our agreement with the Greens, we revisited that advice and have been told that we are now able to deliver the policy—that is why we are doing it. We have made significant progress in Scotland by working with sectors and encouraging the approach over many years. We are now going one step further. I am sure that members from across the chamber support us in that.

To give an example, the new civil engineering framework that is being developed will include the real living wage as a condition of contract. That will be available for use across the public sector and has an expected value of £600 million over four years. Meanwhile, we issued a procurement policy update, clarifying that we expect public bodies to incorporate fair work first into all relevant procurement processes from the financial year 2022-23. Our reporting framework will enable us to monitor implementation progress across the whole sector.

I look forward to members' comments and support in realising our vision of a fair work nation. I remind members that we have a consultation out and that it is an important opportunity for everyone to come forward with ideas to continue the momentum to ensure that Scotland becomes a fair work nation by 2025.

15:36

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): The past 18 months have been unimaginably difficult for businesses and workers. People have been tested to their limits. Now more than ever, we are looking at how we work and at our financial security.

We have some good news: the United Kingdom economy is recovering more quickly than was expected. As many others were, I was pleased to hear the announcement from the Chancellor of the Exchequer that the national living wage is set to increase by 6.6 per cent, to £9.50 an hour, in 2022. That will give millions of people on low incomes a pay rise of more than £1,000 per year.

However, difficult challenges remain. As world leaders gather in Glasgow for the United Nations 26th climate conference of the parties—COP26—the implications of climate change loom large for decision makers. For thousands of energy sector workers in North East Scotland, ensuring a fair and managed transition to an integrated energy sector is critical. Yesterday, I met Oil & Gas UK to discuss that further.

As we seek to recover from the Covid-19 pandemic, there is an opportunity for lawmakers and businesses to look at the current landscape and to take stock. What conditions will help to facilitate growth, to remove barriers to employment so that everyone who wants to can work, and to close the persistent gender pay gap, which has widened over the past year? How can we make business practices more sustainable across the whole supply chain? How can we support local economies across Scotland as they reboot, post public health measures?

The Scottish National Party Government has significant powers at its disposal to address those questions, including full powers over education and skills, oversight of business support agencies including Scottish Enterprise, and control of public spending powers through procurement. Global management consultancy McKinsey & Company highlights that

“two-thirds of the average company’s environmental, social, and governance footprint lies with suppliers.”

There is great potential through procurement to address environmental, social and governance issues. In the speeches that will follow, my Conservative colleagues will look at the procurement system in Scotland and at how it can be harnessed effectively to meet some of the challenges. Our approach is underpinned by openness and transparency.

After working at senior level in human resources for 30 years, I often talk about the importance of collaborative working in order to avoid silos. Consultation and engagement on the questions that I have raised are key, but I fear that the voices of businesses are not being heard by the SNP-Green coalition.

Take the hospitality sector. Workers in the sector tend to be younger, and the sector’s workforce has one of the highest proportions of women. The Institute for Public Policy Research

Scotland suggests that the hospitality sector will need “ongoing support” to rebuild, following the pandemic. The Scottish hospitality group has repeatedly warned the Scottish Government about Covid-19’s devastating impact on the sector.

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Tess White: I have one minute left, so I will not take an intervention.

The Scottish National Party refused to give hospitality and leisure businesses a full year of non-domestic rates relief to provide some financial headroom, until the Scottish Conservatives secured a U-turn earlier this year.

Despite already being in a fragile state, the hospitality sector is also dealing with the fall-out from the vaccination passport shambles. The vice-chairman of the Night Time Industries Association Scotland, whose hospitality group owns a number of venues in the north-east, said last week:

“It is utterly bewildering the Scottish Government have completely ignored the warnings from sectoral experts ... It has taken just one week for our concerns around market distortion, unfair competition, discrimination and the severe economic impact to be proven true”.

I have made those points because the Scottish Government’s decisions affect the operating environment for the sector. It follows that the decisions affect hospitality workers, who face losing up to £200 a week in wages because of that poorly executed scheme.

The SNP claims that it does not have sufficient levers to promote fair work, but the problem is in the engine room. In the programme for government, the First Minister reiterated her party’s support for a four-day working week as part of a wellbeing economy. That would be a monumental shift in working patterns that would require careful and detailed planning, which is a worrying prospect for many businesses that are already stretched thin and are trying to make ends meet.

When I asked the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Economy about the £10 million pilot, no detail was forthcoming; the matter was kicked into the long grass. That is the problem; the SNP seems to be paying lip service to policy ideas without delivering on the detail. It is full of promises, but it does not follow through.

That is not just my view. Earlier this year, the Carnegie UK Trust identified an implementation gap between the Scottish Government’s rhetoric and its delivery on fair work policies. The left-wing Jimmy Reid Foundation has, similarly, criticised the SNP Government of 2016 to 2021 for not matching its rhetoric with its actions, and has

highlighted the devolved powers that are already at the Scottish Government’s disposal in the area.

As we learn to live with Covid-19 and recover from the pandemic, we have the opportunity not just to revive our economy but to reset it. We are building back fairer and greener, but during this period of change, we must be mindful as politicians to take people and businesses with us. We need to restore confidence as well as trust.

15:43

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): Today’s debate requires us to consider what role the public sector should play in our economy. For me, the answer is straightforward: it should be a role model for the private sector by pushing standards up and creating minimum thresholds and requirements, while harnessing the huge economic power of the state to drive innovation and sustainability.

The minister proclaimed what an excellent job the Government is doing on fair work and procurement, citing the commitments that were made in the most recent programme for government. My main query is this: why has it taken the Government all this time to commit to that agenda? It has taken 14 years for the Government to recognise that the measures that I have just mentioned would help to improve conditions for workers in Scotland. The Government can hardly claim that it is a pioneer in the area, because those measures have been the norm across Europe for years—although, sadly, not in the case of the British Government under the Conservatives, who have ripped £1,040 a year out of the poorest households in work through their cuts to universal credit. In the context of the UK, we will not take lectures from the Conservatives.

Richard Lochhead: I note Paul Sweeney’s comments about European countries adopting all kinds of fair work measures years ago. Does he recognise that those are independent countries that have employment powers, and that the Scottish Parliament does not have employment powers because they are reserved to the UK Government?

Paul Sweeney: It is interesting that policies are now being adopted in the Government as a result of a new agreement with the Green Party. Over the past decade, my former colleague Neil Findlay moved amendment after amendment in the chamber, calling for payment of the real living wage to be a minimum requirement in public sector procurement contracts, but the Government voted them down every time. With the recent agreement, the Government’s hiding behind lawyers has been exposed as a sham. With only

eight of the SNP's 45 MPs having turned up in the House of Commons to vote for Barry Gardiner's bill to ban fire and rehire, the rhetoric rings rather hollow.

There is an element of irony in all this. A few weeks ago, I asked the Minister for Transport to join me in condemning ScotRail for locking its workers out of their depots. He responded by suggesting that I am incapable of being impartial because I am a member of a trade union. We also have cleansing workers on strike in Glasgow during COP26, over a pay dispute with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities; the minority SNP administration in Glasgow tried to use Tory anti-trade union legislation to break the strike.

How can it be that this Government, which is apparently so committed to workers' rights, frequently finds itself involved in industrial disputes with those workers? How can it be that a Government that is apparently so committed to trade union rights can include a minister who brazenly disparages members of Parliament in the chamber merely for being members of a trade union?

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): What are Paul Sweeney's comments on the Scottish Trades Union Congress's demand in the Smith commission process for employment powers to be devolved? Why did his party, among others, refuse to allow devolution of those powers, if he is so concerned about workers' rights?

Paul Sweeney: I note that the Labour Party has not been in government since 2010, but has since adopted, as policy, support for devolution of employment rights as a floor, in order that we can level up. That is a welcome measure. I hope that Maggie Chapman will, as a democrat, welcome that development in our politics, rather than trying to retread history that is long past.

We should look at the context for how the Government is behaving. Many left-wing voters who put their faith in the SNP to uphold their values might be pausing for thought as the true colours of certain ministers shine through.

I welcome many of the measures that were announced in the programme for government—I just do not think that they go far enough. For example, there is still no ban on zero-hours contracts in public procurement. We need only look at the situation that faces thousands of workers in the social care sector, many of whom would be helped by a commitment to ban zero-hours contracts.

We also need to go back to the point that I raised at the outset and ask what role the public sector should play in our economy. Should it actively drive standards up, or passively stifle

them? We see the issue playing out across the UK when the Tories discriminate against young people by excluding under-23s from the increase in the minimum wage.

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Paul Sweeney is part of the small and dwindling group of actual socialists left in the Labour Party. A number of people in his party support a £15-an-hour national living wage. Is he one of them? If so, how would he pay for that?

Paul Sweeney: I welcome the gentleman's intervention. It is apposite, because I will offer an analysis of the subject. I hope that the Presiding Officer will be somewhat generous to me, given that I have taken several interventions—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will be reasonably generous in order to reflect the three interventions, but beyond that I cannot go.

Paul Sweeney: Thank you. I will do my best, Presiding Officer. I have been a bit effusive.

In 2019, the Fair Work Convention looked at the experiences of workers in the social care sector, and it is fair to say that its findings made for grim reading. The convention described the tender methods that were being used as "untenable" in direct response to the use of zero-hours, low-hours and seasonal contracts, all of which undermine job security.

On the question how we would pay for an increase in pay in the social care sector, I will give an example of how we could raise wages. The Feeley report highlighted that every £1 that is spent in the social care sector creates a multiplier effect of £2 of gross domestic product in the wider economy. My question for the minister is simple. When will we ban zero-hours contracts and pay Scotland's social care workers the £15 an hour that they deserve?

I believe that the Government is being short-sighted. Rather than looking at wages of £15 an hour as a way of reinvesting and pump priming our economy's recovery from the biggest recession in history, it sees them as expenditure that would somehow be lost. Let us be clear that the workers would not siphon the money off into offshore bank accounts; they would spend it in their local communities, thereby driving up economic growth and tax revenues.

I am a firm believer in the role of the circular economy and the importance of community wealth building, which we see in the economic model in North Ayrshire Council, where the Labour council leader, Joe Cullinane, is using the power of the public sector to invest in local community-owned energy generation, social housing and sustainable businesses. That is often described as radical, but I argue that it is not radical at all; it is entirely

reasonable and is increasingly essential, if we are to improve living standards.

There is undoubtedly more that the Government can do to drive that agenda. That is why I am committed, along with my Scottish Labour colleagues, to prioritising local communities and enterprise with a “local first” approach. Although there is much to welcome in the Scottish Government’s public procurement plans, it has taken—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Sweeney, I have been generous. I have given you more than a minute extra. Please bring your speech to a close.

Paul Sweeney: I am at my peroration, Presiding Officer.

It has taken far too long to get to where we are today, and it is still too far short of where we need to be. Progress has been painfully slow; we should have been doing it long ago. We need less self-congratulatory rhetoric and more ambition, firmer commitments and quicker action.

15:50

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): Yesterday, I visited the old paper mill at Guardbridge. It used to be a paper mill but has been transformed into the Eden campus by the University of St Andrews. The campus is home to an award-winning biomass energy centre that provides heat to 43 buildings in St Andrews as well as more than 2,500 student rooms. It is also home to a new solar photovoltaic field that delivers electricity to the whole campus. Soon, it will be home to a centre for energy storage and conversion as well as—the first of its kind in Scotland—a centre for battery development. There will be facilities for carbon capture to convert carbon into a range of usable and valuable fuels and products.

That is all part of the university’s plans to be carbon net zero by 2035. It is a great partnership between Fife Council, the Scottish Government and the UK Government and is also part of the Tay cities deal.

Many people were highly sceptical that the plans for the campus would ever be possible, but they have been delivered and at speed. That is an important first lesson when we consider procurement, grants and Government support. We need people who deliver at speed because the climate emergency is an emergency. It is all well and fine to have great plans for the future, but we need to deliver fast. That is why we need to look to institutions such as the University of St Andrews, which has done so incredibly well.

I give credit to the Government for eventually listening. Week in, week out, I and others badgered the previous and current First Minister about Amazon, for example. It received millions of pounds of Government support for very little in return. It was paying its staff low wages and its working conditions were widely criticised, but the Government was happy to give out millions of pounds of support. The measures that are finally being put in place will at last support workers such as those at Amazon. Hiding behind lawyers for years has not helped thousands of workers who were desperate for their Government to stand up for them. The minister would do well to reflect on the pathetic excuse that he rolled out this afternoon.

I like to be fair and I will be fair to Amazon. It is slowly improving pay and working conditions in its centres. It has some way to go, but the feedback that I have received is that it has changed for the better. Other companies should use that as a signal that they too should improve their working conditions and pay. It would help if they paid a little bit more tax but, nevertheless, we must give them credit where it is due.

However, the Scottish Government is squeezing out small businesses from its procurement budget. The share for small and medium-sized enterprises has fallen to just 5 per cent and 200,000 fewer businesses are now getting a share of the Government’s massive procurement budget. If we wish to improve our local economies and cut the unnecessary transport of food and goods, we must improve SME access to those funds. We have been banging on about that for years, but the Government seems to be going in the wrong direction on it. I see the training programmes and I understand the information sessions that are held for businesses, but they are not delivering the change that we need for businesses in our communities.

I referred earlier to the Eden campus in Guardbridge, where a biomass plant and district heating system has been developed within sight of a new housing development. What will power the homes in that development? Gas. The houses are being constructed right now and the opportunity was there for them to hook up to the district heating system. However, for whatever reason—and I have my suspicions—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Rennie, can you please bring your remarks to a close, as you are a bit over time?

Willie Rennie: I will. For whatever reason, the Government and the local council are not imposing restrictions on the housing developers to ensure that they adopt the best possible renewables practices in those houses. They need

to change that approach if we are going to make a difference for the climate.

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

15:55

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): Given that the debate is being held during COP26, I will raise a point regarding our net zero and climate change ambitions. The Scottish Government has published some excellent guidance on many aspects of procurement that will effectively influence our future direction and enable judgment to be applied when awarding public sector contracts. Invitation-to-tender documents specify the criteria—such as price—to be used in the award of contracts and the weighting to be given to those criteria. I simply note here that there is varying practice on the criteria when aligned to net zero ambitions. For some contracts clear criteria and weightings are sought, but that is not consistently applied. It is my opinion that all our actions in the award of public sector contracts should contribute to reaching net zero. With that in mind, will the minister consider reviewing contract award criteria to ensure that minimum criteria are applied consistently across the board? I do not underestimate the work required to make public procurement fit for a net zero purpose or to ensure fair work, but that is vital, for there can be no fair work if we destroy the prospects for work.

As was mentioned earlier, I am confident that there is wide agreement across the chamber that, as we come out of the pandemic, we will not revert to business as usual. We need to build a future for new circumstances. One of the key requirements will be to encourage much more innovation and entrepreneurial activity in Scotland. We need the development of new, more resilient local supply chains, all of which will have implications for procurement policy and our fair work agenda. We need to ensure that new entrants to the marketplace are not disadvantaged because they lack a long track record. Willie Rennie brought that matter up earlier, and this is one of the few occasions when I agree with what he said. We need to prioritise opportunities for innovation and new thinking that help us meet our obligations to current and future generations and we need to hear new voices that are not thirled to the ways in which things have aye been.

We need to ensure that fairness goes beyond traditional patterns of employment and we need to break down continuing barriers faced by women in business, from those in part-time employment to entrepreneurs. A matter of particular concern to me is the lack of systematic impact analysis by sex from many business-related organisations. In

fairness, that should apply to other characteristics, to encourage diversity generally. Does the minister agree that the more evidence that we have, the better the chance of subsequently developing policies that tackle barriers to participation? Will he consider looking at conditionality in procurement contract awards to increase diversity, which leads to greater economic contributions?

It is to the great credit of the Scottish Government that it has been addressing for some time the need for better procurement policies and the need to develop policies regarding fair work. The recent expansion of the fair work criteria from five to seven demonstrates the ambition to keep updating and developing forward-looking policies. In many respects, although much progress has been made, we will never reach the end of our journey. In a world with faster and faster rates of technological, social, labour market and environmental change, we are all challenged—all of us here—to ensure that our policy frameworks remain relevant to the world that we are in by shaping by our actions to fit.

15:59

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): The scale of public sector spending in Scotland's economy is stupendous and yet, as my friend Tess White was at pains to point out, the Government is reluctant to use that spend to bring about positive change. Edmund Burke said:

"If we command our wealth, we shall be rich and free. If our wealth commands us, we are poor indeed."

The Parliament must see to it that the Government uses taxpayers' hard-earned cash to deliver value for money and sustainable benefit to Scotland. Leaving the European Union affords us an opportunity for more of our Government's spending to end up with Scotland's small and medium-sized businesses, which are the backbone of our economy.

We must put Scotland first. Whatever excuses have been given in the past for the lack of anything approaching a level playing field for Scotland's SMEs, they are no longer valid. We should use our new flexibilities to give Scotland's SMEs a much fairer and more equal opportunity to win business in the public sector.

It is not easy for many of Scotland's SMEs to engage with the public sector—doing so is complex and expensive. Many SMEs do not get involved because they cannot afford to. That must change. If ministers listened to businesses, they would know about the excessive burden of red tape and about how difficult it is to get on to certain frameworks. That will not change if the Government complacently sits back and does nothing.

Michelle Thomson: I am delighted to hear Stephen Kerr speaking in the chamber, but he must understand that the Scottish Government has an obligation to spend public money effectively, so the screening processes must be rigorous. Surely there are two sides to the equation.

Stephen Kerr: I am grateful that Michelle Thomson is delighted to hear me speaking in the chamber—I do quite a bit of that. I take her point, which I will come on to discuss. Let us see whether we can meet somewhere between the two points that we have raised.

When contracts are awarded, we need to stop thinking about procurement in a solely financial or legalistic way and to think about it in a way that accords with our values and with supporting our businesses. What is the Government doing to make opportunities more equal for Scotland's SMEs? What is the Government's ambition for Scotland's SMEs? What proportion of public spending—not the number of contracts but the money—will the Government ensure is spent with SMEs by the end of the parliamentary session?

The single biggest drag on economic activity and growth in this country is probably the late payment of invoices. The degree to which large organisations manage their cash flow at the expense of smaller businesses by withholding payments is incredible. That is not clever or fair. What will the Government do to make its tier 1 contractors pay their suppliers' invoices in full, on time and within a reasonable number of days?

As my friends in the Conservative Party have said and will keep saying, we need far more openness and transparency from the Government. To give only one example of many, I have been asking questions for six months about the contractual relationship between NHS Scotland and ServiceNow of Santa Clara in California, and I have had a succession of non-answers from ministers. It is incredible how secretive the Government is; Audit Scotland has repeatedly referred to a deliberate lack of transparency.

It is the Parliament's responsibility to scrutinise the Executive and to ask questions—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: It is indeed, but you are nearly 40 seconds over your time, Mr Kerr. I have been generous because you took an intervention, but please bring your remarks to a close.

Stephen Kerr: It seems to many of us that ministers do not agree that that is the Parliament's responsibility; they seem to think that it is none of our business to ask questions. They might not be used to it and they might not like it, but it is our business, and the questions will not go away.

16:04

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): We all want Scotland to be the best place in which to live, work, invest and do business. Scotland can make strides in fair work that will underpin our economic success as well as the wellbeing and prosperity that we all seek for our people, communities and businesses. Fair work will drive productivity and inspire innovation, which will add value to jobs and to businesses, which will, in turn, create stronger, more sustainable and inclusive growth. It is at the heart of a wellbeing economy.

Increasing the quality of jobs can improve outcomes for the people of Scotland. Fair work is also crucial to our ambition of eradicating child poverty by supporting families with children to gain more income through employment and by providing flexible job opportunities that respect caring responsibilities and other commitments that workers may already have.

The current pandemic has impacted significantly on the economy and has highlighted inequalities. We need to embed fair work principles that will help Scotland to respond to the challenges caused by the pandemic as well as other issues that we face such as an ageing population, climate change, which has been mentioned, automation, the shift to home working, Brexit and changes in the patterns of global trade.

As we have heard, fair work is based on seven criteria. It offers effective voice, security, opportunity, fulfilment and respect. It balances the rights and responsibilities of employers and workers, and it generates benefits for individuals and society. I will touch on those principles later in my speech.

The Scottish Government wants to use every opportunity to promote fair working and ensure that people are paid at least the living wage. As we have heard, the Scottish Government is making payment of the real living wage a condition of winning Government contracts, and it will engage widely to encourage that. This morning, the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee talked about how local authorities can access opportunities through procurement.

We must acknowledge the valuable work that others, such as the Fair Work Convention and the Poverty Alliance, have undertaken in the area. By using procurement powers to ensure that bidders pay the real living wage, the Scottish Government is leading by example in helping to influence employment practices and embed fair work principles. We all have a part to play in encouraging organisations—regardless of their size, sector or location—to adopt the Scottish Government's progressive fair work approach. Everybody should have the opportunity to access

secure and stable employment that offers a proper wage while affording staff the flexibility to balance their life and work.

Through the fair work first criteria, the Scottish Government will incorporate the seven key criteria of fair work. Those include an effective voice, including trade union recognition, which is vital; opportunity, with investment in workforce development; security, with payment of the real living wage and no use of unfair fire-and-rehire practices; respect, including action to tackle the gender pay gap and create a more diverse and inclusive workforce; and fulfilment, with investment in workforce development and support for family-friendly and flexible working practices.

The Scottish Government will, as the cabinet secretary mentioned, consult on its ambition to be a fair work nation by 2025. An agreed vision, an action plan and milestones for delivery and monitoring will be produced by early 2022. The Scottish Government has committed to several initiatives—we have heard about the Scottish business pledge, the promotion of the living wage, the workplace equality fund and support for the Fair Work Convention, to name but a few. The Scottish Government has also established a £10 million fund to allow companies to pilot and explore the benefits of a four-day working week. The Scottish Government will use the learning from that pilot to consider a more general shift to a four-day working week as and when Scotland gains full control of employment rights.

In conclusion, the next few years are critical if we are to make the progress that is needed to achieve that vision and meet the changing needs of our economy and our workers.

16:09

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests.

I should really begin by thanking the Scottish Government for finally coming around to the labour movement's way of thinking. That the award of £13 billion of public money every year—around a third of all devolved public expenditure—for procuring goods and services by the Scottish Government and its agencies will now be subject to the new fair work conditions and minimum labour standards is, on the face of it, welcome, although it is a pity that it did not come sooner. If it is legal now, was it illegal in 2016?

Because of Government hawking, big public contracts such as the £80 million awarded for the construction of the V&A in Dundee went to BAM, a company that is up to its neck in the construction industry blacklisting scandal going back decades. I have raised before in Parliament the anti-union

activity by another blacklister, Laing O'Rourke, on the construction site of the new Dumfries and Galloway royal infirmary, in which £275 million of public money was invested.

On the Aberdeen western peripheral route, which was built with £754 million of public money, workers were liable for both employees' and employers' national insurance contributions and were charged for the privilege of being paid their own wages by an umbrella company. It was a scandal of wage exploitation, cost cutting and tax dodging, which all went on with public money and in our name.

Those are all important cases that illustrate a more general problem—a systematic failure—and all occurred under the gaze of a Government that was not prepared to act. None of this is ancient history. The Dumfries and Galloway royal infirmary became operational only in December 2017, the V&A opened its doors only in September 2018, and the western peripheral route in Aberdeen was opened to traffic only in February 2019. Over £1 billion of public money was spent on those three contracts alone, and all were in the lifetime of the previous session of this Parliament.

So I say to the Government that we welcome its late conversion. We hope that it heralds a new era, that robust governance arrangements will now be put in place, that there will be not only contract monitoring but contract compliance—with tough penalty clauses to boot—and that ministers and principal accountable officers will be transparent and open to scrutiny by Parliament, its committees and the people.

In the Labour Party, we have a wider vision of public procurement that is based on a community wealth-building model pioneered by Labour councils such as North Ayrshire Council. That means ensuring that the award of public contracts does not give rise to massive leakages of investment and profits out of local economies but rather strengthens local businesses, democratic ownership, local workers and the social fabric of local communities. It is a vision that also demands action to take on and take out tax avoiders from public procurement approved lists, not least in the provision of residential care for the elderly.

Although I know that the Government is currently talking about ethical commissioning and ethical procurement in care when it comes to the creation of a national care service, I would make the more profound argument that those services should not be outsourced to the private sector and marketised at all—no more than national health service services and treatments should be outsourced and marketised. They should be run locally, in house, and should be democratically accountable, and the staff should be properly valued. That really would be the dawning of a new

era. That really would be progressive and sustainable, and that really would be fair.

16:13

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): Although Scotland has a proud tradition of progressive procurement, the twin challenges of climate change and Covid recovery mean that Scotland once again looks to reform how we procure.

The Scottish Government, recognising this pivotal moment for Scotland, must be commended for quickly resetting the procurement dial to ensure that we harness the power in procurement for such unparalleled times. With an annual public procurement spend in excess of £12 billion, the scope to enhance the life of employees and marginalised and vulnerable groups, as well as to protect our precious environment, is considerable. Public procurement has the ability to influence change across the business world for the betterment of people and places.

Last week, I had the privilege of listening to South Lanarkshire students about what they expect me to do to ensure that we protect our planet and their future, and a number of the pupils' suggestions are certainly deliverable with more progressive procurement. For example, why does so much of what is delivered into schools still come in plastic packaging? Why do school meals include so few vegetarian and vegan options? Why are single-use face coverings used on school campuses? Those are questions for all public sector procurement staff to consider now. We need to reflect on, rethink and reset what we procure.

Sustainable procurement also means growing our indigenous supply chains. We need look no further than the Scottish personal protective equipment supply base, which the Government has successfully expanded during the pandemic. That not only provides Scottish jobs and security of supply; it delivers significant environmental benefits through reduced carbon footprint.

A reset of how we procure would deliver substantial environmental benefits. A reformed procurement approach will also support enhanced fair work practices across Scotland.

I was delighted by the recent Government announcement that the payment of the real living wage will be a condition of securing future Scottish public sector contracts. Those contracts support a lot of Scottish jobs—around 110,000 of them. That is way more people than the whole population of my Uddingston and Bellshill constituency. Affirmative action by the Government on the payment of the real living wage across the public sector is a transformative action, and I would

encourage private sector organisations to follow suit.

Using procurement to drive fair work practices across the economy will reduce in-work poverty and societal inequalities. Government initiatives such as fair work first and the Scottish business pledge are incrementally changing employment practices across Scotland. Such redress cannot come quickly enough—the Tory Westminster policies are hitting hardest the pockets of the lowest paid

As well as increasing pay, embedding fair work practices in public sector procurement has the real potential to increase opportunities. That includes enabling family flexible working, reducing the gender pay gap, eliminating inappropriate use of zero-hours contracts and increasing worker representation in company decision making. Those life enhancing improvements to fair work practices are particularly needed in sectors such as construction and social care, in which job insecurity, low pay and/or gender imbalance are more prevalent. Given that those two sectors account for around 25 per cent of public sector spend, it is clear that procurement could be a real enabler for sectors that are crying out for positive change.

For many years, the Scottish approach to procurement has been admired and replicated by other nations. In recent years, procurement has enabled Scotland to secure five times as many accredited living wage employers as the rest of the UK. I am confident that we can once again show global leadership. A more progressive approach to sustainable procurement provides us with an exciting opportunity to reimagine the country that we want Scotland to be: a fair work nation.

In conclusion, I am delighted to welcome NHS Lanarkshire's announcement today that the new University hospital Monklands, which is just 14 miles from the 26th UN climate change conference of the parties—COP26—will be fully net zero at the build and operation phases. That is some achievement.

16:18

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): Thatcherism featured many crimes, but perhaps one of the greatest was to hand over the budget of public bodies for predation by private profiteers. Compulsory competitive tendering was a fantastic way to transfer wealth from communities to the balance sheets of corporations, very often reducing the quality of services and leaving the more complex, and therefore more expensive, services for local authorities and other public services to deal with. That made the public sector look less efficient,

and, as the fair work convention found, led to downward pressures on public services' budgets.

We need a root-and-branch approach to eliminate that attitude to our public services. Our public spending should support public bodies' aims, not the aims of people interested only in plunder and profit.

I am delighted to see the rise of community wealth-building approaches that use public spending to create better communities and more employment, and which do so in a way that does not undermine the shared aims of fairness, equality and social justice.

Procurement has been my guilty pleasure across my public service. One of the first things that I did when elected as a councillor many moons ago was to identify ways in which local authorities could use their spending to better effect.

In 2008, I joined the calls for a living wage—the first Scottish politician to do so. I am pleased that we have won that argument, even if, at the time, some of my colleagues thought that it was not worth the hassle, or could not see the difference between a living wage and a minimum wage.

I am proud of the commitments that the Greens secured in the co-operation deal with the Scottish Government on the living wage, and that we have already seen action on that. Requiring all Government procurement contracts to pay the living wage will make a big impact on driving up pay and improving people's lives, embedding the fair work agenda in Scotland's economy more than ever before.

I will not name any names, but some of those same colleagues, 15 years ago, thought that they were doing such a good job on three-year funding that they refused calls to move to five-year funding for the voluntary sector. Instead, they regressed to single-year funding—a disaster for the third sector and something that must end. We must renew our relationship with the voluntary sector, with sustainable funding relationships. We need to update the Scottish compact that, some 20 years ago, gave hope to so many.

What I was doing then has now been wrapped up into community wealth building, which is an approach that can transform our public services and deliver for our communities. Sustainable procurement is key to that—procurement that means that public kitchens, including school canteens, source food provided by local businesses and organic producers, and which bases decisions about public sector capital and revenue funding on targeted social, economic and environmental outcomes.

The debate is not just about procurement, however; it is about treating workers with dignity and respect, and compensating them accordingly. Fair work principles must be the norm: payment of a real living wage, no precarious contracts, decent conditions, democratic engagement, including trade union recognition, and transparent, supportive management. All procured services should be centred on ethical commissioning and fair work, which will be quality and individual outcome focused, collaborative, person centred and human rights based.

We must also acknowledge the global impact of our commissioning and procurement activities. Our supply chains too often include child labour, slavery and actions that drive climate breakdown. In the worst cases, such as in the illegal occupation of the West Bank, they support human rights abuses. Purchasing goods and services made in the illegal settlements in Palestine supports the illegal occupation, and no Scottish public body should be acting in support of that. I would welcome a statement from Scottish ministers on what actions are being taken to ensure that such purchasing ends.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): You must conclude now, Ms Chapman.

Maggie Chapman: By pursuing community benefit, human rights and community wealth building, we can transform our communities. I sincerely hope that in this session of Parliament we can abandon the legacy and mindset of Thatcherism in public services and embrace community wealth building, because that way lies social and economic justice.

16:22

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in today's debate. It is my desire that we should see Scotland's economy growing, so that there are more resources to share around, more tax can be paid and we can have more and better public services. However, economic growth comes in different forms. If all the benefits go to very few people, that is not acceptable and not good for the country. Therefore, along with growth in GDP and other similar measures, we need to see increasing fairness and sustainability, which is why it is important that we have this debate.

It is true that we have seen progress in some areas in recent years. At least women are now paid the same as men for doing the same job. However, it was only relatively recently that there was a breakthrough in Glasgow for men and women doing work of equal value, after years of Labour inaction and collusion. In some sectors,

such as the police and solicitors, more women are entering the profession but they are still not always being promoted into senior positions in the numbers that I, for one, consider they should be.

We need to use whatever powers we have in an imaginative way, which certainly includes in relation to the conditions that are attached to procurement exercises and any grants that are made. Other countries have tried different approaches. For example, France has tried breaking large contracts down into smaller chunks in order to support smaller local businesses—so the EU did not hold us back.

Part of the debate is about where employment law should lie. I would prefer it to lie in Scotland, whether under devolution or independence. However, we have to accept that, even with independence, we would face constraints, given that we compete internationally. Any movement to fairer work practices needs to have an international element to it. Just as we need COP26 and international agreement on climate change, so we need international agreement on fair work practices.

I remain incredibly disappointed that we left the EU through Brexit. We got some good work practices from the EU, including a limit on the maximum number of working hours per week—apart from for MSPs, of course. As EU members, we were quite restricted in the conditions that we could impose when procuring goods and services, but we will still be limited by the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020 and possibly by trade agreements that the UK enters into. I hope that we will push the boundaries on that as far as we can and that, whether by using public procurement or by making grants, we do as much as we can to ensure that decent pay and fair work practices are required.

The closure of the Tollcross branch of McVitie's, which is in my constituency, now seems almost inevitable, bringing the question of ownership into the debate. We have become used to the idea of big multinational corporations as almost the sole and best model for enterprise, but we also need to focus on other models, including co-operatives and employee ownership. In such models, there is likely to be more commitment to the local area, more links to the local community and more fair work practices. We need to do more to fend off the takeover of growing Scottish companies by big multinationals, wherever they are based. *[Interruption.]*

Do I have time for an intervention, Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We are very tight for time to accommodate interventions, I am afraid.

John Mason: I am sorry; I will continue.

Another angle is international fair trade. I absolutely want fair work practices, flexible working, a proper living wage and a reduced gender pay gap for workers in Scotland, but I do not want that for Scottish workers alone. I want workers in Malawi and Rwanda to get a living wage; I want women in Zambia and Pakistan to be paid the same as men in those countries. Fair trade has made great inroads on those issues, but we need to go further so that, when we buy clothes from Bangladesh or coffee from Ghana, we pay a high enough price so that the workers in those countries have a decent standard of living.

Sustainable procurement and fair work practices can mean many things, but, in the coming years, we need to keep our focus on them and not just on GDP and other figures that are easier to measure.

16:26

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I will concentrate on the public procurement angle, because having the right public procurement will go a long way to ensure that we have fair work practices.

I hope that there is one thing that can unite the Parliament in these difficult times: the drive to ensure that we get better value for public money and that we do so as openly and transparently as possible. The public deserves no less. They surely have a right to know exactly where their money goes and why elected members of the Scottish Parliament make certain choices, particularly when it comes to jobs and fair work. We must be held fully accountable for every decision that we make, especially on public finance. The Finance and Public Administration Committee, several members of which are in the chamber, certainly sees its scrutiny role as absolutely paramount in all its activities; so, too, does Audit Scotland.

In 2018, the then Auditor General, Caroline Gardner, strongly criticised the Scottish Government for the limited information that was made publicly available to enable scrutiny of the financial support that is given to several private companies. It is quite clear that, at Ferguson Marine, Burntisland Fabrications and Prestwick airport, transparency has not been as good as it should be.

On the request for openness and transparency, it is important that there is a proper structure around the Scottish Government consolidated accounts. A serious problem with Ferguson Marine was that, although it was a fully Government-owned company with Scottish ministers as the only shareholders, it did not fall into the Scottish Government consolidated accounts.

Caroline Gardner was absolutely correct when she said that, to deliver best value, we need good governance structures and effective management—she said that persistently during her time in office, and her successor is doing the same. That is what is required of local authorities and it should be the same for the Scottish Government.

In his speech, the minister mentioned the Procurement Reform (Scotland) Act 2014, which demands that public bodies consider not only the economic outcomes of procurement but what would enhance social and environmental wellbeing, which several members have referred to. This is a good week to talk about the additional concerns of social and environmental wellbeing.

There is growing demand for help for local economies. My colleague Stephen Kerr mentioned that, as did Willie Rennie. We can do a lot more to help our local economies.

The Federation of Small Businesses has made two very strong points on that front. First, it would be very good for a much higher percentage of procurement funding to go to smaller firms to help local jobs and local investment. We must bear in mind that many smaller firms have been the bedrock of our communities during Covid. Secondly, it is true that Covid has not made things easy when it comes to tracking the money, but that should not be used as an excuse.

I finish on what I think is a very important point: not only are openness and transparency good practice in measuring best value for taxpayers' money, but they are essential if there is to be renewed trust between Government and the public. There is much in the media about how politics—and maybe even politicians—has lost its integrity when it comes to that transparency and openness. That is not good for society, it is not good for where our public money is going, and it is certainly not good for rebuilding Scotland after Covid.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Katy Clark joins us remotely.

16:31

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): The debate is about how public money is spent, but it is also about the kind of world that we want to live in.

The fair work first guidelines describe themselves as a

“flagship policy for driving high quality and fair work across the labour market”.

In those guidelines, the Scottish Government asks employers to adopt fair working practices. One of the issues is to what extent those guidelines are mandatory, to what extent they are voluntary and

to what extent they are criteria that have to be taken into account when decisions are made.

For example, one of the principles that is laid out is about having

“appropriate channels for an effective voice, such as trade union recognition”.

However, trade union recognition is not a requirement in the tendering process. In the recent past, the Scottish Government awarded Amazon a £4.7 million contract for web services. That was last year. The year before, Amazon was awarded £45,272 in a contract. In 2018-19, it was awarded £2.5 million in a contract. Amazon was also awarded £15 million through a tender for web services. That is despite the fact that not a single Amazon warehouse in the whole of the UK is unionised. Even Amnesty International has commented that Amazon has repeatedly issued legal notices to trade union organisers who even attempt to talk to Amazon workers outside Amazon facilities in the UK.

When I was a constituency member of Parliament, I was repeatedly approached by workers who lived in Ayrshire and travelled to the Amazon warehouse in Inverclyde and who, when they got there, were told that, even though they had a contract, there was no work or that hours were very limited. Amazon has said that it does not operate zero-hours contracts. However, according to Amazon workers—and indeed to a fairly recent ITV documentary on the subject—the reality is that the contracts operate as zero-hours contracts. Another provision in the guidelines is that there should be

“no inappropriate use of zero hours contracts”.

Therefore, in relation to the fair work guidelines and the business pledge through which the Scottish Government asks contractors to commit to incorporating those principles, I ask the minister to clarify how many successful contractors have signed the business pledge.

The minister indicated that companies will be mandated to pay the living wage. To what extent does the Government accept that it is only when a company is mandated to adhere to certain principles that those are actually effective? At the moment, companies such as Serco have ended up running asylum accommodation, and PricewaterhouseCoopers was only very recently awarded the £100,000 contract to design the new national care service.

I ask the Scottish Government to outline how it believes that that is consistent with the principles that are being set before Parliament today.

Taxpayers have the right to expect that the public purse is used to support green jobs that are well paid. I welcome today's debate, what the

Scottish Government has said and—indeed—the contributions from the different political parties across the chamber.

Our role in this Parliament is to ensure that those warm words become a reality. I hope that the Parliament will commit itself to doing that over the coming weeks.

16:35

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): I will begin my speech in this short debate on sustainable procurement and fair work by discussing ageism. Much has been made of the UK Government's announcement that the minimum wage will increase to £9.50 from April next year. I am sure that the real living wage will also consequently increase further in the next few weeks. However, the rate for 21 and 22-year-olds will be £9.18, not £9.50; for 18 to 20-year-olds, it will be £6.83; and for 16 to 17-year-olds, it will be £4.81.

I know only too well about the use and abuse of those national minimum wages in the hospitality sector, and I know of some particularly bad practitioners. I hope that members across the chamber can join in saying that that is simply wrong. Although it might be permissible, it is wrong, and I am sure that the chamber will want to come together to oppose such an unfair, divisive and discriminatory approach to the UK minimum wage. I ask the Scottish Government what representations it has made or will make to the UK Government to make the case to end such ageism in employment.

I welcome the fact that the real living wage will now be a prerequisite to securing any Scottish Government contracts. That is of course just one element of a wider fair work first programme, which makes the adoption of fair work practices part of the criteria for securing public contracts and grants.

I very much enjoyed Katy Clark's challenges to Government. Although I will not say too much more about fair work first in relation to that, she made some pertinent points, and I think that I should put that on the record. Not only does the Scottish Government have to ensure that no ageism exists in fair work first; we also have to make sure that companies are much more consistently compliant across the range of contracts and grants that they may secure from the Scottish Government.

I am the convener of the Scottish Parliament's cross-party group on palliative care. Our members have a great interest in the development of a national social care system and in improving the pay and support of the social care workforce. That workforce must be at the centre of any fair work

agenda. I welcome the fact that, last month, the Scottish Government introduced a £300 million package of measures to help health and social care staff. That included ensuring a pay rise of more than 5 per cent for all adult social care staff who are currently paid the real living wage. That is a welcome start, but it is just a start.

I am minded of the words of the independent review of adult social care, which spoke about having to carry out job evaluations to ensure

"equitable assessment of terms and conditions"

and of the "skills, qualifications, responsibilities" and contributions made by social care staff. It also spoke of national minimum terms and conditions, of raising, not lowering, standards within commissioning—whatever that may look like—and of a

"national forum comprised of workforce representation, employers, Integration Joint Boards and the Scottish Government"

at the heart of it; in other words, a national, sector-level collective bargaining structure. That must be at the heart of any reform to adult social care. We should not pretend that national collective bargaining will immediately transform social care or that it will be easy—it will not be. However, it is a key component, and it is also a key component of fair work.

The funding must of course follow the support for any national care service, not just because it is the right thing to do, but because of the equalities agenda—because of the gender and BME aspects, with women and black and minority ethnic workers much more heavily represented in that sector.

I note that the Scottish Government and COSLA are discussing a fiscal framework for local government. Depending on the outcome of the consultation on a national care service, and on who picks up the tab for the aspiration to see the fair work agenda in that, at the heart of this we will have to make sure that we fully fund the sector as we progress.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the winding-up speeches.

16:40

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): I declare an interest as a member of the GMB union, Unite the union and the cross-party group on the RMT—the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers. Presiding Officer, in case any SNP member repeats the recent comments of the transport minister, who suggested that being a union member was a problem for an MSP, let me say that I am proud to declare those interests.

It really is the very definition of irony that the Scottish Government brought this debate on fair work at a time when refuse collectors and cleaners—thousands of council workers—are taking to the streets, not to collect our bins but to strike for fair pay, and when we have just had Britain's longest industrial dispute on our railways. The Government showed little interest in resolving those two disputes until ministers realised that their COP26 selfies might be photobombed by striking rail and council workers.

Meanwhile, our nurses are balloting on industrial action because of the health secretary's inaction since the pay offer was rejected, and last week the Government snubbed retail workers by rejecting the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers' call for large shops to close on new year's day.

It is disappointing that we are witnessing anti-trade union rhetoric from some Scottish ministers, which means that industrial relations between the Scottish Government and our key workers have plummeted to an all-time low. As Paul Sweeney said when he opened this debate for Labour, how can it be that this Government, which appears to be so committed to workers' rights, frequently finds itself involved in industrial disputes with those same workers?

The reality is that the SNP's record on fair work is, sadly, all too often not as progressive as it is reluctant. That has been the case for years. Positive steps are welcome but take too long and, more often than not, do not go far enough. As Richard Leonard said, we welcome the SNP coming round to the Labour movement's way of thinking when it comes to payment of the living wage, including in the context of the award of more than £13 billion of public money every year for procuring goods and services, but it is a pity that that did not come sooner.

When I was a councillor in Dumfries and Galloway Council, before I was elected to this Parliament, I recall being worried, even then, that we would face a recruitment crisis in social care because cuts to council budgets were driving an agenda of outsourcing care for no other reason than that it was cheaper to commission private and third sector care firms than to use council staff. I proposed that the council should seek a commitment from firms to pay the living wage as part of any council care commissioning, and that we should work in partnership with firms to pay a fair price for fair pay. My proposal was booted out by the Tory-SNP coalition that ran the council for most of the decade that I was a councillor. SNP councillors waved letters from SNP ministers that said that they could not support fair pay because it was illegal.

It took the SNP nearly a decade to U-turn on a mechanism for paying the living wage to adult care

workers—by updating its legal advice, as the minister described it.

We know that the whole system of commissioning—that race to the bottom that is competitive tendering—as opposed to co-production is a broken model. Two years ago, the Fair Work Convention report, "Fair Work in Scotland's Social Care Sector 2019" said that the procurement model was not delivering fair work and indeed was a barrier to it, because it was responsible for zero-hours, low-hours and seasonal contracts, thereby undermining job security. The approach was used to manage the savage cuts that Green and SNP budgets imposed on councils and led, in part, to the social care recruitment crisis that we still face, with staff being lost to sectors that offer better terms and conditions.

In last year's budget, the SNP made no provision for an increase in social care pay. We need wholesale reform of social care, which replaces competitive tendering with genuine collaboration. Reform needs to start with a commitment to tackle poverty pay by adopting the GMB union's call for a minimum £15 an hour in social care.

Jamie Halcro Johnston asked whether we can afford to do that. The reality is that we cannot afford not to do it. We currently spend hundreds of millions of pounds on delayed discharge, keeping people in hospital because poor wages mean that we cannot attract social care staff to deliver the care packages that would enable people to leave hospital. We need to stop believing that paying poor wages is good for the economy and that low pay does not come with costs.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: I clarify that I was asking whether the member's Labour colleagues support a £15 national living wage across the board and how that would be paid for.

Colin Smyth: I have highlighted the fact that Labour supports that £15 per hour wage for social care workers as a way of tackling the challenges that we face, particularly in social work. I hope that Jamie Halcro Johnston will back our campaign and that of the trade unions.

As Paul Sweeney said in his response to Mr Halcro Johnston, the Feeley report was clear: every £1 spent on social care generates £2 for the wider economy. Fair pay not only delivers for the workforce—the majority of whom are women—but delivers a stronger economy.

It is vital that a stronger economy is a more inclusive one. Willie Rennie was correct to say that our present procurement processes squeeze out small businesses. He rightly noted that only 5 per cent of the Scottish public sector's almost £14 billion procurement budget is spent on firms with

fewer than 10 employees, despite those firms accounting for 94 per cent of businesses in Scotland.

The value of procurement contracts won by smaller firms has been in decline in Scotland since 2016, which is why Labour has consistently called for a local-first approach to all procurement. It is why we want to see the commitment that we secured in the legislation establishing the South of Scotland Enterprise Agency—one that embeds fair work in all grants to businesses—strengthened and extended to Highlands and Islands Enterprise and Scottish Enterprise. It is also why, as Katy Clark said, we want conditionality in grants to businesses to go beyond the living wage and vague commitments to fair work and to better mandate companies in areas such as collective bargaining. It is why Labour will always call not only for a stronger economy but for one that is more equal and inclusive and is fairer for all.

16:46

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Scotland's workforce has faced unprecedented challenges in the past 18 months. The nature of work has changed or, more accurately, change that was already taking place has been accelerated.

The effects have fallen on employer and employee alike. While businesses were shuttered, employment seemed more precarious. Some businesses stopped trading, while others limped on as their customer base collapsed under the weight of the public health emergency. Many enterprises survived; some, regrettably, were lost. Key workers had to manage and adapt to risk, ensuring that vital services could continue. The pressures placed on them have been immense and in too many cases are still on-going.

It is therefore a welcome step that we are discussing fair work and sustainability in procurement today. I hope that we can all recognise the need to drive forward positive change and to continue or even redouble our efforts, despite the impact of recent times.

We must also recognise that the nature of work is evolving and must evolve if we are to meet the challenges of tomorrow. There is an important role for this Parliament and the Scottish Government in responding to those changes by adapting, leading by example and ensuring that fairness is promoted.

Many of the worst possible outcomes of the pandemic have been averted. Thanks to the furlough scheme and other support mechanisms, our economy carried on and many jobs and livelihoods were protected. UK growth projections look increasingly solid and the threat of huge rises

in unemployment has been averted. We should all welcome that legacy.

Moves have gone further. Despite challenges, the UK Government last year surpassed the SNP's ambition of an £8.70 per hour minimum wage by 2020. Next spring, as announced by the chancellor in last week's budget, the national living wage will rise to meet the Living Wage Foundation's recommendation of £9.50 an hour.

Good, fair work involves fair pay but goes beyond that too. In relation to procurement, there is an opportunity to expand the promotion of skills and retraining, an aspiration that the Scottish Government has said is a priority. Part of that, as colleagues have observed, is about including support for apprenticeships, but it should also recognise the parallel needs for reskilling and upskilling, building bases of expertise and providing the support for transition. The Procurement Reform (Scotland) Act 2014 also recognised the merits of sustainability. This week in particular, environmental sustainability should be at the forefront of our minds.

We should also recognise the need for an inclusive approach in pursuing those aspirations. It would be easy to use procurement to drive those ambitions forward, but in a way that was exclusionary and created a narrow door through which only the few could enter. Avoiding that outcome was another principle of the 2014 act and is one that we should take seriously in turning principle into action. It is no great stretch to see how an outcome that limits potential sources of procurement limits the utility of the measures that we are discussing. It would also, just as importantly, strike at the very fundamentals of Government procurement, which involve finding value for the money that the public has entrusted us to spend.

Scotland has an incredible diversity of innovative and inventive SMEs that are trailblazers in new areas and drive competition in others. That is particularly true in regions such as mine, the Highlands and Islands, where smaller enterprises are the life-blood of our economy, and where Government procurement can make a great deal of difference. We know that there are barriers of access for smaller businesses already, as other members have pointed out, but we must be in the business of lowering rather than raising those walls.

There have been a range of useful contributions from around the chamber today. My colleague Tess White spoke of this as a time to take stock and to ask ourselves the sometimes difficult questions about what we as a state and a society can do to improve. Sustainability is an often-used term but is one that encompasses a great deal,

and it depends both on clarity of purpose and an understanding of the effects of our interventions.

Tess White highlighted the importance of suppliers to an organisation's overall social and environmental footprint, as well as emphasising the importance of education and innovation. She also spoke about the importance of engagement. We know all too well the consequences of a failure to engage, as can be seen in this Government's anti-business approach and the problems that that has created. Attempts at making positive change must be on the basis of working with employers and other organisations, not against them.

Liz Smith spoke about the issues that have been raised by committees of this Parliament, as well as the Auditor General, in relation to the transparency of procurement. Among other things, she mentioned the current issues that are faced at Ferguson Marine on the Clyde, which were brought up in detail in my members' business debate on ferries just last week. Although we recognise the issues around commercial sensitivity, it is clear that there remains a lack of openness on important and high-value procurement and support for businesses from the Scottish Government. As Liz Smith pointed out, openness in that regard is a vital part of good governance and effective management.

Liz Smith also touched on the issue of support for small businesses, a point that was also raised by Willie Rennie and my colleague Stephen Kerr, who highlighted some of the challenges that are faced by small businesses and operations in accessing public procurement.

Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Jamie Halcro Johnston: The continued issue of late payment, which is something that should be simple to correct in today's world, remains one such challenge, but it is one that can make the difference between a business succeeding or failing.

I give way to Mr Fairlie.

Jim Fairlie: That is a surprise.

The member is talking about the need to support small businesses. Does he share my view that the increase in VAT from 5 per cent to 7.5 per cent for the hospitality sector on 1 October, imposed by the UK Government, is anything but business friendly? The hospitality sector was the first to shut down and the last to open and is being brutalised by a lack of staff because of the lack of free movement of people. Does the member stand by that rise in VAT?

Jamie Halcro Johnston: I am sorry if my letting the member intervene surprised him. He tried to intervene on me, so I am surprised by his reaction.

The UK Government has supported business and, if the member goes out into communities, he will hear businesses saying how important that UK Government support has been. He will also hear them say how difficult it has been to access some of the Scottish Government support, how there has been a lack of clarity and delays in getting that support through and how there have been far too many different pots of money, which has made everything much harder. I am sure that the member will have heard that message himself.

There is an important role for this Parliament in promoting sustainability and positive employment practices in a changing world, but it must be an approach that is collaborative and responsive to change. Without those key requirements, the influence that the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government has will be greatly diminished.

In furthering the principles of sustainable recruitment, we should look to the future and to the coming needs of wider society and consider whether, in the round, public authorities in Scotland are making a positive contribution.

16:53

Richard Lochhead: I thank all members for their contributions to this debate, which is an important one. It is a debate that affects every working Scot and every Scottish employer. It takes place against the backdrop that we have all witnessed of the impact of Covid, which has exposed and highlighted many of the unacceptable features of our economy and of some people's working lives. Further, of course, it takes place against the backdrop of Brexit and, as we look ahead, with COP26 taking place, the economic transformation that our country will have to go through in the coming decades to meet our 2045 net zero targets, which, again, will have an impact on every working Scot and every business in this country. Further, as Katy Clark said, it is also a debate about the kind of country that we want to build.

I will refer to some of the powerful contributions that members have made and answer some of their questions if I can. I start with Jamie Halcro Johnston saying in response to Jim Fairlie's excellent intervention that the Conservative Party is pro-business. I recall that the Conservative Prime Minister Boris Johnson was not very complimentary about business. He said the word "business" preceded by a four-letter expletive that I will not say because I like to adhere to the standards of the Scottish Parliament.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: The member is trying to deflect the point. How many businesses in his Moray constituency have commented to him about the difficulties that they have had in accessing Scottish Government support and the confusion, lack of clarity and other problems that they face?

Richard Lochhead: It is ironic that I was about to refer to some businesses in my constituency and the rest of Scotland, because I was also intrigued by Tess White's comments when she had the audacity to say that the SNP Government does not listen to the hospitality sector. I speak to the hospitality sector in my Moray constituency and to other organisations in my ministerial role. Their number 1 concern is the impact of Brexit on Scotland's hospitality sector, and I put it to Tess White that it is not SNP or Green ministers who are not listening to the hospitality sector but her colleagues in the Conservative UK Government in London.

I was also intrigued that Tess White said that the Scottish Government has to be careful about the impact of our fair work criteria on business and then immediately afterwards—in the same breath—that we should listen to the recommendations of the “left-wing Jimmy Reid Foundation”. I am sure that the Jimmy Reid Foundation will be delighted that a Conservative MSP supports it.

I turn to comments made by other members. Michelle Thomson spoke about sustainable procurement and many other members explored other issues around procurement, which is just one of the windows into the fair work agenda. We have been pushing the boundaries of what is permissible in public procurement in Scotland for the past two decades in the Parliament. There is a major focus on ensuring that public procurement contributes to a green and inclusive recovery, and I give Michelle Thomson that assurance.

Maggie Chapman referred to issues around procurement and Government contracts in relation to the occupied territories. I again say that the Scottish Government takes the issue of human rights very seriously and believes that those we contract with should take a robust approach to preventing human rights violations in any part of their business, including their supply chain. That is reflected in much of the procurement legislation.

I am embarrassed to find myself agreeing with Stephen Kerr on one particular issue. I will come back to that later, because I want to address a point that he made that I do not agree with. He referred, as others did, to the recent rise in the national living wage which, although welcome, is not nearly as generous as it sounds, as others such as Bob Doris pointed out. It does not support workers under the age of 23, who are one of the groups most affected by the recession, does not

compensate for the £20-a-week cut to universal credit and will soon be woefully short of the new real living wage rate that will increase on 15 November, during living wage week 2021. I read in the newspapers this week that the UK chancellor is the richest elected politician in the UK, so I do not think that anyone was surprised that he missed the opportunity to do more for low-paid people.

The issue that Stephen Kerr and other members raised on which I agree with him is the need to do more to ensure that small to medium-sized businesses and their local economies benefit from procurement and the spending of the public pound. I hope that there is cross-party support for community wealth building as part of the agenda of the Government and the Parliament.

People will be aware that there are five pillars to the community wealth building agenda. Those include

“making financial power work for local places”,

“fair employment and just labour markets”

and

“socially productive use of land and property”.

Tess White: Will the minister please explain how the SNP Government believes that it can manage work when it—disastrously—cannot manage its ferries, reduce the attainment gap or improve its drug deaths record?

Richard Lochhead: What would help us to deal with the challenges that face working people in Scotland is to have employment powers devolved to this Parliament. We have no competence to legislate on reserved matters such as the setting of the minimum wage, trade union law, employment rights, protections against discrimination or enforcement action. Many members who spoke in the debate made the case for those powers to be devolved to this Parliament when they called for action to be taken that we do not have the legislative power to take in this Parliament. I ask all members to get behind the Government's efforts to get legislative powers over employment devolved to Scotland's Parliament. *[Interruption.]*

Do I have time to take an intervention, Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: No. I am afraid that you must bring your remarks to a close, minister.

Richard Lochhead: Over the past few years, this Government has achieved so much on the fair work agenda, in the absence of legislative powers over employment. Through our fair work first criteria, public sector grants and procurement, we have asked employers to commit to appropriate

channels and effective voices for staff, such as trade union recognition; investment in workforce development; no inappropriate use of zero-hours contracts; action to tackle the gender pay gap and create a more diverse and inclusive workplace; and payment of the living wage. I remind members that more people are paid the living wage in Scotland than in other parts of the UK.

From October, two additional criteria have been added to the fair work agenda. Employers have been asked to offer flexible and family-friendly working practices for all workers and to oppose fire and rehire practices. Over and above that are the other issues that we have discussed today to do with conditionality through public grants and procurement.

I urge everyone to submit to the Scottish Government's consultation on making Scotland a fair work nation by 2025. Under the SNP's leadership and with the support of the Green Party, we are making fantastic progress towards that.

Point of Order

17:02

Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Earlier today, I asked the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Veterans about a Scottish Prison Service policy in respect of prison mail. The policy is that contaminated mail items are given to prisoners on their release. I explained that officers are angry and worried about that, and further stated that they feel complicit in what they describe as "state-sponsored drug dealing". In response, the cabinet secretary stated;

"I do not believe that it is right to call prison officers drug dealers, even to make a political point."

As a new MSP, I try to avoid making personal attacks and false comments—*[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): Can we hear the point of order, please?

Russell Findlay: I strive to avoid making personal attacks and false comments about colleagues of all parties. Presiding Officer, with respect to rule 7.3 of standing orders, which is about order in the chamber, what options are available to you, or to me, in respect of the cabinet secretary's false and deeply offensive comment?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I thank the member for his point of order. As he will be aware, the content of contributions during proceedings is the responsibility of members themselves—*[Interruption.]* Excuse me, Mr Halcro Johnston. I am in the middle of responding to your colleague's point of order. Thank you.

I will repeat that. As the member will be aware, the content of contributions during proceedings is the responsibility of members themselves, and is not a matter for the Presiding Officer. There is a place for robust debate and discussion in the chamber, but members are expected to treat one another with courtesy and respect at all times. Should I or my colleagues in the chair consider that a lack of courtesy or respect is being shown, we will intervene. Thank you.

Business Motion

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-01914, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a change to this week's business.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees to the following revision to the programme of business for Wednesday 3 November 2021—

after

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:
Health and Social Care;
Social Justice, Housing and Local
Government

insert

followed by Ministerial Statement: Action by Legal
Aid Solicitors

[Interruption.]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I ask Mr Golden to move to another desk as the microphone at his current desk does not seem to work.

17:04

Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con): Presiding Officer, I seek your guidance on how Parliament will allow members to scrutinise the Scottish Government on whether it operates with the transparency that is expected of a Scottish Government.

Members will have noted the Government's intention to provide a statement on incineration and deposit return, but not until after the 26th United Nations climate change conference of the parties—COP26. The Government has all the evidence now, so why the delay? We can only assume that it is because it is going to deliver bad news that could embarrass it in front of the world at COP26. Why are the two equally important environmental issues being bundled into one statement? That can only mean less scrutiny. It is to spare the blushes of the Scottish National Party and Green Party coalition.

In fact, incineration could have been dealt with two years ago. That is when Zero Waste Scotland forecast that the SNP was headed for more than 1 million tonnes of incineration overcapacity. That overcapacity could see the SNP-Green coalition not only importing waste to burn, but—which is perhaps more important—constraining future Scottish Governments to do the same. The Greens promised a ban on new incinerators in their manifesto, but now they announce a nonsensical review. That means that more

incinerators can be built, which will make Scotland the ashtray of Europe.

There has been little on the deposit return scheme that has been promised for 1 July next year. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind members around the chamber, including Labour members, to listen to Mr Golden.

Maurice Golden: There has been very little on the scheme, despite the fact that the Government has been working on it for a decade.

My letter to the minister is still unanswered after a month. The Government is hiding from parliamentary scrutiny. It is time that the SNP and the Greens took their responsibilities seriously and allowed Parliament to question them on their shambolic record on tackling climate change.

17:07

The Minister for Parliamentary Business (George Adam): In answer to Mr Golden's questions, I say to him that there is no conspiracy in this scenario; there is no lone shooter on the grassy knoll. It is, in effect, just a case of getting through parliamentary business.

I am trying to be reasonable with all members, as always. When Opposition parties make requests, I try to work with them. Incidentally, I am trying to be a better person as well; I am trying to see others' points of view and to work with them for the betterment of the people of Scotland.

The issue in question is purely a matter of process, as is the case with much of my job as Minister for Parliamentary Business. The Scottish Government has accepted requests for two statements this week—one from Labour and one from the Conservatives. The motion proposes that a statement on action by legal aid solicitors will take place tomorrow. The statement covering the incineration review has been scheduled for Wednesday 17 November.

I will tell members about the arguments that the Conservatives have made at the Parliamentary Bureau on a number of occasions. First, they requested that we lessen the pressure and intensity of parliamentary business for the duration of COP26. The bureau accepted and agreed with that proposal.

Secondly, they repeatedly requested that we maximise scrutiny of Government policy. To have the statement on the date that we propose will give the Conservatives the opportunity to get more publicity and to ask their questions because, currently, the whole world is rightly looking at Glasgow and COP26.

I have listened to the Conservatives and, on the basis of both their suggestions, I have scheduled the statement on the incineration review for the week immediately following COP26, in order to allow all members to participate without conflicting commitments. That is me being reasonable; that is me trying to help colleagues to ensure that the flow of parliamentary business can be as easy as possible. It is purely about process, and is not about the conspiracies that the Conservatives believe.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I point out that my offer in the Parliamentary Bureau to accommodate this special period in the history of our country, when we are hosting perhaps the largest gathering of world leaders ever in the United Kingdom, was intended to be in the spirit of working across the Parliament in order to facilitate that. At no point have any of my overtures to the Minister for Parliamentary Business been intended to convey the idea that we were anything less than keenly interested in scrutiny of the Scottish Government. I therefore hope that the Minister for Parliamentary Business understands what he has insinuated by his remarks, and the consequences that will flow from that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That is not a point of order.

The question is, that motion S6M-01914, in the name of George Adam, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees to the following revision to the programme of business for Wednesday 3 November 2021—

after

That the Parliament agrees to the following revision to the programme of business for Wednesday 3 November 2021—

after

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:
Health and Social Care;
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Government

insert

followed by Ministerial Statement: Action by Legal
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Decision Time

17:10

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): There are no divisions as a result of today's business. I will move on to the next item of business after a short pause to allow members to change their seats.

Menopause

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): Before we begin the final item of business, 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 final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-01534, in the name of Collette Stevenson, on improving support and ending the stigma of the menopause. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament recognises that World Menopause Day is held every year on 18 October; understands that around 400,000 women in Scotland are of menopausal age; acknowledges that most women will experience menopausal symptoms and in a variety of ways, which, for some, may be severe and have a large impact on their lives; notes that these symptoms can include memory loss, insomnia, anxiety, palpitations, hot flushes and pain; further notes the encouragement given to women to access the support and advice to which they are entitled, such as through their GP and primary care team; welcomes the Scottish Government's Women's Health Plan which aims to alleviate women's health inequalities and ensure that women can access specialist menopause services; notes the view that many women could benefit from flexibility from employers to manage menopausal symptoms and that employers should consider introducing a menopause policy to best support women in the workplace; understands that South Lanarkshire Council was the first local authority in Scotland to implement such a policy; acknowledges that there continues to be a taboo and stigma surrounding the menopause; welcomes the Scottish Government's commitment to launch a public campaign to remove this and raise awareness of the symptoms of the menopause; notes the calls for young women and girls to be empowered through high-quality education on menstrual health, and further notes the view that awareness-raising of the menopause will help its impact be better understood and addressed.

17:12

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): I thank colleagues for signing my motion so that we can debate this important topic.

In Scotland, we have come a long way towards improving support for, and ending the stigma of, the menopause, but we still have much to do. I am passionate about starting conversations and ending the stigma around the menopause, and I look forward to the upcoming campaign to remove the stigma and raise awareness of symptoms. I thank my friend Christina McKelvie, the Minister for Equalities and Older People, for leading the first ever Government debate on the menopause in 2019, and for all the work that she has been doing to advance women's equality.

There are around 400,000 women of menopausal age in Scotland. The average age at which a woman reaches the menopause is 51; however, some women experience perimenopause 10 years earlier, which can include heavy or infrequent periods, night sweats and hot flushes. Earlier this year, the Scottish Government published its very welcome "Women's Health Plan". One of the plan's priorities is to ensure that women can get

"access to specialist ... services for advice and support on the diagnosis and management of menopause".

All too often, we are given leaflets from our general practitioner to read over, but we need options and better advice. There are more than 30 symptoms of the menopause, and women deserve support that is tailored to their own symptoms. Hormone replacement therapy is a well-known treatment, and thankfully it is free at the point of need in Scotland. However, HRT is not for everyone, and I would like to see more treatment options available. I urge our Government to offer more holistic approaches to tackle the varying degrees of symptoms that are associated with the menopause.

Many women do not speak to their doctor about their menopause, as they worry that they are wasting national health service time. NHS Inform's new menopause website is a welcome development, but I encourage any woman who is struggling with menopause symptoms to speak to her GP or other healthcare worker to ensure that she gets the support that she needs and deserves.

Another important aim of the plan is to continue the women's lived experience group, which will inform policy and improve services. During the development of the plan, the group talked about the need for choice and flexibility, and to educate everyone about women's health issues, and I absolutely agree. However, most importantly—and shockingly, but not surprisingly—the group found that women wanted to be taken seriously. We need not only more research and support, but ultimately more education, on the menopause.

Current events highlight the need to improve support, end the stigma of the menopause and ensure that women can get a break when they need it. Wearing masks when a hot flush hits you is the equivalent of a towering inferno. As someone who is experiencing menopause symptoms, I know how challenging that has been. While many women who experience hot flushes and sweats want to down tools and run a mile, there are so many women in the medical, nursing and caring professions who have had to look after us during the pandemic while kitted out in full personal protective equipment and battling menopause symptoms. I applaud those women,

who have overcome their own challenges to protect the lives of others.

With regard to the workplace, 45 per cent of women told a survey that menopausal symptoms had had a negative impact on their work, and 40 per cent of those who took a day off work for that could not tell their employer the real reason. Furthermore, Engender's research found that, although most women think that workplaces should have a menopause policy, only 3.7 per cent were aware of such a policy in their own workplaces.

Many workplaces have improved in recent years. I was instrumental in launching South Lanarkshire Council's groundbreaking menopause in the workplace policy, having campaigned for many years, as a trade union representative, to make that happen. NHS Lanarkshire also implemented a policy this time last year. It is good to see that those two large employers are ahead of the curve, and I hope that other workplaces will follow suit. I have an open door to any East Kilbride businesses that want to discuss the best way to support women and colleagues. I acknowledge Gillian Martin's great work on the matter, and I look forward to her contribution to the debate.

I hope that the debate today will raise awareness and encourage employers to do all that they can to help colleagues who are going through the menopause, and to ensure that women know that they deserve support. Let us empower our young women and girls through high-quality education on menstrual health, but let us also pay attention to our attitudes and behaviours. There is still a stigma there, and we need to reach out to men and women alike in order to tackle it. We all have a part to play in ensuring that the conversations continue, and that this natural process in a woman's reproductive cycle stays visible. Women's health should be a subject that we can broach without fear or flux. The support that is available continues to improve, but the stigma must end.

17:18

Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): I thank Collette Stevenson for bringing to the chamber this debate, which is so important to women in Scotland. I also thank her for name-checking me in her speech—I am delighted. I know that Ms Stevenson has campaigned for many years for better menopause services and workplace policies. In fact, I spoke in the 2019 debate that she mentioned, which was led by Christina McKelvie, when I mentioned the work that she had done in making South Lanarkshire Council the first local authority in Scotland to introduce a menopause policy.

It is that campaigning, including the Pausitivity campaign, 50Sense and all the Menopause Cafe events, that has really prompted change. The change that has happened in the past few years has been incredible, not least in making discussions about the menopause more open, frequent and normal. In large part, it is those conversations and campaigns that have led to the Scottish Government's "Women's Health Plan", which includes the development of menopause and menstrual health workplace policies, and the need to ensure that we have GPs who are menopause experts and access to specialist menopause clinics across Scotland.

I also mention the importance of Ms Todd holding the first ever ministerial post that has "women's health" in the title. That is significant progress and I can think of no better woman to have that responsibility. Put bluntly, stigma around menopause is a barrier to women getting the help they need, but here is the thing: menopause is a normal stage of life as a female. If we use that fact as our baseline, perhaps we can then start to normalise conversations around the menopause and, if we can do that, perhaps we can make more progress on the treatment of its often debilitating effects.

Stigma is one thing, but a lot more needs to be done clinically in the menopause sphere. More menopause training is needed for GPs. It should not be left to chance whether you get to speak to someone with that interest or expertise, and a five-minute appointment is often not long enough to diagnose menopause. It may even be the wrong day to diagnose menopause, if your hormones are playing up. Also, women should not have to go private to see a menopause specialist; we need to make sure that access to menopause specialists is equal for all women. There should be more referrals from GPs to NHS services. I note that the women's health plan addresses those points.

I am pleased to see a commitment to more research into women's health more generally and menopause specifically. I have been researching the role that testosterone plays in women. We think that menopause is about oestrogen, which is largely true, but we lose testosterone, as well. That can lead to memory, sleep and energy loss, and complete loss of libido. If the stigma around male erectile dysfunction is, rightly, being diminished and men can easily get medication to counteract that, let us start talking about the loss of hormones that can end a woman's sex life in the same frank, compassionate, serious and solution-focused way.

Marriages and relationships break down because of that hormone loss and women's mental health suffers; it is high time that we took it seriously. There is no available female

testosterone replacement available in this country. If a GP prescribes testosterone, it is the male AndroGel variety and the dosing of that for women is a shot in the dark. That issue is being addressed in Australia, which has just approved Androfeme, a metered female testosterone replacement. I believe that the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence is looking into approving it in the United Kingdom.

As the menopause specialist Dr Louise Newson says, these are hormones that we have lost and we want them back. Every cell in a female body has oestrogen and testosterone in it, so is it any wonder that when those decline we start to feel ill and miserable? Dr Newson says that all we want is our hormones back. Talking about the issue as openly as we will be today, combined with the seriousness that the Scottish Government is placing on menopause policy and getting us access to the right menopause care, gives me hope for a better life for women when they are going through this entirely normal stage of their lives.

17:23

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): I thank Collette Stevenson for bringing this important motion to the chamber for members' business. Ending the stigma and misinformation around menopause should be at the heart of any future women's health policy. In the short time that I have, I will make three key points—about stigma, the workplace and the action being taken across the UK to make a difference.

Ending the stigma is the first building block in tackling the systemic issues around the treatment of women. It is extremely important that we teach not only young women and girls about menopause, but young men and boys, too. We cannot expect the stigma of menopause to disappear unless we educate everyone about it. Today is that first step.

Secondly, we must do more to support women in the workplace during menopause. There are significant issues around a complete lack of understanding from employers towards their employees. I thank Dr Louise Newson, a menopause doctor who runs the not-for-profit company Newson Health Research and Education, for her new research. Her survey found that 99 per cent of women felt that their perimenopausal or menopausal symptoms had a negative impact on their careers. Overall, more than one in five women passed on the chance to go for a promotion that they would otherwise have considered, 19 per cent reduced their hours and 12 per cent resigned.

Those figures are quite outstanding. I am glad, too, that leading broadcasters, celebrities and other public figures have recently spoken of their experiences. DJ Jo Whiley revealed that she was struggling with menopause symptoms at the same time that her Radio 2 show with Simon Mayo was being criticised. Jo Whiley felt that she could not continue on "Drivetime" due to her experience. No woman should ever be held back from pursuing her career or doing her job well because of such stigma.

Recently, I learned that only 10 cases of alleged discrimination against women affected by menopause have been heard by industrial tribunals in Scotland over the past five years, with three this year alone. I am the deputy convener of the cross-party group on women's health, which includes a number of women who are speaking in this debate, and our discussion on forthcoming work will certainly include how we can further support women in the workplace to avoid those exact scenarios.

Back in 2019, we welcomed Christina McKelvie's promise that the Scottish Government was encouraging all employers, including other public bodies, to update or provide menopause awareness training and guidance for their managers. I would be grateful if, in closing, the minister could provide an update on the progress of that work.

On a positive note, right across the UK, fantastic work is being done to tackle the issue. In July, the UK Women and Equalities Committee launched an inquiry into menopause in the workplace, and since then, it has collected evidence from a wide range of sources about the impact that menopause can have on women and their occupations. Further to that work, I welcome the new Menopause (Support and Services) Bill in the House of Commons, which has been interesting to follow, and the announcement by the health minister, Maria Caulfield, that menopause will become a priority in the UK Government's upcoming women's health strategy, which is due to be published shortly—we can all keep an eye out for that.

In Scotland, I welcome the work involved with the women's health plan, which outlines improvement and changes in areas including menopause, heart health, menstrual health, endometriosis and sexual health. Right across the UK, it is clear that there is momentum to finally address the personal, social and professional impact of menopause on the lives of women.

I welcome the Scottish Government's commitment to launch a public campaign to raise awareness of the symptoms of menopause alongside the women's health plan. There is much more work to do, but if we continue to work in a

collegiate manner, we will make progress in seeking to end the stigma and improving support for women.

17:27

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): I am pleased to be speaking in the debate, and I thank my colleague Collette Stevenson for bringing it to the chamber. I echo her comments about the great work that has been done by our colleagues, Christina McKelvie and Gillian Martin.

Thankfully, the days of the menopause being viewed as a bit of a joke are coming to an end, and not before time. Around 400,000 women in Scotland are of menopausal age, and more than half suffer a variety of distressing symptoms, such as memory loss, insomnia, anxiety, palpitations, hot flushes, joint pain and much more. Therefore, mugs, napkins, aprons, car stickers and other rubbish, all emblazoned with so-called slogans about the change are not really funny at all. That is why I welcome the Scottish Government's women's health plan, which aims to reduce stigma, raise awareness and get people talking about an issue that affects more than half of our population and is perfectly normal.

Sadly, women's health issues have been taboo subjects in society for as long as I can remember. When it comes to talking and being open about such issues, subjects such as menstruation, endometriosis, thyroid conditions and in vitro fertilisation treatment are often swept under the carpet, particularly in the workplace.

The menopause exacerbates gender inequality in the workplace. We know that there are increasing numbers of older women in employment and that many more women than previously will experience the menopause while at work. Some will sail through it, but others will not. That is why I am glad to see that we are at last making some headway. I welcome the Scottish Government's women's health plan, which aims to alleviate women's health inequalities and ensure that women have access to specialist menopause services.

Praise should go to South Lanarkshire Council, which is the first local authority to implement a menopause policy to support women in the workplace. Other employers, both public and private, must have buy-in, too. A menopause policy will give women peace of mind and reassurance that they will be understood, their symptoms recognised, and support and flexibility will be offered if they need it. That is really not too much to ask in a civilised society. It is not acceptable for employers to jeopardise a woman's career by showing a lack of understanding and respect around this perfectly natural process.

In the summer of 2019, the excellent feminist charity Engender undertook a survey as part of a research project seeking to understand how current Scottish policy meets the needs of women going through the menopause. It found that most women still felt inadequately supported and that many women simply did not know where to go for information: 40 per cent reported not feeling informed about the menopause, an additional 10 per cent reported that they were unsure whether they were informed and only 15 per cent reported being aware of the existence of specialist menopause services.

We must do better. In response to the question, "What would help you manage your menopause symptoms while you are at work?", the most common responses included access to fans and temperature control, breaks in work days, flexible working, and greater mental health and wellbeing support generally.

The good news is that not all women felt negative about the menopause. Several indicated that they perceived it as either a neutral or a positive transition. For example, one respondent used these words to describe the menopause:

"Liberation, fun, wellbeing, joy, happy".

Let us get rid of the stigma, increase support, collect and utilise further data—especially from underrepresented groups—do more medical research, raise awareness, and scale up specialist services and make them equally available across health boards for women needing support.

Women of future generations must not endure the same stigma, misinformation and, frankly, indifference to this perfectly natural process in women's lives. Let us ensure that, with the correct support, women can embrace their newfound freedom to enrich their lives.

17:31

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank Collette Stevenson for bringing this important issue to the chamber.

On behalf of Scottish Labour, I welcome world menopause day, which was marked on 18 October. It is vital that we take time to recognise the importance of raising awareness of the menopause and how it can impact women's health and their day-to-day life, and—crucially—to highlight what we can do to tackle the stigma that still surrounds the menopause.

As the motion states, around 400,000 women in Scotland today are of menopausal age, and most of them will experience symptoms that are wide ranging and often distressing. Our role in the Scottish Parliament is to ensure that their experiences are not stigmatised, but are spoken

about openly and freely, and that adequate support is put in place to support them in all aspects of society—at home, in public places and in the workplace.

My call for such support to be put in place is addressed not only to councils, the Scottish Government and places where support can be offered to women with relative ease. Although interventions such as the excellent policy brought forward by Collette Stevenson that we heard about earlier, are very welcome, I also call for support for every woman up and down the country who experiences menopause symptoms, including women who work in industries where a path to securing such protections may not be clear and for those who do not feel comfortable going to their employer to discuss such concerns.

It is important to discuss Scotland's significant health inequalities and how they link, and will continue to link, to women's experiences of the menopause. The motion states—correctly—that employers should be flexible with women who feel that their ability to work has been impacted by symptoms linked to the menopause, and that they should be treated with dignity and respect in the workplace. That must mean a minimal expectation of allowing flexible and/or home working and of giving time off where necessary.

As we have heard, in recent years, we have made significant progress in improving provision relating to women's health in Scotland's workplaces. However, we can still go further, including by being more open in our discussions about the menopause and offering greater levels of protection than already exist.

In Scotland in 2021, we must accept that we fall way below the standards when it comes to addressing health inequalities. Time and again, it is the poorest in our communities who suffer the consequences of inaction—those with low incomes and debt and those who, at this time of year, have to make the incredibly difficult choice between feeding themselves and their families or heating their homes.

The health inequalities in our country are one of our greatest challenges. Women in low-paid and precarious employment may want to take time to attend their GP or a primary care service relating to the menopause, but they simply cannot afford to do so. Those who are working in male-dominated sectors might want to explain their difficulties to employers, but do not feel comfortable doing so. In the worst cases, those who have the most severe symptoms might want to take time off work but either cannot afford to do so or do not feel that there is adequate support to do so.

Decisively resolving those issues is within the power of the Scottish Parliament. Inequalities in

health, particularly in employment practices more widely, do not reflect the Scotland that we want to live in. However, that is the Scotland in which ordinary people struggle through and live. We must do all that we can to bring health solutions closer to home so that those who need them most, such as women who are experiencing menopausal symptoms, can get relief and support without having to visit a hospital or go to the GP continuously. That starts with addressing stigma about women's health, tackling health inequalities more widely, and ensuring that workplaces are suitable for the needs of such women.

We must push on with increased purpose to create a just and compassionate society that recognises that, for generations, women have largely been left to struggle needlessly, and that that must change. As we have heard tonight, it has to change now.

17:35

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): I welcome this debate on the stigma surrounding menopause, and I thank Collette Stevenson for bringing it to the chamber.

For too long, people going through the menopause have had their experiences and symptoms ignored and underplayed. They are often the butt of the joke and their symptoms are dismissed as women's issues. That is why it is so important that we make time to talk about it in Parliament and raise awareness of how much impact menopause can have on women and people who menstruate.

As the motion states, much stigma still surrounds the menopause, and it is part of a wider culture that discourages people from talking about their menstrual health. That causes real harm. It prevents women from asking for support from employers or accessing healthcare. It causes shame and embarrassment, which causes unnecessary distress and can prevent people from getting the help that they need.

Workplaces can do more. A survey conducted by Engender in 2019 revealed that only 3.7 per cent of respondents were aware of their workplace having a menopause policy, and 21.7 per cent were unsure whether their workplace had one. A 2019 UK survey conducted by BUPA and the Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development found that three in five menopausal women were negatively affected at work, and almost 900,000 had left their jobs because of menopausal symptoms.

It is scandalous that so many workplaces are either unable or unwilling to make adaptations to allow for the fact that most women will go through the menopause at some point. Surely it is in their

interests to make adjustments and implement policies that will allow them to retain their staff. Also, how can we hope to tackle the gender pay gap when some women are being driven out of employment by symptoms that a significant proportion of women will experience? The stigma surrounding the menopause marginalises and disadvantages women and is a driver of inequality.

How do we tackle that? As I said earlier, debates like this can help to address stigma. The Engender survey found that there has been an increase in the amount of public conversation about the menopause, its impacts, and women's needs, although most respondents still felt that they were inadequately supported.

Conversations about the menopause should not be left to women. Everyone should be educated about menopausal symptoms. We teach children in school about puberty as part of their personal and social education, but there is no corresponding educational tool for menopause, despite it being one of the major transitions in many people's lives.

We need robust workplace policies on health and safety, sickness absence, and flexible working, and a workplace culture that is understanding of the ways in which menopausal symptoms can impact on employees. We also need healthcare that addresses the needs of those who are experiencing menopause, and I am pleased to see that the commitments in the women's health plan include ensuring that women receive access to specialist services for advice and support on the diagnosis and management of menopause. The availability of specialist services recognises the impact that menopause can have on people's health and wellbeing, and that it warrants dedicated support.

Menopause stigma is born out of sexism and ageism, and we must recognise how it can intersect with other forms of discrimination. For example, we know that black women in the UK experience significant inequalities when accessing healthcare. A report published in 2019 found that black women still have more than five times the risk of dying in pregnancy or up to six weeks postpartum compared with white women. Black women might face barriers to accessing healthcare or find it difficult to have their symptoms taken seriously. I would like more research and data on how black women in Scotland are impacted by the menopause and their experiences of accessing medical and workplace support. I look forward to working with the minister and colleagues on that, and on wider women's health issues.

17:40

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to speak in this important debate and I congratulate my colleague Collette Stevenson on securing it.

Menopause matters. I agree that menopause has always been, at best, stigmatised, ignored or treated as a joke—aye, Rona Mackay is right—and, at worst, used as a way to degrade women.

Women are not a homogeneous group, and the impact of the menopause can be very different—there is certainly no one-size-fits-all experience. Menopause treatment, too, can vary significantly; it is a complex area, with new observations and medical advances continually being made.

I welcome that the Scottish Parliament was the first Parliament in the UK to hold a Government debate on the menopause. That debate, in 2019, was led by Christina McKelvie, as members said. I also welcome that a Scottish National Party Government was the first Government to direct national attention to reducing menopause stigma and improving treatment. It was right to do so.

Some women experience menopause at a significantly younger age, either naturally or because of surgical or medical intervention, for example as a result of an oophorectomy as part of cancer treatment. For many women—around 10 per cent, according to research from the University of Manchester—the negative impact of the menopause is life changing. As Gillian Mackay rightly said, it can even prevent women from attending work.

Research that informed the Scottish Government's women's health plan, which sets out action to tackle menopause stigma and support women who are going through the process, highlighted that women and girls are unprepared for the changes that menopause causes and often experience menopause in silence. I welcome that the Scottish Government's work is beginning to make a difference by making menopause the subject of national debate—just as we are doing here, right now.

Collette Stevenson, Gillian Martin and Rona Mackay said that we need more research. I highlight the work of Dr Lisa Mosconi, a neuroscientist at New York University who specialises in the study of women's brains and the impact of the menopause. Dr Mosconi's research presents the relationship between menopause and Alzheimer's disease and shows that women's brains age differently from those of men, due to the brain's interaction with hormones. For example, men have a lifetime's supply of testosterone, on the whole, whereas a woman's supply of oestrogen reduces at around 50 years old—although that age is not set in stone.

The key side effects of the menopause, which members described—night sweats, hot flushes, memory lapses, anxiety and insomnia—start not in the ovaries but in the brain. Oestrogen increases cerebral blood flow and aids in the provision of glucose to the brain, so without it the neurons can start to slow down and age more rapidly. In some cases, that can lead to the development of amyloid plaques, which are a key indicator of Alzheimer's disease. Plaques might affect the brain's hypothalamus, which controls the body's temperature, thereby causing hot flushes and so on.

I find Dr Mosconi's research very interesting. She has said that more research needs to be done. There should be a continued focus on the complexity of menopause and its impact on some women and not others.

Menopause is a medical process, as members said. It is a normal fact of life and we need to discuss it. I welcome the Scottish Government's women's health plan, which commits the Government to ensuring that women have access to specialist menopause services for advice and support if they need such services in the context of menopause diagnosis and management. I also welcome that the Scottish Government is working on a national public health campaign, which NHS Dumfries and Galloway has picked up through its menopause matters programme.

Menopause covers much more than just a physical transition; there are mental health implications. It impacts every aspect of our lives as women, individually and collectively, and we must do all that we can to reduce the stigma and improve treatment. Menopause matters and should be discussed.

17:44

The Minister for Public Health, Women's Health and Sport (Maree Todd): I thank Collette Stevenson for lodging the motion, and I thank colleagues for their important contributions to the debate.

Menopause is one of the top priorities of the women's health plan, and I truly believe that we cannot talk about menopause enough. I am grateful to Collette Stevenson for mentioning Christina McKelvie. She was absolutely right to credit her for her groundbreaking work and efforts on that front. I look forward to working with her as we bring forward more ideas on how to make progress in this area.

World menopause day provides us with a valuable opportunity to highlight an important transition in women's lives, but one that many know little about. We want to continue that conversation throughout the year so that we can

improve support and end stigma. Women have told us, and evidence shows, that when they are well informed about the menopause and know what to expect, their experience can be more positive. Knowledge, information and myth busting are powerful. Knowledge is power.

Women of all ages, including those who do not identify as women, should know what to expect from menopause, what the symptoms are and what can help them so that they are not taken by surprise by any changes, physical or mental. It is essential that everybody gets the support that they need, when they need it and for as long as they need it. We want women to be provided with consistent information and care when they seek help with menopause symptoms, however they access such support. Being informed about the menopause means that we know what to expect in the future. It can also help us to manage symptoms that are being experienced in the present and to support those in our lives in their experience of menopause, whether on a personal level, if a partner, family member or friend is going through it, or in the workplace.

The frustration and disappointment that women are expressing in relation to their experience of menopause is consistent with feedback that we have received from many women across Scotland. We have listened to women, which is why we are taking action through the health plan. There are 10 specific actions on menopause for the short, the medium and the long term, which we will drive forward so that we can make a real difference to women's experience of menopause, including the provision of timely access to menopause care and support. We want to make a difference right now, and the short-term actions in the plan will be delivered within the next year. We hope that those actions and the ones that follow will make a real difference for women in Scotland.

On 11 October, we launched a new menopause platform on NHS Inform, which includes comprehensive information on menopause, from signs and symptoms to mental health treatment and support in the workplace. Remember: knowledge is power. We will also progress work to ensure that support is available to women who cannot or prefer not to access information online. In addition, we have established a national menopause specialist network, which has regular online meetings, to provide consistent advice and peer support to healthcare professionals. The network supports primary care teams by providing access to a menopause specialist for consistent advice, support and onward referral, as well as leadership and training.

Gillian Martin raised the issue of reduced libido. There are lots of reasons why women might not want to have sex during the menopause, but loss

of libido can be one of the most difficult symptoms to experience and to talk about. Therefore, I am grateful to Gillian Martin for raising the subject. For women who no longer feel sexual desire or no longer want to have sex, that can be really upsetting. We cannot underestimate the effect of that. The platform on NHS Inform tackles that specific topic, because we were keen to address it. We have included a whole page of information on sexual wellbeing and intimacy during and after menopause, as well as a short video that busts the myth that menopause means that a woman's sex life is over.

In relation to testosterone, it is important that women can access the treatment that they need. I am interested to hear that that is being prescribed in Australia. However, for a medicine to be routinely prescribed in Scotland, it must first receive a licence from the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency, which is the licensing body for the UK, and it must then be accepted by the Scottish Medicines Consortium, which provides advice to NHS Scotland about the value for patients of newly licensed medicines. I am keen to consider further issues around access to medication, so if there are specific constituency cases that Gillian Martin would like to raise with me, I would be keen to hear about those.

Several colleagues, including Rachael Hamilton, raised the issue of menopause in the workplace. Collette Stevenson has done outstanding work on that, for which she has rightly been credited during the debate. In a recent survey, the British Menopause Society found that 45 per cent of women felt that menopausal symptoms had had an impact on their work. Being supported in the workplace is an essential part of action on menopause. Women need to know that support is in place for them to work comfortably during menopause.

Menopause can be really difficult to talk about, but it is important to talk openly about it at work, so that support is provided and employers recognise what people might need. Women who contributed to the women's health plan said that what they wanted most from employers was flexibility to manage their symptoms through, for example, working from home or changing their hours, if that was needed.

To respond to Rachael Hamilton's specific ask, we absolutely have a suite of Scottish Government actions that are on course. The women's health plan highlights the impact of menopause in the workplace and commits to developing a menopause and menstrual health workplace policy for NHS Scotland.

In line with the action in the older people's framework action plan, we continue to work with women's organisations and trade unions to gain a

clearer picture of the issues that are faced by women who are going through the menopause, to identify other areas where action might need to be taken. Our gender pay gap action plan recognises the need to gain a clearer picture of the issues that are faced by women who are transitioning through the menopause and the need to improve workplace practices to support women. Our women returners programme supports women to build the confidence, skills, work experience and networks that they need to ease the transition back to work. We also have a workplace equality fund, which seeks to remove labour market barriers for priority groups, including women. A suite of work is going on.

To tackle stigma, access to good information on menopause is important. Menopause information must be part of our education offering, and menstrual health, including menopause, is included in the Scottish curriculum. We have made available online for young people, teachers, parents and carers resources that are tailored to different age groups. We have strengthened the inclusion of menopause in an activity at the senior phase of relationships, sexual health and parenthood education in the Scottish curriculum to deliver meaningful learning about this important topic.

The women's health plan makes it clear that menopause is a priority in Scotland. I agree with my colleague Collette Stevenson that we in Scotland have come a long way, but we still have much to do. I am determined that, through the plan, we will drive forward improvements in menopause support. At all times, we will listen to the voices of lived experience and ensure that they inform everything that we do.

We know that women do not always get the menopause care, treatment and support that they need but, through working in partnership, together we can improve menopause support, end stigma and support women to experience more positively this important life transition.

Meeting closed at 17:52.

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