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Scottish Parliament

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

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

The first item of business is time for reflection. Our time for reflection leader today is the Rev Mairi Perkins, minister of Ardoch parish church linked with Blackford parish church in Perthshire.

Rev Mairi Perkins (Ardoch and Blackford Parish Churches): Presiding Officer and members of the Parliament, thank you for your invitation to address you this afternoon. On starting my training for ministry, I knew that it was going to be good, but I never knew that it would be this good.

On the night of my ordination, I knew in my heart that I had not been ordained simply to be a minister but that I had been ordained to ministry, because ministry is the serving of others in a world in which pain and darkness too often prevail in people's lives. Ministry is about listening to people's stories, pain and happiness and simply holding them until you find the light, bringing hope into the lives of the vulnerable, poor, marginalised and discriminated against in our society, striving to give them equity. It struck me that that is exactly what all of you signed up to do as members of the Scottish Parliament—to serve the needs of the people of Scotland, no matter how difficult, unpleasant or unpopular that might be.

I have a favourite passage in the Bible that teaches me how to serve and shine a light into people's darkness. It is in Matthew, chapter 25, starting at verse 35. It says:

"For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.

Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'

Everyone needs to see the light in the darkness; they sometimes just need a little help. My prayer for you is for the wisdom to strive to be the light bearer for others.

I leave you with the words of the young black American poet Amanda Gorman:

"For there is always light,
If only we're brave enough to see it,
If only we're brave enough to be it."

Point of Order

14:04

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Yesterday, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills announced on Twitter several significant updates to this year's school exams. This morning, substantive changes that are contained in today's Covid-19 statement were leaked to the media, including STV and the BBC, ahead of the statement's delivery in the Parliament.

That has become common practice for the Scottish National Party Government in this session of Parliament, and I have raised the matter with you on numerous occasions. Each time that I have done so, you have said that all

"significant and substantive announcements should be made to the Parliament".—[*Official Report*, 22 June 2021; c 12]

Presiding Officer, what steps can now be taken to end that contempt? What can be done to insist that the Scottish Government respect your good office and the Scottish Parliament?

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I advise Mr Kerr that I intend to address that issue before we move to the First Minister's statement.

Topical Question Time

14:05

Glasgow Prestwick Airport (Sale)

1. **Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an explanation of its decision not to proceed with the sale of Glasgow Prestwick Airport at the present time. (S6T-00415)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Economy (Kate Forbes): During our period of ownership of Glasgow Prestwick airport, we have sought to do what is right for the business, for taxpayers and for the Ayrshire economy. Glasgow Prestwick has developed as a specialist airport through carving a niche in a competitive aviation market. The annual accounts that were laid before Parliament in December show that the business continues to move in a positive direction, with a profit having been posted for 2020-21.

We were pleased that the recent sale process attracted bids from credible investors. Detailed and extensive work was done by all parties involved. However, following careful consideration of a recommendation by the Prestwick board, we decided not to proceed with the sale, at this time. It is still our intention to return Prestwick airport to the private sector at the appropriate time and opportunity. Any decision must be informed by what is right for the long-term success of the business and the contribution that it makes to the local economy.

Colin Smyth: The cabinet secretary has just said that the Government rejected bids for the airport. It seems that there was one preferred bidder but more than one bid. Can the cabinet secretary confirm reports that two bids for Prestwick were received from the preferred bidder? Now that the process is at an end and it seems that there is no longer a preferred bidder, can she tell us why those bids were rejected by ministers? There have been reports that the second bid was lower than the first one, due to earlier withholding of information about the condition of the runway that came to light after the first bid was made. Is that correct? In the almost 10 years since the Government bought Prestwick, and before the latest bids were rejected, has the Government received and rejected any other bids for the airport?

Kate Forbes: I know that there is a lot of interest in the matter, so I am happy to return to the chamber to answer some of those questions more fully.

There has been speculation about bids and bidders throughout the sale process, and a

number of companies have been mentioned. I stress that much of that speculation has been inaccurate. We must continue to respect commercial confidentiality, so we cannot comment on the identity of bidders or the substance of bids. I hope that Colin Smyth appreciates that. It will be hugely important in providing confidence in any future sales process with either previous or new bidders.

Regarding the substance of Mr Smyth's question, the commercial bids that were received were assessed against the commercial case and the wider economic case for the region. It was on the basis of independent advice, and following a recommendation from the Prestwick board, that we decided that the bid does not, at this stage, represent the value to the taxpayer that we are looking for.

Colin Smyth: I would welcome a further opportunity to discuss the matter. That vague answer is not good enough. There is no preferred bidder for Prestwick at the moment. The cabinet secretary cannot hide behind on-going confidentiality when the process is not on-going: the sale has collapsed.

I ask the cabinet secretary to reconsider her answer and to tell us why the bids that were on the table were rejected. Significant investment is required in order to give Prestwick a sustainable future. That will not come from a new owner any time soon. Can the cabinet secretary tell us exactly where the necessary investment for Prestwick will come from? Is it the case that, as it seems, and a decade after buying Prestwick, the Scottish Government still has no plan for the future of the airport?

Kate Forbes: There were many questions there. I appreciate that you want short answers, Presiding Officer, but I would like to answer them in detail.

Whether or not there is a live bid, we should not and cannot comment on speculation about the identity of bidders. I appreciate that there is a desire for more information about the detail of the bids that were received and rejected. I hope all members understand that it is important that we safeguard the integrity of commercial discussions, both because we are bound by commercial confidentiality and in order to avoid undermining any future negotiation with current or previous bidders.

I can be clear, as I have already said, that the commercial bids that were received were, on the basis of independent advice, considered not to be adequate right now to secure value for the taxpayer. Any return to the private sector needs to be on the right terms. We need to ensure that we are confident that a sale would not only represent

value for the taxpayer but would put the business on a firm footing. Long-term commercial sustainability is important: the business needs to develop and to support jobs and the economy. In the most recent sale process, we were not satisfied—on the basis of independent advice—that those objectives would be met.

Siobhian Brown (Ayr) (SNP): Given the importance of investment, through the Ayrshire Growth Deal, in South Ayrshire, which is primarily focused around Prestwick airport, can the Scottish Government give assurances that any future potential buyer for the airport would be supportive of the Ayrshire Growth Deal and the spaceport?

Kate Forbes: Siobhan Brown has made a very important point that emphasises the comments that I have already made about meeting the objectives that we have set. Of course, any potential future buyer would need to take their own decisions about what is right for their business, but we are clear that the Ayrshire Growth Deal provides significant opportunities locally—not just for Prestwick, but for the wider region. We need to do all that we can to encourage any future owner to engage with local growth deal partners.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): Colin Smyth tried his best to get an answer to this question, but the cabinet secretary was having none of it. I ask the cabinet secretary, again: what was the reason for the bid, or bids, being turned down? Was it down to the price that was offered, investment, jobs or a combination of all three?

Kate Forbes: The answer to that question has a number of elements. We were pleased that the sales process attracted significant and credible interest from bidders. We considered very carefully the offer from each bidder and we considered a revised offer from the business that remained in consideration. We reached the view, informed by the advice of the Prestwick board and professional advisers, that the sale should not, on commercial and broader economic grounds, progress.

We agree with the Prestwick board—this might go some way towards answering Graham Simpson's question—that the market conditions are not particularly favourable at this time for maximising the enterprise value of the business and the value to the Scottish Government, as a shareholder. Again, that conclusion was reached following independent assessment. The business will continue to develop its commercial and growth strategy under the Scottish Government's ownership.

My last point is that, obviously, the annual report and accounts were published on 21 December; I am sure that they were of great interest to Graham Simpson. The annual report and accounts show

that diverse revenue streams helped to mitigate the impact of Covid on passenger numbers in 2020-21. However, there is no question but that Covid has had an impact on the aviation sector. Operating profit before exceptional items was £500,000, and the total profit after tax for the year was £12.8 million. The business is progressing—

The Presiding Officer: In conclusion, cabinet secretary.

Kate Forbes: —and we need to ensure that we choose the right bidder at the right time in order to maximise the economic asset.

Free Bus Travel for Young People (Access)

2. Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it will assist young people to access the expanded free bus travel scheme. (S6T-00399)

The Minister for Transport (Graeme Dey): This potentially transformational scheme opened for applications yesterday. There are a range of ways in which people can apply, and they are detailed on the Transport Scotland website. For example, online applications for either a Young Scot card or for a national entitlement card can be made at getyournec.scot, the Improvement Service's online portal. Applications can also be made directly through local councils. I believe that, as of this morning, more than 37,000 applications had been made via the getyournec.scot portal alone.

I know that concerns have been expressed about the complexity of the online application process, but the process that is in place for the young person's national entitlement card is broadly similar to that for the card for older people.

It is also, obviously, not ideal to be launching the scheme in the current circumstances. Given the situation with the pandemic, we are encouraging only children and young people whose travel is essential at this time to apply.

As I set out in my letter to MSPs last week, I think that we are striking the right balance in enabling children, young people and families who potentially will benefit the most from free bus travel to access it at the earliest opportunity while maintaining plans to fully market the scheme at the right time—potentially helping bus services to recover from the impacts of the pandemic.

Gillian Martin: I thank the minister for that answer and for writing to all MSPs and MPs last week to update us on the plans. I will certainly do what I can to promote the scheme in my constituency.

The minister is right: it is potentially a transformational policy. I want to know how the minister will ensure that children and young people

who might benefit the most get their entitlement cards as early as possible. Some concerns have been raised with me, by parents who are applying, about the complexity of the application process—particularly the proof of identity that is required. Is the minister concerned that that might limit its success?

Graeme Dey: I welcome the member's positive comments about the scheme and her commitment to promoting it. However, there are no additional requirements for proof of age, person or address when applying for a Young Scot NEC with the free bus travel product on it in comparison with applying for one without that. The only difference is that parents, guardians or, in some cases, carers have to apply on behalf of children and young people who are under the age of 16 if they want a Young Scot NEC that has the free bus travel product on it, and they have to provide proof of their status in order to protect the children and young people.

However, I reassure the member that we are committed to delivering the scheme in a way that is safe for children and young people and that instils confidence in parents and guardians, and that we are absolutely determined that the children and young people who might benefit the most from free bus travel will not miss out on it. We will, of course, be monitoring the scheme and responding accordingly as we go along.

Gillian Martin: Again, I thank the minister for his reply and for what he has just said about monitoring the scheme.

I lodged this topical question specifically because I wanted to ask about one particular group of individuals when it comes to the application process. Foster carers in my area have raised with me the fact that care-experienced and looked-after children might not have ready access to their birth certificates and so might face the additional process of going to council social work departments for access to those, which might complicate or extend the process for them. Obviously, those children and young people cannot be disadvantaged. We need to make sure that there are no additional barriers for them. Will the minister comment on that specifically and on how we can make sure that there are no barriers for care-experienced young people?

The Presiding Officer: Be brief, minister.

Graeme Dey: Gillian Martin raises a perfectly valid point. I offer her the reassurance that we are aware of the potential challenges for foster care and kinship care families. Clearly, local authorities, which are corporate parents, have a responsibility to help families to access the benefit, and we are working with local authorities to ensure that that happens. I say to members that, if any issues

emerge that involve their constituents, they should contact my office and we will seek to assist.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): The current Young Scot card has already been calculated and is part of the age standard scheme in Scotland. Why can young people not use that until they receive their new card, so that they can benefit immediately from the free bus travel?

Graeme Dey: Many existing Young Scot card holders are under the age of 16 and therefore need their parent, guardian or carer to apply on their behalf for a replacement card with the free bus travel product. That is because we are committed to delivering the scheme in a way that is safe for children and young people.

For those over the age of 16, local authority partners need to ensure that they are sending a replacement card to the correct address, as the details that are held are not necessarily current—hence the need to apply for an additional card. Offline Young Scot NEC replacement processes are also in place with local councils.

If Mr Whitfield has any specific cases in mind, he should get in touch with me.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): How does the Scottish Government's approach to concessionary and free bus travel differ from that of the United Kingdom Government?

The Presiding Officer: Be brief, minister.

Graeme Dey: There are some very obvious differences. Free national bus travel from the age of 60—not the state pension age—is an example. Essentially, we are determined to expand the national provision of free bus travel and not to shrink it, in so far as that is possible.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you. That concludes topical questions.

Covid-19 Update

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

Before I call the First Minister, I would like to say that I am aware that details of today's Covid-19 update have been reported in the media prior to their being announced to the Parliament. I should not be reading in the media that they have seen a draft copy of the statement before it has been made to this Parliament. That is extremely disappointing, and it is disrespectful to this Parliament and its elected members. I have spoken to the Minister for Parliamentary Business about this, and he has informed me that the Government will undertake an inquiry into the leak.

I will allow the statement to be delivered today because I cannot be assured that all elected members have seen the full draft and because it is important that the public hear the full detail. However, I ask the First Minister for an assurance of her commitment to the place of this Parliament being respected by her Government and of her commitment to a repeat of this situation being avoided.

14:21

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Thank you, Presiding Officer. First of all, let me give you that assurance. Aside from the matter of showing disrespect to Parliament—which is a very serious matter—let me assure you that there is no benefit or advantage to the Scottish Government in the contents of these statements being known in advance of my delivering them to Parliament. I have asked my officials to look into the matter, and I can advise the chamber that the Scottish Government's chief information security officer will undertake appropriate inquiries to establish whether there has, indeed, been a leak of some of the contents of the statement in advance of my delivering it—and, if so, the circumstances and source of that leak. I undertake to keep your office advised of the progress and outcome of that, Presiding Officer. However, let me assure you that I take very seriously my obligations and responsibilities, and those of my Government, to this Parliament. I hope that you will accept that assurance.

Today, I will report on the current course of the pandemic. I will assess the latest data and set out our tentative view that, although significant uncertainties remain in both the data and the immediate period ahead, there are nevertheless some grounds for cautious optimism that a combination of the protective measures that were introduced before Christmas, responsible action on the part of the general public and the rapid delivery of vaccine boosters has had a positive impact. As a result, I will indicate that, from next

week, we will begin to lift the measures that were introduced before Christmas, but in a phased and careful way, starting with the removal of attendance limits on live outdoor events from Monday.

First, though, I will run through today's statistics. Yesterday, 10,392 positive cases were reported as a result of polymerase chain reaction tests, which was 27.7 per cent of all PCR tests that were carried out. There are 1,479 people in hospital with Covid, which is 47 more than yesterday. Of them, 65 people are in intensive care, 11 of whom have been in intensive care for more than 28 days. Sadly, a further 16 deaths have been reported, which takes the total number of deaths under the daily definition to 9,950. Again, I send my condolences to everyone who is mourning a loved one.

The increased transmissibility of the omicron variant is still causing very high levels of infection in Scotland, across the United Kingdom and in many countries around the world. However, although the situation remains very challenging, not least for the national health service, some very early indications in the data offer some encouragement.

First, although it is always difficult to prove a direct causal link between any specific action or measure and subsequent outcomes, there is reason to be optimistic that protective measures, the behavioural response of the general public and the vaccination programme have helped to mitigate, to some extent, the impact of the omicron wave. For instance, our central projection last month was that new infections could reach 50,000 a day by early January, which has not, so far, materialised. Instead, we estimate that the total number of new infections per day in early January—not only those recorded through positive PCR tests—may have been around 30,000. In other words, it is very likely that the situation that we face now, although serious, would have been even more challenging without the renewed sacrifices that have been made by people across the country over these past few weeks.

Further, although we need to be cautious in our interpretation of the daily case numbers at this stage, for reasons that I will set out, we can see from those numbers and from hospital data some early indications that the situation might be starting to improve. Over the past week, an average of just over 12,700 new cases a day were confirmed through PCR tests. That is down by 17 per cent compared to the daily average in the preceding seven days. Indeed, on that measure, cases have fallen in the past week across all age groups except the over-85s. That is encouraging and gives us some hope that cases might be at, or close to, the peak.

However, as I said a moment ago, caution is required in interpreting the figures. The changes to the guidance on testing that I set out last week—to the effect that people without symptoms who test positive with a lateral flow device no longer need to get a confirmatory PCR test—mean that the current daily numbers are capturing fewer positive cases than before. To address that, Public Health Scotland will augment its daily reports in the future. I advise the Parliament that, from Thursday, in addition to reporting the number of people who test positive for Covid through a PCR test, it will report a combined figure for the number of people who have recorded a first positive PCR or lateral flow test.

Given the increased complexity—and, not least, the need to avoid duplication—there will initially be a time lag in that reporting, so the data that is released on Thursday will cover the period up to today. Public Health Scotland will work to reduce that time lag in the coming period.

The additional data will allow us to assess the trend in cases more accurately than we can do now. Of course, that is dependent on all of us actually recording our lateral flow results, whether they are positive or negative. Therefore, let me take this opportunity to remind everyone that that can and should be done through the UK Government website. You can find the page easily by searching for how to report a lateral flow test.

One further piece of data gives us some grounds for optimism at this stage. Although the number of people in hospital with Covid has continued to increase over the past week, putting significant additional pressure on the NHS, there are signs that the rate of increase might be starting to slow down. The number of people in hospital with Covid increased from 594 two weeks ago to 1,147 this time last week—an increase of 553. Since then, it has risen further to 1,479—a smaller increase of 332. It is important to note, however, that the number of people with Covid in intensive care has increased more rapidly in the past week than in previous weeks. However, that is likely to reflect the time lag between people becoming hospitalised and then requiring intensive care.

In summary, the situation just now is undoubtedly serious but perhaps less so than it might have been, and there are some signs that we might be starting to turn a corner.

That said, the position is still fragile and significant uncertainties remain. I have already explained the uncertainties in the data that mean that the picture is not yet quite as clear as we would like it to be and as we hope it will be in the next week or so. Of course, we do not yet know what impact the post-Christmas return to work and school will have on the level of infection.

What we do know is that staff absences resulting from high levels of infection are causing disruption in the economy and in critical services and that the NHS remains under very severe pressure indeed. Continuing to slow down transmission therefore remains a vital imperative.

The conclusion from all of that, in my view and in the view of the Cabinet, is as follows. It is reasonable and right to be hopeful on the strength of the latest data, but, for the period immediately ahead, it is prudent to remain careful and cautious. That is the balance of judgment that has informed the decisions that the Cabinet reached this morning.

As I indicated, from Monday, we will begin to lift the protective measures that were announced before Christmas, but we will do that in a phased way that will allow us to form, in the days ahead, a clearer picture of the trends in infections and the associated impacts.

As a quick reminder, the measures to which I am specifically referring are limits on attendances at live public events, the requirement for distancing between groups in public indoor places and the requirement for table service in hospitality venues that serve alcohol on the premises.

I expect to confirm further dates next week, but I can confirm today that the attendance limit of 500 at large-scale outdoor events will be lifted from Monday 17 January. That means, for example, that spectators will again be permitted at major outdoor sporting events including the football fixtures that are scheduled for early next week and the forthcoming six nations rugby matches.

The Covid certification scheme will remain in place for those and other events and venues previously covered, but with two important changes. First, our guidance will now stipulate that the organisers of large events of 1,000 or more people should check the certification status of at least 50 per cent of attendees, rather than the current 20 per cent, or at least 1,000 people—whichever figure is higher. Secondly, from Monday, the requirement to be fully vaccinated, for the purposes of Covid certification, will include having a booster if the second dose was more than four months ago.

The NHS Scotland Covid status app for domestic use will be updated from Thursday so that its QR code includes evidence of booster vaccination. It will also be possible to order updated paper and PDF copies of vaccination status, which are now valid for three months, and it will still be possible to gain admission to events and venues covered by the certification scheme by providing proof of a recent negative lateral flow test.

The Cabinet will next review the data at our meeting a week today. I hope that that will allow us to lift the other protective measures—limits on indoor live events, table service in hospitality and distancing in indoor public places—from 24 January. However, I will confirm that in my statement next week.

There is a related point that I want to draw to Parliament's attention. As we lift those other protective measures, it will be necessary to consider again whether extending the scope of Covid certification to other venues might be a necessary protection. To be clear, we have not yet taken any decisions on that, and it will require careful judgment. However, I want to be clear to Parliament that it is something that we feel bound to give appropriate consideration to.

What I have just set out gives our direction of travel in relation to the additional measures that were set out before Christmas in response to omicron. The baseline measures that were in place before the emergence of omicron, such as the requirement to wear face coverings in indoor public places and to work from home when possible, will remain in place for now. So, too—for at least the immediate period ahead—will the advice to the general public to try to limit contact with people in other households and, in particular, to limit the number of households in any indoor gathering to a maximum of three.

We are not advising or asking people to cut all social interaction. That simply is not practical, and it would have a serious impact on mental health and wellbeing. However, trying to limit social interactions remains a sensible step at this stage. It helps to stem, to some extent, increases in transmission. It therefore not only has a collective benefit but helps to protect us as individuals. At a time when 1 in 20 of us could have the virus, the risk of becoming infected when we mix with others is significant, and cutting back on contacts, where possible, and prioritising those that are most important to us helps to reduce that risk. If we make sure that there are no more than three households in any indoor gathering that we do have, and take lateral flow tests before we go, we further reduce the risks. All of that remains important for now.

There are four further issues that I want to touch on before I conclude. The first is to underline, as I alluded to earlier, that staff absences caused by the virus are having a significant impact, not just on the NHS and the wider economy but on other vital public services—most notably, for the purposes of my comments today, social care. We are working closely with local partners to maximise the resources available for social care so that vulnerable people get the care that they need. In order to give priority to social care, some local

authorities and partners may require to make difficult choices that involve temporarily pausing or reducing other services. Those decisions, which will be taken by front-line partners, will be made only when absolutely necessary. The recent changes to self-isolation rules will help to alleviate some of the pressure, but where such decisions prove necessary, I hope that members and the wider public will understand that they are driven by the needs of those who depend on social care services.

My second point is about ventilation in schools and early years settings. Before Christmas, we published revised guidance for those settings. That included updated material on ventilation, which, among other things, made clear the circumstances in which use of air cleaning devices may be appropriate. I can confirm today that we will allocate an additional £5 million of capital funding to local authorities and funded early learning and childcare providers. That is in addition to the money previously provided for CO₂ monitors and will support any remedial work that councils need to do to improve air flow and comply with the new guidance.

The third issue that I want to cover is the continued importance of vaccination and booster vaccination, in particular. The programme continues to go exceptionally well. Scotland continues to be the most vaccinated part of the UK in terms of first, second, third and booster doses.

However, there are still too many eligible people who are not yet fully vaccinated. If you are one of them—and if you have no good reason not to be vaccinated—the reality is that you are putting yourself and others at unnecessary risk. The latest available data, adjusted for age, suggests that someone who is not fully vaccinated is at least four times more likely to require hospital treatment than someone who has had a booster or a third dose of vaccine. Whatever age you are, getting boosted is the single most important thing that you can do to protect yourself from the worst impacts of Covid and reduce pressure on the NHS.

Even though being fully vaccinated does not completely eradicate anyone's risk of getting Covid, it reduces that risk and that reduces the risk of passing it on to others, including those who may be more vulnerable to serious illness. In short, being fully vaccinated could save your life or the life of someone you love.

The inescapable flipside of that is this: if you are choosing without good reason not to be fully vaccinated, you are putting your own and other people's lives at unnecessary risk. If you have not been able to get your booster or third jab yet because you have been self-isolating or have tested positive in the past 28 days, or because you

have not got round to it, please come forward as soon as possible.

If you have not had a first or second dose yet, please get it without delay. Do not run the risk of later regretting—or of leaving your family to regret—that you did not get the protection against illness and death that vaccination gives you. There is plenty of capacity in vaccination centres, and you will always be welcomed. So, please go along. It is not too late.

The final issue that I want to touch on briefly is the work that I mentioned last week on a revised strategic framework. The framework is intended to set out how we might adapt, in the medium to longer term, to living with the virus in a way that still mitigates the harm that it does but without the kind of restrictive measures that we are all tired of and that we know do harm in other ways.

Living with the virus—a phrase that we hear more and more—is what we all desperately want to do, but it is worth reflecting on what that does and does not mean. Unfortunately, it does not mean waking up one morning soon and finding that Covid has disappeared or that we no longer need to think at all about mitigating the harm that it can do.

Hopefully, we are on a path from Covid being an epidemic to it becoming endemic—in other words, existing at more manageable and consistent levels—but that is not a shift that any Government, anywhere, can just declare or wish into being. Although it seems that the impact of the omicron variant on individual health is milder than past variants, it is not harmless. It still causes serious illness in some people and it still takes lives. To be blunt, the virus remains a significant threat to public health.

So, trying to live with the virus, as we all want to do, will involve, for all countries, careful thought and possibly some difficult choices. It will also involve consideration of, and empathy for, everyone in our society, including those who are at the highest clinical risk from Covid.

We know that we cannot continually rely on restrictive measures to manage the virus, because we know the harm that that does. Equally, we cannot be indifferent to the continued risks that Covid poses to health and wellbeing. We need to consider what adaptations we can make to manage those risks in a way that is much less disruptive to our lives and much less of a daily presence in our minds.

Those are important issues not just for the Government but for all of us to consider. As we prepare the revised framework in the days to come, we will consult across Parliament and with business organisations and other partners across

society. Our aim is to publish the revised strategic framework within the next few weeks.

As that final point emphasises, we remain in a highly challenging phase of the pandemic. Case numbers are high, the impacts of that are severe and, as I set out, the future trajectory remains uncertain at this stage. However, largely because of the efforts that everyone has made, we are in a better position than I feared would be the case when additional measures were announced in December, and I hope that we are now seeing signs of improvement. That is allowing us to start the process, from Monday, of lifting the additional restrictions, and I hope that, next week, I will be able to confirm the further steps in that process.

In the meantime, we can all continue to act in a way that keeps things moving in the right direction, so I will close with a reminder of what we can all do to help stem transmission.

First, get fully vaccinated as soon as you can. If you have not done that already, please do so and do it this week.

Secondly, try to limit your contacts for a further period. With infections at such a high level just now, every interaction comes with a significant risk of catching the virus, so prioritise the contacts that matter most to you.

Thirdly, if you are meeting other people socially, test before you go, every time, and take the test as close as possible to the time that you will be seeing other people. Remember to record the result, whether that is positive or negative.

Take all the other precautions that we know make a difference. If you are meeting indoors, limit the number of households in the group to three at most, and keep windows open. Work from home whenever that is possible—employers should enable their workers to work from home whenever it is practical. Wear a face covering on public transport, in shops and when moving about in hospitality settings. Make sure that the face covering fully covers your mouth and nose, and follow all advice on hygiene.

Those steps do make a difference. They are making a difference to each person's individual safety and to the collective safety of all of us, so I urge people please to stick with them, and my thanks go, again, to everybody who is doing that.

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

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): The latest data shows that we are in a far more

positive position than the Government was expecting; the projections that were made in December have not come to pass. We might already have passed the peak of omicron, and there are two main reasons for that.

First, the success of Scotland's and the UK's vaccination scheme is clear. People who are vaccinated are much less likely to suffer serious symptoms and are far less likely to be hospitalised.

The second main factor is the response from the general public. People across Scotland got their boosters, they took tests, they self-isolated when they needed to, they were cautious to protect their families and they were especially careful around vulnerable people. That is why the data is more positive. The outlook is much better now, not because of Government restrictions but because of people's good sense. The people of Scotland got that right—not the Government.

The First Minister says that we need to learn to live with Covid but, after two years, people across Scotland have already learned to live with Covid. By now, people understand what is necessary to combat the virus. As we move forward, we have to trust their judgment far more. We should be looking to strike a balance that is much more in favour of wider public, mental and physical health concerns, as well as, of course, our economy.

That is why it is so disappointing to see that the Scottish Government is again looking to extend the vaccination passport scheme. Scottish businesses, jobs and our economy are set to be hit harder, even though the data is more positive. The Scottish National Party Government has accepted that there is no evidence that the vaccination passport scheme stops or reduces spread of the virus.

Therefore, on the basis of what evidence is the First Minister considering expanding the number of venues that are affected by the scheme and the number of people who will be checked as they go into stadiums and large events? What kinds of businesses could be impacted by extension of the scheme and from what date? Does she really believe that her plans, which will see more than 30,000 vaccination passports being checked at Murrayfield during the six nations competition next month, are actually workable?

Finally, while crowd attendance at outdoor events will now be allowed, there was not a single mention in the First Minister's statement of indoor sports events, which are vital for people's mental and physical health. Will the First Minister lift those restrictions? If so, when? If not, why not?

The First Minister: First, we are in a more positive position now than we might have been in, and than I feared we would be in when I spoke to

Parliament before Christmas, but there are still significant uncertainties in the data and in the circumstances that lie ahead, as schools have returned and some people have returned to work. That calls for continued caution coupled with the optimism that we can rightly feel as a result of the more positive signs in the data.

As I said in my statement, the progress that we have made is down to a combination of the vaccination programme—especially booster delivery—the response of the public, and some of the sensible steps that have been taken. It is interesting that Douglas Ross is certain that the measures that he likes have been responsible for progress, but is equally certain that the measures that he does not like have not played any part in the progress. Not for the first time, that is a rather incredible position for him to take.

I am also struck by the fact that some of the measures that the public are willingly following—I thank the public again for that; Douglas Ross is now also rightly praising the public for it—such as using face coverings and working from home when possible, are things that Douglas Ross has stood in the chamber and absolutely opposed in past weeks and months. He said that the Scottish Government was wrong in asking people to do those things. We will continue to take balanced and cautious steps to try to ensure that our progress out of this phase goes one way, and that we do not end up going backwards, despite the unpredictabilities that we know are associated with the virus.

On the two specific questions, first, I did mention indoor events. I hope that indoor events—for the avoidance of doubt, I note that that includes indoor sporting events, although I think that most people who are listening probably know that—will resume on 24 January. However, because of the uncertainties ahead, it makes sense to proceed in phases. As we have done many times in the past, when we phase changes, we lift measures relating to outdoor events before we do it for indoor events.

On vaccination certification, as we lift essential protective measures in settings that we know are, despite the best efforts of those who run those settings, a higher risk for transmission, we are duty bound to consider whether any other measures will protect against and mitigate those risks. That is where vaccination certification comes in. I think that the vast majority of people accept that, if the price of getting to access pubs or nightclubs on a normal basis is to show that they are vaccinated, that might be a price that they are willing to pay. We have not taken a decision on extending the scope. We will consider that carefully and come to a balanced judgment.

Finally, I say that it was not too long ago that Douglas Ross was telling me that Murrayfield would never be able to do the spot checks that we were asking for. Murrayfield has been excellent in coping with that, and I have every confidence that the Scottish Rugby Union will also be able to do it. In some other countries, of course, 100 per cent checks of vaccination certificates are required. I have every confidence that the football and rugby authorities will continue to operate responsibly and effectively.

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

There are reasons to be optimistic, but we are right not to be complacent. I welcome the easing of restrictions, particularly on outdoor sports events.

Last week, contributions from multiple members from across the Parliament chamber stressed the importance of providing up-to-date and comprehensive data, not just because that is vital in order for the Parliament to do its job properly in scrutinising the Government, but because that information's being in the public domain is vital to maintaining and building public trust and confidence. It helps people throughout Scotland to make decisions about what is right for them and their families.

The First Minister promised Parliament that the data would be available on Friday; instead, we got, at best, a partial dataset. That is not acceptable. The Government must have been basing decisions on that information. If not, why not? If it did, why not trust the public and share that information?

A new phase of the pandemic must mean a new approach that recognises that we will be living with Covid in some form for years to come. That means not only building resilience back into the heart of our NHS but into our economy, and recognising the toll that the past two years have taken on the mental health of many Scots. People can no longer live their lives waiting to hear what the rules will be day by day, on an ad hoc basis. Businesses and workers cannot plan for the future properly if they cannot predict the Government's response.

I welcome the fact that the First Minister now recognises the need for a proper framework. Can she confirm whether it will set out clear trigger points for any future restrictions? Those could include rates of infection, hospitalisations and staff absences. Will the framework also include key triggers for the financial support that will be available alongside that? Finally, can she commit to ensuring that Parliament will vote on the framework, and that any deviations from the

framework will also come to Parliament for consent?

The First Minister: The basic data is published every single day. When we can, and where we need to, augment that data, that has happened. I have set out today the way in which Public Health Scotland will, later this week, augment the data to take account of the change in testing advice.

On the hospitalisation data regarding those who are in hospital because of Covid versus those who have Covid but are in hospital primarily for another reason, Public Health Scotland published on Friday the preliminary results of the analysis that it has been doing. I am not sure whether Anas Sarwar is suggesting that Public Health Scotland is somehow hiding some data that it has, but that is not the case. It is doing careful and detailed work so that the information is robust.

What was published on Friday is, so far, broadly in line with similar findings in England on the split between people being in hospital because of Covid and their being in hospital with Covid. The data is broadly in line with, although slightly different from, the same data that was published in August last year, at an earlier stage of the pandemic. That data will continue to be updated as soon as Public Health Scotland can robustly and confidently do so.

As I said last week, any Government that was, right now, basing all its decisions on that particular data set alone would not be serving the country well because—although that information is important—there is a real limit to its significance in terms of the impact of Covid. A person's being in hospital with Covid, even if that is not the primary reason for their admission, still triggers a response that has a massive impact on the national health service, and the fact that they have Covid will, potentially, exacerbate the other condition that they are in with. Again, I caution against oversimplification of the significance of the data.

Finally, I say that I am happy to give a commitment that we will ask Parliament to consider, and to vote on, the draft revised framework. We will always come to Parliament appropriately with changes to our approach, but I repeat—because it is important to understand this fact—that the virus does not wait until Parliament considers things. It spreads at its own pace, and Governments everywhere sometimes have to respond quickly in the interests of public health and public safety. We will consult on the contents of the framework and the triggers that it includes, and we will seek to give as much clarity and certainty as possible.

However, I will make a final point that goes back to the point about predictability. Of course, we want to give people as much clarity and

predictability as possible, but we are dealing with an infectious and unpredictable mutating virus. Any Government that gets itself stuck on fixed triggers or in fixed ways of thinking about things is not serving the health and safety of the country well, so we will not do that.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): I am concerned that the use of vaccine certification is set to continue, not least because it does not show venues who is sick and who is well. I am also concerned about its wider roll-out to a new array of venues, especially when many of those venues are pulling themselves up off the mat following the latest hospitality curbs. I am also concerned that, with just five days' notice, big sporting events will need to nearly treble their checking capacity, which could lead to bottlenecks and the safety concerns that they have already raised with the Parliament.

The First Minister talks about living with the virus. That concept is all too familiar to the 100,000 Scots who are suffering with long Covid, a number that will surely rise given the surge that we are facing.

More than 100 days have passed since the Government published its long Covid action plan, yet we are nowhere. Where are the long Covid clinics, the care pathways and the long Covid nurses? What is the First Minister going to do with the thousands of Scots who have been living with the virus, some of them since the start of the pandemic, and who are still waiting for support from her Government?

The First Minister: On Covid certification, Alex Cole-Hamilton and I will have to agree to disagree. I think that vaccination certification has a role to play. I will briefly illustrate why—and this applies to any individual who gets the virus in a setting where the risk of transmission is higher. As I said in my statement, if they are vaccinated, their risk of being hospitalised is significantly lower than it would be if they were not vaccinated. Therefore, making sure that somebody is vaccinated before they are in such a setting has a significant benefit to individuals. In addition, because that then reduces the chance of that individual being in hospital, which would add to the pressure on the health service, that has a broader societal benefit.

There is a place for vaccination certification, and I believe that to be important, but, of course, we continue to consider it carefully.

On the issue of checks, as I understand it, some sport clubs have already gone beyond the minimum 20 per cent called for in guidance. It was not too long ago that members were saying that checking 20 per cent of attendees was unattainable and undeliverable and that it would lead to all sorts of chaos. That has not been the

case, and I have confidence in the bigger sport clubs doing the checks effectively, because it is in the interests of sport and sport clubs that we keep the settings as safe as possible.

The long Covid action plan continues to be implemented. I again say that I think that it is wrong and an oversimplification to focus purely on one model of long Covid clinics. That has a role to play, but the overall pathways of care, the development of specialisms and the developing understanding of long Covid and its implications are encapsulated in the wider plan. We will continue to take that forward in partnership with clinicians and health boards across the country.

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): Throughout the pandemic, the First Minister has made difficult decisions on complex situations—*[Inaudible.]* Recently, we have heard reports that the UK Government is considering withdrawing free access to lateral flow testing, with some senior UK ministers advocating even shorter self-isolation periods. Further, some influential Tory MPs are even calling for an end to all restrictions, regardless of infection rates, on 26 January.

Even in the face of an endemic disease rather than a pandemic, does the First Minister agree that free lateral flow tests must remain a key part of any protection strategy? Will she also reassure those watching that the gradual lifting of Scottish restrictions will continue to be balanced against wider public health needs?

The First Minister: On the last part of that question, yes, I do think that it is important that we get the balance right. We all want to move back to normality as quickly as possible. However, we know from past experience that, if we do that too quickly or in the wrong order, it can set us back rather than take us forward. Those judgments continue to be made as carefully as possible.

On lateral flow testing, I think that living with Covid is likely to involve the need to test ourselves in particular situations for some time. Therefore, for that to be effective, it is essential that we continue to make lateral flow tests available as widely as possible and free of charge. That is a really important principle for the effective working of any testing strategy.

The UK Government has been at pains to say that it is not thinking of removing free access to lateral flow devices any time soon. I hope that we see that assurance solidify and be replaced with a clear commitment to continuing with free lateral flow devices for as long as necessary.

On self-isolation, after careful consideration, we have moved from 10 to seven days. Having done that, I think that it would be a mistake to go further before we have had a chance to assess the impact of that change. We will continue to keep all

those issues under review, which will be informed by the best clinical and expert advice possible.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The First Minister talked about the protection that vaccination and being boosted provide against serious harm from Covid. Does she agree that publishing the number of those who are in hospital and in intensive care units as a result of Covid who are not vaccinated would help to reinforce that message to the public? Why is the Scottish Government still not announcing the numbers, despite repeated request from the Conservatives?

The First Minister: Public Health Scotland is providing information on the relative risk of vaccination and non-vaccination—I am sure that Murdo Fraser has seen that information in past Public Health Scotland reports. As I said in my statement, the up-to-date data shows that people are at more than four times greater risk of being hospitalised if they are not fully vaccinated than if they are fully vaccinated.

Public Health Scotland will continue to consider how best to present information, but there is no doubt whatsoever—about the fact that, for people who are fully vaccinated, the risk of serious illness is significantly lower than is the case for those who are not fully vaccinated. We should be giving out that message loudly and clearly.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): In the NHS, the staff absence rate because of Covid is sitting at 3 per cent, but the figure in social care is 9 per cent, and some care packages have been withdrawn for several weeks. In acknowledging the crisis in social care, will the First Minister comment on reports that the Scottish Government is considering paying family carers £15 an hour, in the absence of care packages being put in place? Will that be a short-term measure? If family carers are to be valued in that way, why will her Government not value professional care staff by paying them £15 an hour?

The First Minister: What Jackie Baillie describes is not a Scottish Government policy or proposal. I hope that that deals with that point. We have taken steps to increase the wages of social care workers and we want to continue to do that as resources allow us to, so that we can properly value their contribution.

Staff absence is particularly acute in social care, which is why I spoke about the significant work that the Scottish Government is doing with local authorities and other partners to maximise the resources that support those who rely on social care. In the short term, even if that requires local authorities to take resources from other services to ensure that the most vulnerable who rely on social care get the services that they need, local

authorities will do that. We continue to work carefully with local authorities to achieve that.

It is always easy to set out the problem—if I may say so, Jackie Baillie always does that well—but we must focus on finding solutions, including those that come from continuing to bear down on infection. I agree with Jackie Baillie that the approach includes increasing the wages of social care workers, which the Government is already doing.

Joe FitzPatrick (Dundee City West) (SNP): The First Minister will be aware of calls from UK Cabinet ministers for the self-isolation period to be cut to five days that seem to have been made without sufficient regard to the potential risks. What consideration is the Scottish Government giving to that issue? Will she give an assurance that any changes will be guided by expert clinical advice?

The First Minister: As I said a moment ago in response to Michelle Thomson, we will consider the clinical advice on the issue, which we will keep under regular review, as with all issues. Having just decided to move from 10 to seven days—that decision was not insignificant and, as I said last week, it is not without risk—I think that the prudent and sensible thing to do is to monitor the impact of that before deciding whether to go further. We will monitor that in the period that is ahead. It would be a mistake to move quickly from seven to five days, but, as I said, we will continue to discuss the matter with clinical advisers.

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): It is reported that Scotland's national clinical director has said that closing nightclubs and cancelling football fixtures has made little difference to Scotland's coronavirus case numbers. As the First Minister said in her statement,

"the behavioural response of the general public and the vaccination programme have helped mitigate—to some extent—the impact of the omicron wave",

but, contrary to her statement, it seems that the restrictions that I mentioned might not have done that.

When was the First Minister first aware of the data on closing nightclubs and cancelling football fixtures? Will she commit to providing all the data—not just the basic data, which was referred to in a previous answer—that the Cabinet uses to inform its decision making ahead of announcements? Why keep that a secret? For clarity, I point out—in case of confusion—that I am not against proportionate restrictions to mitigate the pandemic's impact.

The First Minister: I am certainly glad that the member has been clearer on that point this week than he managed to be last week. The national clinical director is possibly the most misquoted

person in Scotland at the moment, and I suspect that that applies in relation to the member's question.

It is not the case that there is secret data that we take decisions on. The member is a doctor and understands more than most the difference between data, evidence and judgment. We publish all the data that is there and relevant. Data is case numbers, hospitalisation numbers and the numbers who sadly die—we publish that data.

The evidence is about where the risks are highest in terms of transmission, which we know is where ventilation is most difficult, where people come together and, often, where alcohol is involved. We take all that and apply our judgment to how best to stem transmission. That is what we do every week. It is what we will continue to do. It is difficult—I wish it was easier—to draw absolute causative links between measure A and outcome B, but all of what we are seeing right now, not just in Scotland but, I would suggest, in many other countries as well, is that it is a combination of vaccination, behavioural response and proportionate, balanced measures in higher-risk settings that are helping to blunt the edge of the omicron wave. There is no magic wand to be waved, but it is that combination that is helping us through and it is that balanced combination of measures that we will continue to seek to take.

Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): I have been contacted by constituents who have advised of their anxieties as they wait for cases to go to court. As we know, court closures during the pandemic have led to a significant backlog of cases. Will the First Minister provide an update on the Scottish Government's work to enable backlogs across the criminal justice service to be cleared?

The First Minister: That is an important area of work and all the different justice agencies are focused on doing it. As Elena Whitham and other members will recall, the recent budget announcement included significant funding increases for the justice portfolio, which will help to reduce the backlog and also support community justice services in recovering from the pandemic. We have also established a justice recovery fund for the next financial year to further help with recovery, renewal and some longer-term transformation activity across the justice system. That will include the ability to maintain enhanced court capacity and remote jury centres, which have been very important in dealing with the situation so far. Again, there are challenges facing the justice system, as is the case across all aspects of Government responsibilities, but investment is being made and action has been taken to get those services back to a normal operating basis as quickly as possible.

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green):

The importance of complying with public health guidance to safeguard the most vulnerable in society and to protect our public services has been paramount for the past two years. In that time, so many of us have made sacrifices, not seeing loved ones and not visiting those in crisis, but the level of solidarity shown by the public in following guidance and laws has been impressive. It is, therefore, sickening that it appears once again that the Prime Minister and his inner circle have ignored the rules and tried to cover it up. That is undermining public confidence in following health advice. The public feel betrayed and the Prime Minister must go. Does the First Minister agree, and what can we do to retain public confidence in current measures?

The Presiding Officer: Before the First Minister responds, very briefly, to Ms Mackay's question, I emphasise to Ms Mackay that questions must focus on issues of devolved competence.

The First Minister: Public health and the protection of public health is very much a devolved competence in my view, Presiding Officer. People across the country are aghast at the revelations about Downing Street's conduct. It appears that there was not just one isolated breach but serial breaches of guidance that people were following through painful sacrifices throughout the pandemic, and a Prime Minister who apparently is not being truthful about his knowledge of those matters. It will not surprise anybody to hear my view that not only the office of Prime Minister but the interests of the United Kingdom would be greatly enhanced by Boris Johnson's departure.

Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): It is clear that, from the start of the pandemic, the extent of the buy-in to the Covid restrictions on the part of the people of Scotland—if not, as we have heard, of 10 Downing Street—has been remarkable. Will the First Minister therefore take the opportunity to reiterate that the essential rationale for the remaining restrictions is to protect the NHS as we navigate through another very challenging winter?

The First Minister: When this issue is raised, the groans that come from those on the Conservative benches suggest that they are out of touch with the feeling and sentiment across the country. Over the past two years, people have been unable to see loved ones on their death beds or go to funerals and comfort other loved ones during bereavement, and they have had long periods of absence from those who are nearest and dearest to them. To find that it appears that those making the rules in Downing Street were, on a serial basis, breaching those rules is deeply angering and upsetting to people. That must be understood and acknowledged.

I understand the anger but, as First Minister with the chief responsibility for trying to protect the public health of the country, I say to people across the country that, notwithstanding anger at politicians—wherever and whoever they are—the guidance is there to keep them safe and to keep the country collectively safe. Therefore, I ask people to continue to do the right thing, as the vast majority have been doing throughout. Once again, I take the opportunity to thank everybody for the painful sacrifices that have been made.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): There are many examples of the impact of Covid restrictions on the events industry. For one agency, only seven Hogmanay shows out of 60 that were planned went ahead. For many in the sector, a loss of income due to Covid restrictions is catastrophic. I welcome the additional support that the First Minister announced last week, but can she ensure that everyone in the events industry chain who needs support, including agencies, will be eligible to apply for financial support?

The First Minister: We are working closely with the sector to do exactly that. I will not stand here and pretend that every single organisation, business or agency on which there has been a financial impact will get full compensation for it, but all the packages of support that we have put in place are designed to try to ensure that help goes to those throughout the supply chain, whichever sector we are talking about. That very much includes the events sector, and we are working with the sector to try to ensure that it happens.

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): The First Minister highlighted progress on the revised strategic framework. What will the consultation process entail with regard to public health, education, business and local government bodies?

The First Minister: As I said in my statement, we intend to publish a revised framework as quickly as possible, and I hope that we will do so over the next few weeks. We also want to consult as widely as possible. Principally, we will consult with members and parties across the chamber, but the Scottish Government teams that are responsible for the relevant areas will also ensure that stakeholders in the economy, education and across the wider public health community have the opportunity to feed in their views.

“Living with Covid” has become a shorthand phrase. When I say it, I am not sure that I mean the same things that, for example, Boris Johnson means when he says it. Different people will mean different things by it. That is not a pejorative statement; it is just a statement of fact.

It is important that we consider carefully both what living with Covid means and the different trade-offs that might be involved in enabling us to

do so. That means that we need to listen to views from across society and ensure that we take the best possible advice and expertise that we can. That is what we will seek to do, albeit in a relatively short timescale.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): Presiding Officer,

“Do not run the risk of later regretting—or of leaving your family to regret—that you did not get the protection against illness and death that vaccination gives you.”

Those are not my words, but the words of the First Minister.

Thousands of vulnerable and at-risk people are stuck in hospital or have been waiting weeks to be discharged and have missed getting a booster jab. How will the Government ensure that vulnerable people who are stuck in Scottish hospitals get the protection that the First Minister and I have received and which they have missed?

The First Minister: That is an important issue, so it is important that we do not misunderstand the situation. I have made the point before that whether somebody who is in hospital gets the vaccination is down to clinical decisions and judgment. There is no blanket prohibition on people in hospital being vaccinated, and it is important to understand that.

In relation to people who are in hospital when they could be discharged, our focus is on appropriate discharge as quickly as possible. That is better for the individual, not just because they can be vaccinated normally but for all sorts of other reasons. It is also in the interests of the wider national health service, because it alleviates some of the pressure that comes from delayed discharge.

Let me stress again that whether somebody who is in hospital is vaccinated is not the result of some blanket policy—it is down to clinical decision making.

Siobhian Brown (Ayr) (SNP): A concerned constituent has been in touch because his mother is in an Ayr care home in which the residents are being told that they need to self-isolate for 14 days if they test positive. With the self-isolation period being reduced from 10 to seven days, will the First Minister advise when the guidance on self-isolation in care homes will be updated?

The First Minister: That is obviously an important issue. I think that everybody understands and agrees that protecting people in care homes, who are often the most vulnerable to Covid, is an overriding priority. The measures that are currently in place enable loved ones to have meaningful contact with care home residents while balancing the Covid risk. The need to keep people safe in line with public health advice, especially

given omicron, very much underpins the decisions that we take.

Given the changes to isolation that I set out last week, we have already commissioned public health experts to review the guidelines that are currently in place on self-isolation for care home residents. We expect to be able to update the position imminently, and I undertake to ensure that the Parliament is notified of that as quickly as the work allows us to.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): I heard the First Minister's answer to my colleague Jackie Baillie, but it is my understanding that areas including Orkney are already considering a policy of paying family carers £15 an hour in order to discharge people from hospital, and that a Government minister has been quoted as saying that in the press this weekend. If that is happening, it appears to be a rushed policy that, alone, will not resolve the problem, and, yet again, unpaid carers have not been involved.

Ninety per cent of unpaid carers have stepped up, providing 24-hours-a-day support for nothing; the 10 per cent who access the carers allowance have been doing the same for the equivalent of being paid for 35 hours at £1.93 an hour. Unpaid carers are again rightly feeling bruised by the sudden realisation that they are key to the pandemic response and facing the continued lack of acknowledgement of the solutions that carers organisations have offered the Government. What are the Government's intentions around the policy? How will it determine who gets £15 an hour, who is left on £1.93 an hour and who gets nothing? How can the Government ensure that it does not create a three-tier system of unpaid care in which some people are paid at a rate that we believe is right for the job, as my colleague Jackie Baillie has set out, and others are left in poverty on £1.93 an hour or nothing at all?

The First Minister: Let me again be clear that the Government has no plans to introduce a system to start paying family members £15—or any amount—an hour to look after elderly relatives. Individual partnerships might adopt different approaches as they see appropriate in their local circumstances, but it is not a Scottish Government policy or position.

The Government's position is that we champion self-directed support to allow family members to employ people to provide care. We encourage people to explore that option, where appropriate. I have repeatedly recognised, and we recognise through our policies such as the carers allowance supplement, the enormous contribution that is made by unpaid carers. We are actively considering how we can further support unpaid carers, who are shouldering a disproportionate share of the Covid burden at this time.

As I said in my statement, we are working with local authorities to support the social care service more generally through a very difficult period, which includes increasing the pay rate in the social care sector not just in the immediate term but in the longer term.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Omicron has had a hugely adverse impact on foreign travel, with thousands of people understandably cancelling holidays over Christmas and beyond, resulting in travel agents spending more time and their own money, in terms of staff and utilities, on handing back money to customers rather than booking holidays. Will the First Minister advise what support the Scottish Government will provide to hard-pressed independent travel agents, many of which are family owned and will struggle for many months to come?

The First Minister: This is a difficult time for travel agents, as it is for businesses in different sectors across the economy. Through the measures that we have in place, we are trying as hard as we can to target funding at sectors that are most immediately and severely impacted. We have recently announced additional support for businesses and we are working with different sectors, including the travel sector, to get that money to affected businesses as quickly as possible. That work will continue for as long as there is a necessity to have such measures in place.

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Before the Covid pandemic, about 2,000 people in the NHS Highland area were waiting for orthopaedic treatment. That figure is now closer to 2,800 and the projected waiting time for new patients is six years. With the national treatment centre for Inverness not yet built and staff recruitment looking increasingly difficult, what urgent actions can be taken during the pandemic to reduce those long waiting times?

The First Minister: Action to reduce waiting times is currently being taken in the form of additional investment and efforts to maximise capacity as the NHS recovers. In the NHS recovery plan, we set out the medium to longer-term commitments on increased capacity. That includes the commitment to national elective treatment centres. It also involves increased recruitment.

Recruitment in health, social care and across the economy is a challenge. One significant reason for that is Brexit and the end of free movement. We must ensure that we do not lose sight of that. We will continue supporting the national health service in a range of ways to try to avoid unnecessary admissions, to reduce delayed discharge at the other end of the hospital system

and to ensure that we get waiting times back down as quickly as possible. Getting Covid under control is crucial to that. Reducing that pressure on the NHS will enable it to focus fully on recovery work.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): What reassurances can the First Minister provide to pregnant women who may have reservations about getting vaccinated?

The First Minister: I am happy to provide an assurance about the safety and efficacy of the vaccine for pregnant women. A woman who is pregnant might not want to hear that from me, as someone who does not have clinical qualifications. I would point them to their midwife, to the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists or to the Royal College of Midwives. All those expert voices are not only giving assurance about the safety of the vaccine for pregnant women but actively encouraging pregnant women to get vaccinated.

I repeat that call. If you are pregnant and are not yet vaccinated, take steps to do that. It provides you with protection and also provides protection for your unborn baby.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): Will the First Minister explain how the Scottish Government is financially supporting people on low incomes who are required to self-isolate?

The First Minister: We are doing as much as we can to ensure that those who are on low incomes and who are being required to self-isolate—which is a difficult thing to be asked to do—get the support that they need. We have set aside a further £100 million for the self-isolation support grant, which means that those on low incomes who are asked by test and protect to self-isolate can apply for a £500 grant. If they are eligible for it, the grant helps to ensure that they can self-isolate without financial hardship. We will continue to keep under review all the different ways in which we can help people to do the right thing by self-isolating if that is what they are asked to do.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the First Minister's Covid-19 update. I apologise to the members I was unable to reach. There will be a brief pause before we move to the next item of business.

Labour Shortages

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

The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-02740, in the name of Kate Forbes, on addressing the impacts of labour shortages on Scotland's economy. I invite those members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons now.

15:25

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Economy (Kate Forbes): Today, I ask Parliament to agree to urgent, joint action to address the labour market challenges that we are facing as a result of Covid and Brexit. The Scottish Government has been working actively over a matter of months to resolve those challenges, but we need the help and support of this Parliament and of the United Kingdom Government.

That is why I am calling on this Parliament to support the Government's work to protect the provision of services and the delivery of goods through our supply chains, and calling on the UK Government to commit to establishing with the Scottish Government a joint task force on labour market shortages. We need action, we need engagement from the UK Government and we need a migration system that works for Scotland.

It is clear that the UK immigration system is not meeting the needs of Scottish businesses and the wider Scottish economy. Instead of the UK Government engaging constructively with us on how to develop a system that works, we had to make 19 requests before the immigration minister was even willing to attend a meeting. There are immigration impacts on our economy, our public services and our communities. We need a commitment to genuine, on-going engagement and we need a migration policy that is tailored to Scotland's distinct needs.

Employers across many sectors and regions of the economy are facing continued workforce challenges, and I cannot imagine that there is a single MSP in the chamber who has not come across businesses in their constituency that are directly confronted by those issues.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): I quite agree that Brexit has had an impact on migration, but does the cabinet secretary not agree that, in order to address the issues fully, we need to look at the underlying factors, including

workforce participation and long-term productivity, both of which pre-date Covid and Brexit?

Kate Forbes: The member makes a really important point about the structural challenges, but he cannot ignore the fact that the issues have come to a head in the past few months in particular. Over the past year, businesses in every part of the United Kingdom have faced a really significant challenge.

Just before the debate, I met the council members of the Scottish Tourism Alliance, and they cited data that shows that one of their biggest challenges both pre omicron and, probably, after it lies in being able to recruit and to trade fully as a result of having a full workforce. I will come on to specific sectoral examples.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): In November, Sébastien Bazin, who is head of the Accor hotel group, was quoted in the French press as saying that the French hotel industry was on its knees due to staff shortages. Why does the Scottish Government persist in blaming such issues on Brexit when they are happening right across Europe and, indeed, right across the western world?

Kate Forbes: It is absolutely remarkable— notwithstanding that I accept that there are challenges across the world as a result of Covid—that the Conservatives want to make the situation worse by removing freedom of movement and ensuring that the solutions to some of the problems are denied to Scottish businesses. I do not understand that. That problem lies at the heart of the motion that we are debating.

In the latest published data, which is from November 2021, more than a third of Scottish businesses reported that they had experienced a shortage of workers, and the number of candidates applying for permanent jobs reached an all-time low in the same month. Almost half of businesses in the accommodation and food sector reported difficulties with filling vacancies during the period, as did more than half of construction, health and social care, transport and storage businesses.

Instead of wishing away those figures and the acute impact on businesses, I have come to the chamber to try to find solutions. One of those solutions is to ensure that we have freedom of movement and a migration system that works for Scottish businesses. [*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Excuse me for a second, cabinet secretary. Mr Fraser, I do not know whether you wish to seek another intervention instead of intervening from a sedentary position—

Kate Forbes: I have not granted a request to intervene.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Whether she took such an intervention would be up to the cabinet secretary, not me. Please resume, cabinet secretary.

Kate Forbes: Thank you, Presiding Officer. I will continue, given that I am only two pages into my speech after four minutes.

Although some of those issues are not new, they have been severely exacerbated by the situation over the past year. Time and again, the Government argued that Brexit would be a disruptive force to Scotland's society and economy. Two years on, that has clearly been the case, and very few would argue that it has not.

The ending of freedom of movement has made it more difficult for those sectors that have traditionally relied on European Union citizens. For many EU citizens, Brexit, together with the narrative from the UK Government, has changed their relationship with the UK.

We want to support EU citizens and to help them stay here, so we are providing information, advice and support through the stay in Scotland campaign. However, EU citizens should never have been forced to apply to retain the rights that they already had. We have explored the option of providing physical proof of status for EU citizens, but that is not within devolved powers, so we will continue to press the UK Government to provide physical proof and to safeguard the rights of EU citizens.

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Kate Forbes: I would love to, but I have made so little progress in my speech that I cannot. Perhaps I will do so later.

Although there remains strong business demand for staff across the economy, businesses continue to suffer from a low number of applicants overall, and that has further exacerbated existing pressures around shortages of materials and workers, and has amplified the mismatches between supply and demand that were caused by the pandemic.

What are we doing about that? In June, the Minister for Just Transition, Employment and Fair Work outlined how employers across a variety of sectors were struggling to recruit workers into business-critical roles. At that time, employers in food and drink manufacturing reported an unprecedented drop in the availability of workers over the first six months of 2021, while a shortage of around 76,000 heavy goods vehicle drivers across the UK meant that many supermarkets were struggling to keep their shelves well stocked.

Many businesses in the accommodation and food sector also entered the busy holiday period without the number of staff that they needed in order to meet customer demand, and one in five small businesses reported that they could close or would have to radically change their business model, due to the increased difficulty in recruiting EU workers.

Therefore, over that time, we have been working with businesses and employers to develop and implement mitigation measures in response to those shortages. We have developed a working with business action plan, which identifies new and existing actions that can be taken alongside business and partners such as skills agencies. That plan aims to mitigate the impact of those shortages and to help to stimulate economic recovery through a range of employability, skills and sector-specific interventions.

That approach aligns with the national strategy for economic transformation, which will set out the Government's plans for strengthening Scotland's economy through national and regional action over the next 10 years. We will work with business, education providers and the enterprise and skills agencies to address sector-specific recruitment and retention challenges, including current and emerging skills and labour shortages.

As part of those measures, the Government and Skills Development Scotland are working with a range of sectors to support future workforce planning. Skills Development Scotland is working in conjunction with appointed childcare training providers to develop and deliver a taster programme in childcare for those over 25 who have been made redundant or who face the risk of redundancy, and for returners to the labour market. That will enable those individuals to apply for entry-level positions in the childcare sector, while addressing the retention and recruitment challenges that private and third sector providers face.

SDS is also working with Quality Meat Scotland on a project to encourage young people into that sector. The project aims to future proof the red meat industry by ensuring that there is a pipeline of employees who have the skills and the knowledge to provide a workforce for the industry.

To pick on another sector, through our manufacturing recovery plan we are working in collaboration with the industry, academia, business organisations and trade unions to deliver a set of targeted actions against four key priorities, one of which is skills and workforce. The national transition training funding of £1.98 million for the National Manufacturing Institute Scotland also directly supports that priority; that is in addition to the earlier establishment of the manufacturing

skills academy as a key element of our £75 million investment in the institute.

We recognise how vital the manufacturing sector is, just as we recognise how important the childcare sector and the red meat industry are. They are all vital to Scotland's recovery and just transition, and we look forward to the opening of the institute's headquarters in the autumn.

We need to identify how to support people into key jobs. We are committed to supporting young people from all backgrounds into the labour market and ensuring that they have the right skills to succeed. The construction recovery plan recognises that a particular focus is needed on the younger workforce and getting apprentices back into work and learning.

Our work to align the young persons guarantee with sector and employer needs will open the door to more career opportunities for young people, including in sectors with current or emerging shortages. Through our summer marketing campaign, we have highlighted the diverse job opportunities that are available in the tourism sector, thereby promoting tourism as a career of choice for young people and attracting new talent. We mirrored that approach with our recent national marketing campaign, "There's more to care than caring", which ran from mid-November to December and showed the benefits of a career in adult social care to a younger audience.

I touch on those examples of the importance of understanding the particular issues that specific sectors face and putting in place tangible and meaningful interventions that try to resolve the issue.

Staff shortages pose significant challenges to businesses and require them to become competitive in their offer to employees. By adopting fair work principles and investing in upskilling and training, employers are developing a more sustainable and more competitive approach to recruiting and retaining workers. The Scottish Government is supporting those employers to create fairer workplaces and is promoting a sectoral approach through the Fair Work Convention's inquiries into social care and construction and the planned inquiry into hospitality. Fair work will be central to our national strategy.

I started by outlining all the work that we are doing to tackle skills and labour shortages, but despite all that work, many businesses and employers are struggling due to the impact of the reduction in freedom of movement on labour mobility and supply, and pandemic-related disruption. The emergence of omicron has brought further challenges and insecurity for many industries and has exacerbated existing staff

shortages. Although staff shortages and recruitment challenges are being recorded across all sectors, the issue is particularly pronounced in certain industries and sectors.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Cabinet secretary, could you bring your remarks to a close?

Kate Forbes: I will bring them to a close.

As I draw the debate to a close, the call, as I said at the outset, is to work across Parliament and, I hope, across Governments to bring meaningful resolution to the challenges that businesses face, because as we emerge from Covid and move into living with Covid, the issue of staff shortages will still need to be resolved.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises the resilience and innovation that employers and workers across many sectors of the economy have demonstrated throughout the last year in response to the continuation of workforce challenges associated with the pandemic, combined with reduced workforce availability as a result of the UK's exit from the EU; believes that the Scottish Government and its agencies are committed to working with employers, business organisations and trade unions, to resolve and understand labour shortages, skills gaps and future requirements, and address recruitment and retention challenges through interventions and institutions designed to help more people into work, implementing a range of upskilling and retraining opportunities, and promoting the benefits of fair work, and calls on the UK Government to make immediate changes to its economically damaging migration policies in order to protect the provision of services and the delivery of goods through Scotland's supply chains.

15:38

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I acknowledge at the start of the debate that Brexit has undoubtedly been responsible for some of the current issues in the labour market. Some of those issues are serious; I do not think that anyone should try to deny that or make light of the problems that have been encountered, because we all have constituents, many in rural and farming communities, who have expressed grave concerns about key aspects of the issue, including the shortage of migrant labour. I particularly cite fruit, vegetable and berry picking in my region as examples. Those people are absolutely right to state those concerns.

However, if one looks at the motion and had listened to the Scottish National Party during many debates in Parliament on the issue, one would think that Brexit was responsible for all the labour market issues, which is simply untrue. My colleague Murdo Fraser asked the cabinet secretary about the situation in France, because that is clearly not a Brexit issue.

Daniel Johnson: Will the member give way on that point?

Liz Smith: I will not give way just now.

There is plenty of evidence that demonstrates that several of the current problems existed long before Brexit or Covid. One need take only a cursory look at the evidence that has been supplied to Parliament's Finance and Public Administration Committee by bodies including the Scottish Fiscal Commission—which is mentioned in the Labour amendment—and the Fraser of Allander Institute to recognise that there are much more deep-seated problems at stake.

Let me outline some of those problems. First, there are inherent structural weaknesses in the Scottish labour market, which have created skills shortages and insecure employment in key sectors and which, together with a higher-than-average ageing population, are creating serious challenges and impacting on the potential for stronger economic growth and long-term investment.

Those issues have been created not by Brexit but by Scottish National Party ministers, who sometimes refuse to listen to the business community and to put in place policies that will address problems. My colleagues will talk more about the detail of failures to, for example, close the skills gap, widen apprenticeship opportunities and help employers to upskill and reskill their workforce.

The Minister for Just Transition, Employment and Fair Work (Richard Lochhead): Will Liz Smith acknowledge that some of the structural and “deep-seated problems” that Scotland faces are the responsibility of previous Conservative Governments, which left our communities with intergenerational challenges? Does she accept that that is why we are in the position that we are in today?

Liz Smith: If the minister cares to look at what the Scottish Fiscal Commission is saying, he will see that the greatest concern is the long-term skills gap in information technology and in technology companies. I think that I am right in saying that, according to Scottish Chambers of Commerce, some 47 per cent of employers in Scotland say that there is a lack of suitable talent for their businesses, which is detrimental to growth. That is not to do with the United Kingdom.

Secondly, there are serious productivity issues. If we track back to 2007, we will see that we have consistently lagged behind other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development nations, despite the SNP's bold pledge to get Scotland into the top quartile for productivity. Sixteenth out of 37 is hardly that; we remain below the median for the

OECD and the rest of the UK. That, too, has serious implications for growth.

Witnesses at the committee have flagged up that although we have the potential to improve productivity—and we do—including through our generally well-educated labour force, the SNP Government has neither taken the right approach to innovation nor offered the assistance that is required by employers that want to improve their business structures.

Members of the Scottish Government—or, which is perhaps more accurate, the SNP's coalition partners, the Greens—should be careful about what they say in this debate. After all, their approach to oil and gas is hardly helping matters when it comes to labour market issues. I believe that, deep down, many members of the Government know that.

Then there is the issue of demographics. The Scottish Fiscal Commission and the Fraser of Allander Institute have demonstrated that Scotland's population is ageing more quickly than the populations in other parts of the UK and in EU nations. That results in a higher rate of economic inactivity, as well as a greater social security burden on taxpayers.

The really big issue that results from the demographics is the weakness of the Scottish tax take. The net effect of current tax revenue is negative, to the tune of £190 million. Much more worrying is that we know that it is predicted that that could rise to £417 million by 2026-27. There are worrying signs for tax elasticity, too, in that regard. The decline in the working population as a percentage share of the total population is a serious issue, because the devolved tax take in Scotland, as a proportion of the total tax take, is declining. That, alongside the predicted problems to do with the need to increase social security spending, paints a picture of a very unhappy long-term outlook.

Brexit is by no means the root cause of that problem. Of course, if Brexit was the main cause, nations that are still inside the EU would not be experiencing the same problems as we are experiencing. However, they are experiencing those problems. Indeed, most developed nations are experiencing labour market shortages of various sorts.

Daniel Johnson: In some ways, I agree with the point that Liz Smith is making, but does she accept that, although Brexit might not be the whole reason, it certainly exacerbates every single one of the issues that she has just set out?

Liz Smith: If Daniel Johnson listened to the start of my speech, he heard me say exactly that. I recognise that Brexit is part of the problem. What I am saying, clearly, is that the issues do not relate

only to Scotland and the UK. Other countries in the EU are having exactly the same problems as we are, so it cannot be a Brexit problem. That is the whole point—we cannot just blame the problems on Brexit when it is clear that countries that are still in the EU are having exactly the same problems. My colleagues will set out some of the things that we can do about that, and the policy commitments that we ought to be putting in place.

However, I finish by saying that there are, in the Scottish economy, long-term structural issues that predate Brexit and Covid by many years, so Brexit and Covid cannot be held responsible for them. That is a serious message from every single economic forecaster that we care to listen to. The cabinet secretary needs to listen to them.

I move amendment S6M-02740.1, to leave out from “reduced workforce” to end and insert:

“global supply chain issues and shortages of workers in some key sectors of the economy, and further recognises that there are serious and long-term structural issues within the Scottish economy, as shown by recent evidence presented by economic forecast groups, and that these must be addressed with more focussed Scottish Government policies targeted at reducing the skills gap, at improving productivity and stimulating economic growth.”

15:45

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): It is a pleasure to open the debate for the Labour Party.

It is impossible not to see the impact that labour shortages have had on the Scottish economy. That was clear from the cabinet secretary’s speech. We see it in our supermarkets, at the petrol pumps and in many other scenarios that we encounter daily. I start on that point of consensus.

The Scottish Government refers to the impact of exiting the EU on labour supply and calls on the UK Government to scrap its “damaging migration policies”. I whole-heartedly agree. Brexit is a causal factor in the labour shortages that we are experiencing, and they will undoubtedly be exacerbated by the—frankly—risible and harmful attitude to immigration that dominates Tory thinking. It is telling that the Conservatives would, despite the Conservative spokesperson’s conciliatory language, remove any mention of Brexit with their amendment. I find that troubling, given that the Conservatives have just admitted that Brexit is a major issue with which we have to contend. Although Brexit is, undoubtedly, a crucial factor, it is not the only factor. That much I agree with.

The pandemic has exposed the underlying vulnerability and fragility of the Scottish economy. Although the pandemic has exposed fragilities, they are, in part, caused by the underlying lack of an industrial strategy—one that underpins

upskilling, increases productivity and makes strategic public investments.

It is also just not credible for the Scottish Government to blame that challenge entirely on Brexit. For 15 years, the Scottish Government has been in power, and for 15 years we have had a slow erosion of Scottish economic sovereignty. Domestic ownership of industry has steadily decreased and there have been low business start-up rates. Predatory foreign investment has dramatically increased, at the expense of public investment, and there has been complete overreliance on imported labour that is largely low skilled and un-unionised, thereby generally exerting more downward pressure on wages.

We have had warnings from the Scottish Fiscal Commission that illustrate the scale of the challenge that faces the Scottish economy as a result of the pandemic. As a country, we have lagged behind the rest of the UK on pay-as-you-earn tax, employment, pay growth and labour market participation. Employment has been growing more slowly in Scotland than it has in the rest of the UK. In Scotland, the number of employees per head of population has grown by just 0.6 percent compared with growth of 2.3 percent in the rest of the UK.

Some of my colleagues will elaborate on other challenges that are facing the Scottish economy, particularly in relation to productivity, and on the inequalities that are observable across many sectors of industry.

Richard Lochhead: Many members in the chamber, across all parties, would agree about many of the symptoms over past decades that Paul Sweeney has diagnosed in the Scottish economy. Would he accept that many employment and economic levers are not the responsibility of this Parliament, and that we should, therefore, try to get those levers transferred to Holyrood so that we can do something about the challenges that he outlines?

Paul Sweeney: I would like to focus very much on what it is in the grasp of this Parliament to achieve. I will focus particularly on the skills gap, on which, I am sure, we can find some consensus.

In the past 15 years of this Government, there has been a steady decline in Scottish employees receiving job-related training. Persistent sector-specific skills gaps, some of which were referred to in earlier speeches, are becoming increasingly prevalent. That is not just my partisan assertion. In June 2020, the Scottish Government’s own advisory group on economic recovery stated that

“there are persistent skills shortages sitting alongside graduate under-employment.”

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that upskilling and skills development have fallen by the wayside under this Government.

Just before Christmas, the budget revealed further cuts to Skills Development Scotland—more than £5 million has been cut from its budget. Some £10 million has been cut from the employability and skills budget. There has been a real-terms cut to the education and skills budget.

Our colleges, which should be the engine room of a resilient, adaptable and highly skilled workforce, face similar financial pressure. I was speaking about that to Glasgow Kelvin College only yesterday. It is concerned that new skills training funding is tied up by bureaucratic red tape and cannot be drawn down to meet the challenges that the college faces daily, including redesigning its provision of tailored training for local businesses and industries and getting people reskilled and into the workforce. The college is also finding it very difficult to keep people in training programmes because of the domestic pressures that they face due to lockdown restrictions.

It is quite straightforward: we cannot build a motivated, skilled and productive workforce on the cheap, a flourishing industry through neglect, or resilient economic growth through complacency. Our amendment attempts to address some of the issues. It urges the Scottish Government to provide a robust industrial strategy that is fit for the 21st century, for which I have been advocating for nearly a decade.

Our amendment recognises the need to address the gross inequalities that arise as a result of low pay, poor conditions and a failure to fully utilise fair work practices, which are all entirely within the remit of the Scottish Government. Finally, it urges the Government to fundamentally reconsider its relationship with employers, business organisations, trade unions, colleges and universities.

For far too long, we have been content with our public sector and its development agencies being passive and investing public money as a last resort. I know about that because I worked for Scottish Enterprise for two years. I have personally seen Scottish Enterprise's weaknesses as an organisation, despite the great people who work for it. That has resulted in numerous failed industrial interventions, such as at Ferguson Marine in Port Glasgow, the Caley railway works in Springburn and, most recently, Prestwick airport. Why are we hesitant to use the power of the state to improve the lives of people across our country and to bolster our economy?

We need a shift towards a far more entrepreneurial state that makes proactive

investments and sees such investment as an opportunity to improve people's quality of life and to further their potential, and as a way to seed economic sovereignty in Scotland.

I urge colleagues across the chamber to support our amendment. It would refocus our collective efforts to address the skills gap, to increase productivity and to make investment-led growth our fundamental and singular economic priority.

I move amendment S6M-02740.2, to leave out from "believes" to "fair work" and insert:

"notes the finding from the Scottish Fiscal Commission that Scotland's economy is lagging behind the rest of the UK, partly due to factors that predate the COVID-19 pandemic, such as declining labour market participation, weak investment in productivity and insufficient flexibility in skills development; considers that building a more sustainable and resilient economy will require an industrial strategy that addresses regional inequalities, low pay and poor conditions, and the skills gaps across Scotland; believes that the Scottish Government and its agencies must do more work with employers, business organisations, trade unions, colleges and universities to address recruitment and retention, promote fair work and offer more flexibility in reskilling opportunities for workers".

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Willie Rennie is joining us remotely.

15:52

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I am a bit of a Euro fanatic, but even I accept that the workforce shortages are not just because of Brexit. The Conservative Government would do well to listen to the more balanced approach taken by Liz Smith today—Brexit has certainly made the situation worse. However, the SNP should not hide behind Brexit or the pandemic, because the deep-rooted problems have been mounting for years.

First, I will focus on immigration policy, which is preventing industries from recovering from the pandemic. [*Inaudible.*]—plain and simple. It has deprived British businesses of the workforce that they need to rebuild the economy: the lorry drivers to supply our shops and supermarkets, and the workers for our care homes, farms and the hospitality sector.

Let us take my favourite subject: the berry fields of Fife. The new growing techniques demand more workers for longer periods. The sector has tried to recruit locally, but there are just not enough people locally for them to recruit. It needs a bigger seasonal workers scheme that works. It is not just the farms: the seasonal workers scheme needs to be extended to cover companies such as Kettle Produce, which supplies supermarkets across the country.

The hit on the fruit and vegetable sector in Fife alone stretches to millions of pounds, and that is

just for this year. The rotting berries and the veg left in the fields this year is something that is unlikely to be repeated next year because the farmers will not invest in the crop unless they have guarantees that they will have the workforce, and they have not been given those guarantees. The pleas for a bigger seasonal workers scheme have been ignored by the UK Government. To limit the scheme to 30,000 visas—half of what is required—is bad enough, but for that to be tapered down from next year is utterly reckless.

The Conservative Government should be honest with businesses that it is prepared to accept casualties and business failures, that Scotland will produce and process less of its food, and that it no longer cares about food security, but the sleekit way that it is going about things shows that the Conservatives are obsessed with immigration policy rather than standing up for the economy and businesses.

On a wider basis, we need to get rid of the arbitrary salary threshold of £25,000, which does not recognise unskilled workers as key workers who should be valued. We need the youth mobility scheme to be extended to EU citizens, as well as a 12-month visa for the food and drink supply chain, and we must allow employers to recruit the workers that they need in order to get us out of this crisis.

It is positive that care workers are to be added to the Home Office's shortage occupations list, but that is too late and too timid. The Conservative Government needs to think again and, with immediate effect, offer a three-year visa for carers.

However, the Scottish Government also bears some responsibility for our current predicament in social care. The problems have been brewing for years, since well before Brexit, and that is, in large part, because the SNP Government will not fund social care sufficiently so that we can give decent wages to carers. The social care sector is on its knees. People are waiting in hospital and at home without the care packages that they need. The reason for that is pure and simple: the SNP has been taking carers for granted for far too long.

The Scottish Fiscal Commission has found that Scotland's economy is

“lagging behind the rest of the UK”

because of

“declining labour market participation, weak investment in productivity and insufficient flexibility in skills development”.

Those long-running issues were evident long before the pandemic and long before—*[Inaudible.]*—Brexit. It is right that we need

“an industrial strategy that addresses regional inequalities, low pay and poor conditions, and the skills gaps”.

That is why we are going to support—*[Inaudible.]*—because it takes out any reference to Brexit.

Immigration is a challenge that we must—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Rennie, could you bring your remarks to a close?

Willie Rennie: I am just finishing.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We are struggling because the sound system is breaking down, so please conclude.

Willie Rennie: *[Inaudible.]* All of that is about the longer-term health of our economy.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Rennie, I am afraid that we will have to stop you there. I apologise, but something is going wrong with the sound system. That has been happening, to an extent, during the rest of your remarks but, fortunately, we managed to get most of your contribution.

Before we move to the open debate, I remind all members who wish to speak to press their request-to-speak button now—the person I am looking at is not looking at me.

Michelle Thomson is joining us remotely.

15:58

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): I will watch with interest how the Opposition parties, despite their softer stance today, vote on the motion, which focuses on Scottish business, its employees, growing the jobs market and developing the wider economy.

I have some sympathy for the calls from the Labour Party in Scotland for an industrial strategy, and I look forward with interest to hearing how Labour will protect economic development in the light of the threats that are posed by the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020 and the Subsidy Control Bill, because Labour's answer is always that Westminster knows best.

The Tory amendment, despite the undoubtedly well-intentioned acknowledgement from Liz Smith, fundamentally seeks to remove the wording regarding the impact of Brexit on Scottish business and ignores the problems that have been created by Tory policies on immigration. I gently warn the Scottish Tories that they will not be forgiven for sitting supine and soporific as they allow the charlatan who is their leader, Boris Johnson, to inflict that damage.

I will focus on two main areas today, and the first is international competitiveness. I want Scotland to be a leading international player in a number of areas, particularly those that support

our net zero ambitions such as developing the hydrogen economy.

We want to be at the top of the food chain in selected emerging technologies, with a higher-wage and higher-skilled economy than there is at the present time. I welcome the Scottish Government's commitment to invest an additional £500 million over this parliamentary session for new, good green jobs. However, the consequences of Brexit and, in particular, the deliberate choice of the UK Government in restricting access to labour from Europe present a severe threat to many businesses, not least, as others have mentioned, hospitality, construction and tourism businesses, including those that export and those in new technologies. Surely all MSPs across the parties can add their voice to those of the multiple organisations—such as the Federation of Small Businesses, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the Royal Society of Edinburgh—that support the call from the Scottish Government for new temporary worker routes.

Brexit harms our productivity, and we can all agree that both Scottish and UK productivity needs to be better. Critically, Brexit reduces the available working-age labour market pool precisely at a time of emerging skills gaps. If we are to be internationally competitive, we need to be able to attract the highly skilled to Scotland as well as train our own population to the highest standards.

My second area of concern relates to how best to serve our international-class businesses across a variety of sectors. In my Falkirk East constituency, that includes businesses such as Piramal Pharma Solutions and Fujifilm. They are reliant on access to high-quality skills development for their staff to ensure that they maintain their competitive edge and that they can continually improve their productivity.

I have previously spoken about the need to pursue excellence, as it is called for by the likes of the Cumberford-Little report, which was authored at the behest of the Scottish Government by the principals of Edinburgh College and the City of Glasgow College and was supported widely across the college sector. They invite us to move beyond competence and to drive up standards in pursuit of excellence. They are not alone; the Scottish director of WorldSkills has made similar calls. We need to heed their calls to ensure that our businesses and their employees have access to the skills that are needed to remain internationally competitive.

I fully support the actions of the Scottish Government, and I hope that it agrees that combined action to mitigate the clear damage that is being done by Brexit and to strive for excellence in skills is part of the way forward for Scotland.

16:02

Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands)

(Con): I agree with the cabinet secretary that the issue of labour shortages in key sectors of our economy is a serious one, and it deserves a proper debate. However, it is disappointing—although perhaps not surprising—that, despite five and a half years having passed since the Brexit vote, the SNP continues to pin most of the blame on Brexit rather than acknowledging its own failings on the issue and the fact that labour shortages are a global problem. We may be in a new year and looking to the future, but it is clear that the SNP is looking to the past and focusing on old grievances.

As Liz Smith and others have pointed out, the issue is complex and multifactorial. It cannot be attributed to one reason alone. That is not to say that Brexit has not played some part—it has—but I have made the point in debates in the past that labour shortages across various sectors existed long before Brexit. This morning, I spoke to workers in the maritime sector, who talked about recruitment and retention. There was no mention of Brexit at all.

It is undoubtedly true that the pandemic has played a major role in exacerbating the problem. That is on top of the many pre-existing issues that have resulted in labour shortages in different countries and across different sectors across the world. The OECD noted in “International Migration Outlook 2021” that changes to Covid rules are preventing the settling of labour markets, and that has resulted in a 30 per cent drop in migration to countries worldwide. We should use this debate to examine those deep-rooted problems and do what we can to resolve them.

We know that there is a global crisis and that countries as diverse as America, Australia and China are experiencing labour shortages. The EU faces similar challenges. As Deloitte noted last year:

“The heightened risk of contracting COVID-19 has made certain jobs riskier than others—and employers”

in those industries

“find it more challenging to attract workers at prepandemic pay rates”,

with industries such as the hospitality industry particularly impacted.

Domestically, there are fears that Scotland will experience a massive worker shortage by 2030. The think tank IPPR Scotland has estimated that, by that date, we are likely to have a gap of 410,000 workers. That is hugely concerning, and we face a significant challenge, but the Scottish Government has to play a role in preventing those scenarios from playing out in the long term. The

Scottish Chambers of Commerce made an interesting point when it talked about firms being worried about the skills of the candidates who are coming forward, not simply the lack of candidates. There is a distinction to be made between a skills shortage and a labour shortage, and that is particularly significant.

Paul Sweeney: Will the member give way?

Donald Cameron: I would normally do so, but I have a very short time in which to speak.

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development's report on "Addressing skills and labour shortages post-Brexit" notes

"that apprenticeships could play a stronger role in addressing labour shortages",

and that

"Improving the supply of apprentices is an urgent priority given the severe disruption to apprenticeship activity last year."

The Scottish Conservatives agree with that, which is why, in April last year, we outlined proposals for unlimited demand-led apprenticeships that would be based on employers' needs. We also called for the creation of a £500 right-to-retrain account for every Scottish adult, which would give people the ability to retrain and upskill to enable them to be more competitive in a modern workforce. If ever there was a moment to turbo-charge the skills agenda and focus on reskilling and upskilling, this is it.

Those are some of the Scottish Conservatives' solutions to resolving the issue of labour shortages in our economy, but we stand ready to support any meaningful measure that will help to reduce the skills gap and create economic growth to the benefit of the people of Scotland.

16:06

Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP): I begin by welcoming the fact that there is one part of the motion that neither of the amendments seeks to delete or alter: the recognition of the "resilience and innovation" shown by employers and workers across the country, and across many sectors of the economy, in the face of the most incredible challenges as a consequence of the global pandemic.

Unfortunately, however, the unanimity does not last long, because the Tory amendment clearly tries to airbrush out the role of Brexit. I congratulate Liz Smith on accepting that point. She is clearly speaking to the same people to whom I am speaking in my constituency of Perthshire South and Kinross-shire, and she is hearing from the hospitality industry, the butchery business and the soft fruits sector.

Liz Smith also talked about the long-term structural challenges. I accept that there are such challenges in Scotland, but they predate devolution, going back to the Thatcher years, when she decimated whole communities throughout Scotland. We are still living with the effects of that to this day. I have previously told members about my discussions with the Gleneagles hotel, Crieff Hydro and Simon Howie Butchers, which are three extremely important businesses in my constituency. They have made it clear to me that, in order to operate at full capacity, they need to address a staffing shortfall of up to 25 per cent, and they have to be able to recruit beyond our borders to do so. I wrote on their behalf to the UK Government, but the reply was firmly negative. It is not that the UK Government does not get or know what the problems are or what is needed to address them; it is simply choosing not to hear about or help with those problems, and it is refusing to take responsibility for them.

The problems might be inevitable consequences of the pandemic situation in which we now find ourselves, but they were not unavoidable. They are the consequence of decisions that were knowingly taken by the Conservative Party and the UK Government. The choices that they made and the decisions that they took have left us where we are now. It is not only that they chose to rip Scotland out of the EU, despite the overwhelmingly expressed view of the Scottish people that that should not happen, or that they chose to embark on a harder Brexit than those who put the leave case said would happen. It is the fact that, when the country was careering towards a hard Brexit cliff edge, they chose not to apply the brakes, even when something totally unexpected hit. Nobody knew that we were going to face a global pandemic, but that decision has made it extremely tough for many sectors of the economy, who have had to deal with a double whammy.

As James Withers of Scotland Food & Drink wrote in August on Twitter,

"Brexit has been an enormous shock to the labour market; a Brexit implemented in the middle of a pandemic, when supply chains were already straining."

I know that all other members will have received the same NFU Scotland briefing as I did in advance of the debate. Willie Rennie talked about it earlier. One does not have to have a farming background to understand the grim picture that the NFU paints. To put it simply, there are farmers who are not going to plant this year because they cannot guarantee a labour force for next year. The labour shortages in 2021 meant that those farmers lost huge amounts of money. That is the start of a vicious circle if they are not able to plant for next year.

It is not just farming that is affected, but food and hospitality. Bus companies are cutting services because they simply cannot recruit enough drivers. If we look at the shortage of heavy goods vehicle drivers, we see that the problem is not just the ending of freedom of movement with our leaving the European Union or employers' aversion to the extra paperwork that is now needed. The UK Government has deliberately created a toxic environment for immigration across the board, and this country needs immigration.

Tess White: Will the member take an intervention?

Jim Fairlie: I will, yes.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The member is just about to wind up. Very briefly, Ms White.

Tess White: I will be very quick. Thank you for taking my intervention—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please speak into the microphone.

Tess White: Does the member agree that there is an issue with HGV drivers not just in Scotland and the UK, but across Europe as a whole?

Jim Fairlie: Yes, I absolutely agree that there is an issue across the whole of Europe, but why make things harder by introducing a hard Brexit?

As I am to come to the end of my speech, I will move on quickly. More and more people are coming to recognise that it is only through this country of ours having the normal powers of a nation that we can take the decisions that our people need. This debate underlines the importance of securing our independence and engaging properly with the people and countries of the world.

16:11

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): Colleagues from all parties are rightly raising the real business concerns across Scotland, which have made been made worse not only by Brexit, but by Covid-19.

I thank the Food and Drink Federation Scotland for its helpful briefing for today's debate, which notes that we have now reached crisis point, with the growth and viability of businesses in danger, and knock-on impacts for consumers, with high food price inflation. The briefing also highlights that, in a survey carried out last August, 97 per cent of businesses said that they would struggle to fill vacancies in the future. That shocking statistic highlights just how dire the situation is.

However, as several colleagues have said today, labour shortages have multiple causes. We cannot blame just Covid or Brexit. Those are key

aspects, but they are not the whole story. Many of the factors that are driving failures in the Scottish economy predate the pandemic and have gone unaddressed during the Scottish National Party's entire time in office. We are also lagging behind the rest of the UK.

As Paul Sweeney eloquently noted, before Covid, Scotland's economy had been suffering from low investment and productivity, limited local and community ownership and increasing inequalities in our labour market for more than a decade. Scottish Labour has previously called on the Scottish Government to work with the UK Government to create a flexible visa scheme. We are not asking it to reinvent the wheel, but it is time to look at the steps that we took in the past. We should learn from the experience of the fresh talent initiative that was introduced during the regime of Jack McConnell, the former First Minister. However, it is also clear that, although we need flexibility, we cannot rely totally on imported labour. We must also look at the home-grown crisis.

I want to raise the issues of fair work and childcare, in particular. Labour's amendment highlights the need for an

"industrial strategy that addresses regional inequalities, low pay ... poor conditions, and the skills gaps"

that we have across Scotland.

There has been a steady decline in the number of employees in Scotland receiving job-related training during the past 15 years, and slow wage rises are also reflected in poverty data. The data for 2015 to 2018 show that, after housing costs, 60 per cent of working-age adults living in relative poverty lived in working households. That is the highest percentage on record.

In-work poverty is also a major driver of child poverty, with the proportion of children living in relative poverty also rising. That is before we take into account recent food and fuel cost rises.

Let us look at gender inequalities. In 2018, the gap between employment rates of women and men in the workforce was nearly 8 per cent; between disabled and non-disabled people, it was nearly 36 per cent; and between white people and people from ethnic minority groups, it was nearly 20 per cent, which is the largest gap on record.

We have deep-seated inequalities in our labour market and in our communities that must be addressed with targeted action, not with headline grabbing or empty statements. That means making training available, not cutting skills development budgets. It means making childcare accessible and affordable to parents, particularly for women in the community, so that they can access jobs knowing that they can turn up to work

and that they will be paid enough to support their family and pay their bills.

We need to tackle the deep-seated inequalities and provide adjustments and support for disabled people across the workforce. To tackle such inequalities in our communities, we need Government investment in jobs and training at the national or local level. We need to work with businesses and trade unions and, as we recover from Covid, we need to use procurement policies to provide more attractive employment that pays people enough to live on and offers training and career development opportunities. When we bang our desks relentlessly in relation to care, we just need to look at the number of people who are not getting care support because working in care is unattractive and does not pay well—people cannot support their families on the poor wages that are paid.

All those deep-seated inequalities need to be tackled. In coming out of Covid, we need to find a process that gets people into work that they can live on. That must be the priority in tackling our labour inequalities.

16:15

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): The past few years have been difficult for business, with the on-going pandemic and our departure from the EU. My background is of 20 years in the banking sector and a further five years in the development sector, and I have also been a councillor for 15 years. I have spoken to hundreds of businesses all over my county in the past year or so. In all my time engaging with businesses, the clear feedback has been that this has been the most difficult period that they have ever faced for recruiting staff.

I will focus on a few key areas of the economy in East Lothian and on the impact that labour shortages are having on them. In food and drink, East Lothian led the way with the first-ever sector-based business improvement district in Scotland. Along with East Lothian Council, Queen Margaret University has announced a food and drink innovation centre, which will be funded in partnership through the Edinburgh and south-east Scotland city region deal.

Food and drink is Scotland's largest manufacturing sector. It employs 44,000 people, contributes £3.6 billion in gross value added to the economy and has a turnover of more than £10 billion. Skills Development Scotland forecasts predict that Scottish food and drink manufacturing will need 8,700 new recruits between now and 2031.

In East Lothian, we have fabulous names such as Belhaven Brewery, Glenkinchie distillery, Luca

ice creams, Winton Brewery and Thistly Cross Cider. Members who have not tried any of their products should try them. All those companies are struggling to recruit staff. In recent discussions that I have had with it, East Lothian Food and Drink has said that its members have been impacted by withdrawal from the EU—that relates to the supply chain, export opportunities and of course labour shortages.

East Lothian has about 200 farms. In 2021, labour shortages were a major issue. We are in discussions with the NFU about the new skills strategy that it is looking at. Labour shortages meant that some farmers lost their harvests. Farmers are making decisions now and there is a danger that, if labour shortages remain, many will move away from sectors that are important to the economy, such as soft fruit.

Farmers previously had the ability to employ as many EU workers as possible. The NFU briefing says that research shows that its members had a labour shortage of about 22 per cent this year. A key point is that the retention rate for EU workers was more than 80 per cent. Willie Rennie was right to say that visa numbers have been restricted to 30,000 in the past year. The NFU predicts that about 60,000 visas are needed.

Changes are required to the immigration system to address the acute labour market shortages that are being faced in multiple sectors of our economy and in the public sector. The Scottish Government gave warnings about that. The UK Government could make changes. As has been said, the CIPD is calling on the UK Government to

“establish a temporary job mobility scheme for young EU nationals to act as a ‘safety valve’ to ease immediate, acute labour shortages”,

which apply across the UK, Scotland and Europe. As a few speakers have said, the Scottish Government is calling on the UK Government to immediately introduce a new temporary worker route to address acute labour shortages.

East Lothian has recruitment issues in hospitality and social care—Sarah Boyack mentioned that—and in construction, food production, agriculture and tourism, which is an important sector in the county. Changes could be implemented immediately, and it is really important for workers to be able to switch to other visa routes once they are in the country and have employment.

Scottish ministers and the Scottish Parliament are best placed to decide how to accommodate our distinct labour market needs. We must also be cognisant of the opportunities that the growth of renewables brings to Scotland, and we need to prepare workforce planning strategies by working with the sector.

The impact of the UK's immigration policy confirms the need for a tailored approach to migration in Scotland. The Scottish Government's proposals are widely supported among key stakeholders such as the FSB, COSLA, the Scottish Council for Development and Industry and the Scottish Tourism Alliance.

As the cabinet secretary said, the Scottish Government is working with business organisations to develop a working with businesses action plan. It will engage with education providers and enterprise and skills agencies, as well as local authorities, to address sector-specific recruitment and retention challenges.

The best way to tackle the issue is to put Scotland's future in our own hands. That is the only way to have a migration policy that is fit for purpose.

16:20

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): The past 21 months has taught us much about resilience: our resilience, or otherwise, as human beings, and the resilience, or otherwise, of the systems and structures that support us. We have had some uncomfortable truths laid bare, too. Our economy does not currently support everyone in the way that it should, our politics often fails to provide security and safety to everyone, and our society is profoundly unequal. As we plan and develop an economy that is robust in the face of future shocks, while supporting individuals and communities equitably and fairly, we must address at least two significant issues, both of which speak directly to addressing the problem of labour shortages in different parts of our economy.

First, we must make work fair. I do not disagree with the calls from Labour for a focus on fair work. We must all work with employers and trade unions to secure genuine improvements in pay and conditions. We must address low pay, in-work poverty, poor flexibility and inequalities in the workplace. No worker should suffer precarious contracts. We need better sick pay; Covid has made that very clear. We need strong trade unions with real bargaining power. I remain disappointed that it was Labour, back in 2014, during the Smith commission, that vetoed the devolution of employment law.

However, there are things that we can do, and have started to do, in Scotland. I believe that our social security system will support people better. I just wish that we had the powers to introduce things such as a universal basic income—but we will have them, one day. We need to ensure that all workers have access to the training and

development opportunities that they want and need, both to deal with issues such as the much-needed just transition to renewable energy and to allow workers to adapt and be flexible as technological innovations and automation remove some aspects of their roles.

Secondly, we must have the right data and information about the things that we need to understand, and we must use that to plan effectively. We must better understand the differences and intersections between skills shortages and labour gaps. We must also better understand workers' expectations about their employment, how things vary geographically and regionally, what impacts demographic changes will have and so on. We need institutions and organisations that understand those data and can turn them into effective planning and actions. For example, we have known for many years about the challenges that we face in social care due to demographic shifts, yet we have not always effectively planned for those changes and challenges. Similarly, we know that our future economy will be reliant on jobs in green industries, so we must ensure, now, that we provide the right education, training and skills development for people to fill those jobs.

However, it is not just about having the people with the right skills. Our planning must take account of other issues, too: where people will live, where their children will go to school, where they will be able to access healthcare, and so on. We hear, time and again, across different sectors, that the limiting factor for recruitment is affordable housing. In addition, there will be shifts and shocks in the future that we still need to properly identify. That is why we should explore the creation of a foresighting centre—one of the recommendations of the Royal Society of Edinburgh's Post-Covid-19 Futures Commission—to provide an important contribution to the industrial strategies of the future.

There are many more issues that I would want to address in the debate, but I will make my final point about immigration. It seems to me that, for many Conservatives, Brexit was about stopping the world so that they could get off, but they dragged us off, too. With the other awful immigration changes that we see coming at us from Westminster, I urge all those in the chamber with any influence in the UK Government to press this point wherever possible: Scotland deserves so much better than Westminster is currently providing.

16:24

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): We all know the impact of the pandemic on the economy, but in recent months the labour

shortage has become more and more obvious, with understaffed hotels and restaurants, empty supermarket shelves and fuel tankers with no one to drive them. As we recover, it is important that we recognise the labour and skills shortages that we are seeing and understand the causes.

Government must take the right action to resolve those challenges. We are seeing just how reckless it was for the UK Government to press ahead with a hard Brexit in the middle of a pandemic. Long before Covid, the Scottish Government, businesses and trade unions were telling the UK Government that a hard Brexit would have a major impact on the economy, including labour shortages. When Covid struck, it was clear that, at the very least, the reasonable thing to do would be to delay a hard Brexit. Instead, the UK Government carried on.

The Tories should surely have foreseen the consequences of adding another 500 million people to their hostile environment policy on migration. The UK Government's points-based approach to migration does not value the right things, and it has not considered the needs of public services and private businesses. It has fixated on high salaries, rather than the skills and social value of workers. The introduction of short-term visas for HGV and poultry workers was not only embarrassing but, more seriously, a symptom of a broken immigration system. If the Tories cannot create an immigration system that works for Scotland in key business sectors, they should devolve the powers now, so that this Parliament can take those important decisions.

With the powers that it has, the Scottish Government is working with businesses to develop action plans, promote fair work and address sector-specific recruitment challenges. SNP policies, such as the young persons guarantee, will support the next generation by creating more opportunities to work, study or undertake training. Through its Covid recovery strategy, the Scottish Government will also deliver an additional £500 million to support new green jobs and equip people with the skills to work and progress in those jobs. That combination of working to improve things now and laying the groundwork for a better future is crucial.

It is a tale of two Governments with very different visions. It is not only my colleagues and me who are sick of the UK Government; industry is fed up with it, too. Perhaps the Tories have just given up on pretending that everything is good in Brexit Britain. Food and Drink Federation Scotland said that it contacted the UK and Scottish Governments with its demands for support for that vital sector. To date, only the Scottish Government has responded, with Mairi Gougeon reaffirming

her commitment to promote and support the sector.

The labour and skills shortages that we are all experiencing demonstrate the recklessness of pursuing a hard Brexit in the middle of a pandemic. Within its powers, the Scottish Government is working hard to support business recovery, promote fair work and boost skills. The upcoming 10-year national strategy will drive Scotland's economic transformation as we recover from the pandemic. The young persons guarantee will equip our young people with new skills so that they can flourish.

Migration is also part of the solution—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to wind up now, Ms Stevenson.

Collette Stevenson: The UK Government must face reality and take a rational approach before the damage to our economy and communities increases. If it does not do so, it should devolve the powers now, so that this Parliament can.

16:28

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. At the start of her speech, the cabinet secretary said that she was drawing the debate to a close. Hopefully, that was a mistake and it does not mean that the Parliament is not working and there is no debate today. I wanted to put that on record.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That is certainly not a point of order. I would be grateful if you would continue with your speech, Ms White.

Tess White: As we continue to navigate our way through the Covid-19 pandemic, the blunt truth is that most developed economies are grappling with labour shortages. The pandemic and associated public health responses have had a profound impact on workforces and working practices. That is not unique to Scotland or the UK; business leaders and policy makers around the world are assessing which levers to pull to remedy the situation as best they can.

Those in the sectors that are worst affected by labour shortages recognise that the problems that they are experiencing have multiple causes. The Road Haulage Association, for example, told the Scottish Affairs Committee in November last year that

"The driver shortage that we face is nothing new. It existed before Brexit."

It added that

"there is not one single lever that could have been pulled to sort this."

Predictably, the SNP-Green Government is focusing its energy on blaming Brexit and the UK Government's migration policies for Scotland's reduced workforce availability. As usual, it is about constitutional grievance. However, the pandemic has brought into sharp relief pre-existing tensions and weaknesses that prevent economies from reaching optimum performance. As my colleague Liz Smith identified earlier, there are serious structural issues with the Scottish economy that long predate the pandemic and Brexit.

The message that we repeatedly hear from the business community is that Scotland is being hampered by a significant and persistent skills gap, which goes back years. We know from the employer skills survey that, between 2015 and 2017, the number of businesses in Scotland that reported skills gaps increased, while there was a decline at UK level.

More recently, the SNP failed to meet its commitment to deliver 30,000 new apprenticeships by 2020, impacting the pipeline of talent that Scotland needs as its ageing population becomes economically inactive. That is not to mention the dramatic fall in apprenticeship starts in the early months of the pandemic, which the CIPD says fell more sharply in Scotland than England.

I have spent the past 30 years of my career matching people and skills with organisational demand. Our top priority should be full employment, which requires the creation of good, sustainable jobs across all regions of the country.

We need to give people the opportunity to reskill and upskill, which must be demand led. Take, for example, Scotland's digital sector, which creates around 13,000 new roles annually. Only around 5,000 new recruits are being produced each year through universities and apprenticeships, which is a massive shortfall. As the Confederation of British Industry argued after last month's budget announcements, we need "greater ambition" from the Scottish Government on upskilling and retraining. It needs to start delivering.

The world order changed profoundly as a result of the pandemic. The resilience that has been demonstrated by businesses and workers over the past two years has been extraordinary. As we seek to recover from the pandemic, we must focus on ways to help as many people as possible. We need action—Scotland's economic growth and productivity depend on it.

16:33

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): In speaking in the debate, I must first acknowledge the devastating impact of Brexit on the Scottish and UK economies. I note that the Conservative

amendment to the motion removes any acknowledgement of the impact on the Scottish economy of the end to free movement. I can only say that burying your head in the sand and completely disregarding the impact of Brexit today is as great a betrayal of the Scottish people as was the entirety of the disingenuous Brexit campaign.

Although beyond the scope of the debate, it is clear that there is a need for a wider discussion on immigration in general and on the potential pros and cons of a separate Scottish immigration system that is under the control of this Parliament.

However, I will focus today on a key sector on which there is no doubt that Brexit is having an impact and in which the main underlying causes of recruitment and retention issues are poor pay and, crucially, unequal terms and conditions, depending on the employer. I am speaking about the social care sector and the terms of employment for care workers who are employed by agencies to deliver health and social care through public sector contracts issued to private companies by public authorities and paid for by this Government.

I have talked to a number of contractors who have outlined the difficulties that they have in recruiting staff—and the even greater difficulties in retaining those staff. That is no wonder. The rate of pay for the job, at £10.02 per hour, comes nowhere near recognising the complexities and challenges of being a care worker.

The problem is about much more than the rate of pay for the job. Many carers are paid only for the time that they spend in the client's house. If they are allocated half an hour for a client, they clock on when they enter the house and clock off when they leave. They do not clock on again until they are in the next client's house.

I spoke recently to one carer who told me that she has to travel for up to 20 minutes between clients but is not paid for any of that travel time. She can find herself working for eight hours a day but being paid for only five or six. She is away from home for 10 hours because she is required to take two hours of unpaid breaks in the day. Would that be acceptable to any worker? Is it any wonder that we have a recruitment and retention problem in that key sector of our economy?

Carers who have to use their own cars to get between clients are not paid for travel time but get a mileage allowance. Care workers I have spoken to tell me that the allowance is 25p per mile. MSPs are paid 45p per mile, as are most public sector workers. Care workers, who are key to our economy, are paid far less and have very poor terms and conditions. Can anyone justify that? Can anyone seriously say to potential recruits that

caring is a valid and valued career option? I think not.

While the finance secretary rightly points to UK Government figures, she must accept that the Scottish Government must first put its own house in order and must ensure that workers who are hired directly or indirectly to deliver key public services are treated with dignity and respect and are paid the rate for the job. Discrimination against care workers must end if we are to tackle the underlying issues in care.

16:37

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): It is a privilege to speak on an issue that affects every part of our country. As others have said, we are approaching a crisis of labour and skills shortages. Although many factors play a role in that, I believe that the biggest is the reckless choice to pursue a hard Brexit, especially during a global pandemic. However, as we have seen from news reports last night and in recent weeks, there is not much that the Tory Government has not done during the global pandemic.

Many of the amazing sectors in the Scottish economy report issues with the supply of labour and skills, which have been exacerbated by Brexit and the pandemic. That double attack on our economy is difficult to navigate. What is frustrating is that one of those factors could have been avoided. At the start of the pandemic, all parties in the chamber, except the Conservatives, asked for Brexit at least to be put on hold. A Tory Westminster Government pushed Brexit on us in full knowledge of the effect that that would have; I believe, as others have said, that that was a grave mistake, particularly when coupled with the pandemic.

We can be really proud of Scotland's food and drink sector. However, it is suffering greatly from labour shortages. Although encouraging migration is important, migration is not the sole solution to that widespread problem. The Scottish Government is working productively with business and, in line with its responsibilities, is acting in those areas.

This is a worrying time. Farming and the seafood industry report extreme labour shortages. In August 2021, Scotland Food & Drink carried out a survey of Scottish food and drink businesses to find out more about the scale of the labour crisis. Of those that responded, 93 per cent had job vacancies, 90 per cent described job vacancies as being "hard to fill" and 97 per cent felt that they would

"struggle to fill vacancies in future."

Those figures are stark and incredibly worrying.

Like Alex Rowley and others, I have spoken to the owners of local recruitment businesses. Gary Robinson, who runs Talent365 in Coatbridge, works on the front line. He said:

"We are witnessing acute labour shortages across multiple sectors in Scotland, as businesses seek to rebuild from the pandemic and deal with the implications of Brexit (notably higher energy costs and costs of purchases / raw materials). This, in turn, is creating significant wage inflation, leaving many businesses with no option but to pass these costs on to their customers, at a time when we are already seeing considerable inflationary pressures on the economy.

Of particular concern are labour shortages in the agricultural, logistics, hospitality, technology and manufacturing sectors, with employers reporting significant difficulties in recruiting the staff they need to operate their businesses successfully."

That business owner in my constituency has done a lot of good work in this area, and that is how he is feeling right now.

The truth is that industries do not want to see just blame or talk about the reasons for the shortages; they want to see action now. The Scottish Government's Covid recovery strategy includes investment of an additional £500 million over the current session of Parliament to support new good, fair and green jobs and to equip people with the skills to enter and progress in them.

We must recognise that Scotland's current population growth is due to migration, and the UK Government must end its destructive policies, which limit that growth. We have repeatedly made representations to the UK Government asking it to put in place emergency changes to the UK immigration system in order to combat acute post-Brexit shortages, but they have gone unaddressed. As usual, the UK Government just buries its head in the sand and hopes that the issue will go away. It will not, and action is needed now.

That is why I will vote for the Government's motion. I ask members across the chamber to take this unique opportunity to do the same and demonstrate a united front in our resolve to deal with the crisis, which is affecting every constituency and every corner of our country.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the closing speeches.

16:41

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): I will pick up, perhaps, from where Fulton MacGregor left off. In a sense, there has been more unity in the chamber today than one might have expected from looking at the motion and the amendments. There has been a stark contrast

between what were clearly the pre-prepared, written bits of members' speeches and the bits where they responded to the debate. There has been acknowledgement that businesses are having to face a number of issues because of Covid, because of other changes in the economy and, not least, because of Brexit.

The most important point of consensus was perhaps the one that Jim Fairlie highlighted. The one bit of text in the motion that we all agree on is the one that says that businesses out there and people in the workforce have shown incredible resilience over the past years. We must pay tribute to them and perhaps listen to them a little more when we consider the solutions, rather than pretend that we have all the solutions.

Unfortunately, however, in what has been written down, we see all-too-familiar approaches from the two parties of government that we have, with one trying to claim that all the issues are to do with Brexit—many of them are, but not all of them—and the other saying that none of them is to do with Brexit.

I agree with much of what Liz Smith said—indeed, there was barely a word that I did not agree with—but unfortunately, when we look at the Conservative amendment, we see that it would completely obliterate the terms of the Government's motion. We cannot look at the labour shortages that we see across the country—whether Scotland or the rest of the UK—and not conclude that the shortages are that much worse here than in any other part of the world.

Fulton MacGregor: Does the member accept that it is not about SNP members saying that it is all about Brexit and not recognising that Covid has been an issue? Does he accept that one of those things—Brexit—was avoidable and was due to a political decision, whereas Covid is a worldwide pandemic?

Daniel Johnson: I would not disagree with that, but I ask the member to acknowledge that other political decisions that have been made over the past 10 years have impacted on our productivity, our labour participation rate, our attempts to tackle skills shortages and, ultimately, our income tax receipts. Not only are those receipts growing more slowly than the UK average, but pretty much every Scottish region is lagging behind pretty much every other region of the UK. Those are the consequences of other political decisions.

Our amendment would not remove the reference to Brexit—

Jim Fairlie: Will the member take an intervention?

Daniel Johnson: I would like to make some progress.

If Fulton MacGregor acknowledges that, he should vote for our amendment, which makes exactly those points. Quite simply, it is not credible to claim that Brexit is the sole reason that we have labour shortages. It is not just the rest of Europe, because America has shortages of truck drivers, too. Likewise, we have global supply chain problems. We have to look much more broadly if we are to seriously address those issues.

The Scottish Fiscal Commission's report, which a number of members have alluded to, is a critical intervention at an important time. It highlights the points that I have just raised in response to Fulton MacGregor. We need a broadly based approach.

Critically, I also highlight the points that were raised by my colleagues Sarah Boyack and Alex Rowley. There is an issue about overreliance on immigration that ignores the fact that, fundamentally, inequality and insecurity have been a feature of our jobs market for far too long. Simply seeking to replace the lost migrant workers, as the sole solution, completely ignores that point.

Fundamentally, there are two ways of approaching the shortages in the labour market: either one can seek to bring more people into the labour market or one can seek to invest in skills to boost productivity and thereby the wages of the people who are already in that labour market. The best, or, rather, the worst and most egregious example of that is in social care, as highlighted by Willie Rennie and others. Alex Rowley gave the example of the mileage rate that social care workers are allowed: 25p. An MSP can claim 20p if they commute by bicycle. We are paying social care workers barely more to travel by car than we are paying MSPs to travel by bike. That shows the inequality that we have in the Scottish labour market.

On top of that, we have huge regional inequalities. The difference in hourly output between Edinburgh and the least productive region in Scotland is 50 per cent. Just between Edinburgh and Dundee—a distance of 30 miles—there is a one third drop in productivity.

Those are things that the Scottish Government has the ability to tackle. It has the levers, in its competence, to deal with skills, to support enterprise and to drive investment in infrastructure that can link our cities and places of work—yet it chooses not to use them. It has consistently cut enterprise support and it has cut the skills budget. A number of members have highlighted the fact that such choices are political—they are choices to pursue Brexit as opposed to a more rational approach, or to improve support for businesses, invest in infrastructure and invest in enterprise support—which, frankly, the Government has failed to do.

16:47

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland)

(Con): I will start my contribution by agreeing with the first part of the Government's motion. The resilience and innovation that employers and workers have shown through the pandemic in keeping much of our economy open should be recognised, so I, too, thank everyone who has played their part.

As we have heard today, labour markets across the world are undergoing significant pressures and changes. The United Kingdom is no different from what can be seen in the US, Europe, China and beyond.

However, there are differences within the UK, right here at home, thanks to 14 years of SNP inaction and failed economic policy. Our tax take per person is lower than the take in the rest of the UK, our welfare bill is rising, our working population is falling in comparison with that in the rest of the UK, economic growth is lower and our recovery is slower than recovery in the rest of the UK is.

Jim Fairlie: Will the member take an intervention?

Douglas Lumsden: No, I will make some progress first.

As we say in our amendment, that has been highlighted by forecast groups, and must be addressed by the devolved Government as a matter of urgency. However, instead of attracting investment and higher-paid jobs, the Government seems to be intent on driving business away. Decisions such as turning its back on the energy industry do nothing to reverse that decline. Another lost opportunity is the Government's decision to block free ports in Scotland. We lose out, while investment goes to England.

Kate Forbes: Will the member take an intervention on that point?

Douglas Lumsden: I will, at the end of this part of my speech.

The mayor of Tees Valley said:

"We have attracted investors who were originally looking at Scotland when some areas in Scotland were looking at freeport status, and when they decided not to move forward with the current UK freeport policy"

they

"have actually abandoned Scotland."

Kate Forbes: To correct the record, I note that—as Douglas Lumsden might know—the Treasury was committed to ensuring that there was a free port or green port in Scotland before that was changed by the Scotland Office. We are engaged in discussions with them to ensure that

Scotland is treated fairly. I remind the member that the UK Government has chosen to invest in ports in England to the detriment of Scottish ports.

Douglas Lumsden: I hope that we have seen another U-turn from the SNP Government, because so far it has not engaged with the UK Government like the other regions across England have. If that is now the case, I welcome that news.

Jobs and investment have been lost to Aberdeen, all because the devolved Government wants to pick a political fight. It is a disgrace. Another motion for debate has been brought before us by a tired Government that is attempting to pat itself on the back but is, in fact, doing the opposite by highlighting its incompetence. That is just like when Alex Salmond promised many years ago that there would, with the SNP, be thousands of green jobs, none of which have come to fruition.

Members from across the chamber have made interesting points. I think that we all agree that immigration impacts on our economy—but so do many other factors. As Daniel Johnson and Liz Smith pointed out, the economy has long-term underlying issues that existed long before Brexit or Covid.

The cabinet secretary ignored the intervention by Murdo Fraser about labour shortages in Europe and how the Accor group of hotels in France cannot get staff. Freedom of movement is therefore obviously not the only issue, when places in France also have labour shortages.

As Liz Smith pointed out, SNP ministers have refused to listen to businesses, failed to listen to the Scottish Fiscal Commission and failed to invest in skills and productivity.

Daniel Johnson: I am grateful to Douglas Lumsden for giving way. Does he acknowledge that although there are shortages in hospitality on the continent, they are worse here—and worse because of Brexit?

Douglas Lumsden: If there are issues in France and companies cannot employ people there, how can we tell that it is worse here? It is not as though there are thousands of people lined up who are being blocked by Brexit. That is simply not the case.

The big issue is the weakness in tax revenue and the shortfall that it will bring. Liz Smith pointed that out and we heard about it at the Finance and Public Administration Committee today. That is the big serious issue that is caused by long-term structural issues in our economy.

I completely agree with Michelle Thomson that we need to train Scottish workers to the highest possible standards. However, Paul Sweeney was right to highlight cuts to the skills budget. Just when we need it, money is being taken away.

Jim Fairlie said that we need independence. Well, I have news for him. He does not like Brexit, but the SNP's own economic adviser said that independence would be like "Brexit times 10".

Other huge areas of failure by the Scottish Government are productivity and automation. I have seen nothing from the Government that will address those issues, which are long term.

The Scottish Conservatives' top priority at the last election was employment. We want to create good and sustainable well-paid jobs across all the regions of the Scotland. We want to give people hope and opportunity.

We also promised unlimited apprenticeships for Scotland's young people. Our demand-led model for apprenticeships would ensure that funded places would reflect employer need rather than unambitious SNP targets. We would expand funding for graduate apprenticeships, and we would extend choice in and availability of one-year and two-year foundation apprenticeships for secondary 5 and 6 pupils. We would aim to boost the number of apprenticeships that are taken up by women, and we would ensure that the UK apprenticeship levy is fully used for apprenticeship funding in Scotland.

The UK Government's kickstart scheme has been a great example of what a Government can achieve when it is focused on the day job. New figures show that 100,000 young people have started new jobs through the kickstart scheme—among them, thousands of Scots who have been helped on to the first step of the career ladder.

So much more could be done by the Government to develop the existing talent in this country, so that we could boost our currently lagging productivity levels. There must be a real focus on workforce planning, skills training and increasing employee compensation for our essential workers. Scottish workers have heard enough warm words while seeing other parts of the UK recover faster than us. They have heard enough platitudes, but seen no action, from the Scottish Government, and they have had enough of seeing our public services being underfunded and our workers being undervalued.

It is time that the Government stopped playing politics with the issue and, instead of simply blaming Westminster for all Scotland's ills, came up with proposals for how it can grow and flourish. It has had 14 years in power. It is time that it stepped up and took responsibility for the financial situation that Scotland is in.

16:55

**The Minister for Just Transition,
Employment and Fair Work (Richard**

Lochhead): I genuinely thank members for their powerful and valuable speeches, which have reflected the importance of the issues that we are discussing.

Let me reiterate what we say in our motion and what members of other parties have said: this Government recognises the resilience and innovation that employers in many sectors of our economy have demonstrated over the past year in response to extremely challenging circumstances.

It is clear that businesses and employers need our support, and the support of others, in mitigating the impact of the current shortages in the labour market. Labour shortages affect our nation's productivity, as many members have said. They affect business profitability and growth, inflation, and the country's finances and economic success. They can also present an opportunity to get more people into employment, but labour shortages hold our country back.

The cabinet secretary set out the challenges that, as a result of several factors, face Scotland's business community, economy and society. As many members have said, the pandemic has been enormously disruptive. The challenges are also the result of the cataclysmic, reckless and monumentally foolhardy decision to remove Scotland from the European Union against her will.

Liz Smith: Several SNP members have said today that Brexit was a political decision. Does the minister acknowledge that the decision about Brexit—I disagreed with Brexit—was a democratic one by the British people, including many people in Scotland and in the SNP, which we have to accept?

Richard Lochhead: We have to accept that Scotland's Parliament and the people of Scotland rejected Brexit in a referendum and that Brexit was foisted on us against our democratic will. Not only that, but—this is key to the debate—Brexit was foisted on Scotland at the worst possible time and in the worst possible way, against the backdrop of a pandemic and other on-going pressures, including the demographic trends of an ageing population and declining birthrate that have led to projections of a 3 per cent to 5 per cent reduction in the working-age population in Scotland. In that context, the loss of freedom of movement, the erection of barriers and the tightening of immigration are the last things that our economy needs.

Those are themes that many colleagues have eloquently explored—albeit that some members, particularly Conservative members, seem to live in an alternative reality in which those issues can simply be brushed under the carpet. Indeed, Donald Cameron said that he did not even want to

talk about Brexit. Of course, Brexit is such a fiasco and is so damaging that we can understand why the Conservatives do not want to talk about it.

In the real world, employers across the Scottish economy have been reporting a combination of skills shortages and labour shortages that are impacting on their ability to provide goods and services. In November, 38.3 per cent of Scottish businesses reported that they were experiencing a shortage of workers. The shortages are more substantial in particular sectors, including accommodation services, food services, and transportation and storage. Although some of the issues are not new, as members have said, Brexit and the pandemic-related disruption have severely increased their scale.

Less than two years after Brexit, it is clear that its impact on the Scottish labour market has been disastrous, particularly for industries that traditionally relied on EU workers. Brexit has significantly reduced businesses' ability to source non-domestic labour, which makes up about 8 per cent of Scotland's workforce. The rate is higher in some sectors—for example, the hotel and restaurant sector.

Over the past two years, national insurance number registrations for overseas nationals in Scotland have fallen by around 75 per cent. I ask members to think about that for a second; the number has gone down by three quarters. It is preposterous to dissociate that statistic from Brexit or the UK Government's hostile immigration policy.

Liz Smith *rose—*

Daniel Johnson *rose—*

Richard Lochhead: I will take an intervention from Daniel Johnson.

Daniel Johnson: I thank the minister and I apologise to Liz Smith.

I agree that it is preposterous to dissociate those issues, but Brexit is a fact and it is not going away any time soon. Does the minister acknowledge that, whether we agree with Brexit or not, the solution is to do with flexibility, skills and getting people who are out of work into jobs as efficiently as possible?

Richard Lochhead: The solutions should be, and are being, looked at, but the damage that is being caused by Brexit needs to be fixed, and many of the tools for fixing the damage that is being caused by Brexit lie with the UK Government. That is why Brexit is such an important part of the debate.

However, this is not just about Brexit. Covid's impact of further reducing migration to Scotland has worsened the issues, which is leaving businesses across the economy struggling to

attract enough staff and skilled workers. Again, however, I note that we cannot divorce Covid from Brexit, because what we are being told by employers—the Conservative Party should listen to Scotland's employers—is that people who have left to go home because of Covid are, because of Brexit, not coming back to Scotland.

Liz Smith: When it comes to listening to employers, would the minister care to remember that the business community is telling us very bluntly that many of the issues that it is facing now are partly issues about productivity, growth and investment, which are Scotland-related problems that are not to do with the UK?

Richard Lochhead: Various problems face the labour market in Scotland at the moment, some of which the Government is addressing. However, other problems require the UK Government to wake up to the damage that has been caused by Brexit and to use the tools that it has to help us to repair the damage and to address labour shortages in Scotland.

One of the biggest sectors that is suffering at the moment is Scotland's food and drink industry, which is facing crippling staff shortages. Seafood Scotland has said that around 15 per cent of jobs in larger factories are unfilled, and 63 per cent of seafood processors are experiencing staff shortages. There are fears that the situation will get worse. So much for the "sea of opportunity" that was promised by the Conservative Party to fishing communities in this country. The chief executive of Scotland Food & Drink, James Withers, recently reported that one business had been forced to forgo up to £15 million-worth of contracts because it did not have enough staff to fulfil orders. If we replicate that right across the Scottish economy, we can see the cost of Brexit to our economy.

I will reiterate the impact that Brexit has had by illustrating its effects on agriculture. The past year has been a particularly difficult time for agriculture. As Jim Fairlie said, the industry has struggled to cope with the issues that the UK's exit from the EU has created, including additional paperwork and reduced labour supply for planting and harvesting crops.

In the soft fruit and veg industry alone, businesses have reported an average 20 per cent shortfall in seasonal agricultural workers. With the uncertainty over labour, some growers have had to walk away from the industry, while others have reduced production, which is another economic cost to our rural communities.

On Christmas Eve, the UK Government announced an extension, to the end of 2024, of the seasonal worker visa route, with a statement that the industry must transition to using domestic

workers. Apparently, the Conservative Party thinks that that has nothing to do with Brexit, but it was treated as a big damp squib by NFU Scotland, which said:

“On Christmas Eve, the government has given Scotland’s fruit and veg industry deeply disappointing news”.

It went on to say that

“Government plans to then start tapering the scheme down from 2023 shows a complete disconnect from the industry.”

It continued:

“Plans to start dismantling the scheme are a blow and mean some very difficult decisions will have to be made about future production.”

Yes, there are things that the Scottish Government can do, but the UK Government has the tools now to try to fix the damage that has been imposed by Brexit. We are asking the UK Government to work with the Scottish Government to try to fix some of the damage; otherwise, more damage will be inflicted on the Scottish agriculture sector.

I want to close by talking about what the Scottish Government is doing. We will develop a talent attraction programme and an immigration service to attract workers who have the skills that Scotland needs. We have made constructive proposals to the UK Government, including for 24-month and 36-month visas, additions and structural changes to the shortage occupation list and a number of other measures. We want the UK Government to work with us, which is why we are proposing a joint task force that would include the devolved Administrations and the UK Government.

This is a very serious situation for the Scottish and UK economies and it is a very serious situation for Scotland’s business community, so our message to the UK Government is this: “Work with us. Help us to get this sorted, repair the damage caused by Brexit and address the staff shortages that are undermining this country’s success.”

I support the motion.

Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill

17:04

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of legislative consent motion S6M-02739, in the name of Mairi Gougeon, on the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill, which is United Kingdom legislation.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the relevant provisions of the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill, introduced in the House of Commons on 8 June 2021, relating to animal welfare, so far as these matters fall within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament and alter the executive competence of the Scottish Ministers, should be considered by the UK Parliament.—[*Mairi Gougeon*]

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

Business Motion

17:05

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-02755, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on changes to this week's business. Any member who wishes to speak against the motion should press their request-to-speak button now.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees to the following revision to the programme of business for Thursday 13 January 2022—

delete

2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.30 pm Portfolio Questions:
Rural Affairs and Islands

and insert

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:
Rural Affairs and Islands

followed by Ministerial Statement: Reducing
Scotland's Car Travel by 20% by
2030.—[George Adam]

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

17:05

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There are four questions to be put as a result of today's business. I remind members that, if the amendment in the name of Liz Smith is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Paul Sweeney will fall.

The first question is, that amendment S6M-02740.1, in the name of Liz Smith, which seeks to amend motion S6M-02740, in the name of Kate Forbes, on addressing the impact of labour shortages on Scotland's economy, 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.

17:06

Meeting suspended.

17:08

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We move to the division. Members should cast their votes now.

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

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 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)
 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)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (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)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (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)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 30, Against 93, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-02740.2, in the name of Paul Sweeney, which seeks to amend motion S6M-02740, in the name of Kate Forbes, on addressing the impact of labour shortages on Scotland's economy, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

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)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lockhart, Dean (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 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)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)

McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-02740.2, in the name of Paul Sweeney, is: For 25, Against 98, Abstentions 0.

Motion disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-02740, in the name of Kate Forbes, on addressing the impacts of labour shortages on Scotland's economy, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is now closed.

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I could not connect to the voting platform. I would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: We will ensure that that is recorded.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Apologies, but I was unable to connect. I would have voted no.

The Presiding Officer: We will ensure that that is recorded.

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)

Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 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)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 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)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 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)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)

Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 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)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 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)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lockhart, Dean (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-02740, in the name of Kate Forbes, on addressing the impact of labour shortages on Scotland's economy, is: For 68, Against 55, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament recognises the resilience and innovation that employers and workers across many sectors of the economy have demonstrated throughout the last year in response to the continuation of workforce challenges associated with the pandemic, combined with reduced workforce availability as a result of the UK's exit from the EU; believes that the Scottish Government and its agencies are committed to working with employers, business organisations and trade unions, to resolve and understand labour shortages, skills gaps and future requirements, and address recruitment and retention

challenges through interventions and institutions designed to help more people into work, implementing a range of upskilling and retraining opportunities, and promoting the benefits of fair work, and calls on the UK Government to make immediate changes to its economically damaging migration policies in order to protect the provision of services and the delivery of goods through Scotland's supply chains.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-02739, in the name of Mairi Gougeon, on the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill, which is United Kingdom legislation, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the relevant provisions of the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill, introduced in the House of Commons on 8 June 2021, relating to animal welfare, so far as these matters fall within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament and alter the executive competence of the Scottish Ministers, should be considered by the UK Parliament.

Endometriosis

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

The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-01569, in the name of Rachael Hamilton, on endometriosis. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes the view that there is a need to raise awareness of the widespread nature of endometriosis; understands that this painful disorder affects an estimated 10% of women worldwide and is the second most common gynaecological condition in the UK; believes that, despite its widespread nature, healthcare professionals still find it difficult to diagnose and treat the condition and that this situation has affected women in the Scottish Borders and across the country; recognises the Scottish Government's commitment to reduce the average time taken to diagnose endometriosis from eight years to less than 12 months during the current parliamentary session, as outlined in the Women's Health Plan; acknowledges the work done by the UK Parliament's All-Party Parliamentary Group on Endometriosis in highlighting the key areas that need to be addressed in order to see a reduction in the time to make a diagnosis, and notes the calls for the Scottish Government to present MSPs with a detailed plan and timeframe for achieving this target.

17:19

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): I am truly delighted to be able to speak on this subject tonight, and I thank my parliamentary colleagues for supporting the motion.

A lot of people do not know what endometriosis is, and—as we may find out tonight—some find it difficult to pronounce. I will open the debate by quoting a young woman from the Borders who lives with endometriosis. She says:

“Endometriosis is a cruel disease. To live with endometriosis is living with the constant feeling of guilt, worry, feeling alone and misunderstood. It is a crippling pain, the type that slowly but surely takes everything away from you, meaning you cannot plan ahead. It is a constant pain, a constant anxiety that can be dismissed for almost 8 years before someone believes your pain is actually real.”

She goes on to say:

“Living with endometriosis can be like survival for many, waking up each day with immediate and intense pain. Being betrayed by your own body, repeatedly and unpredictably”.

That woman's experience is backed up by a recent survey that was conducted by the BBC, which found that the majority of the 13,500 women who responded felt that the condition had badly

impacted their mental health, career and education. Furthermore, endometriosis costs the United Kingdom £8.2 billion in lost earnings, healthcare costs and costs to the welfare system.

I would like to share some facts. Endometriosis affects 10 per cent of women—that is more than 1.5 million women in the United Kingdom. That makes the condition as prevalent as asthma and diabetes. The impact of this long-term health condition can be detrimental to all areas of life. It takes on average eight and a half years to be diagnosed, which is unacceptable, and many feel that they have been dismissed by health professionals, with their pain and symptoms being normalised. Endometriosis is the second most common gynaecological condition in the UK. Sadly, its cause is unknown and there is no definitive cure.

I want to see change, and I am glad that I have the support of so many colleagues in the chamber tonight. I could not hold this debate without paying tribute to Sir David Amess, who worked tirelessly to raise awareness of endometriosis and improve services for those affected by it, including in his role as chair of the Westminster all-party parliamentary group on endometriosis. In recent years, his work was crucial in bringing about greater public awareness and understanding of the condition.

The APPG was launched in 2018 to raise awareness. It brought together parliamentarians across Westminster, from all the political parties, to debate the key issues affecting people with this debilitating condition and investigate how patients can receive the support that they need. In October 2020, the group produced a report that analysed the current approach to endometriosis in the UK. It concluded that, first, there must be

“A commitment to drive down diagnosis times”.

We, in the chamber, can all agree that a waiting time for diagnosis of eight and a half years is outrageous. Secondly, the group concluded that there must be

“access to appropriate care”.

The report said:

“The NICE Guideline on Endometriosis Treatment and Management was issued in 2017 and has been adopted across the UK, but not”

yet

“implemented.”

It went on to say:

“The APPG is calling for Government and NHS commitment in each nation for implementation of the Guidelines and the corresponding NICE Quality Standards on Endometriosis ... to provide a baseline for endometriosis diagnosis, treatment and management”.

The group recommended that

“As a first step, a gap analysis of endometriosis services should be undertaken”,

and it noted the need for

“Recognition ... that more needs to be done to ensure inclusivity and equality of access to ... services.”

Most importantly, the report highlights that raising awareness is crucial. That is what we are doing today, and it is what my colleagues are doing—I am grateful for that. Finally, the report states that there needs to be a better system in place, as

“Those with endometriosis have to recognise that what they are experiencing are symptoms, in order to seek help.”

Moving to devolved action in Scotland, I note that work is under way to help people with endometriosis, but there is still a long way to go, which is why we are talking about the subject today. Apparently, three specialist endometriosis centres exist and were planned to provide specialist endometriosis coverage for the whole of Scotland. However, the services that they provide are currently being commissioned as local services to meet local capacity, and people have found it difficult to get a referral if they live in a different health board area. For some, that can mean that they have no access to specialist treatment even if they are suffering from deep endometriosis.

The Scottish Government’s document “Women’s Health Plan: A plan for 2021-2024”, which was published last year, includes a number of actions to

“improve access ... to appropriate support, speedy diagnosis and best treatment”,

and work is under way, as part of the modernising patient pathways programme by the centre for sustainable delivery, on developing a pelvic pain pathway for Scotland, starting with endometriosis. However, the fact remains that in Scotland, our wait time is eight and a half years. That is totally unacceptable for people like my constituent, who is suffering so dramatically from the condition. I welcome the Government’s commitment to

“reduce waiting times for diagnosing endometriosis ... to ... 12 months”

within the current session of Parliament. However, I fail to see that there is a robust pathway to achieve that, given the lack of data and detail from the Scottish Government.

Through lodging parliamentary questions, I have found that there is a total lack of information at Government level on endometriosis. I have found that

“Information on the endometriosis waiting times in each NHS board is not currently available.”—[*Written Answers*, 1 July 2021; S6W-00781.]

I have also found that

“The Scottish Government does not hold information on how many staff are employed in each of the three centres in Scotland or what the average waiting time is for each centre.”—[*Written Answers*, 1 July 2021; S6W-00783.]

Furthermore, the Scottish Government is

“unable to identify the total number of people who have been diagnosed with endometriosis in the population from routine healthcare data, and therefore cannot provide figures for the required breakdowns (NHS board, age cohort and ‘deep endometriosis’).”—[*Written Answers*, 1 July 2021; S6W-00787.]

If we are seriously to tackle the disease, we need the right information. I urge the Scottish National Party Government to give us a detailed plan and timeframe.

I want to mention in particular Tao McCready and Becky Leigh, and thank them for all their hard work in raising awareness of endometriosis. I look forward to working with them, and with my colleagues David Mundell MP and John Lamont MP, who recently took part in a debate on endometriosis at Westminster.

I thank Endometriosis UK for all its work, and I fully support its “key asks” of Government. First, it rightly points out that we need

“Faster diagnosis—Reducing diagnosis time ... to an average of four years by 2025 and under one year by 2030.”

However, the Scottish Government wants to go beyond that, and we need more detail on that.

Secondly, Endometriosis UK says that there is a greater need to ensure that there is

“a baseline in endometriosis care”,

with

“everyone with endometriosis in Scotland”

being able to

“access to care and support in line with NICE”

guidelines.

The third ask leads me on to a subject on which I do not have time to expand today—it is maybe for another day. I agree with Endometriosis UK that we need better

“Menstrual wellbeing education”,

such as

“Mandatory age-appropriate menstrual well-being education in all Scottish primary and secondary schools”.

I would appreciate it if the Minister for Public Health, Women’s Health and Sport and the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care

could update members on what progress, if any, has been made on those asks to date.

In conclusion, I emphasise that more attention must urgently be focused on reducing endometriosis waiting times—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ms Hamilton, could you please conclude? Thank you.

Rachael Hamilton: Yes. Together, we can fight this horrendous disease and help women to live better lives through research and better treatment, and by meeting those targets.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Emma Roddick, who is joining us remotely—I hope.

Excuse me, colleagues. We have Ms Roddick—excellent. You have up to four minutes, Ms Roddick.

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): [*Inaudible.*]

The Presiding Officer: Sorry—I do not know whether you can hear me, Ms Roddick, but I ask you to pause for a second, as we cannot hear you.

We will go to Sandesh Gulhane and then seek to come back to Ms Roddick. Apologies for that.

17:28

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): I begin with a declaration of interests, as I am a practising general practitioner. However, I have a further interest to declare that does not appear in my entry in the register of interests: I am a man. I do not know what a period feels like, nor do I know what endometriosis feels like, but, as a GP, I can tell members that my patients really suffer.

We have heard Rachael Hamilton tell us that 10 per cent of women have endometriosis. That is 1.5 million Scots who have chronic pelvic pain; period pain that affects their daily life; deep-rooted pain after sex; cyclical gastrointestinal symptoms, which is pain on passing bowel motions on a cyclical basis; cyclical urinary symptoms, which is blood or pain when passing urine; and infertility. The risk factors for developing endometriosis are early periods, not being pregnant and a family history of the condition.

I want to tell members briefly about a patient of mine—a working woman who basically had to give up her job. The reason was that, every month, she had to take time off work because she could not cope with what was going on. She was crying and she was depressed, and she was given multiple different painkillers and antidepressants. She was unable to get pregnant. Members will see that there is a vicious cycle—every single thing that I have mentioned makes the next thing even worse. We treated her with painkillers, and eventually we

realised the diagnosis and she ended up in surgery and had laser treatment. She actually saw some improvement.

I have read out the symptoms to members, and it seems pretty obvious that endometriosis would be the diagnosis, but each symptom came to us separately at a different consultation. These are some of the problems that we experience. Women might not seek help, and that is a concern.

To go back to my declaration of interest as a man, I simply could not put up with the symptoms that I have described. I do not understand how women can put up with them, but they do. It is because they are not believed. It is because they turn up and tell GPs and health professionals that they have problems, and they are dismissed. It is unbelievable that that happens now, but I know that it does; I have given an example from my own practice of when it has happened.

I want to say this to anyone who is out there listening and to any women who are suffering with the symptoms that I have described: please do not suffer in silence. Come forward and see your GP, and—most important—keep a diary of your symptoms, because, if you can present us with a diary, that makes it more obvious. When I read out the list of symptoms just now, the diagnosis was more obvious, so I ask anyone who is listening to please do that. Come and see us, and do not suffer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will now try to go back to Ms Roddick. I am assured that she is online and ready to go and that the broadcasting is going to function—or perhaps not, as the case may be.

Ah, there is Ms Roddick—excellent. You have up to four minutes, Ms Roddick.

17:32

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): Thank you, Presiding Officer and the information technology team.

I thank Rachael Hamilton for bringing the debate to the chamber. I am glad not only that endometriosis is being discussed in the chamber again but that it is being discussed outwith an awareness month. We need people who are seeking assistance with what is a chronic and often excruciating condition to be treated with respect and due pace, regardless of when they present, which means that greater awareness is needed all year round—in particular, among health professionals, employers and schools.

Awareness is improving, and we have to acknowledge the work that has been done in getting us to that stage by many incredible third sector organisations, including Endometriosis UK.

I meet regularly representatives from the organisation's north Highland support group, and I was told this morning that it has now reached 129 members.

I discussed with a fellow endo warrior a number of stories, including the story of one woman who had to give up her job while waiting for surgery and another who found that, when she finally got surgery, many around her cried with relief. It really is a big deal that many people in the Highlands and Islands will now be aware of endometriosis before they are diagnosed with it, as they will know where to go to get peer support, whether in dealing with the NHS or understanding their condition, or simply to find someone else who understands how much it can affect their life.

Endometriosis does not mean just painful periods—it can mean debilitating pain throughout the month. It can mean loss of employment, loss of organs, loss of fertility and so much more. It means that, even when you are on effective treatment, an unrelated but familiar cramping feeling can cause intense terror and trauma. Just today, a woman had to cancel a meeting with me because simply travelling yesterday had caused a flare-up. Endometriosis is not something that affects just a few people. Even the estimate of 10 per cent that is quoted in the motion amounts to one in 10 women, and we also have to remember those who are not included in the statistics.

There are people being turned away with more paracetamol every few months and people presenting to accident and emergency to be put on morphine just so that they can breathe properly, but they are not getting follow-up. Both of those situations used to be regular experiences for me.

We have to remember that there are still thousands of doctors who brush off cries for help and tell teenagers that it is normal to be curled up on a bathroom floor in agony, vomiting and passing out, with the clear underlying belief that it is basically a case of hysteria or a dislike of physical education. I was glad to hear recognition of that from a GP in the chamber.

The issues that I outlined have a devastatingly isolating effect across the board, but they are intensified for people who live in rural areas or far from the nearest hospital that can offer treatment. I am aware in particular of a number of women in the rural Highlands and Caithness who, after what we all know is a long wait, have to make preparations for a lengthy trip to Raigmore hospital for a hysterectomy or other procedure. Childcare is arranged, cover is agreed at work, petrol money is exchanged and a last-minute cancellation of that appointment can feel like the whole world has fallen apart.

Like most members who have spoken before me and who will speak after me, I am heartened by the women's health plan and the commitment to reduce the time that it takes to make a diagnosis. However, alongside that, we have to ensure that a diagnosis means treatment, not years or even decades of people waiting for a solution while in pain and sacrificing the life that they want to live.

Once again, I thank Rachael Hamilton for lodging the motion. I look forward to hearing the minister's response and commit to joining Rachael Hamilton and others in keeping up the pressure for endometriosis support.

17:36

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank Rachael Hamilton for bringing such an important debate to the chamber. I know that she has championed the cause for many years.

As we have heard, endometriosis is thought to impact a staggering one in 10 women worldwide. Endometriosis UK highlights the point that its impact can be seen from puberty to menopause and, in some cases, can last a lifetime. The painful, often debilitating condition impacts many women in our country and across the globe, but awareness of it remains low and it is not given the prominence that it deserves.

Tonight's debate will take steps towards raising awareness of endometriosis, but we must go much further: we must listen to people who have lived experience of the condition and to experts such as those at Endometriosis UK so that we can deliver what they believe is necessary to improve the day-to-day lives of people who live with the condition now, and of those who might live with it in the future.

That means that members such as me must hold the Scottish Government to account and ensure that it reaches its target of reducing the shockingly high diagnosis time of more than eight years to less than a year. We must also fight for equal access to proper care and ensure that all women have a central point of support that can provide assistance related to the impacts of endometriosis.

I welcome Maree Todd's work on, and commitment to, the women's health plan. Although progress has been made on it, we must acknowledge that much more needs to be done. It is fair to say that making faster progress would benefit the women who live with the condition.

We must also commit to providing age-appropriate menstrual wellbeing education. Only by removing the stigma surrounding the discussion of menstrual wellbeing will we raise

awareness and tackle the issues that are staring us in the face.

Endometriosis is a condition in which tissue similar to that in the lining of the womb starts to grow in other places, such as the ovaries and fallopian tubes. Its main symptoms include painful periods; pain in the lower abdomen, pelvis or lower back; pain during and after sex; difficulty becoming pregnant; and discomfort when going to the toilet. It causes many women a long time of suffering and social and mental health problems.

One of the main difficulties that is highlighted by people with lived experience of the condition, Endometriosis UK and a wide range of healthcare professionals is that such symptoms can be attributed to many other conditions and illnesses. The condition is often missed, or it takes a long time to be diagnosed. It is therefore vital that we call for greater research into the presentation and causes of endometriosis, so that women can be provided with high-quality treatment at a much quicker rate than at present. We must also hope that research produces alternative treatments and, at some point in the future, a cure.

As we have heard, a significant amount of work is already being undertaken in our communities by individuals, groups and organisations. I have had the pleasure of meeting groups, such as the group in the Scottish Borders, that are doing a tremendous amount of work to support those who live with the condition and to hold us decision makers and those in the health services to account. We must commend the work that individuals and organisations do, because, without their support, advice and advocacy, many more women would have faced the difficulties alone.

I once again thank Rachael Hamilton for highlighting the importance of raising awareness of the condition, and I thank members who have spoken in the debate. I hope that this debate is the start and not the end of a heightened focus on the condition in the Parliament and beyond.

17:40

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I congratulate Rachael Hamilton on securing this important debate and pay tribute to the women and girls across Scotland who suffer from endometriosis, many of whom will be awaiting a diagnosis and are not yet aware that what they are feeling is a condition that they should be diagnosed with and treated for.

We are all grateful to Endometriosis UK for its research and campaigning and to support groups. I commend the quite formidable endo warriors whom I have known for their indomitable spirit over the years—they even persuaded me to join one of their marches through Glasgow. It is vital to

continue to raise awareness and to drive through the changes that we want to see.

Five years ago, I led the previous dedicated endometriosis debate, during which many—primarily male—contributors admitted that they had no prior knowledge of the widespread but little-known disease of endometriosis. However, it is 21 years since Annabel Goldie first raised the important matter in Parliament. Now that Elaine Smith has retired, I am the last remaining member who spoke in that debate more than two decades ago. The make-up of the chamber has changed beyond recognition, but can we say that the treatment of endometriosis sufferers has also changed? Every endo warrior, clinician or even MSP will agree that the answer to that is, “Possibly, but at a glacial pace.”

The purpose of my debate was to press the Scottish Government to establish a third accredited endometriosis unit in Scotland. Following much post-debate discussion and deliberation, that unit was established in Glasgow three years ago with the necessary specialist staff to serve the women of the west of Scotland, following the early development of units based in Aberdeen and Edinburgh. I thank Aileen Campbell and Jeane Freeman for all their hard work and tenacity in taking that forward. However, more units, from Inverness to Ayrshire to Dumfries, are, of course, essential.

The opening of the new unit was followed by the Scottish Government’s women’s health plan, which was a UK first and which aims to reduce the average length of time that it takes for an endometriosis diagnosis from an often fraught, painful and drawn-out average of eight and a half years. Much work is required to cut that to under a year by the end of the current parliamentary session. The Scottish Government was right to have set such an ambitious target, based on clinical feasibility. We now look forward to a more detailed description of exactly what steps will be taken and when. I know that we will receive more detail in June, when more significant headway will have been made in gathering information. I hope that we will also hear about progress in the ministerial response today.

Information is crucial, and I know that many colleagues will agree that communication is a hugely important factor to constituents who suffer with endometriosis. That is why we must normalise talking about endo, collect accurate and relevant data, publicise what we have and communicate better.

Currently, a search for “endometriosis” on the Public Health Scotland website returns zero results. In trying to find the menstrual wellbeing toolkit on the Royal College of General Practitioners website, I found that the page was

not working. Those basics must be fixed if we want endometriosis patients to know that they are valued and are being taken seriously.

I know a number of women with endometriosis. From what I understand from them, endometriosis is much more than physically painful. As we heard from Emma Roddick, it is mentally draining for a woman to feel that she has to tell her story over and over again, as if she is being doubted. Losing focus at work because of the constant pain, frustration and uncertainty and the general quest for answers is exhausting.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): Does Kenneth Gibson agree with me, as a man, that, if 10 per cent of all men were in the situation that 10 per cent of all women are in, something would have been done long ago and that that adds to the urgency of the action that we must now take for Scotland’s women?

Kenneth Gibson: I agree with Mr Kerr on that. We all have a mother, and many of us have sisters, daughters, a wife or partner and female friends. It is absolutely critical that such a devastating disease is addressed with greater urgency. It must be absolutely unbearable for sufferers. As Sandesh Gulhane said, I do not know how women get through it, but, of course, they must.

No one denies that endometriosis is idiosyncratic and notoriously difficult to diagnose and treat. I do not believe that any of us hold unrealistic expectations about that, but it is now a matter of urgency that women and girls are spared the long and arduous path that so many have had to navigate before them.

Let me emphasise once again that one does not need to suffer from endometriosis to recognise that too many women are suffering too much and for too long. We can all offer support, listen, campaign to raise awareness, and ensure that women are being heard and receive a better service. I know that I will do that. To anyone who is awaiting a suspected diagnosis or treatment, I say please know that faster help and a better experience are on their way. There are hundreds of people, including elected representatives of all parties, who care and are working to improve the service that you receive. The Scottish Government’s women’s health plan contains a firm commitment to you, so let us look forward with determination to its being fulfilled.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Because of the number of members who wish to speak in the debate, I am minded to accept a motion without notice, under rule 8.14.3, to extend the debate by up to 30 minutes. I invite Gillian Mackay to move the motion.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 8.14.3, the debate be extended by up to 30 minutes.—[*Gillian Mackay*]

Motion agreed to.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Beatrice Wishart, who joins us remotely.

17:46

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): I congratulate Rachael Hamilton on securing this important debate. So much has already been said about the impact that endometriosis has across all aspects of life, but I make no apology for repeating some of what has already been highlighted today.

I want to start by outlining exactly what is at the heart of this discussion: the lives of women and girls. Endometriosis is a condition in which tissue similar to that in the lining of the womb starts to grow in other places, such as ovaries and the fallopian tubes. Symptoms include, among others, painful or heavy periods, painful bowel movements and pelvic pain. An estimated 1.5 million women in the United Kingdom are affected, which is similar to the number of women who have diabetes.

However, as we have heard, it takes an average of eight and a half years to receive a diagnosis, which means eight and a half years of pain, of missing out, of uncertainty and of explaining. How tiring must all of that be? Relationships break down because the pain and struggle are too hard to comprehend. There is the misogynistic dismissal of so-called women's issues and people saying that it is just painful periods or, even worse, that it is perfectly normal for women to experience pain.

There are long waiting lists and a postcode lottery for treatment. There is a serious problem with delays in getting an initial appointment with a consultant, and Covid has only made the long waits even longer. Non-urgent appointments have been delayed because of Covid, but, for patients, endometriosis is not non-urgent.

One person told me that, although their GP has been good, before being referred to a consultant, their daughter had to go through various other options to rule out cysts, irritable bowel syndrome and food intolerances. More than a year after their GP's referral, they are still to receive an appointment.

I have also been told by women that endometriosis has made them infertile, and how the inability to have children has affected their marriages. As many as 30 to 50 per cent of women who are affected by infertility have endometriosis.

I have heard stories of women spending years on painkillers that do not help. One woman had to have an ovarian tumour removed, but it turned out to be not cancer but endometriosis. The tumour was the size of a small orange. She eventually had a full hysterectomy after years of struggling with chronic pain.

The Scottish Government's women's health plan is set to directly address endometriosis. We must ensure that the plan improves lives and shortens waiting lists. Endometriosis has no definite cure, and the cause is still unknown, so we need to support research to better understand the condition and develop more treatments.

As we have heard, support is available, including from the north Highland support group for Endometriosis UK. I met its development officer Kirsteen Campbell, as the group's support network includes Shetland. A midwife and former constituent of mine lived with chronic pain for years before being diagnosed and starting treatment for endometriosis. With the help of the charity, she started a petition for menstrual wellbeing to be taught in all Scottish schools. It is important for both boys and girls to learn how female bodies work so that we can all better understand and support those with conditions such as endometriosis, polycystic ovary syndrome and premenstrual dysphoric disorder. Those medical terms will rightly sound mystifying and scary to many, so, like my former constituent and Endometriosis UK, I want to encourage openness about what is and is not normal for those who are menstruating.

Unfortunately, too many people are led to believe that their debilitating symptoms are something to put up with and so they end up spending too many school days in bed suffering from intense pain. If our young girls are forced to take one week off every month with debilitating pain, they will miss out on much of their education and be radically behind their schoolmates.

Encouraging openness and breaking down taboos around women's health issues so that women who are affected know when to seek help is important. Misconceptions need to be addressed and medical staff need training to spot the signs of endometriosis sooner. Plainly, we need to do better than averaging eight and a half years for a diagnosis for endometriosis but I am sure that, working together, we can make progress.

17:50

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): I thank Rachael Hamilton for bringing this important debate to the chamber and highlighting a condition

that affects many women in Scotland, including me.

I have endured endometriosis all my adult life, resulting in chronic pain and, at times, misery. I sought help for many years, but the pain that I experienced was generally dismissed as normal. One day, in my late 30s, the pain reached a point such that I collapsed at work, was taken to A and E and finally received the support and diagnosis that I needed. I had endured 15 years of pain without an answer. I do not want any other woman to go through what I went through.

The striking thing about the disease is the sheer number of women who are suffering right now and do not know it. As Rachael Hamilton noted, one woman in 10 has endometriosis. That is a huge number. A survey for an all-party group inquiry into endometriosis in 2020 found that, in Scotland, prior to diagnosis, 61 per cent of people with endometriosis had visited their GP 10 times with symptoms, 43 per cent of people had had five hospital appointments and 55 per cent had been to A and E.

Stacey, a young woman from Fallin in Stirling, battled endometriosis from the age of 13. Her pain was so unbearable that she would collapse in class and be sent home. Stacey often felt that the teachers did not believe her. In a bid to ease her pain, she eventually had a hysterectomy aged just 25. Now, Stacey is 34 and still deals with regular and painful symptoms. She hoped that the hysterectomy would help, but it has not. She now has no cervix, fallopian tubes, ovaries or uterus, so she feels extremely fortunate that she managed to have her children before the treatment.

Stacey's story and those of many other women underline the point that awareness of the condition is critically low. Delays in diagnosis mean years of physical and mental distress and, if the condition is left untreated, might result in infertility. We must ask ourselves the difficult question why something that is so common and so destructive is still so regularly dismissed or undiagnosed. Having as much pain as I have described is not normal. Attitudes need to change. It was very good to hear Sandesh Gulhane's words. GPs are often a woman's first port of call.

I very much welcome the commitment to reducing waiting times for diagnosis from more than eight years to under 12 months by the end of this session of the Parliament and the fact that the Government is making that issue a priority. Tragically, the fact remains that, even when someone is diagnosed, there is no cure. The treatments that I was offered were going on the pill, staying on the pill and having a baby. The first time that I was asked if I wanted to have a baby I was 18. I was a student, had no partner and

thought, "Hmm, that is not something I will be considering at present."

It begs the question why treatment for something that affects so many people is still so lacking. I look forward to hearing how the Scottish Government intends to meet its diagnosis targets, how endometriosis will be treated, and how health inequalities in general will be challenged.

As a nation, Scotland can be proud of its commitment to equality, so let us make endometriosis treatment another thing of which we can be proud.

17:55

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): I thank Rachael Hamilton for securing this important debate. As we have already heard, around one in 10 women suffers with endometriosis. It can affect fertility, cause chronic pain, depression, fatigue and severely impact the quality of life of those who suffer with the condition.

The actual cause of endometriosis is unknown. There are several potential risk factors or triggers, but none of them fully explains why some and not others develop the condition. It can last between puberty and menopause or for much longer.

It is estimated that endometriosis costs the UK economy £8.2 billion a year. Many will feel the financial impact through lost days of work, or not being able to work at all. For many who have endometriosis, the quality of life impacts will be severe. The mental health impact of endometriosis needs more recognition and better support. The current average time to diagnosis is eight years, which, as we have all recognised, is too long. I welcome the commitment in the women's health plan to reduce it to less than 12 months.

There are many gynaecological conditions that have similar symptoms and lengthy waits before diagnosis. To ensure that we get everyone the correct help and treatment, we need to reduce diagnosis times across the board, and raise awareness of the specific conditions. In previous women's health debates, many of the MSPs who spoke noted that, at some point, they felt that their symptoms were not taken seriously. We need to address why that is happening, otherwise those who are suffering will continue to not come forward to raise their symptoms.

I take the opportunity to thank the MSPs and campaigners who worked to bring the condition to the forefront in the previous session. As a result, we have seen wider recognition, and I am sure that many people are now seeking support for their symptoms after seeing that others are also experiencing them. It is important that we continue to talk about our experiences and break the stigma

around talking about gynaecological issues and the symptoms that they cause.

Rachael Hamilton mentioned menstrual health, but she did not have time to elaborate further, so I hope that members will indulge me for briefly covering another gynaecological issue. Previously, I have asked about ensuring that polycystic ovarian syndrome is appropriately recognised in the women's health plan. On average, it takes three years for a diagnosis, and those seeking help will see three doctors before being diagnosed. Similar to endometriosis, without interventions, symptoms can deteriorate and serve as a risk factor for other conditions, such as heart disease. Symptoms can include irregular periods, fertility issues, weight gain or issues losing weight, and hirsutism, which is excessive body hair growth that is usually dark and coarse. In a world in which appearance is routinely judged, that can severely impact women's confidence and their mental health.

Often, those seeking help are simply told that losing weight will resolve their symptoms, with no recognition of the increased insulin resistance that can come with PCOS. One of the many tests for diagnosis is the test for different hormone ranges. For someone who suffers those symptoms to be told that they cannot be given a diagnosis because their hormones are borderline okay can leave them feeling adrift and helpless. I am one of those who is seeking a potential PCOS diagnosis, and alongside those who are raising awareness of treatment standards of endometriosis, I want to do more.

To those who are struggling with symptoms of endometriosis, PCOS or any other gynaecological condition, I say that you are not alone. Your weight or your body hair does not define you. Choose to embrace it and choose to deal with it. Do not let society shame your body—it is the one that gets you around during the day. Whether you have hair on your arms or face, or whether you have a period, it does not reduce your worth.

We need to break down the societal stigma as we work to ensure that our health services are able to diagnose and treat appropriately in a timely manner. We need to allow GPs time to do the research and update their knowledge. The entire health service is under extreme pressure, and it would be negligent not to acknowledge the impact that the pandemic will have on our ambitions for treatment times. That does not mean that we should not be striving for quicker diagnosis now, but it is important to be realistic.

I thank Rachael Hamilton for securing the debate, and I thank all colleagues who have shared their stories this evening.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Monica Lennon, who joins us remotely.

17:59

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): It has been a pleasure to listen to the debate so far. I congratulate Rachael Hamilton on securing it and attracting so many members to take part.

I was struck by Emma Roddick's observation that it is good to have this debate outwith endo awareness month. We have to continue to do that. If anyone is listening who has an interest because they live with endo, whether or not it is diagnosed, it is important that they do not just feel encouraged but see that we are determined to take action.

Like other members, I welcome the women's health plan, which is a positive development in Scotland that I hope will represent a real breakthrough. My party campaigned for such a plan. We now need to consider how we will achieve the important ambition of reducing the waiting time for diagnosis from around eight and a half years to 12 months by the end of this parliamentary session.

When the minister responds, I hope that she will be able to give us a little more detail and reassurance in that regard, because none of us wants to build up people's hopes and expectations, only for them to continue to be disappointed throughout their lives. That is key.

I have been reflecting on some of the things that I was involved with during endo awareness month in March last year. Evelyn Tweed shared a personal story about being told as a young woman—a teenager—just to get pregnant. That reminded me that I tweeted that it is appalling that women are still being told to get pregnant as a way of treating their endometriosis, after hearing, on BBC Radio Scotland, young women in their 20s share their experience of that happening.

It is good that Dr Sandesh Gulhane is taking part in the debate. He will probably want to share what he has heard tonight with general practitioner and clinician colleagues. We have first-class endometriosis specialists and clinicians in Scotland, but we are not cascading the knowledge and good practice enough and, too often, women and other people who experience endometriosis, including trans and non-binary people, are just not believed.

That brings me to a point that other members made about menstrual health and wellbeing education. I know from correspondence that I had with Jeane Freeman and others in Government that the Government takes the view that it cannot mandate things on the curriculum. However, we have to get serious about working with schools to

ensure that young people have all the information and tools that they need at an early age.

I join Rachael Hamilton in paying tribute to Sir David Amess for all that he did in Parliament to shine a light on endometriosis. The all-party parliamentary group does important work. I am the chair of the Scottish Parliament's cross-party group on women's health, and I hope that we can continue to work together. It was Kenny Gibson—who gave us a pocket history of previous debates in this Parliament—who encouraged me to set up the cross-party group on women's health, and I thank him. I hope that more men will get involved.

We should focus on the things that we get right in Scotland. Tomorrow marks the first anniversary of the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act 2021 receiving royal assent and making it on to the statute book. I thank everyone who lives with endometriosis for sharing their experience in the context of the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Bill, which was about not just ensuring that we improve access to period products, but sharing people's stories so that we can get it right in the workplace, in education settings and here, in the Parliament.

I encourage my MSP colleagues to become endometriosis-friendly employees, as I have done. It is really easy to do and they can take this important conversation into their constituencies or regions. They can get in touch with Endometriosis UK, which will tell them how to sign up.

I again thank Rachael Hamilton. It is great that everyone has taken part in tonight's debate. I hope that we will hear from the minister that there is a plan to put these important ambitions into practice.

18:04

The Minister for Public Health, Women's Health and Sport (Maree Todd): I thank Rachael Hamilton for lodging this important motion. I welcome the opportunity to respond on behalf of the Government. Members from across the chamber have made really powerful contributions, and I am grateful to hear them. In particular, I welcome the personal contribution from Evelyn Tweed. Her story will resonate with so many people. It is such a powerful thing to use personal experience to make progress in this space, so I thank her for that. I also thank Gillian Mackay for raising the almost taboo issue of stigma, and for speaking so powerfully about it. She highlighted clearly why it is difficult to make progress on these issues.

I am grateful to Beatrice Wishart for mentioning the north Highland endometriosis group and my constituent Kirsteen Campbell. The women involved in that are the most incredible group of women. I have met them and know that they are

absolutely unafraid to speak truth to power, and let me tell members that I am grateful for it.

Endometriosis has a devastating impact on many women in Scotland. It is estimated that the condition affects 1.5 million women in the United Kingdom, but it can be difficult to diagnose, in part as a result of the diverse symptoms and the lack of non-invasive diagnostic procedures. The symptoms can be debilitating and can impact on all aspects of women's lives, including their relationships, work, education and mental health.

I am really proud to say that, in August 2021, Scotland became the first country in the UK to publish a women's health plan and that we are committed to improving access for women to appropriate support, speedy diagnosis and best treatment for endometriosis.

Stephen Kerr: As the minister knows, Rachael Hamilton cannot intervene in this debate, so I am a proxy for her. Is the minister confident that the Scottish Government's promise to reduce waiting times for diagnosis from 8.5 years to less than 12 months is achievable in the lifetime of this Parliament?

Maree Todd: I am very confident that we will make progress on the issue. I join with all the members who have contributed in recognising the barriers to receiving support and the long waiting times for diagnosis. We are absolutely committed to reducing the time to diagnosis and ensuring that the best possible advice and support are available for women throughout the diagnostic process.

We have been taking positive steps to improve the diagnosis and wait times. I am pleased to share that a new endometriosis care pathway is being developed by the modernising patient pathways programme, adapted from the NICE guidelines for endometriosis. That pathway will support healthcare professionals to recognise the symptoms of endometriosis and will provide a timely standardised referral care pathway for women with suspected endometriosis to secondary and tertiary care for those who need it. The pathway will enable women to be more informed and empowered to make choices about treatment and management. Alongside the pathway, Endometriosis UK is developing a leaflet to explain the process for diagnosis, which will be available online and for GPs to give to patients who have symptoms of endometriosis but have not yet received a diagnosis.

We recognise that reducing the time to diagnosis is not, by itself, an effective measure or demonstration of improved health and wellbeing outcomes. We will continue to work closely with Endometriosis UK and Public Health Scotland to analyse the data to help to indicate the reasons for blockages to treatment and support at primary

care level. As Rachael Hamilton mentioned, in order to establish a baseline to measure progress that will be meaningful for all women and their families, Endometriosis UK is producing a report that will provide an overview of the data on service provision in Scotland and make recommendations. I look forward to receiving the findings of that report, which will be available shortly, and I give members my assurance that those findings will be acted on.

I want to pause for a moment to pay tribute to Sir David Amess, who was the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on endometriosis from the time that he launched it in 2018. He worked tirelessly to raise awareness and improve services for those living with the condition. His dedication and determination during his time as chair led the APPG to undertake an inquiry on the improvements that need to be made to ensure that those with endometriosis receive the care and support that they deserve. The actions in our women's health plan reflect those recommendations. We are aligned in our vision to drive down diagnosis times and to improve access to care.

I assure members that work is going on to deliver the actions in the women's health plan and to take the necessary steps forward to improve health outcomes for women. We will soon convene the first meeting of the women's health plan implementation programme board. To ensure that progress is achieved at pace, a detailed implementation plan will be published by spring this year, and the first progress report will be published in autumn this year. Importantly, we will continue our lived experience engagement to ensure that women's voices and experiences shape the implementation of the plan.

We will strengthen collaboration across the regional specialist endometriosis centres and will use those hubs to support local delivery across health boards. We will continue to build collaborative relationships with endometriosis third sector organisations and support groups in order to help to deliver the women's health plan actions. We will work with Public Health Scotland and partners to analyse the available quantitative data to allow us to identify the gaps in national data and where improvement is required.

While being mindful of the impact that the pandemic continues to have on health boards, we will gather local qualitative data to help us to understand immediate pressures on waiting times for out-patient and in-patient endometriosis care. We will continue to support the implementation of the endometriosis care pathway and we will explore opportunities to partner with Endometriosis UK and other lived experience groups to raise awareness and consider ways to

support the diverse needs of people with endometriosis.

I will close the debate by thanking those who have contributed to it. I am listening. We have taken positive steps, but I know that there is still a great deal more to do. I assure members that we will continue to work with our partners to implement the actions in the women's health plan and to bring about real and transformational change for women with endometriosis. I end by thanking those with lived experience who have helped us to shape the actions in the women's health plan and who continue to share their stories with us, so helping us and everyone out there to understand what we could achieve within the lifetime of the plan.

Meeting closed at 18:12.

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