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Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 21 December 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 around the Holyrood campus. The first item of business is time for reflection, and our leader today is the Rev David Burt, who is the minister of Old Gourrock and Ashton church.

The Rev David Burt (Old Gourrock and Ashton Church): Good afternoon, Presiding Officer, and thank you so much for allowing me the privilege of sharing with you today.

Today is Tuesday 21 December. It is the day of the winter solstice. It is the shortest day of daylight that we have in the northern hemisphere, and for us, it is a symbol of the start of our journey out of winter. The darkness starts to get shorter, and daylight gets longer. Also today, there are now only three more windows to be opened on Advent calendars; if you happen to have a chocolate one, there are only three more chocolates to go. The wait is nearly over, and Christmas is just around the corner.

For the church, the Advent journey began on Sunday 28 November, as we lit the first Advent candle. On Sunday, we completed that countdown as the fourth candle was lit. We save the last one, in the middle of the ring, for Christmas day. As each candle is lit during the Sundays of Advent, we get ready to receive the wonderful gift of the Messiah—the light of the world. Each candle has its own significance. The first one to be lit reminds us of hope of better things to come. The second candle is for peace in our lives and in the lives of everyone throughout the world. The third is for love, that we may learn to love one another and to love this wonderful world in which we live, and to know the love of God. The fourth candle is for joy—that sense of happiness and wellbeing, and the sense that all is well for us.

In these difficult Covid times, I believe that the Advent candles take on an extra resonance for us. We need to have that sense of hope for better days to come and hope that the darkness that Covid has brought upon us can be put to flight.

The uncertainty of these days has created worry and fear. The promise of peace in our lives, and in

the lives of our communities the length and breadth of our nation, is important for us to hear.

Throughout these difficult days, we have also witnessed the power of love in action, as neighbours have rallied round each other and random acts of kindness have taken place and been shared. We have also seen the outpouring of wonder for the national health service and all the people who have been there for us in our time of need.

Also in these dark times—times of all this difficulty—we can still know the sense of joy that even one small candle lit in a dark room dispels the gloom.

In the gospel of John, chapter 1, verse 9, we read that

“The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.”

For Christians, that light is Jesus Christ. That, for us, is the wonder of the Christmas message.

I pray that as you start the last few days of your work in Parliament this year, and as you contemplate what your Christmas experience will be with all those whom you will share your time with, that you may be blessed with the living light of Christ, and that for us all there may, indeed, be hope, peace, love and joy this Christmas and in the year to come.

Thank you for allowing me the privilege of sharing with you today. I wish you all a peaceful Christmas and a blessed new year.

Business Motion

14:05

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-02650, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on a change to today's business.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees to the following revision to the programme of business for Tuesday 21 December 2021—

after

followed by Scottish Government Debate: A New Deal for Tenants

insert

followed by Legislative Consent Motion: Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill - UK Legislation—[George Adam]

Motion agreed to.

Topical Question Time

14:05

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is topical question time. In order to get in as many people as possible, I would appreciate short and succinct questions and responses.

Rail Fares

1. **Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will explain its decision to increase peak and off-peak regulated rail fares by 3.8 per cent. (S6T-00385)

The Minister for Transport (Graeme Dey): I assure members that the decision was not taken at all lightly. Significant analysis was carried out by ScotRail and Transport Scotland to look at various options for rail fares. The cost of delivering rail services must be met at a time when passenger numbers remain well below pre-Covid levels. Fiscal prudence makes an inflation-linked fares increase necessary, unfortunately. I have heard others call for fares freeze or offers of free travel to entice people back to rail. Unfortunately, none of those suggestions comes with any recommendation on how to fund them.

Neil Bibby: Scotland faces a climate crisis, but what impact will fares hikes have on passenger growth and modal shift? Scotland faces a cost-of-living crisis, so why rule out a fares freeze to keep costs down for commuters? Why hike fares in January, when even the Tories are waiting until March? After months of industrial unrest with the rail unions, and with fares hikes about to hammer passengers, our railways face a leadership crisis under the transport minister. Will he explain how his fares hikes are compatible with action on the climate emergency and the soaring cost of living that commuters face?

Graeme Dey: As I have made clear, the situation is regrettable but necessary. Consideration was given to applying no increase or an increase below the retail prices index, but with costs of between £6.5 million and £9.1 million, those options could not be taken forward, especially as such a decision would have had a cumulative impact that would recur annually in future years. We have to ensure that rail fares are affordable for the taxpayer as well as for passengers. We need a rail service that is financially sustainable. Although the Government covers the majority of the cost of rail passenger services, fares have to contribute overall funding.

I recognise the point about encouraging people back on to rail as part of action to tackle the climate emergency; it is an important point.

However, we must also make rail sustainable from a financial perspective, and we are in a difficult situation at the moment.

Neil Bibby: Scotland's railway faces a leadership crisis under this Government. In a written parliamentary answer to a question that I asked, which was issued on Thursday, the transport minister said that his fares strategy remains under consideration. On Friday—a matter of hours later—the minister announced to the nation his brutal 3.8 per cent fares hike. When was the decision to increase fares taken? Does the minister expect the travelling public to believe that the answer that he gave me on Thursday is remotely credible?

Graeme Dey: As I made clear, a great deal of consideration was given, over an extended period, to the necessity of a fares increase. As I said, I wish that it was not necessary, but I am afraid that it is.

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): ScotRail's current range of discounts to reduce the cost of travel for passengers had been working to promote train travel before the arrival of omicron. How does the Scottish National Party's record in Government of supporting affordable travel compare with that of the rest of the United Kingdom? Given that we need trains to run over the festive period and beyond, what advice can the minister give people to encourage safe travelling?

Graeme Dey: It is a fact that the Scottish Government's approach to rail fare costs has ensured that the average fare remains 20 per cent cheaper than fares across the rest of the United Kingdom.

I want to pick up Bill Kidd's point about the current situation. ScotRail is doing all that it can to manage cancellations while its affected staff follow isolation rules. Unfortunately, that situation changes by the hour. We encourage passengers to plan their journeys, taking account of the latest operator updates and Scottish Government guidance. I also appeal to passengers, please, to follow all the basic Covid protection measures to protect themselves, fellow passengers and, of course, staff.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): I put it to the minister that he might want to look again at how we do fare increases and at the ticketing settlement agreement, and that he perhaps pegs increases to the consumer price index rather than to the retail price index, because we cannot go on like this.

Graeme Dey: I could point out that the increase is almost identical to the one that has been introduced in England by the Conservatives, but I do not want to do that. I want to accept that Mr

Simpson is trying to engage constructively on the issue. In that spirit, I would be happy to meet him to discuss these matters.

“The 2020/21 audit of the Scottish Government Consolidated Accounts”

2. **Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what actions it will take in response to the 2020-21 audit of its consolidated accounts by the Auditor General for Scotland. (S6T-00388)

The Minister for Public Finance, Planning and Community Wealth (Tom Arthur): I welcome the Auditor General's opinion on the accounts. This is the 16th consecutive year that the accounts have received an unqualified opinion, demonstrating the Scottish Government's sound and transparent management of the country's finances. The financial position that is reported in the accounts has been taken into account in the subsequent budget process. There are aspects on which action has already been taken and is in progress. However, the Scottish Government will consider and respond to all audit recommendations and will report on agreed actions. The report will, I understand, be considered by the Public Audit Committee in January, and the Scottish Government will respond to the committee's interest in any aspect of the report, which is wide ranging.

Stephen Kerr: Describing the Auditor General and Audit Scotland as the “Opposition” is not a good look for the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Economy or the Deputy First Minister. The cabinet secretary seems to have been busying herself claiming that the rest of us just do not understand the numbers. I am more than satisfied that the Auditor General understands the numbers, and I hope that the cabinet secretary does, too. The Auditor General says that there is a £580 million underspend for 2020-21. Will the minister tell us straight—because it should be an easy answer—the specific amounts of funding and which specific departments and projects that £580 million has now been allocated to? In short, where is the money?

Tom Arthur: First, I would say to Stephen Kerr that I do not recognise the remarks that he attributes to the Deputy First Minister or the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Economy. I would assure the member and Parliament that this Government has absolute respect for all the work that Audit Scotland carries out.

With regard to the member's other questions, I would refer him to the statement that I gave to Parliament six months ago, on the provisional outturn, or to the budget document that was published for the current financial year, in which

the majority of that underspend was carried forward. If he seeks further guidance on the matter, I suggest that he look behind him, to Liz Smith, to whom I wrote following the provisional outturn statement, providing further detail following the statement in the summer.

Stephen Kerr: I note that the minister was unable to answer that specific question.

What else do we learn from the report? We learn that £45 million of European Union funds has been lost due to Scottish Government failures and that it is having to be paid from the Scottish Government accounts. We also learn that hundreds of millions of taxpayers' pounds have been wasted by the SNP on bailout projects that have "not delivered expected outcomes" and that are

"unlikely to achieve value for money."

The Auditor General says that it is essential that the Scottish Government learns lessons from those significant failures, so will the minister tell the chamber what lessons he has learned?

Tom Arthur: We listen closely to all recommendations that are made by the Auditor General. As I said in my answer to Mr Kerr's original question, I understand that the Public Audit Committee will consider the report early in the new year. We will monitor, study and listen closely to what that committee has to say.

With regard to where funds have been allocated, I appreciate that Mr Kerr is relatively new to the Scottish Parliament but I restate that the majority of the underspend was anticipated. We have a process of budget revisions in the autumn and the spring, when money is allocated. Indeed, I detailed those further aspects of the underspend to which Mr Kerr refers to the Finance and Public Administration Committee last month, when I presented the autumn budget revision. Mr Kerr will find full details of that in the *Official Report* and in the other documents published on the Scottish Government's website. I am sure that they will provide stimulating, engaging and informative reading for Mr Kerr during the Christmas period.

Social Care Workforce

3. Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to address any workforce issues in social care, in light of comments from the chief executive of Scottish Care that the social care sector is facing the biggest workforce crisis it has ever experienced. (S6T-00382)

The Minister for Mental Wellbeing and Social Care (Kevin Stewart): The Scottish Government is fully committed to improving the experience of

the social care workforce, as we recognise and value the work that it does. As part of the £300 million national health service care winter package, we announced an increase in wages for our adult social care workforce who are delivering direct care to £10.02 per hour from 1 December 2021. As we announced as part of the Scottish budget, we will increase those wages again next year to a minimum hourly rate of £10.50 per hour. That represents an increase of 12.9 per cent for lower-paid workers in the course of a year.

In collaboration with partners, we are working to attract more people to the sector. On 8 November, we launched a national marketing campaign, which is doing things differently from previously campaigns by focusing on social media and a younger target audience and by working with schools and colleges. The campaign links to other work that we are doing with the Scottish Social Services Council and NHS Education for Scotland on career pathways and learning and development. We have also funded the myjobscotland recruitment website, so that all social care vacancies can be advertised in one place and at no additional cost to all third and independent sector organisations.

I put on the record my thanks for the remarkable job that those who are working in social care have done throughout the pandemic. I have no doubt that they will continue to do that during this winter.

Alex Rowley: I thank Mr Stewart for his answer, and I join him in putting on the record our sincere thanks to everybody who is working on the front line in the sector just now.

Donald Macaskill, the chief executive of Scottish Care, recently warned a committee of the Parliament. He said that the sector is "haemorrhaging" staff to better paid and less stressful jobs in retail and hospitality. The coming months will see more and more providers going to the wall. Although I welcome the £10.50 per hour that has been announced, does the minister accept that that is not enough and that, if we do not increase low pay in the sector substantially, we will not tackle the problems that we are facing in social care?

Kevin Stewart: The Government takes this very seriously, which is why we are funding two wage increases in a short period of time. Let me compare the situation now to when Labour was in power. At that point, the minimum pay for care workers was £5.35 an hour. The figure will be £10.50 from April under this Government. It is not as much as we would like it to be, but it is still 96.2 per cent higher than it was under the previous Labour Administration. Mr Rowley should take cognisance of that fact and ask himself why Labour did not do more to increase the pay of social care workers when it was in power.

Alex Rowley: I have already welcomed the announced increase, but I have also made it clear that I do not believe that it is enough. People will be dismayed to hear Mr Stewart playing party politics on such a serious issue. I will quote Dr Andrew Buist, the chair of the general practitioners committee of the British Medical Association Scotland. He said:

“We must do something to support the social care workforce”,

or the burden

“that that creates on the rest of the system will take down anything else that we try to do.”—[*Official Report, Covid-19 Recovery Committee*, 11 November 2021; c 21-2.]

Does the minister accept that, although massive progress is being made, it is not enough and we cannot tackle the problem if we do not tackle the low pay in social care? Will he therefore make representations directly to the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Economy to bring forward a further increase to tackle the issue?

Kevin Stewart: I am glad that Mr Rowley recognises that there has been a massive change and an improvement. The Government will continue to do all that it can to ensure that we are paying people fairly—and we have done, with our fair work ministerial working group looking at pay across the social care sector. We have said, in our national care service consultation, not only that we will look at pay but that we will look at conditions in the sector. Of course, we also want to ensure that there is care progression, so that we can attract new people to enter the care profession.

As for discussions with the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Economy, I know that Mr Rowley often does not have much faith in negotiations with the finance secretary involving his own colleagues, but I suggest that he ask his finance spokesperson to discuss with the cabinet secretary what further ways forward there are on this front.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): Carers and vulnerable people who are listening to the minister will be severely disappointed by his partisan tone this afternoon. Carers in my constituency are telling me directly that they are at breaking point. They tell me that, right now, vulnerable people are going without visits, without medication, without food and without showering. That is not a situation that we should have in a modern Scotland. What practical steps will the minister take today to deal with this crisis, which we are facing right now? No partisan politics; just practical steps.

Kevin Stewart: The Government is taking practical steps every single day of the week to help health and social care partnerships and local authorities to get it right for people. Mr Rennie is

right in saying that it is all about people and the care that they need and deserve. That is why the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care and I are in regular discussions with health and social care partnerships, health boards and local authorities across the country, to see what we can do to alleviate any difficulties that people experience.

I was on to Fife health and social care partnership, Fife Council and Fife NHS Board only last week to discuss issues around delayed discharge and to ensure that we get care right for people. The cabinet secretary and I will continue to have those discussions and do all that we possibly can to improve the situation for people across the country.

Covid-19

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is a statement by Nicola Sturgeon giving a Covid-19 update.

14:23

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I will give an update on Covid generally, as well as the latest data on omicron; I will report on progress with booster vaccinations; I will again appeal to everyone across the country to reduce contacts and to stay at home as much as possible in the run-up to Christmas day, and then again after this Christmas weekend; I will reiterate the steps that we can all take to make family celebrations this weekend as safe as possible; and I will confirm the Cabinet's decision to propose some additional protections in relation to large-scale live events and indoor public places. We judge those to be necessary to further slow the spread of the virus, so that we can protect health, the national health service and the economy as we work to complete booster vaccinations. I will also set out further support for the many businesses that are affected by the advice that we feel duty-bound to give in the interests of protecting public health.

First, I will give today's statistics. A total of 5,242 positive cases were reported yesterday, which is 14.9 per cent of the tests carried out; 515 people are in hospital with Covid, which is one fewer than yesterday; and 37 people are in intensive care, which is also one fewer than yesterday. Sadly, a further nine deaths have been reported, taking the total number of deaths under the daily definition to 9,790. I again send my condolences to everyone who has lost a loved one.

In last week's statement, I reported that cases had increased by 25 per cent in the preceding seven days and that we would, in all likelihood, see a further increase in infections as omicron became the dominant strain circulating in Scotland. Omicron has now firmly established itself as the dominant strain. We know from the S-gene dropout indicator that it now accounts for 62.9 per cent of all cases. That compares with 27.5 per cent this time last week.

Omicron is significantly more transmissible than previous variants, and we estimate that its R number is well above 3. It is currently spreading rapidly across Scotland, so the steep increase in infections that was predicted last week has now started to materialise. Cases have increased by more than 50 per cent in the past week, from more than 3,500 a day on average to almost 5,500 a day. There have been increases across all age groups, but the biggest—an increase of 161 per cent—has been in the 20 to 24-year-old age

group. The rate of acceleration in an age cohort with, to date, lower levels of booster protection, relatively speaking, underlines the vital importance of everyone getting booster jags as quickly as possible. I will return to that later.

As the booster roll-out is completed, and bearing in mind that it takes around a week for immune protection to take effect in individuals, we must also act to slow down the spread of cases. I want to explain why that is so vital.

First, the toll that a rising wave of infections will have on health and social care is considerable. We do not yet know whether the proportion of omicron cases needing hospital care will be lower, higher or the same as with delta, but there is still no compelling evidence that omicron is intrinsically milder than previous strains. However, even if the proportion of cases needing hospital care is lower, as we all hope that it will be, a smaller proportion of a much larger number of infections will still have a deeply damaging impact. As well as the suffering caused to individuals and families, the additional pressure on our already stretched national health service will be extremely difficult to manage.

In addition, if large numbers of people become infected—even mildly—the impact on the economy and critical services through sickness and isolation absences will be crippling. Indeed, we are already starting to see that impact. One hundred ScotRail services were cancelled yesterday due to staff absence. Theatres are already being forced to cancel shows due to Covid cases among casts and crews and, even more seriously, staffing shortages are already being felt across the supply chain. They are exacerbating the intense pressures that the NHS and emergency services are working under. That is why we must act.

Let me be clear again: this is not a choice between protecting health and protecting the economy. If we do not stem the spread of the virus, both health and the economy will suffer.

Before I set out the action that we must take, let me address one further point. Some ask why we cannot wait until we have more data and we know exactly the impact that omicron will have on the NHS. I totally understand the temptation to delay and to hope, after two long years of the virus, that further steps might not be necessary. However, as I said a moment ago, we are already seeing a significant impact from staff absences across the economy and public services. We must do what we can to stem that. We also know from experience that, if we wait until the data tells us conclusively that we have a problem—for example, with hospital admissions—it will already be too late to act to avoid that problem. We must act quickly in so far as we are able, given our

financial constraints, and we must get ahead of the data if we can.

The obligation of Government is to take difficult decisions to keep the country as safe as possible, no matter how unpopular those decisions might be. Let me now set out the steps that we all need to take.

First, let me stress that we are not changing the advice for Christmas that I set out last week. It is important that, with just a few days to go, there is certainty about family gatherings on Christmas day and boxing day. I am not asking anyone to change those. However—I cannot stress this enough—please follow advice to keep family celebrations as safe as possible. Keep gatherings as small as your family circumstances allow. Make sure that everyone does a test shortly before getting together. Anyone who tests positive should not mix with others. Given how infectious omicron is, you should assume that, if one member of a household is positive, the others are likely to be so, too. Follow hygiene advice and keep windows open.

Crucially, between now and Christmas day, cut your contacts with people in other households as much as possible. Minimise socialising with others, either at home or in indoor public places—indeed, stay at home as much as is feasible. That is the best way of avoiding getting Covid and having to isolate over Christmas, or inadvertently spreading infection when you meet up with others.

I am grateful to everyone who has followed that advice over the past week. It will be making a difference. I want to stress that point. The steep increase in cases over the past week would have been steeper still but for people complying with that advice. I therefore hope that we may already be collectively slowing the spread.

However, it is important that we stick with it, so my first new request of everyone is that, from 27 December, as we come out of the Christmas weekend, until at least the end of the first week in January, when we will review the advice again, please go back to limiting your contacts as much as possible; please stay at home as much as is feasible; and, when you go out, please maintain physical distancing from people who are not in your group. Difficult though it is, please follow that advice over new year. Minimise Hogmanay socialising as much as you can.

If we all follow the advice to minimise the contact that we have outside of our own households, we will help to limit the spread of infections. That is the bedrock of our plan for the immediate period ahead.

However, although our core advice is to reduce socialising and stay at home as much as is feasible, the Cabinet's judgment is that we must

also take some further steps to make as safe as possible the places where people might still gather. That is why we are proposing some additional protections. None of those is being proposed lightly, but we consider them necessary to help to stem the increase in cases, safeguard health and protect the NHS, the emergency services and the economy, while we complete the booster programme and get its full effect.

First, from 26 December inclusive, for a period of three weeks, we intend to place limits on the size of live public events. I stress that that does not apply to private life events such as weddings. For indoor standing events, the limit will be 100; for indoor seated events it will be 200; and for outdoor events it will be 500, whether seated or standing. Physical distancing of 1m will be required at events that go ahead within those limits.

That will, of course, in effect make sports matches, including football, spectator free over that three-week period. That is similar to the situation in Wales from boxing day. Unfortunately, it will also mean that large-scale Hogmanay celebrations will not proceed—including the one that is planned here in our capital city.

I know how disappointing that will be for those who are looking forward to such events, and for their organisers. I will underline why we think that that difficult decision is necessary. First, we know that the much higher transmissibility of omicron means that large gatherings have the potential to become very rapid super-spreader events, putting large numbers at risk of getting infected very quickly. Limiting such events helps to reduce the risk of widespread transmission. It also cuts the transmission risks that are associated with travel to and from such events. Secondly, and not insignificantly, such large events put an additional burden on emergency services, especially on the police and ambulance services. Given that those services are already under severe pressure and are dealing with high levels of staff absence, limiting large-scale events will help them to focus on delivering essential services to the public. Despite the disappointment that I know the decision will generate, I ask the public please to understand the reasons for it.

Secondly, we intend to issue guidance to the effect that non-professional indoor contact sports for adults should not take place during the three-week period from 26 December, because such activities, in which physical distancing is not possible, also create a heightened risk of transmission.

Finally, from 27 December, again for up to three weeks, we intend to introduce some further protections in hospitality settings and other indoor public places, to reduce transmission risks in what

are, through no fault of those who run such venues, higher-risk environments. I can confirm that a requirement for table service only will be reintroduced for venues that serve alcohol for consumption on the premises. We will also ask indoor hospitality and leisure venues to ensure 1m distance not within but between groups of people who are attending together. As I set out last week, we will continue to advise people that, if they attend indoor hospitality or leisure venues—and people should remember that our core advice remains to minimise that—no more than three households should be represented in any group.

I know how unwelcome this will be for everyone, but we believe that those precautionary steps will help us to navigate a difficult period more safely.

I am also acutely aware that those decisions and the advice that we are giving the public have significant financial implications for many businesses. Last week, I announced £100 million of support from within our existing resources for affected sectors. I also confirm that eligibility criteria and guidance for the hospitality sector will be published on the Scottish Government website today. Since that announcement, the Treasury has given approval for money that would have come to us later to be allocated now. As I have said, we had already budgeted for most of that money and, therefore, cannot allocate it now without causing significant shortfalls elsewhere, including in the health budget. Money simply cannot be spent twice. However, we estimate that the Treasury announcements give us additional spending power now of £175 million. I confirm that we will allocate all of that to business support.

The Treasury has also, in the past hour or so, announced additional funding for business. Unfortunately, it appears that that announcement generates no further funding for Scotland and that any consequentials are already contained in previous announcements by the Treasury. However, the Scottish Government will allocate a further £100 million from elsewhere in our budget between now and the end of the financial year. That will involve difficult decisions, but the impact of the current crisis on business is such that we consider it essential.

Taken together, that adds up to a fund of £375 million that will help to support business for the unavoidable impacts of our decisions over the next three weeks. That is proportionally significantly more than the Chancellor of the Exchequer has just announced for businesses elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

Although that is significant funding, I understand that it will not fully compensate business. As I said last week, my view is that the scale and urgency of the omicron challenge requires financial support for business on a scale similar to that at the start

of the pandemic. However, current UK funding arrangements mean that only the Treasury has the borrowing powers to provide support on such a scale and that financial support at scale is triggered only when the UK Government takes decisions for England. All that means that our ability to act to protect public health, and to compensate individuals and businesses affected, is curtailed. That cannot be right in a public health emergency.

Although today's Treasury announcement may be a welcome acknowledgement of the crisis that businesses face, it does not go far enough. Therefore, we will continue to press the UK Government to take the threat of omicron more seriously and to act accordingly. In the meantime, we will—indeed, we must—do what we can to protect health, lives and livelihoods here in Scotland.

Before I conclude with an update on vaccination, I will cover two further points.

First, it remains our priority—and, I hope, the Parliament's priority—to reopen schools as normal after the Christmas holidays. Indeed, one reason for asking adults to make sacrifices for a further period after Christmas is to help to minimise any impact on children's education. However, to ensure that schools are safe environments for young people and staff, updated guidance based on recommendations from the education advisory sub-group was published at the end of last week. Colleges and universities are also assessing any steps that they need to take for the new term and some are returning to a default model of online learning for the start of that term.

For everyone who is involved in education—staff, children, students and parents—the past term has been another exceptionally difficult one. I say a heartfelt thank you to everyone who has helped to ensure that children are well supported and, indeed, I thank children and young people themselves for continuing to endure the tough times that they face at such an important stage of their lives.

The second point that I will cover briefly relates to test and protect. The current surge in cases is putting significant pressure on that service and I am grateful to all its teams for working so hard to break chains of transmission. From this week, test and protect will flex its approach as necessary to ensure that priority is given to higher-risk settings, such as hospitals and care homes, where outbreaks can cause the most harm.

For many of us, that means that, if we test positive, our contact from test and protect teams is more likely to be by text or email rather than a phone call. I ask people to respond to those messages and complete the online form that is

sent. That helps their contacts to get the right advice as quickly as possible. I also ask the contacts of someone who tests positive to follow test and protect's advice. That will help to slow the spread of the virus.

Finally, I turn to booster jags, which are our best line of defence against omicron and which will, I believe, get us through, and out of, this difficult phase. In the past week, there has been a significant acceleration of the programme, and I thank everyone who has been involved. This week, a further two large-scale vaccination centres have opened, at Hampden in Glasgow and the Edinburgh international conference centre. Yesterday, 69,135 boosters or third doses were administered, which means that well over half the adult population has now had a third dose or a booster.

Last week, I said that our target was to have 80 per cent of the eligible population vaccinated with boosters by the time the bells strike on Hogmanay. Today, I can confirm that we are now confident that we have the capacity to meet that target. However, in order to reach it, or to get as close to it as possible, we need everyone who is eligible to come forward. If you have an appointment booked for January, please now reschedule it for December. Appointments will be available right through Christmas eve and then next week, up to and including Hogmanay, so please book an appointment now. Alternatively, you can check out the location of drop-in clinics and go there instead. Getting fully vaccinated is the best thing that any of us can do to protect ourselves, our loved ones and the country, so please get boosted before the bells.

In some ways, this statement feels distressingly similar to the one that I gave this time last year. Just a few days before Christmas, I am again urging people to stay at home as much as possible in order to slow down a highly infectious new variant of Covid. However, although it may not feel like it, we are in a much stronger position than we were last year. We have had far fewer restrictions in place for much of this year than was the case in the previous year, and Christmas day will be more normal than it was last year. Most importantly, a rapidly increasing number of adults are now protected by three doses of vaccine. We all, as individuals, know what to do to protect ourselves and each other.

Please make sure that you do all the following things. First, please get fully vaccinated as soon as possible. Secondly, please test regularly. Our advice is to stay at home as much as possible, but if you are meeting other people, please test before you go, every time, and test as close to when you go as possible. That is very important for family gatherings on Christmas day or boxing day.

Finally, please take all the other precautions that can help to make a difference. Please work from home when possible, and stay at home as much as you can. If you visit indoor public places, please limit the number of households in your group to a maximum of three. Please wear a face covering on public transport, in shops and when moving about in hospitality, and make sure that the covering fully covers your mouth and nose. Please keep windows open if you are meeting indoors, even at this time of year, and follow all advice on hygiene. Sticking to all that is hard, but there is no doubt that it will help to keep all of us safer.

I end my final statement before Christmas with a heartfelt thank you to everyone for everything that you have done to help us through another exceptionally tough year. I wish everyone the happiest and safest Christmas possible, and a much better and brighter new year ahead.

The Presiding Officer: The First Minister will now take questions on the issues that have been raised in her statement. I intend to allow about 40 minutes for questions.

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): We are, once again, facing the unwelcome reality of a new variant and new restrictions, and every member in the chamber has to understand and accept the frustration and anger that people across Scotland are feeling right now. However, we can get through this. Like the First Minister, I encourage everyone to go out and get their booster jags; I have my own scheduled for Christmas eve.

I also want to speak to a proportion of the population out there. We often focus solely on booster jags, but there are people who have not yet had their first jag, and I encourage them to come forward as well. They have not left it too late. There is no shame in turning up to get your first jag now; the vaccinators simply want to protect you, so please consider doing so. Our vaccination scheme, in Scotland and across the UK, has helped to keep Covid under control, and it remains our best way out of the pandemic.

It is crucial that the Scottish and UK Governments work together constructively, fully focused on omicron. Instead, sadly, over the past week, we have seen an unnecessary funding row that is a distraction from the task at hand. The Scottish Government originally expected £268 million, which would have still been new money, but it has now been provided with £440 million. As the Institute for Fiscal Studies made clear yesterday, that £440 million is extra money now. The Scottish Government has the funding available, and Scottish businesses are crying out for it. Last week, the First Minister said that businesses are

“already bleeding, every 24 hours counts.”

Will the First Minister tell us today when the first grants will start to reach businesses? Will it be before Christmas, or will it be into the new year?

Secondly, in her statement, the First Minister explained that 100 ScotRail services have been cancelled due to staff absences, and there are similar pressures on our emergency services and others. Last week, we raised concerns that self-isolation guidance for household contacts would lead to those challenges. Although well intentioned in seeking to limit the spread of the virus, the rules could grind our transport network, economy and public services to a halt. Given that the evidence now shows the impact of those rules on our essential services, will the First Minister tell us whether she has considered changing them so that household contacts can end self-isolation if they have a negative test, and if she has not, is she confident that that position is sustainable for our economy and public services?

The First Minister: I will take each of those points in turn.

First, I take the opportunity to agree with Douglas Ross that, if someone has not already had their first or second jab, it is important to get it as quickly as possible. It is never too late, so I ask those people to come forward now, and they will be vaccinated. The sooner people get their first jab, the sooner they can get their second, and the sooner they will be able to get the protection of a booster vaccination. I reiterate and underline that point.

Secondly, in terms of the funding, I am not trying to cause a row with anybody. There are structural problems in how our funding arrangements work. Across the chamber, we have different views on the Barnett formula, which I will leave to one side. However, during a public health emergency, we have learned that the Barnett formula is not fit for purpose. That view is, I think, shared by the Governments in Wales and Northern Ireland. We are trying to propose constructive ways of ensuring that we are all able to discharge our public health responsibilities fairly and equitably.

I welcome the announcements that the Treasury has made. The money that was announced this time last week is not new money; it is already budgeted for—largely for the health budget. Therefore, to spend it now, we have to remove money that the health service is already planning to use.

We think that the announcement that was made on Sunday gives us extra spending power now, being money that is not already budgeted. I am saying today that we will allocate every penny of that to business support. Between my announcement last week and my further

announcement today, we will find, through very difficult budgetary decisions between now and the end of the financial year, an additional £200 million. That means that we are creating a pot of £375 million to help businesses over the next period. That is proportionately significantly in excess of the £1 billion for the whole of the UK that the chancellor has announced today.

Based on my announcement last week, the grant for hospitality is up to £6,800 per hospitality business, compared with the grant of up to £6,000 that was announced by the chancellor today. We are working to get the grants to businesses as quickly as possible, and we are working with councils to do so.

The point about self-isolation is an important one that is under on-going consideration by the Government. The fundamental point is that it is not self-isolation but the virus that is creating staff absences. At this stage, given the infectiousness of omicron, if we do not have households isolating when one member is positive, we will have many more cases of the virus spreading, which will compound, not alleviate, the problem.

That is the position right now, but we want to migrate to something more proportionate as quickly as possible. I can tell members in the chamber that the Government is actively considering, as the booster programme meets its target, moving away from the current situation to something more proportionate. However, it would be counterproductive to do so right now, because the current household isolation policy remains one of the protections that we have in place.

Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): I start by sending my condolences to all those who have lost a loved one.

I was fortunate enough to get my booster yesterday, so I thank Zahira and all our vaccinators for their extraordinary efforts. I appeal to people across the country: if you have not had your first or second dose of the vaccine, please get it, and if you are due a booster, please book it. As we head towards Christmas, I ask everyone to please wear a mask where appropriate, follow the advice and take a lateral flow test before meeting others. It is about protecting you, your family and those around you.

This is a time of anxiety for people who are worried about their lives and livelihoods, especially those people in the hospitality, events and leisure industries as well as those who are self-employed. People expect and need the Scottish and UK Governments to work together in the national interest at this time of crisis.

I note the announcements from the chancellor today, but they simply do not go far enough. There must be an increase in the level of statutory sick

pay; significantly more financial support for impacted businesses and the self-employed; and, for the sectors that are shut down or as good as shut down, a furlough-type scheme so that we do not have businesses going bust and thousands becoming unemployed.

In Scotland, the financial support that businesses could apply for was limited to around £4,500. I think that the First Minister was suggesting that that might be increased to £6,800. However, for many businesses, that will go nowhere near covering the impact of the losses that they will face over Christmas.

No one should have to think twice about self-isolating due to financial pressures. Last month, 30 per cent of applications for a self-isolation support grant were rejected. That has peaked at as much as 50 per cent and, in some local authorities, as much as 70 per cent of applications have been rejected. Can that be urgently reviewed, with all the data for every local authority being published? Also, can the eligibility criteria be expanded and the payments made much more quickly?

Of course, we hope that this is the last variant, but it is highly likely that it will not be, so we must learn the lessons of delta and omicron. We need to build resilience and contingencies into our public services and the wider system. The Scottish and UK Governments must develop a framework and triggers for when restrictions will kick in, what they will be and what financial package of support will come with them. Will the Scottish Government commit to urgently starting that work? We commit to engage with it actively on that, because the ongoing uncertainty only adds to the level of anxiety and impacts negatively on people's health and wellbeing.

The First Minister: I agree about the importance of the Scottish and UK Governments working together. In many respects, we have been working well together and continue to work well together. In the past week and a half, I have taken part in three COBR meetings, and we have regular four-nations discussions over and above those meetings.

We have an issue with financing that we cannot unilaterally resolve. Anas Sarwar has narrated much of it today, and the points that I make in this chamber are almost identical to those that Anas Sarwar's Labour colleague Mark Drakeford is making in Wales. We cannot unilaterally resolve that issue, but I hope that we will get movement to find a better way forward on it.

After the announcements that I have made today, we will have further consultation with businesses on what additional support can be made available from the additional funding and the

best way to make that support available. We have already given commitments to hospitality and other sectors, and the additional money that I am announcing today will allow us to go further.

However, I agree—indeed, I said this in my statement—that that will not fully compensate businesses. At this stage, at the least, a targeted furlough scheme should be introduced to help the most affected sectors. We will do everything that we can within our own resources, and we will work with colleagues in Wales and Northern Ireland to try to get more support from the UK Government.

I will take away the member's points about the self-isolation support grant. I accept the premise of his question, but I again come back to the fact that we have a limited pot of money. We have decisions to make about whether we focus that money on those most in need or spread it more thinly over a wider range of people by extending eligibility criteria. That is not an easy balance to strike. We have put an extra £100 million into the self-isolation grant and we will consider that again.

We have already started work on longer-term health resilience, which is not just about the entry into and exit from restrictions. I very much hope, although I have said this before, that this will be the last time that we have to impose restrictions. More fundamentally, as we come out of the acute phase of the Covid pandemic and it becomes endemic in our society, that work will be about how we build resilience into the economy and health services to deal with the situation.

The work is at an early stage. We are looking at whether and how our overall Covid strategic framework can be adapted. We may publish a more updated version, with a greater focus on health resilience, in the early part of next year. If members from all parties have thoughts that they want to feed into that, I am sure that they would be gratefully received.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): Tonight is the longest night of the year and this statement will spell further darkness for an events sector that is already on its knees. Its businesses were the last to reopen and they will be the first to be asked to close. Pantomimes and theatres will shut their doors, stadiums will close and Hogmanay is cancelled again, and all that has a knock-on effect on pubs and restaurants. They will all need to be made whole and compensated, pound for pound and drink for drink.

We are seeing a return to the pingdemic that we first experienced last year, which put so much pressure on so many of our key sectors and services, so I want to ask about polymerase chain reaction testing capacity. Last week, on one day alone, 64,000 tests were processed. Last time the chamber was updated, our national capacity stood

at just 80,000 tests a day. Is 80,000 still the reach of our capacity in PCR processing and is the First Minister confident that demand will not outstrip lab capacity? If it does, we run the risk of asking healthy key workers—health workers, in particular—to stay at home for want of a negative PCR test result.

The First Minister: First, I accept the points about the impact on the events sector and the knock-on effects of that into hospitality and other parts of the economy. That is why it is so important that we do everything that we can to deliver financial compensation and, with others, encourage the UK Government to provide more wherewithal.

On the points about a pingdemic, the issue is important and legitimate and I will address it directly. It is not people being pinged but people getting the virus that is causing the problem. Therefore, we need to suppress the virus. That is an inescapable truth, which leads to some of the difficult decisions that Governments are again having to take. Some of the decisions that I have outlined today are in common with decisions that are being taken by Governments in many other parts of Europe—indeed, they are being taken in other parts of the UK, such as Wales. The Republic of Ireland, slightly further afield, has taken many of those decisions, too. It is suppressing the virus that will ultimately help us to relieve the pressure. Self-isolation, which is where the pingdemic comes from, is part of the way in which we can help to suppress the virus. I go back to the comments that I made in response to Douglas Ross.

Lab testing capacity is being increased across the UK right now. I will give the Scottish Parliament information centre the up-to-date figures for our daily capacity. It is increasing, but it is still a bit of a moving feast—if you forgive me for using that non-technical expression, Presiding Officer. We have ample capacity right now. In addition to the UK network capacity, we have the three regional NHS labs and pre-existing NHS capacity. If cases continue to soar, we will reach a point, not just in Scotland but across the UK, where we start to challenge that capacity. That is another reason to keep a downward pressure on cases.

Lab capacity is, of course, only one half of our testing capacity; sampling capacity is another. However, right now we have testing capacity and people who have symptoms or a positive lateral flow test result should go forward and get a PCR test. We continue to have constructive discussions—this is an area of very good joint working between the four nations—about how we continue to increase the testing capacity as far as we possibly can.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): I have been contacted by a number of constituents who are concerned about their employer requiring them to attend their office, as they feel that they should be able to work from home. What advice would the First Minister give to my constituents in that situation and what steps will the Scottish Government take to ensure that employers are treating the situation as seriously as possible?

The First Minister: First, I note that most employers are treating it seriously, but I would very strongly encourage all employers to do so. Where staff have concerns, I encourage them to raise those with their employer, or with their union reps where that is appropriate, or to contact Scottish Hazards and the local authority environmental health team for advice and support.

Remember—this is a message to employers from last Friday—it is a legal requirement for businesses to take all reasonable measures to minimise the spread of Covid. The guidance makes it clear that one of the measures that employers must take is to allow employees to work at home if they can. We expect businesses and employees to take that requirement seriously. Working from home is a really important measure in controlling this more transmissible version of the virus. We continue to engage regularly with business organisations and trade unions on encouraging working from home.

I encourage businesses to remember that suppressing the virus is in the interests of business and the economy, as well. It is not a choice between protecting health and the NHS and protecting the economy. If we do not protect health, the economy will suffer. We all have an interest in ensuring that all the guidance is followed.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): In her statement, the First Minister mentioned schools. She will be aware of calls in some quarters for schools to return to a blended learning model in January. Does the First Minister agree that, given the harm that can be caused to children by being absent from the classroom environment, we should do all that we can to ensure that schools reopen fully in January? Will she commit to ensuring that there is no delay to the start of the new school term after the Christmas and new year break?

The First Minister: I have made my views on that very clear. I want schools to reopen on schedule and I want children to be back in school as normal. Everybody has suffered through these past two years, but children and young people have suffered disproportionately, particularly given the very important stage of life and education that they are at. My views on that are clear.

I will say two further things. First, when teachers hear me say that, they might think that I am dismissing concerns about their safety, but I am not—I want to be clear about that. We must ensure that schools are safe environments for young people and staff, which is why the guidance that was published last week is so important.

Secondly—this is a message to all us adults—the best way of keeping schools safe and getting them to open normally and on time is to suppress community transmission of the virus. For a period, we, as adults, need to accept some further sacrifices, although none of us will enjoy it and it will not be easy for individuals or businesses but, if it helps us to ensure normality in our schools, that is one good reason why we should accept it and work together to get the transmission rate down.

The Presiding Officer: I advise members that there is a great deal of interest in this statement, so I would be grateful for short and succinct questions and responses.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): A number of constituents and even a member of my staff have visited pharmacies to collect lateral flow test kits, but were initially refused them as they were not registered with the pharmacy, even though the advice is that people do not have to be registered to receive test kits. Given that regular testing is essential to curb the spike in omicron cases, will the First Minister advise what steps have been taken to encourage pharmacies to hand out test kits to people who need and request them?

The First Minister: LFD kits are available for everyone. Let me be clear: a prescription is not required nor is there a need to be registered for any form of community pharmacy service in order to obtain a kit from a local pharmacy. The Scottish Government wrote to the community pharmacy network on 17 December re-emphasising that point, along with providing other advice for streamlining the process for distribution to relieve pressure on community pharmacy teams, which are extremely busy and have done heroic work over the course of the pandemic.

The community pharmacy network is a vital part of the public health response to Covid. Since the introduction of the pharmacy collect arrangements in June, the network has distributed more than 1.3 million packs—nearly 10 million tests—helping to keep us all safe during this time. I place on record my thanks to pharmacists and their teams in communities the length and breadth of the country.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Accident and emergency statistics for the week ending 12 December are the second worst on record. As John Thomson of the Royal College of Emergency

Medicine has said, the delays will cost lives. We all applaud A and E and all NHS staff for their valiant efforts, but things are about to get tougher as staff absence increases due to omicron. What contingency planning is in place to deal with staff shortages in the NHS and in other essential and emergency services?

The First Minister: Accident and emergency services, like health services in general, are under intense pressure because of the pandemic. Again, that pressure has been exacerbated because of the rising number of cases, so we come back to the essential point, which is that we must get the number of cases to come down again to relieve the pressure. That is direct health pressure and also the pressure that comes from staff absences.

In the week that was cited, there was no exemption from self-isolation for the NHS, but there is one now. To an extent, that will help to alleviate the pressure. However, the only way of properly alleviating pressure—not just in the health service but in the economy—is to get the number of cases down, which comes back to the reason for the difficult decisions that I have set out today.

Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): Although the advanced funding that the UK Government has announced is welcome, it falls well short of the financial support that is required to reinforce public health messaging. It is not sustainable that the Scottish Government is responsible for protecting public health but that its actions are constrained by UK Government funding decisions. Does the First Minister agree that that is yet another example of how the current funding arrangements for Scotland are entirely inadequate to responding to the impacts of the pandemic?

The First Minister: Yes. That view is shared by the Labour First Minister of Wales and the Democratic Unionist Party First Minister of Northern Ireland.

Let us put views on constitutional matters, whatever they are, to one side for the moment. The Barnett formula depends on decisions being taken for England by the UK Government. That then triggers resources for the devolved Administrations through consequential. We have different views about that. It may be appropriate in some circumstances but, in a public health emergency, when we all have our own responsibilities to act to protect public health and to do so quickly, that situation self-evidently does not work. It is not fit for purpose in these circumstances. We are making that case. I hope that we are getting some understanding of that and that we might be able to see some changes.

We are making available as much money as we can from within our own resources. I welcome the

acknowledgement today by the chancellor that help is needed, but further help is required. It is not just me saying that or even the Governments of Wales and Northern Ireland; many voices across England are saying that now. Hospitality businesses and others are facing all the same pressures that businesses in Scotland are facing but, even after the chancellor's announcement today, they will be getting significantly less funding to help with that.

The position is unsustainable. I suspect that some in the UK Government understand that. The quicker they act, the more we will be able to get on top of this latest phase of infection.

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): The need for caution is clear and the chancellor must bring back furlough to protect small businesses.

The absence rate in schools over the past 10 days cannot be sustained in January and February without massive disruption to pupils' learning. I fully appreciate the current financial difficulties. Given the transmissibility of the new variant, has any new funding been identified to help schools to ensure that ventilation is as effective as it can be?

The First Minister: I know that Gillian Mackay takes a close interest in this and that she will be aware that we made additional funding available to local authorities some months ago for carbon dioxide monitors that would allow them to assess ventilation. We continue to discuss with local authorities what further support we can provide them to ensure that ventilation is given due priority. Ventilation is not the only thing that needs to be done, but it is an important protection, particularly in the school environment. We are looking carefully, and will continue to look, at what further steps we can take.

I keep coming back to a point that I know that Gillian Mackay absolutely understands. We should not accept the inevitability of soaring cases and soaring staff absences as we go into January and February. If we do not do the right things now, there is a real danger of that. That is why we are setting out the decisions that we are taking now to try to change the future.

On that point, I was listening to a discussion on the radio this morning in which someone said that models from the scientific advisory group for emergencies always turn out to be wrong. Modelling is an imprecise science, I grant you that, but the reason that the worst predictions of SAGE have not come true on past occasions is that we have acted to stop them coming to pass. That is the key point. We must act to influence what happens in the next few weeks to avoid some of the worst impacts that will otherwise confront us.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): I welcome the £375 million that is available for business and I note the First Minister's comments about the need for a targeted furlough scheme. I understand that the Prime Minister and the chancellor were not at the recent COBR emergency meetings. Does the First Minister think that they understand the seriousness of the situation? Does she know who is in control at Westminster? Is anyone in control?

The First Minister: I am not sure that I am able to answer that question. I might pass on it.

I spoke to the Prime Minister on the telephone late on Friday. I think that he appreciated the seriousness of the situation; that is definitely the impression that he gave me. We had a good conversation on Friday. However, appreciating the seriousness and acting in such a way as to try to change that seriousness are two different things.

My Government and I take responsibility for public health decisions here in Scotland. I cannot and should not second guess the decisions that the UK Government takes for England, although there are many voices pointing out that, just as in Scotland, action needs to be taken to get Covid under control.

The interest for my Government and me is that it is only when the UK Government acts for England that funding at scale is triggered. That is the unsustainable asymmetrical bit that is constraining our ability to act. I hope that the Prime Minister, the chancellor and the entirety of the UK Government treat this challenge with the seriousness that it merits because, frankly, all of us need them to do that.

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): We know that the coronavirus is airborne and not droplet spread. We know that omicron causes differing symptoms from the classical triad and that it has a reproduction number of 4 and an attack rate of 50 per cent. It evades double vaccination and thus can be unwittingly spread by people. Given that it is our responsibility to protect the Scottish NHS workforce, will the First Minister upgrade healthcare workers' personal protective equipment from surgical masks to FFP2 and FFP3 equipment?

The First Minister: I will take advice on the clinical requirements for PPE in the health service—I have done that throughout—and respond accordingly. The guidance on PPE, if my memory serves me correctly, is produced on a four-nations basis, so we use the same grading of PPE in different circumstances. However, if clinicians say to me that something additional is required, then of course, as a non-clinician, I will listen to that and act on it.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): What with vaccinations, boosters and lateral flow tests, the role of test and protect has to an extent disappeared from sight. I welcome test and protect prioritising higher-risk settings such as hospitals and care homes, but will the First Minister remind us all of the importance of test and protect in general, and of keeping the app active?

The First Minister: Yes. I hope that test and protect is out of sight for most people, because that means that they are not being contacted by it, but it is doing incredible work every single day to help to break the chains of transmission of the virus.

I take the opportunity, as Christine Grahame has invited me to do, to remind people of the importance of test and protect. If the service contacts you because you have tested positive, make sure that you fill in the details that it asks for so that your contacts can be given information as quickly as possible. If you are contacted as a contact of someone who is positive, make sure that you follow the advice that you are given. That is really important.

I end on Christine Grahame's final point. The app is really important. If you downloaded it at the start, go and check that it is still active—that you have it properly switched on and activated. Doing that absolutely helps test and protect to do its job and make sure that people are getting the protection that they need.

Foysoi Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): Delayed discharge continues to affect many of my Lothian constituents due to care staff shortages. One 82-year-old man from Kirkliston has been stuck in hospital for almost three months now as there is a lack of available care homes that take residents who are local authority funded. As we witness the surge of Covid cases, how will the Scottish Government solve the staff shortages and increase funded places so that social care packages can be delivered for my constituents in Lothian?

The First Minister: It is a very important question. Delayed discharges are not in the interests of the people who are delayed in hospital, but they are not in the interests of the wider health system, either. We are working hard to try to reduce delayed discharge. I will come on to the issues that are compounding the challenge, but one of the key things that we have done—the health secretary reported this to Parliament in the recent past—is to provide funding for the recruitment of 1,000 additional workers to help with exactly the problem that the member outlines.

Right now, of course, all those problems are being compounded by staff absence due to the

virus. That is happening in social care, the health service and across all sectors of our public services and the economy. That brings me to the essential point that I keep coming back to today: we have to get the virus under control. That will not solve all those problems, but it will at least mean that we are not exacerbating them with the absences that we are seeing right now. That is one of the big factors behind the decisions that we have set out today—not least the cancellation of large-scale events to reduce the pressure on the Scottish Ambulance Service, for example, which is already struggling with some of these issues.

Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): It is so important that everyone who is eligible comes forward for vaccination. What is the Scottish Government doing to encourage the uptake of vaccinations and boosters in our black, Asian, ethnic minority and heritage and culture communities?

The First Minister: That is a really important question, because, although it is vital that we get the uptake of boosters high across the whole population, we also have to make sure that the uptake is high in particular communities that we know have been disproportionately affected by Covid. Black, Asian and ethnic minority communities are certainly a key grouping in that regard.

We are working with health boards, which have inclusion plans within their vaccination programmes that set out how they will actively offer vaccination to groups that we know face barriers to uptake. Decisions on the location of clinics are often taken with that very much in mind. Clinics have been set up in places of worship, for example. Glasgow central mosque is not the only one, but it is probably the most prominent example of that in Glasgow. The Scottish Ambulance Service is also providing mobile outreach units to get into communities that have been harder to reach.

We are also working closely with organisations such as BEMIS, which is the national umbrella body supporting ethnic minority voluntary sector groups in Scotland. A whole range of work is being done, and I know that health boards will keep at it for as long as is necessary.

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): It is imperative that there are enough personnel to run offshore oil and gas facilities. Equally, there must be enough competent personnel in all the safety-critical roles and emergency response teams at those installations. We are still learning about omicron, as we have heard today, and failure to act swiftly could result in the shutdown of offshore installations or onshore terminals, which would result in a security of supply issue for Scotland and the wider UK. Will the First Minister support

the oil and gas industry with a more flexible approach and a strategy that can be deployed quickly to focus on the protection of the most vulnerable yet retain personnel on our installations so that can they continue to power the UK?

The First Minister: The short answer to that question is yes. We work with different sectors to make sure that the challenges that are being faced because of staff absences are being mitigated as far as possible. There are exemption arrangements in place for critical sectors, and we keep them under review. Officials and ministers engage with different sectors, and I will make sure that we are engaging closely with oil and gas to address the particular concerns that have been raised.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): At last week's Covid update for NHS Grampian, we discussed the challenge of people with health inattention not presenting with conditions that require investigation or treatment. Although the situation is beginning to ease, I am concerned that the upsurge in omicron will again discourage those who are in most need of healthcare from seeking help. What assurance can the First Minister give that everything is being done to encourage people to make and keep appointments with general practitioners and others, while recognising the huge pressures that health services are facing once again?

The First Minister: That is an important point as well. Obviously, all parts of the NHS are under severe and increasing pressure right now, but the NHS remains open for people who need it. If anyone needs to contact their GP or other parts of the health service, they should do that. We have worked hard to ensure that GP capacity for medical care is preserved. That is one reason why we deliberately limited the involvement of GPs in the Covid vaccination programme. Let me stress that they have not had no involvement in it and that I am very grateful to them for what they have done for the programme. However, we have not relied overly on GPs to deliver the vaccination programme.

We are also increasing funding for the expansion of multidisciplinary teams, and we have provided additional funding to primary care specifically to support services through the winter, in order to increase as much as possible the availability of face-to-face appointments. Nevertheless, we recognise that, for many reasons in addition to Covid protection, patients will also benefit from other ways of accessing their GP, whether online or through telephone services.

We will continue to work with and support GPs as much as we can.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): Constituents have contacted me because they are concerned about the distance that they need to travel to get their Covid vaccinations. Many do not live near vaccination sites and do not drive, so they are reliant on public transport, which is patchy in Glasgow, especially in the north of the city. Public transport not only poses financial challenges to low-income households; it can also be inaccessible and distressing to use for disabled people. One constituent said that they are afraid of using public transport because of the risk of catching Covid. What plans are in place to ensure that people can get vaccinated closer to home and that, when people have to travel to a Covid vaccination centre, affordable, accessible and safe transport is available to get them there?

The First Minister: Pam Duncan-Glancy illustrates very well a challenge that I have articulated on occasion in the chamber, not least when I have been challenged by members—understandably—to have more mass vaccination centres. Mass vaccination centres have a part to play, but we need a balance of provision, so that we have much more community availability as well. That is why we have tried to get a balance between big-scale but sometimes more remote places and smaller-scale places that are easier for people to access in their communities. The balance is difficult to get absolutely right.

My advice to people who are struggling to get to a vaccination appointment is that they contact the helpline and seek advice on how they can get the vaccination in a way that is more accessible. There are a variety of appointments and different ways of booking appointments, and a person does not have to book an appointment in their own area.

We will ensure that health boards make sure that appropriate assistance is given to people who are really struggling to get to vaccination appointments. We will ensure that the issue continues to be borne in mind.

The Presiding Officer: I call Clare Adamson, to be followed by Craig Hoy.

There is a problem with Ms Adamson's connection. I will go to Mr Hoy.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): Public health messaging remains a crucial part of the fight against omicron. Given that recent YouGov polling found that fewer than 2 per cent of Scots fully understood the FACTS acronym, how will the Government ensure that any new Covid guidance is communicated effectively? Will the First Minister ensure that, whenever possible, such communications are consistent, through the adoption of a four-nations approach to messaging?

The First Minister: We adopt four-nations approaches. Some of the advertising right now is being done on a four-nations basis. There have been periods during the pandemic when we have not thought that the messages from the UK Government were appropriate or right, and therefore we have had messaging that we thought was appropriate for Scotland. I reserve the right to do that, just as the UK Government would reserve its right in that regard.

The Government and I try to communicate as clearly as possible. We do not always get that right. We test messages and we learn from that. We will certainly learn from the FACTS advice campaign. That campaign is no longer in use, as we are not currently advising people to follow all of its components—although we are getting closer to that at the moment.

I take the whole public communications aspect of this seriously—people sometimes criticise me for taking it too seriously—because I know how important it is. We absolutely will learn any lessons, as we go, about how we can improve it.

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): Given that the advice from the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation now includes pregnant women in the at-risk category, will the First Minister provide an update on Covid vaccination uptake among pregnant women?

The First Minister: I very much welcome the JCVI's recent advice, which moved pregnant women into the at-risk group for Covid vaccination. That demonstrates the importance of women getting vaccinated when they are pregnant, to protect themselves and their babies against what we know are the risks of Covid in pregnancy.

Uptake remains much lower among pregnant women than it is among non-pregnant women, but it is increasing. The most recent data that Public Health Scotland has published, which covers September and October, shows that the uptake among pregnant women in those months was more similar to the uptake in the general female population than had previously been the case.

The fact that the uptake is improving is encouraging, and I continue to urge all pregnant women who have not already done so to book a vaccination as soon as possible: it is really important, to protect not just your own health but the health of your baby.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the First Minister's Covid-19 update. I apologise to members whose questions I was unable to take.

I understand that Clare Adamson has a point of order.

I am sorry, Ms Adamson, but we cannot hear you at the moment. We will look into why we have had this difficulty this afternoon.

Point of Order

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Before we move to the next item of business, we have a point of order from Edward Mountain.

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. In a debate last week, I asked whether I could make an intervention virtually. It is not by choice but by necessity that I am participating virtually. I have notified the Presiding Officers that I feel marginalised, because I cannot intervene in debates.

I have now trawled through the minutes of Parliamentary Bureau meetings to try to identify where it was agreed that members who are participating virtually would not be able to intervene or take interventions in debates. I can find no reference to it. Presiding Officer, I ask you to guide me to the correct minute so that I can see where it has been agreed that members who are participating virtually cannot make interventions or join in debates if they are not making a speech. Thank you.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you for your point of order, Mr Mountain. I can advise you that that point was made clear in the guidance on hybrid meetings that was circulated to all members. I can also advise Mr Mountain and the chamber that the bureau is looking very seriously and with a degree of urgency at the issue of being able to make or take interventions remotely. In fact, I understand that the Parliament's chief executive updated the Finance and Public Administration Committee this morning on developments.

There is no imminent breakthrough in relation to this issue. I understand the frustration. Every step is being taken to try to address the concerns.

Rented Housing Sector

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-02625, in the name of Patrick Harvie, on a new deal for tenants. I invite members who wish to participate in the debate to press their request-to-speak button or place an R in the chat function.

I invite Patrick Harvie to speak to and move the motion. You have around 10 minutes, minister.

15:28

The Minister for Zero Carbon Buildings, Active Travel and Tenants' Rights (Patrick Harvie): I am delighted to be able to do so, Presiding Officer. I have taken part in housing debates in the chamber over many years, and during those debates, I have often taken the opportunity to reflect on my own experience of renting a home.

I have known good landlords who act responsibly, but I have also known high rents and poor maintenance. I have been harassed out of a flat by an abusive landlord, and I can still remember the shock, when I could eventually afford to buy a home, of learning just how much more I had been paying to rent a room and kitchen than it cost to have a mortgage on an entire two-bedroom flat. I know very well, from personal experience, that Scotland's tenants need a new deal. I am delighted that I now have the opportunity to propose action to Parliament.

The 700,000 people who rent privately need a new deal to give them the freedom to turn a house into a home, to better protect them from eviction, to challenge excessive rents and to assure them that authorities will take action if their landlord steps over the line.

More than 1 million people who rent from a council, a housing association or a co-operative need a new deal to continue to improve access to housing and to drive up standards, as we tackle the twin challenges of fuel poverty and climate change.

Together, all the people who rent need a new deal that helps them be better informed, more meaningfully engaged and better able to exercise their rights—a new deal that centres firmly on housing as a human right. That is why the draft new deal for tenants that we announced yesterday is a new deal for all tenants. It is also why "Housing to 2040", which was published earlier this year, pledged to develop a whole rented sector strategy. The draft new deal for tenants also incorporates all the ambitions for the rented sector that were set out in the shared policy

programme between the Scottish Government and the Scottish Greens.

For work of that scale of ambition, we need to hear from many perspectives. Over the past few months, I have met senior councillors and staff, tenants unions, landlords, housing associations, campaigners and letting agents. However, above all, the Government needs to hear more from tenants. That is why we are working with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, whose expertise has been very helpful in enabling us to engage with private rented sector tenants.

I have already committed to establishing a tenant participation panel for the private rented sector—it will be the first of its kind—to ensure that tenants' voices are front and centre. I am also seeking views on how we can support the development of tenants unions and other ways of engaging with tenants. Early in the new year, we will launch a new publicity campaign to make sure that tenants know their rights.

I believe that a whole sector approach is required so that all tenants can expect value for money and good housing standards. Housing systems are integrated, and neighbourhoods and even buildings are mixed—each sector can learn from the other. However, I recognise that, for private renters in particular, there is a power imbalance where tenants are less able to exercise their rights and continue to have less secure tenancies than those in the social sector. Therefore, many of the specific policy proposals that I am seeking views on in the consultation relate to private renting.

That is why I have set out proposals for the introduction of a new housing bill in the second year of this parliamentary session and a new regulator for the private rented sector to enforce standards. We will also work towards a national system of rent controls for the private rented sector by beginning to put in place the evidence framework that is needed.

However, I know that there is more to be done for social tenants, too, so we are also consulting on a number of things to support them. They include creating a new housing standard, regulating to set minimum standards for energy efficiency and zero emissions heating for all homes, and exploring what further action we can take to ensure that rents in the social rented sector are affordable.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): Will the minister take an intervention?

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): Will the minister take an intervention?

Patrick Harvie: I think that I heard the request from Pam Duncan-Glancy first.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Thank you, minister, for taking an intervention—it seems to be a popular thing to do at this point.

Tomorrow, in Glasgow, approximately 14 people will be taken to court by housing associations—action that could potentially result in evictions. You and I have both campaigned strongly against winter evictions. Would you consider bringing forward immediately regulations to end winter evictions so that no one is evicted from their house, particularly in this period when people can be asked to self-isolate at home? People cannot self-isolate if they do not have a home.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please direct interventions through the Presiding Officer.

Patrick Harvie: I will come on to winter evictions later. As Pam Duncan-Glancy knows, some of the temporary coronavirus pandemic measures around discretion at the tribunal are to be made permanent. I hope that she understands that I am not able to comment on court actions.

I will take another intervention—this time from the back of the chamber.

Bob Doris: I apologise—I will try very hard to be brief. I have previously corresponded with the minister on this matter.

Many constituents feel that social landlords have to do better on consulting on rent increases. Although social landlords have to have regard to the views of tenants, there is no set process for consultation and some believe that there must be greater constraints on rent levels in the social rented sector. Will the minister give consideration to how any new legislation could take better account of that?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give you some of that time back, minister.

Patrick Harvie: I am grateful for that, Presiding Officer.

Bob Doris makes very fair points, and I hope that such arguments will come across in the consultation responses. Tenants' voices are critical if we are to shift some of the power imbalances and address some of the injustices that exist. Hearing those voices can now be better organised in many places in the social rented sector, but there is still scope to do things better and to learn from best practice. I hope that people will take the consultation as an opportunity to put forward constructive ideas for how to achieve that.

I am seeking views on existing private rented tenancies and the grounds for repossession, and I am exploring how tenants can feel more at home in their rented property through simple things such

as being able to decorate or keep pets. Those things might be seen as trivial by some people, but they are critical to the feeling that a house is a home and to supporting people's wellbeing and mental health.

I am proposing new restrictions on evictions in winter. There are a number of questions around defining how that will work, on which we want to hear views. That is in addition to ensuring that the penalties for illegal evictions in the private sector are a meaningful deterrent.

I am highlighting the need to help people who live in non-traditional rented accommodation—from student accommodation to residential mobile homes, and from the Gypsy Traveller community to people in agricultural tenancies.

It is right to raise standards, but it is just as important to ensure that renting is affordable. On average, people who rent privately spend more of their income—more than a quarter of it, and for some, much more than that—on rent.

The social rented sector already has some safeguards in place to protect tenants from high rent rises, and all the money from rents should be reinvested for the good of tenants. The position is inconsistent, to say the least, in the private rented sector, where approaches to rent setting can vary dramatically among landlords. We are therefore consulting on how to introduce an effective national system of rent controls by 2025 for privately rented homes, with appropriate mechanisms to allow local authorities to introduce local measures.

I recognise that campaigners for that policy are impatient; some people even argue that we should use emergency coronavirus legislation to bypass the need to consult. I do not agree with that. The Scottish Parliament has always consulted before legislating, where that is possible, and that is as it should be: it helps us to make better law. The weakness of the 2016 reform to create rent pressure zones is a warning about legislation that is developed swiftly without adequate testing or dialogue.

I want the new system to be one that works for the long term. That means collecting the information that we need, learning from what works well elsewhere and taking the time to get it right. We will improve the collection of data on rents and other factors in the private rented sector so that we have the evidence needed to inform an effective system. A more detailed consultation on rent control will follow later in the session, as we gather that evidence and as building the evidence base picks up pace. At the same time, we will consider how best to share good practice and improve affordability in the social rented sector, too.

Affordability and supply are of course closely linked, and I know that Parliament will support my commitment to our expanded programme of building 110,000 affordable homes, 70 per cent of them being for social rent, by 2032. That programme is on a larger scale than any for decades, and I am determined to work with colleagues across both Government and Parliament to ensure that every contribution counts—public, private, community and third sector—in achieving that goal.

New homes for rent are rightly a major theme in the new deal for tenants, but most of the homes that we will live in in 2040 are already here today. That is why we are seeking views on how we can improve quality and raise standards across the whole rented sector, both in physical buildings and in the services that are provided to all tenants. With that in mind, I am seeking views on establishing a new housing standard for all homes.

I could say more. There is a great deal to do, and a great deal of work ahead of us throughout this session of Parliament. There will be no shortage of views, and the consultation is open for the next 16 weeks, so that everyone can engage on the wide-ranging and ambitious aims of this agenda.

I believe that the draft strategy will deliver a new deal for tenants, with stronger rights, greater protections against eviction and access to better, more affordable homes. That will help us to deliver a fairer Scotland, to tackle child poverty and to meet our climate change targets.

I urge MSPs across the chamber to support that ambition, to contribute their ideas and to join me in welcoming this new deal for tenants.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the publication of the consultation on A New Deal for Tenants, which seeks views on the Scottish Government's ambitious plans for the rented sector; agrees that the 1.85 million people who live in the rented sector should have improved quality, standards and rights in the place they call home; supports the aims of A New Deal for Tenants to ensure tenants have more secure and stable tenancies, flexibility to personalise their homes, improved safeguards against eviction, improved regulation and effective national rent controls in the private sector; recognises that this strategy will support progress towards the human right of an adequate home for all, and welcomes, therefore, this draft strategy seeking to make renting a home more affordable, safer, with a higher quality, better managed and more secure.

15:39

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I thank the organisations that provided useful briefings ahead of today's debate and the many housing charities and organisations that work in all our communities across the country.

The Scottish Government's draft rented sector strategy proposes a number of new rights and protections for Scottish tenants, many of which Conservative members support and want to see improved—specifically, those that relate to domestic abuse and the rights of victims. There is an opportunity to significantly improve support and to help to ensure that it is available, and I genuinely hope that the minister will look at making the strategy an opportunity for all of us across the Parliament to contribute and help to achieve that.

However, at the outset I express concern about some of the more controversial proposals that have been outlined in the draft strategy. What the rented sector in Scotland needs is proper investment and further action to stop increased rents instead of missed house-building targets and cuts to the housing budget, which we saw being put forward at stage 1 of the Scottish Government's Budget (Scotland) Bill. As Shelter Scotland made clear in its briefing for the debate,

"Without increasing the supply of social homes, realising the commitment to deliver the right to adequate housing will be extremely difficult."

In the short time that I have, I want to concentrate on a few areas that are outlined in my amendment.

The strategy details plans to establish an independent regulator for the private rented sector. That regulator would operate in a similar way to that the Scottish Housing Regulator, which covers social rents and a national system of rent controls.

The minister has already outlined that further consultation on rent controls will be proposed later in this parliamentary session. However, it is clear from countries in which rent controls are in operation that the supply of rental properties has been negatively impacted and, indeed, policy outcomes around controlling levels of rent have not been achieved. When the minister closes the debate, I would be interested to hear from him what genuine assessment ministers have made of the proposal in the strategy for national rent controls and how the discussion to shape the consultation that he has outlined will take place.

If we are going to have that debate, it is important that we start to look at unintended consequences and international lessons that we are already aware of. It is becoming a hallmark of the Government not to look properly at the unintended consequences of regulations and legislation, and there are concerns about the potential negative impact on not only tenants but landlords.

The draft strategy aims to outline what impact existing legislation, such as on rent pressure

zones, has had on existing high rental markets, of which the market in the capital is an example. I would like the need to understand that important aspect to be considered in the strategy.

Patrick Harvie *rose*—

Miles Briggs: I am happy to give way—if I can get some time back, Presiding Officer.

Patrick Harvie: It is very clear that rent pressure zones have not been used anywhere by any local authority. One of the issues is that the burden of responsibility is on local authorities to come forward with evidence. I hope that, even if the Conservatives do not ultimately support the proposals on rent controls, they will support the action that we need to take to gather the evidence and data that are required to design a good system.

Miles Briggs: I very much agree with that point. Rent pressure zones were introduced by the Government, but local authorities have not felt that they have been provided with the powers that they need—and that the zones do not give them the opportunity to make a difference. We need to look at that. An answer to the questions around rent pressure zones does not seem to be forthcoming. One of the key questions relates to the market levels of rent. In the capital, for example, they are much higher than they are in other parts of the country.

Above all, the delivery of affordable housing is important. In its evidence to the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee, the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations made clear its concerns about on-going rises in construction costs. The spike in construction costs is having an impact on maintenance and on future developments, and SFHA was clear that, without additional support from Scottish ministers, long-term solutions to that issue will be difficult to develop. The impact on housing association budgets and the ability to keep rents affordable is, obviously, of concern to the SFHA.

In the programme for government, Scottish National Party ministers set out a house-building target over 11 years into the future of

"110,000 affordable homes by 2032—with at least 70 per cent for social rent and 10 per cent in our remote, rural and island communities".

Let us look at the Government's record to date. Since 2016, the SNP has promised to build 50,000 affordable homes, and ministers have failed to meet that target. To March 2021, only 28,154 houses were completed in the social rented sector. In rural Scotland, the situation is even more concerning. SNP ministers spent less than half the £25 million budget that was allocated to rural housing funds; £11.4 million of that funding

delivered just 59 affordable homes in rural Scotland over a four-year period.

Ministers' rhetoric is strong, but delivery of their promises has not been forthcoming. Scottish Conservatives want SNP and Green ministers to step up the affordable home building agenda across the country. That is the only way in which we can properly address the lack of affordable housing across our communities, which is the fundamental issue that tenants face.

A key part of my amendment is that we need to look not only towards the strategy but at the lack of action from the Government on temporary accommodation for homeless people. SNP and Green ministers will know that the number of families and children in unsuitable and temporary accommodation is now at a record high. The increase in rental costs is one of the main barriers that prevents many people from securing a home and a secure tenancy, and must be considered as well.

I hope that, as the strategy is developed, ministers will genuinely look at the issues and concerns that I have raised. We need to make sure that the solutions that are being developed to the lack of affordable housing and the issues with the unsuitable accommodation order that many councils face are not forgotten about and will be included as we move forward.

It is vital that SNP and Green ministers listen to the real concerns that are being put forward at this stage of the draft strategy. I hope that ministers will engage across the Parliament far more on the draft strategy. I do not believe that we have seen such engagement to date. Many members have come to the debate with issues that we want to include in the strategy and in future legislation. I hope that the minister will make sure that those issues are included.

I move amendment S6M-02625.1, to leave out from “, improved regulation” to end and insert:

“and improved regulation; acknowledges, however, that the biggest challenge facing those in the rented sector is the rising cost of living caused by a national housing shortage; notes that the Rural Housing Fund delivered just 59 new homes over four years; notes with concern the decision to reduce the housing budget in 2022-23; further notes concerns that current levels of investment in this sector are not high enough to meet the target of building 110,000 affordable homes by 2032; notes that the number of households in temporary accommodation is now at a record high and that high rental costs are one of the main barriers preventing those who are homeless from securing new tenancies; regrets that the implementation of the Homeless Persons (Unsuitable Accommodation) (Scotland) Order 2014 was repeatedly delayed; notes concerns that the introduction of rent controls may be counter-productive and result in reduced choice for private tenants; calls on the Scottish Government to provide increased investment in the housing market to ensure tenants have access to a wide range of affordable properties, but otherwise

welcomes this draft strategy seeking to make renting a home more affordable, safer, with a higher quality, better managed and more secure.”

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I advise members that we are tight for time. That is not an instruction not to take interventions, but you might need to accommodate them in your allocated time.

I call Mark Griffin to speak to—for six minutes, please—and to move amendment S6M-02625.2.

15:47

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

Scottish Labour welcomes the publication of the draft rented sector strategy consultation—which has arrived, finally, at the end of the year—because we have long called for more meaningful Government intervention in the private rented sector, in improving tenants' rights and in protecting people from rising rents, as my colleague Pauline McNeill's Fair Rents (Scotland) Bill and her general work in campaigning last session would have done.

Once again, with more restrictions expected soon, on top of the reinstatement of widespread self-isolation rules, the pandemic forces us to acknowledge that our homes have never meant so much to us. Once again, if we have somewhere that we can call home and that is warm and safe, that is the first line of defence against Covid.

We will support the motion, and we agree with the aims of the strategy. Tenants must have secure and stable tenancies, rights that allow them to truly live in them, a pause clause, a chance to decorate, continued safeguards against eviction and private sector rent controls. However, we also want to use the debate to ask the Government to take immediate action, because Covid continues to exacerbate the housing crisis. How quickly we move will be key.

Last month, the First Minister told me that the Government is

“happy to engage about the timing of legislation on rent controls.”—[*Official Report*, 18 November 2021; c 28.]

Our amendment therefore singularly seeks to hold the Government to that and to secure agreement that the framework for rent controls will be put in legislation sooner rather than later, via the forthcoming housing bill.

Patrick Harvie: I would like to support the Labour amendment, if I understand its meaning correctly. When Mr Griffin says that the framework needs to be brought forward in the year 2 bill, is he referring—I hope that he is—to the need to

generate the data that is required to understand the matter and to design a proper system? We will not be able to implement the rent control system in year 2, but we will put in place the framework for collection of data. If that is what he means, I very much welcome his position and would like to support his amendment.

Mark Griffin: We certainly do not expect the legislation to come into force in year 2 of this parliamentary session, but we would look for the details of the framework for the rules, and data for the broad system that we expect to be implemented, to be in the forthcoming housing bill.

Let us not forget that rent controls are needed urgently. The number of children in private rented housing living in severe poverty more than doubled in the decade from 2008. Living Rent has said that it is ready to go on the matter. Its proposed points-based system, which would link rents to the quality of property, aligns with the strategy's vision. That link to quality would provide an incentive for landlords to make improvements and would be a block on landlords who refuse to do so. It is important that it would also attach the control to the property and not to the lease. That landmark reform would deal with the fundamentals of costly rents and would be a step towards implementing the human right to an adequate home for all.

However, 2023 is still a lifetime away for renters who are struggling now. The situation for those tenants is reaching crisis point and, as Living Rent says, they cannot wait another five or so years for the protections.

A major cost-of-living crisis is just weeks away. Energy bills are set to rocket by 40 per cent in April and, last month, the Government's own statistics showed that in 2020 there were inflation-bursting rent increases in West Dunbartonshire, Ayrshire, Fife, Forth Valley and Lanarkshire. The contribution of rents to November's unprecedented 5 per cent inflation was the highest since March 2016.

The starting point that we are at is bleak. Almost 150,000 people are waiting for a social or council house and homelessness applications are up. After a University of Glasgow report estimated that £126 million is owed in the private rented sector and that social arrears jumped £9 million over the summer, it looks as though arrears in the rented sector have topped £300 million.

Changes to the notice period and pre-action protocols for evictions have been proved to keep people in their homes, so those measures should stay. I look forward to working with the Government on that commitment. I echo the calls from Living Rent and Shelter for the reforms to be made permanent as we go into the new year. That

would prevent an evictions crisis in the short term, but given the fast-developing situation with omicron, the Government must also consider extending the evictions ban.

The importance of stability and security for renters is not secondary to affordability. It is fundamental to a sense of self and to the ability to make choices. Security stems from the ability to call a place home, as the minister pointed out. People without open space, a spare room and the freedom to have a pet or to redecorate have endured a miserable pandemic, regardless of their tenure. People who had those—mostly owner occupiers—could work from home, do renovations and consider upsizing.

Research from Crisis also found that more than 40 per cent of employers are unprepared to support a homeless employee and would even consider terminating their employment. That is a devastating statistic that reinforces the call that Pam Duncan-Glancy made for a winter evictions ban to be put in place right now.

I support the strategy that the minister outlined and look forward to working with the Government on it.

I move amendment S6M-02625.2, to insert after "private sector":

"; agrees that the legislation establishing the framework for these rent controls must be included in the forthcoming Housing Bill in the second year of the current parliamentary session"

15:53

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I have been in too many shoddy, damp, mouldy, poorly insulated and cold but far too expensive properties that could never be classed as a place to call home. A building that makes people ill is no place to live. It should be a human right to have a warm and affordable home; I am sure that all members across the parties agree with that objective. The questions are how we get there and how we do so quickly, because the crisis has gone on for far too long.

All housing organisations speak with unity in pointing to the need for an increased affordable housing supply. We simply do not have enough affordable or social rented homes, so we need to build far more. At the election, the Liberal Democrats offered a commitment to deliver 40,000 homes for social rent in the next five years. That was an important part of our plan to build more homes that people can afford, with an initial programme to build 60,000 homes.

We want to return to a housing market that re-establishes social renting as a valid long-term option for people. However, Shelter has today

expressed concern that the Scottish Government's commitment to deliver 110,000 affordable homes over the next decade has been downgraded to an "ambition". It would be helpful to have clarity from the minister on whether it is only an ambition, rather than an election promise and commitment. My amendment is aimed at strengthening the Government's motion so that we can have confidence that the housing supply is a top priority for the Government.

I am interested in what works, and less interested in slogans. The Liberal Democrats are interested in rent controls, but we are cautious about how effective they would be. We want to support the motion, the consultation that was launched last week and the future consultation on rent controls that the minister has set out today, but we need to work on the detail. That is incredibly important.

Despite what I said about there being an awful lot of poor-quality rented homes, the private rented sector provides a lot of good homes for good tenants, with good landlords. We have a duty to get it right and to ensure that any future rent controls create the right incentives for the sector.

We have seen in evidence from other countries that have rent controls that the benefits of such controls are often not clear. Controls seem to have an effect on investment in the private rented sector and on the types of properties in which it will invest. There is also potentially a question about their effect, regarding whether they control rent or the cap becomes a minimum as well as a maximum increase.

We Liberal Democrats want to see the detailed proposals and the evidence to back them up. We are open to considering what works. As I said, it is important that we ensure that we have a high-quality private rented sector, which is why we need to treat the issues with care. We will not support the Conservative amendment, because it rules out rent controls. We think that it is important to explore rent controls, along with the evidence. However, on the basis of what Mark Griffin said, we will support the Labour amendment, which will allow for further evidence to be gathered.

It is important that we invest in the housing sector in Scotland, because far too many homes are shoddy and poorly insulated. That is why the consultation paper and the "Housing to 2040" strategy document are incredibly important. We need to get this right, because too many homes are at stake.

I move amendment S6M-02625.3, to insert at end:

“; urges the Scottish Government to also address the issues around the availability of private rented properties; considers that it should increase its ambitions for the

building of more homes for social rent, and believes that increasing the supply of affordable rented housing is necessary to give people security, stabilise the housing market and support progress towards the human right of an adequate home for all.”

15:58

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): I draw members' attention to my entry in the register of members' interests, as I am a councillor in Aberdeen City Council.

The new deal for tenants consultation is a crucial consultation to address long-standing issues in the rented housing sector—specifically security, affordability, standards and regulation. We all deserve to live in a warm, dry and affordable home in which we feel secure and safe. Access to housing is a recognised social determinant of health and sits alongside education, health services, employment and economic stability as a key factor in ensuring good health and wellbeing.

There is no doubt that the pandemic has heightened anxiety and insecurity for many people who live in Scotland's rented sector. Many lost their jobs or became too unwell to work. Despite lifeline Scottish Government support for tenants who are at risk of arrears or eviction, rising costs, cuts to universal credit and Brexit have created a perfect storm for many tenants across Scotland. I therefore welcome the SNP-Scottish Greens agreement, which puts the rights of tenants and the right to housing at its heart.

Like other north-east constituencies, over recent decades Aberdeen South and North Kincardine has seen sustained high rents, courtesy of the energy sector. However, the reality is that we continue to host poor-quality rented stock, particularly in the city of Aberdeen. Typically, dated council housing stock that is now affected by damp and mould has gone unactioned. In Aberdeen, 59 per cent of homes are not energy efficient, which results in high fuel bills, high carbon emissions and residents being unable to heat their homes to a comfortable level.

I have a local consultation under way, with residents who live in some of the poorest-quality housing in my constituency, to identify the housing issues that impact on them most. To date, the responses have been stark. The local economy, which was once propped up by oil and gas, has been in decline. That is reflected in the private rented sector, in which between 2010 and 2014 rents consistently rose far above the Scottish average, only to decline rapidly since then. That means that rents today are, largely, the same as they were a decade ago. Some private housing developments that had commenced before then have now become unprofitable or have collapsed,

which has impacted on the supply of badly needed social housing, as well as on delivery of developer obligations, including schools. We face a bizarre paradox in which there is overprovision of private rented properties while, in June 2020, the waiting list for council houses was more than 6,000.

It is regrettable that Aberdeen City Council has fallen short of its commitment to build 2,000 new homes, with only 900 having been completed to date, which is adding to the already significant shortage of affordable housing in the city. It is safe to say that local change is needed, starting with a genuine commitment to build more high-standard affordable homes and, where feasible, to retrofit existing homes to make them warm, dry and more liveable.

I welcome our commitment to build 110,000 affordable homes over the coming decade, but I want to see within that local projects that are driven by what is required in housing areas, not by what developers choose to include in a project specification—which is, in other words, the tail wagging the dog.

The consultation on a new deal for tenants is a welcome step on from “Housing to 2040”. It offers tenants a tangible opportunity to have their voices heard, and it offers us an opportunity to provide our constituents with the good-quality, secure and safe rented housing provision that they deserve.

16:02

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries)

(Con): It goes without saying that the housing system in Scotland is notoriously complex, and I welcome the opportunity to make positive changes to our rental sector to address the fundamental underlying problems that tenants and landlords face. It gives us the chance to address a number of issues, such as amending the Scottish model tenancy agreement for private residential tenancies so that consent for a pet is the default position for responsible pet owners.

Landlords should be allowed to refuse pets only with a good reason, thereby putting an end to blanket no-pets policies, in line with the recent amendments to the English model tenancy agreement. We also need more social housing providers to introduce reasonable pet policies to allow responsible tenants in social housing to keep pets in suitable properties.

For people who are not a cat or dog lover, it might not seem a major problem, but cats and dogs bring their renting owners joy, love and companionship. A survey by animal charity Cats Protection found that 92 per cent of social housing tenants and 73 per cent of private tenants in Scotland who are able to keep their own cats report that the cats have a positive effect on their

life by making them happy, providing company and affection or improving mental health. If that is the case, the chances of those tenants leaving are far less.

Recently, I had the pleasure of meeting Cats Protection. In its most recent report, which is cleverly named “CATS”—“Cats and Their Stats”—it found that renting with a cat in Scotland can be quite difficult. Pet-friendly rental houses are in short supply, with just 10 per cent of private landlords explicitly allowing cats, and only a further 25 per cent permitting a pet but not specifying the actual pet. It is estimated that people in 1 million UK households who would like to own a cat cannot because they live in rented accommodation that does not allow pets; a staggering 1.6 million more cats in the UK could be rehomed if all landlords allowed pets.

Although I absolutely understand that landlords might be reluctant to rent to cat or dog owners for fear that the pet might damage the property, that is not the case. For example, the charity found that 83 per cent of cat-friendly private landlords reported having no problems at all.

However, it must also be recognised that, in some cases, landlords are left with a far bigger cost than they would otherwise have—for example, if they need to replace carpets when reletting their properties. Often, the deposit does not cover such a cost, so that point needs to be considered.

There are obligations and responsibilities on both sides, as is always the case with landlord-tenant relationships. In that regard, the Dogs Trust and Cats Protection have created a pet CV to help potential tenants with dogs and cats to highlight that they are responsible pet owners and to enable landlords and letting agents to be better informed. The pet CV sets out details about the animal, including whether they are neutered, microchipped or vaccinated, as well as information about their general behaviour and temperament. Such a CV can be a vital tool in helping landlords to assess whether a tenant is a responsible pet owner.

However, it is not just animal lovers who are facing issues when it comes to private and social housing. More needs to be done to improve accountability, affordability and quality in relation to existing housing. As the SFHA rightly points out, one of the main rights in relation to housing is to a

“safe, warm and affordable home, in a thriving community”,

and Shelter Scotland insists that enough social houses should be built to reduce affordable housing needs.

Additional rights for tenants are welcome, but the SNP strategy fails to address the fundamental issue of shortages in the Scottish housing and

rental markets. I am sure that members from all parties will agree that spiralling rents are often caused by housing shortages, and that is the real issue facing today's renters.

Tenants are still facing rising costs that are caused by a national housing shortage, particularly in rural areas, and the situation will not be helped by a reduction in the Scottish housing budget in the financial year 2022-23. We must see an increase in investment in rural areas such as Dumfries and Galloway where many young people are forced to leave communities because of a shortage of suitable housing.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The next two speakers join us remotely.

16:07

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): I draw members' attention to my entry in the register of members' interests, as I am a serving councillor at Aberdeen City Council.

I am grateful to have the opportunity to speak in this important debate about the Scottish Government's plans to strengthen the rights of tenants across Scotland. In this day and age, everyone should have the right to a safe, secure and affordable home that meets their needs.

Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, we have seen the importance of having a suitable home, with increased protections for renters being required to prevent evictions and ensure secure, safe housing for all during the difficult lockdowns.

The Scottish Government gave £10 million to local authorities to provide grants to tenants who have fallen behind with their rent as a result of the pandemic and who were at risk of eviction. That forms part of a package of measures that local authorities could use to tackle homelessness, which also includes discretionary housing payments and additional advice on maximising income.

Nearly 40 per cent of people in Scotland rent their homes, so it is key that we get this right. Everyone should be entitled to good-quality housing that they can call their home, no matter whether they are renting from their local authority, a registered social landlord or the private sector.

The on-going pandemic has offered us all an opportunity to reflect on what is important to us when it comes to our housing needs. Over the past two years, we have seen a unique set of circumstances that nobody could have envisioned. Many people have been required to work from home, which brings its own challenges. We have all spent more time at home than we perhaps would have liked to or planned for and, for many renters, outdoor space is extremely limited. That

has highlighted the need for high-quality, suitable housing for everyone in our country, not just those who can afford the most expensive rents.

Housing should be a human right; it should not be dictated by anyone's ability to pay. The Covid-19 pandemic has given us an opportunity to re-evaluate priorities when it comes to rented properties, and it has highlighted the need for protections for both renters and landlords.

I am pleased to see the Scottish Government bring forward its consultation to seek views on proposals to deliver a fairer rented sector. Those include

"increasing penalties for illegal evictions ... restricting evictions during winter"

and

"giving tenants greater flexibility to personalise their homes and keep pets".

The list goes on. I am also pleased to see the requirement for a minimum standard for energy efficiency included in the proposals, helping Scotland to reach our net zero goals and helping to ensure that no renter has to make the decision between heating and eating.

Renters make up nearly half of our population. There is an expectation in public sector housing that renters have the right to safe and secure housing that meets their needs. The legislation seeks to level the playing field between public and private sector tenants and ensure that they are all afforded the same security.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): Pauline McNeill is also joining us remotely.

16:11

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): I believe that the Scottish Government missed the opportunity to get private sector rents under control in the previous session of Parliament. I say that because I felt a sense of frustration that my Fair Rents (Scotland) Bill was not supported by the governing party. I believe that we lost critical time in tackling poverty and inequality.

However, I make it clear that I plan to work with the Scottish Government and Patrick Harvie, who I know is committed to this set of reforms. I hope that the minister will consider incorporating some of the ideas from my bill in the forthcoming legislation. Tenants cannot wait until 2025 to see at least some change. In the private rented sector, there is a need for parity with the public sector. That is long overdue.

This has been an extremely tough year, with tens of thousands of people losing their jobs and incomes. Many people in the private rented sector

have also had to contend with rents rising above the rate of inflation, yet again. It will be worse for some, as the Scottish Government figures on private rents up to the end of September 2021 show that average rents in Lothian and greater Glasgow increased at above the rate of inflation again. Between 2010 and 2021, we have seen rent rises at well above the rate of inflation on all property sizes.

However, rising rents are not just a problem in Glasgow and Edinburgh. The statistics show staggering increases in rents of 7.1 per cent in West Dunbartonshire and 6.8 per cent in Ayrshire. Therefore, I am pleased that the temporary legislation that Parliament passed during Covid clearly succeeded in preventing mass evictions during the worst of the pandemic. It also sheltered public services from the additional pressures of responding to, and ensured a reduction in, homelessness.

A report by Andrew Watson at the University of Glasgow that was published last month found that around one in five landlords had current tenancies in arrears at July 2021. That scales up to around 45,000 landlords across Scotland, with arrears totalling around £126 million, as Mark Griffin mentioned. It is a real crisis and we need to get our heads round it.

However, the state of private rented sector housing leaves much to be desired. Many tenants routinely suffer from water penetration, damp and condensation, and the associated mould growth. Those problems are frequently made worse by repairs that are slow, with issues often going unrepaired and unresolved. Therefore, I believe that rent controls must be linked to the quality of the accommodation that people rent. My Fair Rents (Scotland) Bill would have done that.

There is a clear link between poverty and high housing costs, which should be at the centre of the legislation. We cannot continue to accept the number of people who are living in poverty in the private rented sector, many of whom have no alternative available to them. That is the key point. Evidence shows that around half of tenants spend 30 per cent of their income, and some spend 40 to 50 per cent of their income, on rent. A mortgage is cheaper for most of those people, but because of the problem that they face, they will not get alternative options for housing.

Young people are at the centre of the housing issue—they need a fair deal. We need a fair deal for families and we must recognise that single parents are very likely to be struggling to pay their rent in the private rented sector. The number of children in the sector who live in severe poverty has more than doubled.

We need a fair deal for students, too. In my bill, there is a way to address Willie Rennie's point, which I am happy to talk about another time. We can overcome the problems. Students in the private rented sector saw their rents rise by 34 per cent in the past three years, and many of them who live in private accommodation have no rights. I ask the minister to consider whether students will be at the centre of housing reform.

We must make the reforms in this parliamentary session and ensure that we make a difference by tackling poverty and giving people options for good, affordable, warm homes.

16:15

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in the debate. I welcome the consultation with all the relevant parties. I draw members' attention to my entry in the register of members' interests, as I am a serving councillor in East Lothian, where I own a rental property.

I grew up on a council estate in Dunbar with my mum, dad and sister. It was and still is a close-knit community. I have been a councillor for 15 years in Dunbar, and the most pressing issues over that time—any councillor will tell you this—have been housing related. Members have mentioned the various houses that they have been in; I have been in houses of various sectors that were in various states. It is a much-needed consultation.

In East Lothian, the right-to-buy scheme resulted in the loss of 8,000 council houses, with no means to replace them. Today, we are still trying to recover from that.

How we treat our tenants is key and fundamental to ensure a vibrant housing sector. As the motion states, 1.85 million people live in the rented sector, which accounts for 37 per cent of all housing in Scotland. Those people should have improved quality, standards and rights in the place they call home. They should have the right to more secure and stable tenancies with improved safeguards against eviction, improved regulation and effective national rent controls in the private sector, as the minister said.

Shelter Scotland said:

"This is an ambitious strategy, and it offers the chance to mend many aspects of a housing system that is currently failing thousands."

The Scottish Federation of Housing Associations said:

"We welcome the Scottish Government's ambition that all tenants should have access to secure, good quality, affordable homes."

I want to focus on two main issues in the consultation. The first is the commitment to deliver

110,000 homes. We need to ensure that we have an appropriate tenure mix to ensure deliverability, and we must look at other funding models to support the long-term commitment. As we have heard, the target is for at least 70 per cent of the homes to be for social rent and for 10 per cent to be in our remote, rural and island communities, as Finlay Carson said. That is an issue in East Lothian; the remote and rural issue is an important one and, in a second, I will come on to how we might deliver on that.

We must ensure that the private sector can deliver its commitment, as much of our affordable housing target is dependent on that. It is of course being supported by £3.6 billion of Scottish Government investment.

Housing supply affects affordability and quality across all tenures, but we need the proper tenure mix in that supply so that everyone has access to the housing that they need at a price that they can afford. Local authority local development plans have a key part in that, as they deliver affordable rented accommodation. Local authorities must be brave in their allocations. Mid-market rent has a role to play, along with build to rent, which is a growing sector in Scotland. They all have a key role in ensuring the tenure balance that I talked about.

I am keen for us to explore other funding models. In my constituency, I have seen housing delivered with funding from Co-op pension funds and the LAR Housing Trust through commercial lending. We need to look at ways of scaling up such delivery options to maximise grant funding. The Co-op and LAR Housing Trust have both worked with East Lothian Council on allocations, which is very important.

The second issue is about strengthening and enforcing housing rights. I welcome the Scottish Government's commitment to deliver a new human right to adequate housing through the forthcoming human rights bill. On that, Shelter Scotland has stated:

"This is welcome and is a vital step on the journey to ensuring everyone has access to a home that meets their needs. Accompanied with ensuring there is an adequate supply of social housing in the places that need it most, this will help to tackle Scotland's housing emergency. We welcome the Rented Sector Strategy's focus on marginalised groups and look forward to more work being done in this area to fix the broken and biased housing system which disproportionately harms people with disabilities, women, and people from ethnic minority backgrounds."

On that issue, a few weeks ago I met Women's Aid East and Midlothian, which said that housing policies for those fleeing domestic abuse require a different, gender-competent approach. For that reason alone, we must ensure that changes are made.

I look forward to working with Scotland's housing sector to deliver the basic human right of a house over everyone's head for them to call home.

16:20

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands (Green)): I thank the Minister for Zero Carbon Buildings, Active Travel and Tenants' Rights for lodging the motion. It signals the beginning of a long-overdue transformation of Scotland's private rented sector. For too long, tenants have been second-class citizens, living in houses that they cannot make their homes.

Housing is a fundamental human right. I know that members from across the chamber will agree that everyone deserves to live in a secure, affordable, good-quality home, and the draft new deal for tenants will deliver on that right. I am proud to support the motion on behalf of the Scottish Green Party. Reforming the private rented sector is hard graft. That is why Green ministers in Government and with the grit and determination to tackle difficult problems are vital to the long-term wellbeing of tenants.

During the pandemic, we have spent more time than ever indoors, and our surroundings and our sense of belonging are essential to good mental health. Seemingly simple things such as allowing tenants to decorate their homes or keep pets can uplift their mood and alleviate loneliness. However, poor conditions have been far too common in the private rented sector, and we have seen rents skyrocket even during the pandemic.

Last winter, evictions were banned. That should be the case every winter, not only during a pandemic. Firm action will be taken against landlords who evict illegally, whatever the time of year. Greens in Government will deliver protections and controls to ensure that tenants are not subject to unfair treatment, with much-needed rent controls and action against unfair evictions. Tenants across the country who do not have the time, money or energy to fight their corner will have a greater say in the private rented sector through new tenant participation panels and options to establish tenant unions. They will be supported to do that by new powers to allocate long-term unclaimed deposits to fund rights and representation work. Landlords, in turn, will benefit from having tenants who are invested in the properties that they live in and who are connected to the communities around them.

Scotland is a founding member of the group of wellbeing economy Governments, and the new deal for tenants is exactly the sort of innovative approach that will put the wellbeing of the people of Scotland at the heart of the Scottish

Government's housing policy. The changes will be felt not only in urban areas; rural and island communities will see action taken on residential mobile homes and on agricultural and tied tenancies. Rent controls in those areas will also tackle the rural depopulation crisis by making housing more affordable and preventing young people from being priced out of the communities that they grew up in.

I hope that the new rent guarantor scheme for estranged young people will help some of the most vulnerable young people to live authentically and to break free of abuse. The review of grounds for ending private tenancies and action to make it easier to exit a joint tenancy will ensure that tenancies are fit for purpose and that they can adapt more easily to changes in life circumstances. This deal for tenants may be new to us, but it simply brings us into line with many other European countries where tenants have long had protection through measures such as rent control.

In August, as part of the shared policy programme, the Greens said that we would introduce a new deal for tenants. Four months later, Green MSPs and ministers are delivering on Green promises. The Scottish Greens will stand with tenants and tenant unions to revolutionise the private rented housing sector. The review will deliver for people, not profit, it will view houses as homes and it will place wellbeing at the heart of our housing policy.

16:24

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I celebrated the strides that were made in the previous session of Parliament to make private tenancies more secure. They did not undo the fact that I had been priced out of my studio flat in Inverness when the landlord hiked the price despite there having been no hot water for a year, or the fact that I was kicked out of another flat because the owner wanted to stick it on Airbnb, but I knew that it would be harder for landlords to pull such things in the future.

I am as delighted as anyone else will be who has put off getting a pet, or who has snuck their cat into the back of a pal's car every time the landlord has come round, that we are discussing the right for people to make their home their own.

Affordability is now the big issue that we have to tackle for private tenants. The commitments to build social and affordable housing across Scotland will do wonders for attempts to claw back some balance in the housing market. However, as fantastic as 110,000 new homes will be, we all know that that is not enough. The constant loss of homes to absentee landlords in tourist hotspots

and the fact that so many people are waiting on housing lists that, half the time, someone has to be homeless to get a council house cannot be addressed by house building alone. In addition, on the subject of depopulation, the fact that a house is expected in 2035 will not prevent people from leaving the Highlands tomorrow.

I understand that it will take time to implement the measures that we are talking about. However, we must recognise that a five-year warning to landlords that they will not be able to increase rents will mean many hiking their prices now. I urge the minister to do what he can to tackle that mindset.

I have said in the chamber before, and I will keep saying, that we must not make policy that relies on the good will of landlords. We must make policy that puts the rights of tenants—people who use houses as homes—far above the rights of landlords to own multiple properties with little regulation and a guaranteed increase in their value.

Miles Briggs called the proposals controversial and asked for bailouts for landlords instead. I suggest that, if someone cannot meet their obligations as a landlord, they should not be a landlord. The proposals are not extreme—they are just not Conservative. Until Scotland starts to vote Conservative, my colleagues on those benches should probably get used to the fact that the Government is not Conservative either.

In some communities that I represent, overtourism has prompted the conversion of more than 50 per cent of locally available residential properties to holiday homes with key safes at the door. They lie empty; they cannot house our badly-needed health and social care workers, students or families; and they drive up the cost of homes and the ever-scarcer long-term rents that are available nearby. Whatever figures members use to argue how much money such properties bring to local pubs and shops, those places will not stay open without staff, and those staff need homes. Whatever members say about how much we need tourism, we need communities more.

I had eight addresses in the space of three years before I found my current flat. Such insecurity prevents people from bedding into their communities. I have heard stories about people in rural areas realising during the Covid pandemic that they had no neighbours to help with the messages because all the nearby houses were empty holiday lets.

In 2019, the Scottish Government reported that there were more than 22,000 whole-home Airbnb listings. That is equivalent to a fifth of our 14-year house-building programme. Four hosts were responsible for nearly 2,500 listings. We know that

the issue is only getting worse, and rent controls may well make unregulated short-term letting at higher prices for shorter stays even more attractive. Although much of what I am hearing is positive, I urge the Scottish Government to work on the matter across portfolios. We need to tackle the housing crisis from all angles if we are going to make a difference.

16:28

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): There can be no doubt that, as others have said, Scotland is facing a difficult period with regard to the housing market. Here, in the Lothians, it can be seen starkly as rents rise and the number of available properties falls. Something has to be done to address the problems, and I put on the record my and my party's willingness to work with anyone in this Parliament on reasonable measures.

However, we must be careful about what constitutes a reasonable measure. We must not allow ourselves to fall into the trap of thinking that doing something is the same as helping. We must not allow ourselves to be seduced by the easy option of measures that will help in the short term but wreak untold damage in the future. It is incumbent on the members of this Parliament not to be short sighted but to see beyond dogmatic convictions and consider the consequences of legislation beyond the current five-year session of Parliament.

The Government's so-called new deal for tenants is not the revolutionary legislation that it would have the country believe. It is a package of old, tired and previously unsuccessful policies that define the concept of a short-term fix at the expense of future generations.

My colleagues in the Green Party like to talk about the settled science. I am afraid that, when it comes to rent controls, the verdict is in—and they do not work. Mr Rennie asked for evidence of why we are going down this road. It is not as though we do not have example after example from around the world of rent controls having been implemented and having failed to fix the problem of affordability.

Patrick Harvie: A number of countries, including some in Europe, have a system of rent controls and are not seeking to abolish it, and they are not saying that it has had huge unintended consequences. What about the consequence of not acting? Mr Balfour and I both represent cities that are seeing wildly disproportionate, way-above-inflation rent increases. Do we simply not act and allow that to happen?

Jeremy Balfour: I think that the minister would recognise that the countries in Europe that he is

talking about have a very different housing market from ours in Scotland.

The biggest issue that we face is that, if we go for rent control, landlords who have only one or two flats will simply sell them. That will take them off the market and those who are looking to rent will have less choice rather than more choice. That, in economic terms, means that rents will go up. Of course, there will be short-term benefits for renters if the proposals go ahead. However, they are minimal and will be dwarfed by the costs for future renters.

I would argue that none of this is controversial. An economist from the left-leaning Brookings Institution in America stated that

“Rent control appears to help affordability in the short run for current tenants, but in the long-run decreases affordability”,

makes negative extremes and affects surrounding neighbourhoods in a way that no one would expect. I would suggest that, if we go down the way of rent controls, that is what would happen in this country.

Yes, we need to fix the problem that has been created over the past 14 years. Scotland would be better served by the Scottish Government if it focused on meeting its targets for new houses built, a measure that would effectively bring prices down and ensure that there was enough accommodation for everybody to have, instead of trying to fix the market.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Rona Mackay will be joining us remotely.

16:32

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): Some of the most distressing cases that my office deals with involve tenants who are being forced to leave their homes, sometimes with very little notice and without regard to their personal circumstances. Some have been in their properties for years, and sometimes decades. It is where their children have grown up, where their neighbours are friends and where their lives have been rooted. At those times, I often ask myself how I would feel in that position. I think that lost, scared and confused would be the answer. That is why the consultation on a new deal for tenants is so necessary and so right.

I profoundly disagree with Jeremy Balfour on rent controls. Tenants need to know that their tenancies are secure and that they can call the place where they live home by personalising it to their taste. They need to know that they will not be faced with exorbitant rent rises that they cannot afford, which would inevitably lead them into debt. Have no doubt about it—many private tenants are

paying high rents, which are usually much more than a mortgage, for poor-quality homes. We have heard that from across the chamber. The latest report from Citizens Advice Scotland states, under the category “Problems during a tenancy”, that the figures have gone up by 54 per cent since the start of lockdown, in 2020. Lockdown showed us all the value of having a secure and suitable home, and this consultation, held in conjunction with the Scottish Green Party, is the start of a conversation about ensuring that a new and better deal for tenants will be delivered.

Unlike the previous private rented sector strategy, this strategy will pursue a whole-sector approach that considers the social and private rented sectors together, because housing tenures are integrated across the same neighbourhoods and even within the same buildings. All tenants have the right to a safe, warm, affordable and suitable home, regardless of the form that their tenancy takes. Although the Scottish Government’s aim of providing a further 110,000 affordable homes by 2032 is exemplary, there is no doubt that we will need private sector rental houses and responsible landlords for the foreseeable future.

Of course, the housing shortage that we are experiencing comes from Margaret Thatcher and her Tory Government’s disastrous policy of selling off council houses. What a legacy to leave for future generations, which are now struggling to put roofs over their heads.

The new deal recognises those difficulties, and the much-needed agreement will help people with all aspects of renting a home. It aims to increase penalties for illegal evictions and to restrict evictions during winter. It will give tenants greater flexibility to personalise their homes and keep pets. That is crucial. Why should tenants be denied the right to enhance their lives that homeowners take for granted?

Rent controls for the private rented sector and a new housing standard will apply, and there will be a regulator to ensure that the system is fair for renters and landlords.

Crucially, the new deal will set minimum standards for energy efficiency, to make homes cheaper to heat and to help us to meet climate change targets.

The measures form part of the “Housing to 2040” strategy, which was published in March, and they take forward several commitments in the co-operation agreement with the Scottish Green Party. The results of the consultation will feed into the final version of the strategy, which will be published next year, and proposals will be put to the Scottish Parliament in a housing bill in 2023.

I know that members of all parties agree that a warm and affordable home is a basic human right, but it is a right that has been denied to too many people for far too long. I welcome the commitment to a new deal for renters, and I hope that it will ease anxiety for and give security to the 1.85 million people in Scotland who live in rented premises.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mercedes Villalba joins us remotely.

16:36

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): The pandemic has exposed what decades of failed housing policy have done to the rented sector in Scotland. Many tenants are being driven into debt by unaffordable rents and are being forced to live in damp, cold, poor-quality housing. Therefore, I welcome the Scottish Government’s publication of a consultation on a new deal for tenants.

However, let us be clear. It is thanks to activists in tenants unions such as Living Rent, and to campaigning members of the Scottish Parliament such as Pauline McNeill, who lodged a proposal for a fair rents (Scotland) bill, that there are proposals for rent controls in the consultation.

I am concerned by the Scottish Government’s approach to implementing a system of rent controls. The co-operation agreement with the Greens commits to introducing rent controls by the end of 2025, which means that tenants must wait another four years for action to be taken on rents and that landlords will have another four years in which to raise rents with impunity.

Living Rent is calling for urgent action from the Scottish Government. In support of that, the Labour amendment calls for a commitment that

“the legislation establishing the framework for these rent controls must be included in the forthcoming Housing Bill in the second year of the current parliamentary session.”

I hope that all members will support our amendment.

The minister said earlier that no legislative change can come until the consultation has concluded. However, we are in the middle of an unaffordability crisis and every month in which rent controls are delayed is another month in which renters experience increasing debt and insecure homes. I ask the minister to look again at urgent interim measures that can be taken right now to address unaffordable rents.

Rent controls will be vital if we are to improve the quality of rented accommodation and security of tenure. Scotland’s housing stock is in a state of disrepair, with every second home failing the Scottish Government’s quality standards, but

tenants have no real power to force landlords to make repairs and, too often, complaints are met with the threat of eviction. Even if a landlord cannot evict a tenant through a no-fault eviction, they can increase rent and use cost as a weapon to pressure tenants to get out.

In Germany and the Netherlands, rent controls are used to force improvements and repairs to rented housing. We should adopt a similar approach in Scotland, with rent controls serving to incentivise improvements and deter unscrupulous landlords from refusing to make repairs or hiking up rents to secure evictions.

Unaffordable rent is not unique to the private rented sector. In 2019, the Scottish Housing Regulator found that up to 80 per cent of tenants in the social and public rented sector were concerned about their ability to pay rent. Too many social landlords leave tenants with no choice but to accept rent increases. We must democratise social landlords and put tenants at the heart of social landlords' decision making. That is why the Scottish Government must make rent consultations statutory, and the results binding on registered social landlords.

Although my remarks have focused on the need for rent controls and proper consultation on rents, those measures cannot be implemented in isolation. They must be matched by significant improvements in enforcement and measures that enhance tenants' rights, such as ending the practice of tenant reference fees. Given that landlords received 14 times more in financial support than tenants during the pandemic, the Scottish Government now needs to prove to tenants that it is on their side by introducing those changes as a matter of urgency.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to closing speeches. I note that two members are not in the chamber, which is a discourtesy not just to the chair but to other members taking part in the debate. I expect an apology from each of those two members.

16:40

Willie Rennie: This has been quite a good debate. I have enjoyed many of the contributions, which have been quite enlightening. However, I wonder what has happened to Finlay Carson, because he went all cuddly this afternoon about cats and dogs. That is not the character that I am used to. Perhaps, because the Lib Dems are sitting on this side of the chamber now, Finlay Carson has gone all soft, or perhaps he has had too much of the sherry in advance of Christmas. Nevertheless, his was a good contribution, because it got across how much people care about cats and dogs, especially when they are

going through periods of self-isolation. Things like that are incredibly important.

That relates to Audrey Nicoll's comments on health and wellbeing. I am particularly passionate about the need for improved mental health support. It is incredibly important that we take into account the impact of poor housing on people's mental health.

Emma Roddick's contribution was particularly powerful. She talked, from personal experience and with quite a lot of knowledge, about the interoperability of different parts of the housing sector. She talked about holiday lets, short-term lets, second homes and absent landlords, and the impact that that has on people, particularly in the remote and rural communities that Ms Roddick represents. I was full of admiration when she spoke directly to the Scottish Government about the need to improve supply. Supply is at the heart of the Liberal Democrats' amendment, which I hope the Government is able to support, because, if it does, we will be able to support the motion.

It has been a good debate, because we got into some of the complex issues that are at its heart. I was interested in the comments on evictions. We want, of course, to minimise evictions as much as we can. However, it was interesting to read the briefings from Shelter and the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations, which address evictions from slightly different perspectives. Obviously, the SFHA is keen to keep the tool of evictions as a last resort, in order to address the issue of people who simply refuse to pay their rent, even though they can afford to do so. The SFHA tries to keep evictions to a minimum.

On the other hand, Shelter says that there are still far too many evictions in the social rented sector. It is also concerned about illegal evictions in the private rented sector. However, even Shelter admits that we need to keep the tool of evictions as a last resort. It focuses on the need for best practice to avoid people getting into a situation in which they are not paying their rent. Nevertheless, Shelter regards evictions as an important tool that landlords should have available to them. I would be keen to hear the minister explain how that all fits together, and how we can spread best practice without denying the tools of control, so that those who are supposed to pay rent, and can afford to do so, pay the rent that is due.

We have dealt with short-term lets in recent legislation. Some issues, such as licensing, need to be finally resolved, but we have dealt with an important part of the housing market that is contributing to major problems in coastal and remote communities. Second homes, however, are another issue in such areas, including in North East Fife and many constituencies across the

country. There are parts of my constituency where the combination of short-term lets and second homes accounts for something like 80 per cent of the community.

How on earth are we supposed to keep a thriving community together, with local shops, a school, public services and buses, if we do not make efforts to deal with second homes? I was interested in the plan set out in the housing to 2040 strategy, which includes a reference to more powers for local authorities. However, it is scant on details and I would be interested to hear from the minister what more will be proposed and how quickly. The situation is urgent and coastal, remote and rural communities need it to be addressed.

16:45

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): This has been a really interesting debate, describing an issue that has been at the heart of Scottish politics for over a century: the tension in our economy between landlordism and tenants' rights. That perpetual struggle for power has run for decades, it is at the heart of why the Parliament was established and we need to confront it boldly and with imagination. In that spirit, Scottish Labour welcomes the publication of the draft rental sector strategy. We will seek to drive it forward with encouragement and support, and our amendment proposes to inject some pace. I hope that the minister will meet that in the spirit with which it was intended. It was good to have that insight at the start of the debate.

We have had some very good speeches. We are working against the clock. The pressure on tenants is rising daily and, over the past decade, we have seen rent increases in Edinburgh of 46 per cent and in Glasgow of 41 per cent. We know that the longer any bill takes, the more pressure people are under. As incomes continue to stagnate and people experience continued cost pressures, something has to give. It is often the security and fundamental ability of people to live their lives with a sense of mental wellbeing. As many members have said, we have to act urgently to address the housing crisis in our midst.

We have seen the symptoms of the crisis increasing in the past few years because of the pandemic. Once the temporary ban on evictions was removed, we saw social rental evictions due to arrears increase by 975 per cent—that is explosive growth. We have heard estimates that the total of social and private sector rental arrears has climbed to more than £300 million. That is a major pressure.

As Ms Villalba, who represents North East Scotland said, we cannot wait for the crisis point to

address the issue. My colleague from Glasgow, Pauline McNeill, addressed the point about short-term measures that can be implemented, such as protecting renters' rights under the Coronavirus (Scotland) Act 2020, alongside extending powers to end evictions in circumstances where there are no issues related to anti-social, disruptive or criminal behaviour. It is unreasonable for the community to see people being displaced from their homes and ratcheted out of accommodation, resulting in their homelessness, because of private landlordism. That is not something that society can accept; the cost of homelessness is not priced in. It is not something that the community as a whole should bear for the sake of private profit.

The Scottish Government is proposing rent controls and we welcome those in principle. However, our amendment calls on the Government to move faster and to agree framework legislation in the second year of the parliamentary session. I understand that the minister is prepared to accept our amendment; I welcome that and I hope that we can work constructively to deliver that framework at pace, being mindful of the pressures that renters are under.

We have heard about the extent to which insecure tenancies affect people's lives. Members who have personal experience of that have offered some pretty stirring testimony. We can also understand that there are other pressures in the discussion on rent controls. We have to understand what we mean by rent controls: rent control already exists, but the control lies with the landlord and not with the tenant. The strategy is an effort to try to redress the balance of control. Control is constant, but the question is, who has that control? That is what rent controls seek to address.

I noted that there was a question about dogmatism. Let us look at the evidence. I know that one of the Conservative members for the Lothians raised that point. Yes, we are dogmatic about ending poverty and income-related issues that push people into homelessness and other distress as a result of housing costs that are completely out of control because of landlordism. We have to address that issue in our society urgently.

We know that it can work because there are practical examples, although some models have been flawed. In Scotland, there were rent controls in Glasgow from 1915 to 1989, which resulted in significant issues in the city. We have learned from that and there are international models that we can benchmark against. I hope that that is what the proposed legislation will seek to achieve.

In New York, for example, there have been rent controls since the 1940s, and they have not

resulted in the sort of calamitous effects that were described by Conservative members. There is an issue in San Francisco, where pre-1980 properties are subject to rent controls but those built after 1980 are not, which creates a perversity in the market that causes distortions. That can be addressed; what has been described is a false equivalence. It is not a constant that all rent controls are bad. As ever, the devil is in the detail, and we hope to address all that in the course of considering the legislation. That is why Labour supports it.

We broadly support the principles behind the living rent campaign around democratic accountability, which I think was mentioned by the member for East Lothian, referring in particular to the legacy of the right-to-buy scheme causing distortions in the market. At one point, Scotland had the highest level of social tenancies in the world. In Glasgow, it was second only to Hong Kong worldwide for social rented tenancies. We have seen a massive disruption and change in the marketplace over the past 40 years, which we must address.

Things are out of control and we have heard numerous descriptions from members today about the impact that that has had: the lack of control on tenancies, including from the public rented sector, and rampaging profiteering in the market must be addressed. We hope to work constructively as we proceed in the coming months and years to address that with urgency, boldly and with imagination. Let us redress the power of rent controls from the landlord to the tenant.

16:51

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to close the debate on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives. Today we have heard many contributions about the importance of protecting and enhancing tenants' rights, and I welcome the fact that we have had time to debate that.

All too often, the rented sector and tenants themselves have become forgotten elements of the wider debate around housing. Now, there is certainty and opportunity. Over the past two years, the pandemic has shone a light on many of the challenges faced by tenants the length and breadth of the country. In response, the Coronavirus (Scotland) Act 2020 included measures to protect tenants in both the social and private rented sectors from evictions. That was very much welcomed, and the period went from three to six months. Similarly, the Coronavirus (Scotland) (No 2) Act 2020 dealt with students stuck in rental contracts during the Covid pandemic, and they were protected. Measures such as those are entirely justified, and

Conservative members did not hesitate to support them.

It is right, however, that the conversation should now shift and that we are talking about supporting tenants in the long term while we look towards Scotland's recovery from the pandemic. There is much in the rented sector strategy that we can welcome, including measures to prevent illegal evictions and evictions during the winter months.

Although those protections are there, evictions involve what happens to tenants themselves. There is a gap in the rental market, and it has been proposed that new tenancies provide financial guarantees to cover the cost of deposits, for instance. It is perhaps disappointing that such a scheme is not included in the proposals that we are debating today.

It is clear that the main issue faced by tenants is spiralling rents. Some of the largest increases have been in Fife and the Forth valley, in my region, where rents for two-bedroom properties have increased by 5 per cent in the past year, and by more than 30 per cent since 2010. In Fife, rents for three-bedroom properties have increased by 40 per cent, and rents for four-bedroom properties have increased by 72 per cent since 2010 and by 16.5 per cent in the past year alone. Such statistics make it clear that increasing rents will be among the main challenges faced by tenants. We look forward to that being addressed.

Although conversations about increasing tenants' rights are very important, there needs to be a plan to discuss increasing housing. Tenants indeed have the right to protections. However, while we talk about the proposals that will come into effect towards the end of 2025, we should not suppose that they offer a one-stop solution to ensure that rents will be managed. We considered what is happening in the rental market and we discussed some examples from different parts of the country and around the world. In Sweden, rent controls have ensured that there is a second, sublet property market, and there have been waiting lists there of more than a decade. In an attempt to fix one problem on the rental market, we should not inadvertently create another. It is vitally important that we manage the situation. Experience tells us that we should not try to push through such proposals without considering the potential pitfalls.

There have been some very good contributions from across the chamber. I will talk about some of them.

My colleague Miles Briggs spoke about the need to increase the supply of homes and rental properties, rent controls and rent pressure zones. What can happen with them has to be examined in

the process, because there will be different market levels and rents.

Willie Rennie talked about increasing the supply of affordable housing and the key to that being ensuring that the supply is the priority. I believe that that is the case.

Finlay Carson talked about the complexities of the issue. We acknowledge that massive complexities are involved. Rented properties need responsible tenants. There are many responsible tenants and there are many responsible landlords. Finlay Carson also talked about pet-friendly rentals, which have been brought to the fore during the pandemic. They have a part to play in the sector to deal with social isolation and loneliness.

Jeremy Balfour talked about the difficulties that the market faces and short-term assessments that should not be short sighted. We must ensure that we do not fall into that trap and that we understand the needs of the workforce and how sustainable it should and can be.

The Conservatives welcome the efforts to enhance and protect tenants' rights, and we have set out an appropriate timescale for doing that. There will be opportunities for people to contribute during the process. The key focus for the Government needs to be on investment in the housing sector more generally. The bigger problem that renters will face will be the lack of rental properties and maintaining sustainable investment. That is what the Government should address to ensure that change takes place.

It is appropriate that tenants' needs are looked at. We will continue to call for that to ensure that there is a balance, an opportunity and a structure that supports and enhances the sector. I look forward to the debate and discussion that will take place.

16:57

Patrick Harvie: I thank all members who have contributed to a constructive debate. It is clear that there are some issues of substance that we will disagree on. Some are calling on us not to do certain things; others say that we are not going nearly fast enough. We will have those debates and perhaps disagreements—that is all legitimate.

I want to pull out one point that has come across from right across the spectrum. The importance of home has been recognised in speeches from all parties. We have learned more about that and maybe understood that at a deeper level in these days of Covid, in which more people have had to work from home or have been isolated and cooped up together. The necessity of making the right to adequate housing a real, delivered human

right in our society and of recognising that not everybody's right to adequate housing is being met is really important, as is recognising the meaning and importance of home.

Residential properties are not principally speculative investments or substitute pensions; they are principally homes. That is what they are for, and that must be our priority. I hope that, whatever differences we might have on points of detail and individual policies, we will all continue to stick to that principle and work towards the realisation of adequate housing being a human right that has to be met everywhere.

In the time available, I want to run through some of the contributions and, in particular, I want to talk about all the amendments that we will vote on.

Miles Briggs opened for the Conservative Party. Obviously, we disagree on some fundamentals, but we have some important points of agreement. Not least, we thank the organisations that sent briefings. Many of them have worked with me to help to shape our thinking ahead of the publication of the strategy. The Conservatives have expressed support for measures to support those who are experiencing or are at risk of domestic abuse as well as for action on illegal evictions. I think that I heard support for action on winter evictions, as well. If there is any common ground that we have there, I will certainly look forward to working together on that.

However, I do not agree with the Conservative amendment, the budget analysis in it, or the focus, for example, on the rural housing fund. That fund is not, by a long way, the only way in which social housing is provided in rural and islands areas. In fact, during the previous parliamentary session, more than 6,000 social homes were provided in rural and islands areas. The amendment would also delete a lot of the ambition in the Government's motion, so we will not support it.

Miles Briggs: It is a fact, which the minister will have to accept, that the housing budget is being cut by £10 million.

Patrick Harvie: There are contesting analyses of how we look at that budget. That is always the case. Pretty much every year, political parties, analysts and others try to cut and slice the budget in different ways, in order to present their own particular preference.

I will touch on the point of disagreement about rent controls. Miles Briggs asked what assessment had already taken place. We are not yet at the point of having a fully developed proposal on rent controls, but we recognise the depth of the problem and the need for it to be addressed. We are open to hearing all points of view on the particular design of a rent control system. We have been very clear. We need to gather far more

data—detailed data—on rent levels and on the other aspects of the private rented sector before we are able to design and present finalised proposals on that. We will keep an open mind.

Miles Briggs *rose*—

Patrick Harvie: I will take one more intervention, if I have time.

Miles Briggs: I also highlighted the complete failure of rent pressure zones to make any difference. What assessment has taken place of that?

Patrick Harvie: As I have said, it is clear that one of the fatal flaws in that system has been placing the onus—the whole responsibility—on local government to generate the data and produce an evidence base to show that rent pressure zones are necessary. That is why I believe that an effective national system of rent controls is needed.

When it comes to the fixation on market values and on the operation of a free market, it is abundantly clear that such an approach to housing has failed far too many people. In any case, housing is not just a market commodity; it is a human right. There is a moral case for fair rent, which I believe is equal to the moral case for fair wages. These days, few people would question the need for a minimum wage and for the state to intervene in what would otherwise be an extremely exploitative free market. The case that we need to make is every bit as clear.

Finlay Carson: Will the minister take an intervention?

Paul Sweeney: Will the minister give way?

Patrick Harvie: I need to move on, I am afraid.

I come to Labour's position. I recognise the long-standing case for intervention that has been made by Labour colleagues. I believe that our intention to lay the framework for the data collection machinery that we need will start to build on that case. That is what is to be proposed in the year 2 housing bill. From my exchange with Mark Griffin early in the debate, I understood that that was the intention of his amendment, and I will support it on that basis.

It is clear that, if we are to take action, we need to take the time to get the detail right. Some elements of what is proposed in the strategy will take until 2025—near the end of this parliamentary session. Other measures, such as those on rent adjudication, will happen much earlier. I hope that we will continue to work with Labour colleagues on that. In addition, I recognise Pauline McNeill's long-standing work on the issue, and I thank her for the opportunity to work constructively on it, as I will be very happy to do.

We must be clear. This is not about saying, "No change until 2025"—far from it. It is about saying that a schedule of work will begin in the short term and will work through to 2025—for example, on pre-action protocols, as Mark Griffin also mentioned.

There is a review of student accommodation. I will write to Pauline McNeill with more detail on that.

In the Liberal Democrat contribution, Willie Rennie recognised the level of cold, damp, overpriced properties that are still out there—the reality of the problems that the strategy seeks to address. A lot of his focus was on social renting. Pre-pandemic, we were clearly on track to meet the target for delivery for social housing. The pandemic has provided a massive challenge to everybody when it comes to the construction sector, but the 110,000 homes target is a clear commitment. As far as I understand Willie Rennie's amendment, he does not seek to up that figure to an arbitrary and unfunded target but to put pressure on us to deliver the target to which we have committed. On that basis, I will support the amendment.

Finlay Carson: Will the minister give way?

Patrick Harvie: If I have time for one more intervention, I will.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The minister has eight minutes and is closing now.

Patrick Harvie: In that case, I once again thank everyone who has contributed to our thinking in developing the strategy and who has contributed to the debate. It is clear that Scotland is on a journey to a much fairer position for tenants in the private and social rented sectors, as well as in the more niche, unconventional areas of rented accommodation. I invite the Parliament to share my ambition for a new deal for tenants in Scotland to make that fairer Scotland possible, and to support the Government motion as well as the Labour and Liberal Democrat amendments.

Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill

17:05

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of legislative consent motion S6M-02618, in the name of Keith Brown, on the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, which is United Kingdom legislation.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the relevant provisions of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, introduced in the House of Commons on 9 March 2021, relating to the power to extract information from digital devices of witnesses, victims and others, so far as these matters fall within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament, should be considered by the UK Parliament.—
[Keith Brown]

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

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

17:06

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of three Parliamentary Bureau motions. I call George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move motions S6M-02651, S6M-02652 and S6M-02653, on suspension and variation of standing orders.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that Temporary Standing Orders Rule 4 be amended in paragraph 1 to delete “31 December 2021” and insert “11 February 2022”.

That the Parliament agrees that, for the purposes of committee meetings up to 11 February 2022—

(a) in Rule 6.3A.1 after “member” the words “or members” be inserted;

(b) Rule 6.3A.2 be suspended;

(c) in Rule 6.3A.4 the first sentence be suspended;

(d) after Rule 6.3A.5(d) the words “(e) a political party withdraws in writing to the Bureau that nomination of the member or members nominated for the purposes of committee meetings up to 11 February 2022.” be inserted; and

(e) in Rule 12.1.15 the words “(other than a committee substitute)” be omitted in both instances where they occur.

That the Parliament agrees that Temporary Standing Orders Rule 3 be amended—

(a) in paragraph 1 to delete “24 December 2021” and insert “11 February 2022”; and

(b) in paragraph 2 to delete “24 December 2021” and insert “11 February 2022”.—[George Adam]

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

Decision Time

17:06

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

There are six questions to be put as a result of today's business. I remind members that if the amendment in the name of Miles Briggs is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Mark Griffin will fall.

The first question is, that amendment S6M-02625.1, in the name of Miles Briggs, which seeks to amend motion S6M-02625, in the name of Patrick Harvie, on a new deal for tenants, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division. There will be a short suspension to allow members to access the digital voting system.

17:07

Meeting suspended.

17:11

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We come to the division on amendment S6M-02625.1. I remind members that, if the amendment in the name of Miles Briggs is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Mark Griffin will fall. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is now closed.

Joe FitzPatrick (Dundee City West) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I could not vote. I would have voted against the amendment.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr FitzPatrick. We will ensure that that is recorded.

For

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lockhart, Dean (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)

McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the vote on amendment S6M-02625.1, in the name of Miles Briggs, is: For 28, Against 89, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-02625.2, in the name of Mark Griffin, which seeks to amend motion S6M-02625, in the name of Patrick Harvie, on a new deal for tenants, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)

Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Against

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)

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

The Presiding Officer: The result of the vote on amendment S6M-02625.2, in the name of Mark Griffin, is: For 88, Against 28, Abstentions 0.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-02625.3, in the name of Willie Rennie, which seeks to amend motion S6M-02625, in the name of Patrick Harvie, on a new deal for tenants, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The fourth question is, that motion S6M-02625, in the name of Patrick Harvie, on a new deal for tenants, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)

Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Against

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

The Presiding Officer: The result of the vote on motion S6M-02625, in the name of Patrick Harvie, on a new deal for tenants, as amended, is: For 89, Against 28, Abstentions 0.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament notes the publication of the consultation on *A New Deal for Tenants*, which seeks views on the Scottish Government's ambitious plans for the rented sector; agrees that the 1.85 million people who live in the rented sector should have improved quality, standards and rights in the place they call home; supports the aims of *A New Deal for Tenants* to ensure tenants have more secure and stable tenancies, flexibility to personalise their homes, improved safeguards against eviction, improved regulation and effective national rent controls in the private sector; agrees that the legislation establishing the framework for these rent controls must be included in the forthcoming Housing Bill in the second year of the current parliamentary session; recognises that this strategy will support progress towards the human right of an adequate home for all; welcomes, therefore, this draft strategy seeking to make renting a home more affordable, safer, with a higher quality, better managed and more secure; urges the Scottish Government to also address the issues around the availability of private rented properties; considers that it should increase its ambitions for the building of more homes for social rent, and believes that increasing the supply of affordable rented housing is necessary to give people security, stabilise the housing market and support progress towards the human right of an adequate home for all.

The Presiding Officer: The fifth question is, that motion S6M-02618, in the name of Keith Brown, on the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, which is United Kingdom legislation, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the relevant provisions of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, introduced in the House of Commons on 9 March 2021, relating to the power to extract information from digital devices of witnesses, victims and others, so far as these matters fall within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament, should be considered by the UK Parliament.

The Presiding Officer: I propose to ask a single question on the three Parliamentary Bureau motions. Does any member object?

No member has objected.

The final question is, that motions S6M-02651, S6M-02652 and S6M-02653, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, be agreed to.

Motions agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that Temporary Standing Orders Rule 4 be amended in paragraph 1 to delete "31 December 2021" and insert "11 February 2022".

That the Parliament agrees that, for the purposes of committee meetings up to 11 February 2022—

(a) in Rule 6.3A.1 after "member" the words "or members" be inserted;

(b) Rule 6.3A.2 be suspended;

(c) in Rule 6.3A.4 the first sentence be suspended;

(d) after Rule 6.3A.5(d) the words "(e) a political party withdraws in writing to the Bureau that nomination of the member or members nominated for the purposes of committee meetings up to 11 February 2022." be inserted; and

(e) in Rule 12.1.15 the words "(other than a committee substitute)" be omitted in both instances where they occur.

That the Parliament agrees that Temporary Standing Orders Rule 3 be amended—

(a) in paragraph 1 to delete "24 December 2021" and insert "11 February 2022"; and

(b) in paragraph 2 to delete "24 December 2021" and insert "11 February 2022".

Point of Order

17:19

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

At the start of my speech during the debate on a new deal for tenants, I forgot to declare my interest as a member of Acorn Tenants Union and Living Rent tenants union.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Thank you, Ms Villalba. Your comment is on the record.

Covid-19 Vaccines

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The final item of business today is a members' business debate on motion S6M-02360, in the name of Sarah Boyack, on ending pharmaceutical monopolies of Covid-19 vaccines. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes the calls by a coalition of Scottish charities to support the ending of what it considers to be pharmaceutical monopolies; understands that these monopolies are reportedly artificially limiting vaccine supply to low-income countries; considers that vaccine inequality has resulted from a handful of pharmaceutical companies rationing supply, by refusing to share their vaccine recipes and know-how with the rest of the world, and notes the calls on the Prime Minister to back plans to waive intellectual property rules and to insist that vaccine know-how and technology is shared via the World Health Organization's COVID-19 Technology Access Pool, in order to enable a life-saving escalation in global vaccine production and help avoid the development of further COVID-19 variants like Omicron, which may impact people in Scotland, including in the Lothian region.

17:22

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): First, I thank colleagues for their support in securing tonight's debate. If the past few months have taught us anything, it is that we are not safe until everyone is safe.

There is massive inequality in access to vaccines across the globe. As of last week, in high-income countries, 66.3 per cent of people had been vaccinated with at least one dose, but in low-income countries only 9 per cent of people had been.

Therefore, with omicron cases rising daily, it has never been more important to debate the need to end pharmaceutical monopolies of Covid-19 vaccines. To address the cost of vaccinating 70 per cent of the population in high-income countries would mean an increase of 0.8 per cent in healthcare spending; in low-income countries, an eye-watering 56.6 per cent increase would be needed. That money is simply not available.

In an excellent briefing, the People's Vaccine Alliance noted that work has been going on to get a solution. It said that, in October 2020:

"South Africa and India submitted a joint proposal to the TRIPS (Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights) Council at the World Trade Organisation (WTO), titled 'Waiver from certain provisions of the TRIPS agreement for the prevention, containment and treatment of COVID-19'. The UK Government rejected the text on the Waiver at the TRIPS Council meeting"—

in October of that year—

“saying that it was not necessary whilst also stating that existing measures to overcome Intellectual Property (IP) barriers would suffice.

The Waiver would allow all WTO members to choose to not grant or not enforce patents and other IP related to COVID-19 drugs, vaccines, diagnostics and other technologies until widespread vaccination is in place globally, and the majority of the world’s population has developed immunity ... The proposed waiver would be applicable only to COVID-19 health technologies.”

In debates and discussions about vaccinations, it is easy to get caught up in the numbers and the percentages. A key job for MSPs is to scrutinise our Government on how it makes vaccines and boosters accessible to our constituents.

However, we know that the greater the delay in rolling out vaccines globally, the more people suffer. Right now, as Oxfam has pointed out in its campaign, the whole world is dependent on just a handful of pharmaceutical corporations, which simply cannot make enough vaccines for everyone.

As a country that, rightly, prides itself on the universality of our national health service, it is morally indefensible that we are not taking every possible action to waive the rules that are creating vaccine monopolies and allowing large pharmaceutical companies to profit off the back of a global pandemic.

In my motion, I note that monopolies are artificially limiting vaccine supply to low-income countries and that that vaccine inequality has resulted from a handful of pharmaceutical companies rationing supply by refusing to share their vaccine recipes and know-how with the rest of the world. That must end now.

As former Prime Minister Gordon Brown highlighted in *The Guardian*,

“In June, Boris Johnson promised he and the G7 countries would use their surplus vaccines to immunise the whole world. In September, at a summit chaired by President Biden, a December target of 40% vaccination was set for the 92 poorest countries. Two and a half months on, there is little chance of this target being met in at least 82 of them. By Thursday the US, which to its credit has been responsible for half the vaccines donated, had still delivered only 25% of the vaccines that it promised.”

The world is now living with the consequences of those broken promises.

It is not all doom and gloom. I welcome the fantastic work of the People’s Vaccine Alliance. Comprised of organisations that include Oxfam, Christian Aid, and Global Justice Now, the People’s Vaccine Alliance continues to advocate for fairness and an end to the vaccine inequalities.

I lodged a previous motion on this issue, which was similar to the one that we debate today. It gained the support of 55 members of the Scottish Parliament. To the First Minister’s credit, after it

was lodged, she wrote to the Prime Minister to urge him to support the waiver.

However, one letter is not enough. I want to hear what work the Scottish Government is doing behind the scenes with United Kingdom Government colleagues and campaigners to ensure that those who are opposed to the waiver are challenged.

To the Conservatives in this Parliament I say, what work are you doing to communicate with colleagues in Westminster to get a different outcome?

In June, the European Parliament supported a temporary Covid-19 vaccine patent waiver. The vote was not unanimous but it reflected a strong agreement that action is urgently needed to produce affordable vaccines that can be distributed across the globe.

Evidence from the Covid-19 response so far and from many other public health issues throughout history, including the AIDS crisis in the 2000s, clearly illustrates that intellectual property rights restrict access. The situation will only get worse, unless Governments intervene.

The issue of high-priced medicines has become a global problem that affects not just low-income but middle and high-income countries. In the UK in the past few years, a breakthrough hepatitis C medicine has been rationed on the NHS, due to its high cost; cancer patients have had to crowd fund and campaign for treatments that have not been available on the NHS; and cystic fibrosis patients have had to wait more than three years to access a new therapy, as the pharmaceutical company priced the drug above the reach of our NHS.

Even though we have vaccines, in Scotland our NHS is under massive pressure from the pandemic. I ask colleagues to imagine what the Covid pressures look like in a low-income country with a small health budget and even fewer resources.

I again thank members for their support in securing this debate. I will continue to campaign on the need for political action and to focus on the concrete steps that we, through the Scottish Parliament and as individual MSPs, can take to bring vaccine equality globally.

We need a life-saving escalation in global vaccine production to ensure that people in low-income countries are kept safe. As I said, we are not safe until everyone is safe.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you Ms Boyack. I remind all members to direct their comments through the chair.

17:29

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I congratulate Sarah Boyack on securing the debate. Ms Boyack has rightly outlined the issue of vaccine monopolies. I remind members that I am a nurse and I am part of NHS Dumfries and Galloway's vaccine team. I have not done many booster shifts recently, but I have one scheduled on 30 December.

I support the calls from charities for the Prime Minister to waive intellectual property rules and to insist that vaccine technology is shared with the World Health Organization's Covid-19 technology access pool.

As Action Aid points out, more than 200 million people have contracted Covid-19 infection during the pandemic, more than 4.5 million people have died and at least nine new billionaires have been minted because of Covid. That must change. Instead of creating vaccine billionaires, we must vaccinate the billions of people across the globe. Access to vaccines is not solely about ethics or fairness; it is also about reducing and limiting the reach and spread of a global and deadly virus.

Ensuring global access to Covid-19 vaccinations is in everyone's interest. It will have many knock-on advantages for societies, economies, businesses and supply chains across the whole globe. At the end of September, the United Nations chief, António Guterres, spoke to world leaders on the disgraceful state of vaccine inequality, calling it

"a moral indictment of the state of our world. It is an obscenity."

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, vaccines have been produced. Although the proportion of the population needed to safely achieve global immunity to Covid-19 is uncertain, the World Health Organization has highlighted that herd immunity against measles and polio required 80 to 95 per cent of the population to be vaccinated.

That means that to be more effective the use of vaccines will likely need to be more widespread, globally. However, vaccine availability currently differs vastly from country to country. Work by the Our World in Data project, associated with the University of Oxford, has shown the differences in availability of vaccines. Using data from Governments and health ministries around the world, the project provides daily updates on global vaccination levels.

On 23 August 2021, it reported that 32.5 per cent of the world population had received at least one dose of a Covid-19 vaccine and 24.5 per cent had received two vaccine doses. However, only 1.4 per cent of people in low-income countries have received at least one dose. Many of those low-income countries could be considered part of

the global south and 1.4 per cent is an incredibly low number.

In April 2020, a global initiative called COVAX was set up to ensure fair access to Covid-19 vaccines between countries, regardless of their income level. Jointly directed by the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations, Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance and the World Health Organization, the initiative pools global funding to invest in research, manufacture, purchase, and distribution of vaccines.

However, most high-income countries, including the UK, have made direct deals with manufacturers. That has led to high-income countries dominating the purchasing and administration of vaccines. As a consequence, vast regions of the world experiencing a rapid rise in COVID cases and deaths are unable to access vaccines, which are our primary route out of the pandemic.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I hope that Emma Harper recognises that it was the advance purchases that the major economies of the world were prepared to make, even while there was no vaccine in existence, that supported the research, development and introduction of the vaccines. That is a good thing. I hope that Emma Harper is not denigrating the actions of the UK Government and other Governments around the world in making those very wise investment decisions.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give Emma Harper the time back.

Emma Harper: Thank you, Presiding Officer. I thank Stephen Kerr for that intervention. I am keen to ensure that we are aware that a lot of public funding from the UK went into the development of the vaccines. It is great that we have the vaccines, but, as Sarah Boyack pointed out, we are just going to go round and round with new variants, which I come on to in more detail.

Pfizer and Moderna are currently selling more than 90 per cent of their vaccines to rich countries, charging up to 24 times the potential cost of production, according to analysis by the People's Vaccine Alliance. It costs around \$1.08 to produce a vaccine dose, but they are being sold to countries in the global south for \$9.72 each.

Last week, a former surgeon colleague of mine, Fanus Dreyer, who is the new president of the International Federation of Surgical Colleges, told me that the only way to reduce new variants and the transmission of the virus is to ensure that the world is vaccinated. That echoes exactly the words of António Guterres, who said:

"If the virus is allowed to spread like wildfire in the Global South ... it will mutate again and again ... This can prolong

the pandemic significantly, enabling the virus to come back to plague the Global North.”

It benefits us if we do whatever we can to make the vaccine available globally. I again call on the Prime Minister to act in the interest of public health, address intellectual property law and ensure that vaccine technology and know-how are shared globally.

17:35

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I am delighted to support Sarah Boyack in this important debate. Adequate healthcare is a basic right that everyone should enjoy. That includes the right to be vaccinated against Covid.

Had we taken that approach globally, rather than simply considering Covid as a national issue, we might not be in the situation that we are in now. From the first moments that the crisis struck, a strange territorialism emerged rather than the co-operation that we need. Whether it means seeking to apportion blame to China or looking at vaccination tables like a football league, that attitude is wrong.

Prevention and co-operation have worked at their best in the rapidity of the vaccine production and the goodwill from members of our own communities, who have looked after each other. Every one of us has been impressed by that spirit. I assure members that not one person to whom I have spoken thinks that it is wise to deprive others of the vaccine simply to protect corporate intellectual property.

We must also recognise that the idea that the vaccines were created by the private sector alone is utter nonsense. There is no such thing as solely private sector research and development when it comes to pharmaceuticals. Most of the technologies and formulas that were used to reach the point at which a vaccine could even be made possible began decades ago in state-funded laboratories throughout the world. The pharmaceutical companies have found success on the back of others' work; it is not a solo effort.

By refusing to make the formulas and vaccines available globally, we are simply shooting ourselves in the foot as well as dooming millions to the worst possible exposure to Covid. A significant number of those millions will die. We can have lockdown after lockdown but, in a global and free-flowing economy, the movement of people will always bring new cases and new strains back to our shores.

Why, then, should companies that have benefited from state subsidy and public research be able to deprive in-need countries of vaccine technology and know-how or make them

completely unaffordable? Those acts are the worst aspects of market capitalism and truly shameful.

The fact is that plenty of people have looked at Covid as an opportunity and raked in cash. Whether it is dodgy personal protective equipment companies with links to UK ministers or multinational retailers hiking up prices, a cash grab is going on and it must not be allowed to happen with people's health.

We have at least some good fortune in the UK, where tests, vaccines and treatments are all free. Sadly, in the world's wealthiest nations, people are expected to bankrupt themselves to fund simple drugs such as insulin and are now being asked to pay for Covid tests, too. Their homes are being taken away and their livelihoods are being ruined just so that they can make it to the next month.

I know that my party says this a lot, but thank goodness for the NHS and the fantastic work of the pioneers in the 1940s. Otherwise, we, too, could have ended up with a similar system based on primal greed and selfishness.

In the spirit of that legacy, I back Sarah Boyack's call to the Prime Minister. We must waive intellectual property rules and insist that the vaccine know-how and technology be shared via the World Health Organization's Covid-19 technology access pool as soon as possible. Britain should lead the way on something positive, rather than spending all our time discussing how to cut overseas aid or close our borders to fleeing refugees. We must do the right thing. That would be a Christmas message to send to the world.

17:39

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): I also thank my Lothian colleague Sarah Boyack for bringing this debate to the chamber.

The UK Government is already supplying vaccines to less-developed, low-income countries, and the World Health Organization has acknowledged that the UK is a leading country in that respect. By the end of 2021, the UK Government will have donated 20 million more Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccines to countries in need, as part of our country's 100 million commitment. A further 10 million Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccines have been sent from the UK to COVAX. Those additional donations mean that 30.6 million surplus doses of Oxford-AstraZeneca will have been given to those in need in 2021, and further donations in 2022 will mean that the entire UK Janssen supply and half of the UK Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine supply will have been or will be donated to countries in need.

Oxford-AZ is one of the world's most widely used vaccines, accounting for more than half of all

COVAX deliveries. Thanks to AstraZeneca's commitment to the UK Government to distribute the vaccine on a non-profit basis, 1.5 billion doses have been used in more than 170 countries.

Stephen Kerr: Does my colleague agree that the rhetoric that we heard a few moments ago from Carol Mochan is regrettable? To rail against businesses such as AstraZeneca that are doing what they are doing in conjunction with Governments, including the UK Government, in the way that we have just heard from Carol Mochan is deeply regrettable, is it not?

Sue Webber: Yes, indeed. We have the best scientists in this country, at universities and in industry, and it was Government, industry and research that together gave us the opportunity to lead the way in vaccination.

Surplus donations alone will not be enough to allow us to defeat the pandemic. That is why the UK is backing the Oxford-AstraZeneca production model, while providing developing countries with the financial support that they need to obtain vaccines. It is not as simple as giving the intellectual property away to developing countries, as the manufacturing process might not be able to deliver the product in some places. That has been stated by AstraZeneca. However, the commitment to providing the initially developed vaccine at cost in perpetuity for less developed countries is extremely welcome.

Domestic need for the current booster programme will be met through our mRNA vaccines and Oxford-AstraZeneca, meaning that the UK can donate its full Janssen order to developing countries. The UK continues to proactively manage our vaccine supply and does not hold a stockpile of Covid vaccines. All the procured regulated doses are either used rapidly by our domestic programme or are being shared internationally with countries in need.

Let us not ignore the role of other manufacturing arrangements that are being made: Gavi announced at the start of December that it had reached an agreement to access an additional 150 million doses of the mRNA vaccine against Covid-19 manufactured by Moderna, to be made available to COVAX at the lowest global tiered price. That amendment to the existing advance purchase agreement between Gavi and Moderna means that a total of up to 650 million doses of the Moderna vaccine could be available to COVAX participants through 2021 and 2022. Furthermore, as part of an urgent call for manufacturers to prioritise supply to COVAX, Gavi and Moderna have reached an agreement to make 20 million doses available to COVAX. Those doses, which were originally scheduled to be released to COVAX in quarter 1 of 2022, will now be available in this quarter, accelerating the response. We

need to be mindful and to acknowledge how those innovative global initiatives between Governments, research and industry are all coming together to tackle the massive challenge ahead of us.

We are not out of this pandemic until we are all out of this pandemic, as Ms Boyack said. We need to help others while ensuring that we contain the virus here. I therefore welcome the UK Government's commitment and action to send 100 million vaccines to countries in need.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind members who wish to participate, including by intervention, that they need to put their cards in their devices.

17:44

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): I thank my friend Sarah Boyack for tabling the debate in Parliament.

Covid has brought out the very best in our society, but it has also brought out some of the very worst. In our local communities, we have seen solidarity in action and the power of people coming together, helping one another and benefiting everyone. In the globalised world of big business, however, too many have viewed the pandemic and the human misery it has wrought as a commercial opportunity—a racket from which excessive profits can be plundered.

Take the giant pharmaceutical companies—monopolistic private corporations benefiting from billions of pounds of public money to research and develop the Covid vaccines and now raking off massive payouts to line the pockets of the idle and undeserving rich. The People's Vaccine Alliance, which includes leading UK charities such as Oxfam and ActionAid, estimates that Pfizer, BioNTech and Moderna stand to siphon off almost £50,000 a minute in profits this year alone. That is double the median annual wage in Scotland every minute.

Emma Harper: One figure that I quoted was that it costs \$1.08 to produce a vaccine dose, but that vaccine is being sold to countries in the global south for \$9.72 per dose. Does the member think that that should be addressed?

Richard Leonard: Yes, I do. That is why the motion talks about monopolies and excessive profiteering. That is what is going on.

Let us take AstraZeneca as an example. Until very recently, it made a virtue of selling doses at cost price, but it is still laughing all the way to the bank after making the equivalent of £1.5 billion from its vaccine in the first nine months of this year. If you want to know what an upward curve looks like, compare Moderna's share price in early 2020 to its share price today.

There are those who say that when businesses profit, we all do. I do not believe that. If it was true, we would all be sharing in the success of big pharma. If it was true, vaccine rates in poorer countries would not be catastrophically low. If it was true, the walls of patent protection, of the general agreement on trade in services and of trade-related intellectual property rights would be tumbling down, but they are not.

We hear complaints about delays in getting access to the vaccine here and of booster appointments not being available before the bells but a month away, but when we think that fewer than 6 per cent of people in Africa are fully vaccinated at all and that in Africa's largest nation, Nigeria, that figure is just 2 per cent, a much bigger crime is taking place right in front of us.

It is no wonder that nursing trade unions representing more than 2.5 million health workers across 28 countries have described the situation as "vaccine apartheid". They are right. They have lodged a formal challenge before the United Nations over the refusal of the UK, Switzerland, the European Union and others, under pressure from those drugs companies, to lift the patents on Covid vaccines. South Africa, where omicron was first identified, has been one of the countries pressing the World Trade Organization to change the rules to widen access.

I say to those, including those Tory members, who continue to oppose this that the public health case is irresistible, the humanitarian justification is unanswerable and the moral case is irrefutable. If we do not act now, we are not only putting more people's lives at risk, we are condemning the world to a cycle of outbreak, containment, outbreak, containment.

Waiving those patents would be an act of equality and an expression of our common humanity. Of course, it would need to be forged into a reality by global investment in the mass production, distribution and exchange of vaccines across the world.

The skewed allocation of the worldwide vaccine roll-out is one of the clearest examples that we have of not just the global inequality of wealth but the global inequality of power.

In many ways, the pandemic has given us a glimpse of how things could be—that solidarity that we have seen in our communities—but it has also shone a light on how unequal our society is. So let us start here. Let us end this racket. Let us put the needs of the people before the greed and profiteering of the corporations. Let us get behind a people's vaccine, and let us go into 2022 with renewed hope that, together, we can defeat the virus, and with the message loud and clear that we

simply cannot and we simply will not wait any longer for global justice.

17:50

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I thank Sarah Boyack for bringing this debate to the Parliament, and I acknowledge and thank all the organisations that she referred to that are campaigning against vaccine apartheid.

As someone who is double vaccinated and boosted by the bells, I am grateful to all those involved in the development, distribution and giving of the vaccines. However, I am aware that I am in a hugely privileged position, and of how easy it is to take all this for granted. I have not always had the comfort of access to healthcare free at the point of need or the certainty of preventative medical care when needed, and every time that I speak to family and friends in southern Africa, I am reminded of just how lucky I am and how unequal the world is.

I refer to luck, but luck really has very little to do with it. The global health inequalities that we see are a product of political and economic decisions, of colonialism and empire. As we have already heard, they are a product of capitalism and greed.

Why do we accept a world in which generic life-saving drugs, such as those for HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria, which the World Health Organization includes on its essential medicines list, can be sold at prices that are up to 150 times the cost of producing, packaging and taxing them, and then a 10 per cent profit is added? Those are the generic medicines. Brand-named drugs can be much more expensive. Emma Harper outlined the cost to price differential of Covid vaccines. Why do we accept that?

We know that the global health inequalities that we see are not inevitable. That means that, if we seriously believe that no one is safe until everyone is safe, we need to change the unequal and unjust system.

We know that one of the key reasons why omicron and other novel variants of Covid will arise is that vaccines have not been made available to the global south in anything like the numbers needed. Three billion will be needed in early 2022. [*Interruption.*] No, I will not take an intervention.

While we are getting third doses, many have not had access to even one dose. That creates the conditions for viruses to mutate and avoid the human immune system, just as SARS-CoV-2 has done in developing the delta and then the omicron variants. It is truly the case with vaccines that the only way for any of us to be safe is for all of us to be vaccinated.

The argument for making vaccines available to the global south is one of social justice and global justice, but it is also one of self-interest. We need to ensure that we have vaccine equality, and the proposal that we deploy the trade-related aspects of intellectual property rights—TRIPS—exclusion for vaccine manufacture is vital. The decision by countries, particularly the United States, to stockpile vaccines only for them to go out of date and be destroyed is criminal. I am sure that many around the chamber will join me in condemning such atrocious selfishness.

However, we need to do more. Even if we had the vaccines available, the global south does not necessarily have all the infrastructure that it needs to roll them out at the rate that is needed to keep us all safe. That is one function of our neo-colonial approach to the global south, but it is something that we can and must rapidly fix.

We know that mRNA vaccines will give us the opportunity to develop resistance to a much wider range of viruses. From the human papillomavirus vaccine to the potential HIV vaccine, we should offer those in the global south access to newly available immunisations by building a global vaccine programme that can quickly be switched to emergency vaccination for the next novel virus that could decimate lives across the world. Such infrastructure will offer real and on-going defences.

While billionaires are going on joyrides in space, a really fitting mission for our world would be to create a global programme for vaccinating as many people as possible as quickly as possible. It is more than time for us to wrest power from the pharmaceutical companies and their interests, and act in the interests of all so that we can all be truly safe.

17:55

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): I thank Sarah Boyack for securing the debate. We have heard some stirring speeches already.

From what we have heard this evening, it is clear that viruses have no regard for the invention of national barriers; they flow with the current of humanity around the world. That interdependence is one of the great strengths of a civilisation but, as we have seen in the past couple of years, it is also a major vulnerability. To not have a coherent global vaccination strategy is a bit like having your house go on fire but only being interested in putting out the fire in the room that you are in; eventually, the house will be engulfed in flames anyway. Worse still, we are denying our house-mates the tools to fight the fire. We have seen that with the omicron variant, which originated in South Africa, a country with a fully vaccinated rate of only 26 per cent. Omicron has made its way to the UK,

resulting in increased restrictions on our lives once again.

People should be in no doubt that, unless we make vaccinating the rest of the world a priority, history will repeat itself with new variants time and again. Just three weeks ago, the UK acquired 114 million doses of Pfizer and Moderna vaccines, and of the more than 450 million doses that it has acquired since the start of the pandemic, the UK has donated just 70 million to the global south. That figure must be increased dramatically.

Given the significant public investment and expenditure that went into funding the development of the vaccines in the first place, surely we, the citizens, should expect better from the manufacturers. As time goes by, barriers to vaccine production at a global scale have been erected by large vaccine manufacturers, and we are all paying the price.

In Africa, one in four health workers are vaccinated, while in developed countries, three in four health workers have received their vaccinations. In the general population, a mere 8 per cent of adults in Africa are vaccinated. The effort to increase equality across the world cannot simply mean donating surplus vaccines from our own stocks, which is a move that simply foists vaccines with short expiry dates on strained healthcare systems that cannot always administer them. There must be a fundamental rethink of the way in which the intellectual property for vaccines operates. Right now, it is undoubtedly in the global public interest to provide access to vaccines and the technologies that are required to produce them in the regions that need them most.

It has been more than a year since the South African and Indian delegations to the World Trade Organization tabled their proposals to temporarily waive the TRIPS intellectual property protections governing Covid-19 vaccines, diagnostics and therapeutics. Seventy-seven per cent of the 6.4 billion vaccine doses so far administered globally have gone to people in high and upper-middle-income countries. However, the proposal remains stalled, despite the support of more than 100 countries. European and UK opposition arising from nebulous concerns about the impact on pharmaceutical innovation has been enough to block the adoption of the waiver. At the very least, as Rachel Thrasher, a researcher at Boston University's global development policy centre, says,

"if we had taken that step a year ago and started that process a year ago, a lot of countries would be in a better spot. We would be facing a different global landscape."

A position of lack of control over production capacity amid rampant vaccine nationalism has resulted in only nine Africa countries hitting a World Health Organization benchmark of

vaccinating 10 per cent of their populations by the end of September this year. Now we understand that the price that we have to pay to install vaccine production capacity around the world is far smaller than the price that we are all paying now as a result of the omicron variant. That goes to a tension at the heart of our public and private realms—self-interest and the private profit interest versus the public good that benefits all mankind. We are seeing that play out in the UK. Conservative members made much play about the UK vaccine, but the UK Government is about to sell the Vaccine Manufacturing and Innovation Centre in Oxfordshire, which is yet to open, despite the investment of £200 million to ensure that we would have vaccine sovereignty in the UK and control of the distribution and production of vaccines globally.

The French company Valneva, which had invested in a vaccine production facility in Livingston, has now stopped that effort because of the UK's controversial decision in September to cancel its order for Valneva vaccines. The decision not to continue that investment has been described as a “disaster” and is an example of how we are not even making an effort to build vaccine sovereignty in the UK, never mind to provide justice for the rest of the world.

18:00

The Minister for Public Health, Women's Health and Sport (Maree Todd): I thank Ms Boyack for raising this issue. I fully recognise that the Covid-19 pandemic is an unprecedented global health crisis. The emergence of the omicron variant serves as a stark reminder that no one will be safe until we are all safe, as many members have said. The crisis calls for an unprecedented global response and, frankly, that is what we have seen from pharmaceutical companies.

As the First Minister outlined on Friday, omicron has now become the dominant strain in Scotland. The surge in case numbers is already putting significant pressure on our health services and will have an impact on businesses. Scotland has made difficult decisions to introduce new measures to combat the rising wave of omicron cases. We all need to play our part in slowing down the speed of transmission, including by reducing social contact, taking a test before joining activities and, most important, getting vaccinated.

I agree that more action is needed to prevent new, more dangerous variants from developing and spreading across the globe. The best action that is available to us is to vaccinate as many people worldwide as possible, which will help to protect lives and livelihoods globally.

At the start of the pandemic, it was far from certain that we would have vaccines available for use within a year. On 8 December 2020, the UK became the first country in the world to deploy an approved Covid-19 vaccination. As a pharmacist, I am in awe of the speed of that development. It is quite incredible how many academic brains came together, with underwriting from Governments, to rise to meet a global challenge. It is astonishing that we managed, in one year, to develop a vaccine. I hope that we can maintain that collaborative effort for future use, because we have plenty more challenges that I would like us to work together on.

The World Health Organization currently recognises nine vaccines, and several more are under development. It is estimated that those vaccines, alongside other non-pharmaceutical interventions, such as hand hygiene and wearing face masks, have halved the number of potential global fatalities from Covid-19. They have saved more than 27,000 lives here in Scotland. It is important to recognise the vital work that researchers, manufacturers and all those involved in developing the vaccines have contributed and continue to contribute. It is thanks to their collective efforts that we have a range of safe and effective vaccines available.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): How is the Scottish Government planning to work with vaccine-producing companies to deliver a corporately and socially responsible approach that results in Covid-19 vaccines being provided worldwide?

Maree Todd: I will come on to the details on that—that is the bulk of my speech. I will not respond to that intervention just now, but I will say what we are doing.

The continued work of academics, alongside public health professionals, to sequence and share data on the virus will be pivotal in enabling us to respond to new variants that might escape the protection that is afforded by existing vaccines.

I recognise the important work that many Scottish charities are doing. In particular, members of the People's Vaccine Alliance have worked hard to ensure that vaccine equity remains high on our agenda. I also commend the monumental efforts of vaccinators and public health professionals in delivering Scotland's largest ever vaccination programme, and the solidarity of the people of Scotland in rolling up their sleeves to participate in that achievement—it really has felt like a national effort.

As a global citizen, the Scottish Government is committed to international solidarity, not just in response to Covid-19 but in tackling other shared global challenges, including poverty, injustice and

inequality. So far, we have allocated £3.5 million of our international development budget to support the Covid-19 response in our partner countries of Malawi, Rwanda, Zambia and Pakistan. We have provided funding to support vaccine preparedness and delivery, including £2 million to UNICEF to help with vaccine distribution and roll-out as well as online healthcare education.

We are also committing a further £1.5 million from our international development fund in this financial year specifically for initiatives that are responding to Covid-19 in Malawi, Rwanda and Zambia. Our international development work continues to support those who are most vulnerable to the impacts of Covid-19, including women and girls, through a new equalities programme.

The UK's participation in the COVAX initiative is an important step in helping other nations to access Covid-19 vaccines, but the initial aim of making 2 billion doses available by the end of 2021 is likely to be missed. Demand for Covid-19 vaccines will continue to outstrip supply. As of 14 December 2021, only 7.2 per cent of people in low-income countries had received at least one dose. Further, COVAX is not designed to build and expand vaccine production capacity. As members are aware, on 9 December, the First Minister urged the Prime Minister to support a temporary waiver for Covid-19 vaccines under the World Trade Organization's agreement on trade-related aspects of international property rights.

That waiver is one measure that would help to facilitate critical access to patents, technology and know-how. It would enable global expansion of vaccine manufacturing and distribution, including in low and middle-income countries. Increasing global manufacturing capacity will benefit all countries and provide additional much-needed supply chain resilience. It is also an important step towards building local capacity and know-how here in Scotland, which will be invaluable for future pandemics.

Paul Sweeney: Will the minister address the issue of the sale of the Vaccines Manufacturing and Innovation Centre in Oxfordshire? The centre was highlighted as a major opportunity to ensure that Government-sponsored vaccine manufacturing capacity would be a vital component of the UK's preparedness for future pandemics, but it will now be lost. What could be done in Scotland to develop an equivalent capability?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am happy to give you the time back for both of the interventions, minister.

Maree Todd: Thank you.

As Paul Sweeney will know, my colleague Ivan McKee works closely with the life sciences industry, and I sit on a group with that industry. We are keen to build capacity to rise to all the challenges. At the start of the pandemic, when there was a global shortage of personal protective equipment, we did great work to ensure that PPE could be manufactured and produced in Scotland. We are keen to do the same for every aspect that we might need in future, such as vaccine manufacture, testing facilities and genomic sequencing know-how. All those things are on our radar, because we recognise how much work needs to be done to be prepared for the next pandemic.

The World Health Organization's Covid-19 technology access pool, or C-TAP, has an important part to play. It provides a platform for developers of Covid-19 vaccines, therapeutics, diagnostics and other health products to share their intellectual property, knowledge and data with quality-assured manufacturers around the globe. That enables manufacturers that have additional capacity to produce the high-quality tools that we need to tackle Covid-19 effectively, efficiently and equitably. Contributions to the pool are voluntary. I commend all manufacturers that decide to share their intellectual property in that way. We recognise that the decision on a TRIPS waiver is a reserved matter, but we will continue to urge the UK Government to join the more than 100 countries that support the measure.

Enabling equitable access to safe and effective vaccines is essential to ensure that as many people as possible are protected as quickly as possible. That will be critical to ending the pandemic and bolstering global health security. Inaction in that regard would contradict Scotland's commitments to international solidarity. Moreover, as others have said, allowing the virus to continue to circulate and further mutate would likely be epidemiologically self-defeating and would undermine the monumental progress on vaccination that has been made to date. We are committed to enabling greater vaccine equality. We will continue to urge action by the UK Government on reserved matters and to take action to deliver impact through our life-saving international development work.

Meeting closed at 18:10.

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