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Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 1 February 2022

[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 the Holyrood campus.

The first item of business this afternoon is time for reflection. Our time for reflection leader today is the Rev Ronald Matandakufa, minister, Kirk of the Holy Rood, Grangemouth.

The Rev Ronald Matandakufa (Kirk of the Holy Rood, Grangemouth): Presiding Officer and members of the Scottish Parliament, thank you very much for the opportunity to address you today.

Sometimes, the world feels dark and cold. There is a lot of pain and suffering caused by poverty, hunger, climate change, war, terrorism and discrimination—the list is endless. I wonder why the world is like that. Do we lack enough resources to alleviate poverty? Perhaps we need more mass demonstrations against discrimination, or perhaps we require more weapons of mass destruction to make war impossible. The question still remains: what do we really need to make the world a better and brighter place for all?

My experience as a church leader in first and third world countries has made me realise that what the world really needs is leadership. Leadership has been defined by different people in many ways, but it is commonly agreed that it is more than a position of authority or a job title. I would say that leadership is the ability to see what could be, despite what is, and to journey with others in making that a reality. Therefore, a leader is someone who can imagine an alternative reality—someone who can see a possible world that could be, regardless of what is. A leader is someone who acts in the present, together with others, to ensure that the future brings about a new reality that is better and brighter than what is.

I have come to conclude that the difference between a thriving nation and a collapsing nation is not economic aid; it is leadership. The difference between a progressing community and a degenerating community is not mass demonstrations against forms of discrimination; it is leadership. The difference between a growing

organisation and a declining organisation is not the unwillingness to change; it is leadership.

Presiding Officer and members of the Scottish Parliament, I believe that the world and our communities and organisations need leadership to realise a better and brighter future for all. I have no doubt that, without leadership, the world will remain dark and cold.

As you deliberate on national issues, the task before you is to imagine what could be, despite what is, and to journey with the Scottish people towards the realisation of a better Scotland for all. In other words, the task that you have is to provide the people of Scotland with leadership. I pray to God that you do so with courage.

Ndatenda. Thank you.

Business Motion

14:05

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-03027, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, which sets out revisions to this week's business.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees to the following revisions to the programme of business for Tuesday 1 February 2022—

after

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

insert

followed by Ministerial Statement: Update on 2022 National Qualifications

after

followed by Scottish Government Debate: UK Elections Bill

insert

followed by Legislative Consent Motion: Public Services Pensions and Judicial Offices Bill—[George Adam.]

Motion agreed to.

Topical Question Time

14:05

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is topical question time. To get in as many members as possible, I would be grateful for short and succinct questions and answers.

Free Under-22 Bus Passes

1. **Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to reported problems with applying for free under-22 bus travel passes. (S6T-00468)

The Minister for Transport (Jenny Gilruth): I was delighted to visit Glasgow yesterday and, with Patrick Harvie, who is the active travel minister, to press the start button on free bus travel for Scotland's under-22s. As we went live, more than 117,000 online applications had been received and more than 55,000 cards had been issued, with a further 16,000 cards issued offline by councils. [Jenny Gilruth has corrected this contribution. See end of report.] I appreciate that we still have a long way to go to reach the 930,000 eligible young people but, given that we opened for applications only 16 working days ago, that is an excellent achievement. I look forward to increasing numbers of young people enjoying the scheme's benefits in the coming weeks.

I recognise that some people have found the application process complex and hard to undertake, not least because of the identification requirements. The Improvement Service, which runs the online portal, has made changes to the process in response to feedback—for example, it has relaxed the proof-of-identity criteria and is now accepting out-of-date passports and proof of address from the last 12 months, instead of three months.

Local authorities can also take applications in person. Yesterday, I wrote to all local authorities to thank them and encourage them to do all that they can to help to make the scheme a success. We are also engaging with stakeholder organisations that can help us to better reach young people and families. I assure Graham Simpson and the Parliament that I will continue to explore ways of making it easier for young people to apply for their national entitlement card, because the policy is vital for opening up work, training, education and leisure opportunities for Scotland's young people.

Graham Simpson: I listened to the minister's answer with interest. It should not really take the Improvement Service stepping in at the 11th hour to make improvements that should have been

there in the first place, although improvements are welcome.

Parents and youngsters have described the process as bureaucratic—one parent even called it “Stasi-like”. I heard today that people who have been lucky enough to get a card are reporting that it does not even work. The minister might want to look into that.

We have a backlog of about 40,000 applications from young people who are waiting for their cards. What will the minister do for them?

Jenny Gilruth: It is important to remind the Parliament of the context of the timescales that have been involved in introducing the new under-22 bus pass. Back in early January, we were still dealing with a steep rise in omicron cases, which directly impacted on the scheme’s launch and our subsequent messaging. Mr Simpson will recall that my predecessor wrote to all members earlier this month about that change.

The applications process went live on 10 January, when the focus was on young people who have an essential need to travel—it was described as a “soft launch” in the letter to all MSPs. The Government guidance that was in place on 10 January was still for people to work from home. I hope that Mr Simpson recognises that our focus changed to more appropriately support the public health guidance at that time.

It is worth saying that that approach was intended to help to minimise pressures on our local authorities, which were impacted by the pandemic situation and which are responsible for processing applications and responding to inquiries. I accept that pandemic restrictions have now eased, which has impacted on our approach, with the official launch in Glasgow yesterday and the Government’s marketing campaign to follow shortly.

On Mr Simpson’s specific point about the Improvement Service, which has direct responsibility for the scheme’s roll-out, I will meet that organisation at the start of next week to discuss in detail further changes that we might seek to make. I hope that he will accept that that does not detract from the importance of having a successful roll-out of the under-22s scheme. *[Applause.]*

Graham Simpson: I am not sure what the applause is about. I assure the minister—

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

Graham Simpson: The Deputy First Minister is speaking from a sedentary position. I am not sure what he is chuntering about.

I want the scheme to be a success. I will ask about another issue that has cropped up with it. Strathclyde Partnership for Transport and Edinburgh Trams Ltd say that the introduction of the scheme will cost them money because youngsters will use buses rather than their services. Has the minister reflected on what they have to say and whether the scheme could be extended to Glasgow underground and the Edinburgh trams?

Jenny Gilruth: With regard to an extension, we are undertaking a fair fares review to consider a sustainable and integrated approach to public transport fares. I do not want to prejudge the outcome of that.

On the other part of Mr Simpson’s question, we have worked with the Confederation of Passenger Transport UK to arrive at reimbursement rates. It is hugely important to recognise that. We will ensure that we help bus services to recover from the impact of the pandemic. The scheme is also intended to do that. It will encourage more children and young people to travel sustainably.

The free bus travel scheme aims for bus operators to be financially no better or worse off as a result of their participation. I have received no direct representations on SPT and Edinburgh trams, but Mr Simpson might appreciate that I am just in post. However, if he shares that information with my private office, I will be more than happy to meet both organisations and have a further conversation on the issues that he raised.

Siobhian Brown (Ayr) (SNP): How can local authorities help in the implementation of the scheme, which has the potential to offer life-changing opportunities to our children and young people by giving them a chance to access increased social, educational and work opportunities? As members might be aware, until recently, I was a local councillor. I am sure that my former Scottish National Party councillor colleagues in South Ayrshire are working hard to ensure that the local authority supports this great initiative, especially by enabling people who do not have the required identification for online application to apply successfully.

Jenny Gilruth: Siobhian Brown is right that local authorities play a vital part in administering the application process for the free bus travel scheme. As I mentioned, I wrote yesterday to all local authorities thanking them for all that they have done to help support the launch of the scheme and encouraging them to do more to help us to encourage young people to sign up to make the scheme a success.

Although many applications are processed through online channels that are provided by the Improvement Service, a number will go directly to

local authorities. Many local councils have dedicated staff on hand to help applicants who might have difficulty with the application process, including, for example, care-experienced young people and asylum seekers, who might need particular support. We have not directed councils on how they might provide that support but, where the necessary mechanisms are not in place, I ask local authorities to let my officials know as soon as possible to resolve any issues that they might have locally.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): It is concerning to hear from the minister that more than 800,000 children and young people do not yet have their free bus pass. Will she confirm that it is the Government's ambition to get every child and young person a bus pass? If not, what is the target and when will it be achieved?

Jenny Gilruth: It absolutely is the Government's intention to have every child and young person sign up to the scheme but I reiterate to Mr Bibby some of the challenges that we faced at the start of the year, which I mentioned in my response to Graham Simpson. I already gave the example of where we were with the pandemic at the start of the year and the necessary requirement that my predecessor set out to delay the scheme's implementation, which led to a soft launch earlier in January and then the firming up of the launch yesterday. I also laid out some of the changes that the Improvement Service introduced in recognition of some of the challenges that we face, as well as my action as minister in writing to local authorities. In addition to that, I will meet the Improvement Service again next week to look again at the numbers.

I take on board Mr Bibby's point about the uptake thus far but I hope that he will also join me in ensuring that we get a higher uptake of applications to the scheme. It is vital for the children and young people of Scotland. It will open up work and leisure opportunities for them as well as fantastic opportunities to get out and about across the country.

I hope that Mr Bibby will help to support that message. I would be more than happy to discuss it with him in more detail, but I hope that he will also take cognisance of some of the actions that I have already taken on the matters that he outlined.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): I warmly welcome the minister to her new role. I highlight the brilliant work that is happening in schools across the country, particularly those in Perth and Kinross, which are using the parent portal system to sign up entire age groups across the school. What more can schools do? Should we start to see a roll-out in primary schools as well?

Jenny Gilruth: We are absolutely determined to ensure that children and young people who might benefit the most from free bus travel do not miss out. As I said in my previous answer, we know that some families might not be able to apply online, or have the required proof of identity to do so. That is why there are a number of different ways in which to apply, including directly with a local authority.

We also know that some families might need additional help or support to access the scheme, so we are working with delivery partners, stakeholders and third sector children's organisations, including Barnardo's Scotland, the Poverty Alliance, Carers Trust Scotland, Citizens Advice Scotland and many others.

As Mark Ruskell alluded to, all local councils have the option of co-ordinating applications through schools on behalf of their pupils. Some are already doing that—Mark Ruskell gave the example of Perth and Kinross—and I hope that, for as long as resources allow, and when it is safe to do so, more local authorities take up that offer.

Storm Malik and Storm Corrie

2. Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what action it will take to support those communities affected by storm Malik and storm Corrie, including addressing the impact on the provision of services such as public transport. (S6T-00467)

The Minister for Transport (Jenny Gilruth): We have been working closely with key partners to co-ordinate the preparation for and response to storm Malik and storm Corrie. The Deputy First Minister and the First Minister led Scottish Government resilience room ministerial meetings from Friday evening over the weekend, which I attended with other ministers, to ensure that that happened.

Local resilience partnerships, which continue to be active, are helping to provide welfare provisions for communities that have been affected. Power companies have worked throughout the weekend, deploying additional staff where necessary, to recover power supplies. That work is continuing in some areas today.

Throughout the weekend, I received regular reports from the Transport Scotland resilience team, and I attended ScotRail tactical command meetings on Sunday evening and throughout Monday. Rail and road staff have worked since Friday, including overnight, to ensure the safety and recovery of the transport network and to ensure that public transport provision can operate with minimal disruption where possible. I thank everyone who is working still, often in difficult conditions, to keep people safe, help recovery and maintain lifeline services.

The Scottish Government has also activated the Bellwin scheme to provide additional revenue support to local authorities that may apply.

Mercedes Villalba: Compared with urban areas, rural areas across the north-east have been disproportionately impacted by recent storms. In recent years, the Scottish Government has made a series of commitments around rural repopulation. That is why the resilience of rural communities and their infrastructure, such as broadband and power, is vital. Will the minister outline what steps the Scottish Government is taking to improve the resilience of rural communities, particularly with regard to infrastructure?

Jenny Gilruth: Mercedes Villalba mentioned some of the challenges that rural communities face, which were present at the start of the weekend, when we saw power outages in the north-east of Scotland. My colleague Gillian Martin has previously raised such issues on a number of occasions.

With regard to the specifics of Mercedes Villalba's question, and the preparations that we made in advance of storm Malik and storm Corrie, we have been working closely with responders, power companies, local authorities and Transport Scotland to co-ordinate the preparation for and response to the storms. Previously, the Deputy First Minister commissioned a Scottish Government review into the response to storm Arwen. That review was published just last week, and any lessons learned were taken forward in our planning for and response to storm Malik and storm Corrie.

It is important to say that every such event is different, and although we can learn lessons from storm Arwen, the storms over this weekend were unique. At the start of the weekend, we were perhaps preparing for a more challenging situation, but as the conditions eased, things started to get better. Before I came into the chamber, I saw that power has been restored to the vast majority of homes across Scotland, which I hope that Mercedes Villalba will welcome.

Mercedes Villalba also asked specifically about our rural communities. I will defer to the Deputy First Minister to get a more detailed answer for her, if she is content for me to do so.

Mercedes Villalba: In 2020, the National Infrastructure Commission published a study into resilience, which made key recommendations, such as Government setting resilience standards every five years, and referred to the need for infrastructure operators to carry out regular stress tests and have long-term resilience strategies in place.

I appreciate that we have had a spate of storms recently, but there is a need for long-term planning for such events. Will the minister outline whether the Scottish Government supports the NIC's recommendations? If so, how is it engaging with the United Kingdom Government on the development of a national resilience strategy?

Jenny Gilruth: On the specifics of Mercedes Villalba's questions, the answer is yes. I will respond to her in detail, but I am aware that work is on-going with the UK Government on the matter.

Presiding Officer, on resilience, can I reflect on some of the challenges that the rail network experienced during the weekend? I know that that was not specifically part of the question, but it is, nonetheless, relevant to the transport portfolio, for which I am responsible.

The Presiding Officer: Please do so very briefly, minister, as other members are very interested in putting a question.

Jenny Gilruth: I will very briefly put on the record my thanks to ScotRail and Network Rail for all the work that they undertook during the weekend to improve some of the rail lines.

I very much recognise the challenges that have been faced. Late on Sunday evening, ScotRail decided to cancel services from 18:00, which impacted on travel on Monday morning. I thank ScotRail staff for their work in putting in place bus infrastructure in particular. That speaks to some of the resilience challenges that Mercedes Villalba mentioned in her question.

Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Winter always brings disruption to ferry schedules, and today's on-going high winds are also causing issues. How is the Scottish Government ensuring that no resilience or welfare issues arise on island communities as a result of periods of prolonged service disruption?

Jenny Gilruth: The decision to delay or cancel a sailing is never taken lightly, as the operator fully recognises the importance of the ferry services to island and rural communities. Both CalMac Ferries, which operates the Clyde and Hebrides route, and NorthLink Ferries, which operates the northern isles route, have an effective working relationship with Transport Scotland's ferries unit and Transport Scotland's resilience team.

Operators will ensure that, where possible and when safe to do so, lifeline and remote island mainline services are provided to connect communities when opportunities arise. They liaise with key local stakeholders and local resilience partners to ensure that welfare issues are addressed.

The Scottish Government is currently working with island community stakeholders and representatives to establish reporting mechanisms that will provide regular overviews of the current challenges and issues impacting on island communities. The information gathered through that approach will provide an understanding of the impacts of operational approaches, and will be shared with national and local government, local resilience partnerships and other key agencies to ensure that there is a collective understanding of the experience of our island communities.

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): Yesterday, I was in Stonehaven, where around 13,000 people were without power. The main feedback from those affected was that they found it almost impossible to access up-to-date information. Recommendation 5 of the storm Arwen review emphasises that

“opportunities for coordination and communication”

should be

“maintained”

where responders

“and those in need of assistance, are without power or telecoms.”

What is the Scottish Government doing to take that forward?

Jenny Gilruth: We previously heard from another member about the challenges in the north-east. I know that, just before I came into the chamber, Scottish and Southern Electricity Networks said:

“As of 12pm, power has been restored to 105,000 customers with around 9,500 customers remaining off supply.”

On the specific question on energy networks, both SP Energy Networks and SSEN contributed to the SGoRR meetings during the weekend.

On the specific question about learning lessons from storm Arwen, the recommendations of the review are being taken forward. The member will appreciate that the review was published only last week, but I give her an assurance that we have taken forward the lessons from what happened during storm Arwen into our dealings with storm Malik and storm Corrie, while recognising that the situation that every storm presents is unique and that we must be cognisant of the local pressures and immediate challenges at the time.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes topical questions. I apologise to those members whom we were unable to reach.

Covid-19

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

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

14:24

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Today, I will give a further update on the levels of and trends in Covid infections. I will also confirm that, when Cabinet reviewed Covid protections this morning—as we are required to do every three weeks—our decision was to keep in place the remaining baseline measures for now.

I will then give brief updates on guidance for schools and early years settings; on the BA.2 subvariant of omicron, which is currently under investigation; and on vaccination. I will conclude with a reminder of the basic steps that are still important to take to help curb transmission and reduce pressure on the national health service, the economy and wider society.

First, though, today's statistics: 7,565 positive cases were reported yesterday through polymerase chain reaction and lateral flow tests; 1,177 people are in hospital with Covid, which is 30 fewer than yesterday; and 42 people are in intensive care, which is three fewer than yesterday. That figure includes 13 patients who have been in intensive care units for more than 28 days. Sadly, a further 30 deaths have been reported, taking the total number of deaths under the daily definition to 10,341. Once again, my condolences go to everyone mourning a loved one.

The most recent data continues to give grounds for optimism. The situation that we are in now is much less severe than we had thought it might be. That said, case numbers remain high and the significant fall seen in the first three weeks of January has now levelled off somewhat. Last week, I reported that the number of new cases had fallen by just over a quarter in the previous 7 days. This week, cases have risen, albeit very slightly, from more than 7,200 new cases a day to just under 7,400, which is an increase of 2 per cent.

The picture across different age groups is mixed. The biggest increase in the past week, of 7 per cent, was in the under-15s. However, that is significantly lower than the 41 per cent rise in that age group that was recorded in the previous week. That may well—indeed, I hope it does—indicate that the impact of the return to school after the Christmas break is beginning to tail off. Cases also increased last week, by 5 per cent, among 25 to

44-year-olds, which is likely to reflect infections among children now feeding through into that age group, many of whom are parents or carers. Case numbers are still falling in all other age groups, although they are falling more slowly now than was the case 7 days ago.

Although it is not as up to date as our daily case numbers, the weekly survey data from the Office for National Statistics is another important measure of infection levels. It shows that, in the week to 22 January, the percentage of people in Scotland infected with the virus declined to around one in 30 from around one in 20 in the previous week. Those figures are consistent with the trends in the daily data for that period in January.

There is a further point about the daily data that I want to highlight. Right now, someone who is reinfected with Covid does not count as a new case in the statistical reports. If, for example, you received a positive PCR result yesterday, you will not be included as one of the new cases reported today if you had also tested positive on a previous occasion. As of yesterday, reinfections are being reported by the United Kingdom Government in the daily figures for England. That means that, for a short period, the daily case numbers for England will not be directly comparable with those for Scotland. However, that will be temporary, as Public Health Scotland is also planning to report on reinfections. I can confirm that initial data will be included in the PHS weekly report tomorrow, and that data on reinfections will be included in daily case figures from later this month. That data on reinfections obviously becomes more important as the pandemic progresses and more people get Covid for a second time. That said, it is important to stress that, as things stand, the current daily figures capture the significant majority of people who test positive each day.

To return to the most recent data, the decline in cases in the first three weeks of January is now reflected in a fall in the number of people being admitted to hospital. In the week to 21 January, 768 patients with Covid were admitted. In the following week, that was down to 602. Hospital occupancy has also fallen. This time last week, 1,394 patients with Covid were in hospital; today, the figure stands at 1,177. The number of people with Covid in intensive care has also reduced—from 49 this time last week to 42 today.

Those improving trends are a result of booster vaccination, the proportionate measures introduced in December and the willingness of the public to adapt their behaviour to stem transmission. That has enabled us, over the past two weeks, to remove virtually all of the additional measures that were introduced in December. Most recently, as of yesterday, guidance on home working was updated to enable a partial return to

the office, with hybrid working where appropriate. From the end of next week—11 February—the requirements for overseas travel will also be eased. Fully vaccinated travellers will no longer need to take a test on their arrival in Scotland.

The return to much greater normality is very welcome for individuals, households and businesses across the country. However, common sense, coupled with the strong desire that all of us feel not to go backwards, demands continued caution.

The national health service remains under acute pressure. As I reported a moment ago, the number of people in hospital with Covid is falling, but it is still double what it was just before Christmas. As I also reported earlier, the recent fall in the number of cases is now levelling off. As often happens when protective measures that have helped to stem transmission are lifted, the number of cases might start to rise again, exacerbating the already significant pressure on the NHS.

That is why the Cabinet took the decision this morning to retain, for at least a further three weeks, the current baseline measures. Those are the Covid certification scheme, the requirement to collect customer contact details in settings such as hospitality, the requirement to wear face coverings in many indoor public places and on public transport, and the requirement for businesses and service providers to have regard to guidance and to take all reasonably practicable steps to minimise the incidence and spread of infection on their premises. We will continue to ask the public to take lateral flow tests before mixing with people from other households.

Complying with those basic protective measures will, I hope, help to stem infections and therefore relieve pressure on the NHS, while allowing us all to get back to living much more normally.

There are three further issues that I want to touch on today. The first is to briefly update the Parliament on the subtype of omicron known as BA.2, which was recently designated as a variant under investigation.

As members will recall, with the main omicron variant, what is called the S gene is absent in PCR tests. However, in BA.2 cases, the S gene shows up. In the past week, the proportion of PCR tests with an S-gene dropout, which indicates the main omicron variant, has declined, with a corresponding increase in the proportion of tests showing S-gene positive results. That could be accounted for by delta cases, which also show positive S gene results. However, it might also indicate increasing transmission of the BA.2 subvariant. Genomic sequencing is being used to investigate that further.

I can confirm that, in Scotland, 26 cases of BA.2 have been confirmed through genomic sequencing so far, but we expect that number to increase as more sequencing results are reported. Given that not all tests can be genomically sequenced, the number will be an underestimate of the presence of the subvariant here.

It is important to stress that, at this stage, there is no evidence that BA.2 causes more severe disease than the main omicron variant, nor is there any evidence at this stage that BA.2 has any greater ability to escape the immunity that is conferred by vaccination or previous infection. However, BA.2 appears to have the ability to outrun the main omicron variant, which might indicate that it is more transmissible. Investigations into that are on-going in the UK and other countries such as Denmark, where the subvariant has been circulating for longer.

At the moment, therefore, the BA.2 subvariant is not a cause for any alarm or to change our approach, but it warrants further study. It is a reminder that the course of this pandemic—of any pandemic—remains uncertain, so, even as we get back to normal life, we must take care and remain vigilant. We must remember that, as this is a global pandemic, developments in other countries will impact on our ability to control the virus here, which underlines the vital importance of extending the protection of vaccination to all countries as quickly as possible.

The advisory subgroup on education met last week to review Covid measures in schools and early learning and childcare settings. I confirm that, in the light of its recommendations, revised guidance is being published today, which effectively returns schools and early years settings to the situation before the emergence of omicron. The revised guidance eases requirements for bubbles or groupings in schools, and it is less restrictive in its advice on school trips and on visitors to schools.

The subgroup considered the issue of face coverings last week. It concluded that, although we might be close, assuming that current trends continue, to the time when face coverings no longer need to be worn in classrooms, we have not yet reached that stage. No one wants young people to have to wear face coverings in the classroom for a moment longer than necessary but, given the current uncertainty about infection trends in the immediate future and the relatively high levels of Covid in younger age groups, continued caution is prudent at this stage. The subgroup will consider the issue of face coverings again at its meeting on 8 February.

The final point that I want to cover relates to Covid and flu vaccination. In December, flu vaccination was paused for some groups to allow

priority to be given to the delivery of Covid booster jags. However, flu vaccinations have now resumed for higher risk groups such as the over-65s. Uptake in those groups was already high in December but, if you are in one of those groups and have not yet had your flu vaccination, the NHS Inform website will provide details of how to arrange it in your local health board area.

Covid vaccination has now started for five to 11-year-olds at the highest clinical risk and for those five to 11-year-olds who are household contacts of someone who is immunosuppressed. Parents and carers of children in those groups will receive a letter or phone call about vaccination soon. Some will have received that already.

In addition, invitations are now being sent to all 18 to 59-year-olds who are eligible for the booster but have not yet had it. Approximately 580,000 people are in that category. Invitations to scheduled appointments are being sent in blue envelopes, with the first appointments scheduled from Monday onwards. So, if you have not had a booster yet but are eligible for one, please look out for the blue envelope and go along to your scheduled appointment. If the appointment time you are given is not convenient, you can rearrange it to a more convenient time.

This is an important point: for anyone who has had only two vaccinations, protection against serious illness from Covid wanes significantly over time. The booster is a vital—in fact, essential—way of maintaining that protection. So please, get boosted. It is the best way to protect yourself from serious illness and to protect the NHS.

We can continue to be optimistic as we look ahead to spring. Case levels are likely to remain high for some time and may increase further as a result of the recent easing of protections, but there are good grounds at this stage for confidence that we are again entering a calmer phase of the pandemic.

Our revised strategic framework will be published after the February recess. It will set out in some detail our approach to managing Covid more sustainably in the remaining phases of the pandemic and as, hopefully, the virus becomes endemic. Between now and then, we will continue to engage on the contents of the framework and Parliament will get the opportunity to debate and vote on it.

For the moment, I will close with the steps that we can all continue taking to protect ourselves and others, while we return to more normal lives.

First, get fully vaccinated as soon as you can.

Secondly, continue taking care when out and about socialising. In particular, take a lateral flow test every time before meeting other people

socially, and remember to take the test as soon as possible before you go out, rather than several hours before.

Finally, please take the other precautions that we know make a difference. Keep windows open if you are meeting indoors. Wear a face covering on public transport, in shops and when moving about in hospitality. Talk to your employer about a return to hybrid working and follow the guidance and precautions that they adopt to make your workplace safe. Follow all the advice on hygiene.

Those measures are making a difference. They will help us to protect the NHS and get it back to normal and they are enabling us to keep each other safe, even while other protections are lifted. So please, stick with them. I again thank everyone across the country who is doing exactly that.

The Presiding Officer: The First Minister will now take questions on the issues raised in her statement. I intend to allow around 30 minutes for questions, after which we will move on to the next item of business. Members who wish to ask a question should press their request-to-speak buttons now or enter an R in the chat function.

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): The latest figures show that Covid is under control. The success of Scotland and the UK's vaccination scheme means that we can get back to normality. Yet, even though the data is very positive, the Scottish National Party Government is still insisting on the use of face masks in schools. Adults can go to the pub and not wear a face mask, but pupils in the classroom have to.

The First Minister said in her statement:

"No one wants young people to have to wear face coverings in the classroom for a moment longer than necessary."

Just what has to happen for the First Minister's Government to remove the requirement for face coverings in our classrooms?

Face masks are not the only Covid rule that this Government is keen to continue. The Coronavirus (Recovery and Reform) (Scotland) Bill that it introduced last week is a dangerous power grab. *[Interruption.]* SNP members are laughing at that. The legislation that they propose would give the Government the power to close businesses and schools, to let prisoners out of jail early and to force people back into lockdowns in their own homes. That is a power grab from this SNP Government. What is more worrying than anything is that the Government could do all that without ever coming back to the chamber and the Parliament. The powers are extraordinary. They were introduced to be used in an emergency only. Outside the most severe crisis, the Government should not have such sweeping, extensive powers to curb freedoms and control people's lives. Why

does the First Minister's Government need to retain emergency powers indefinitely?

The First Minister: Not for the first time, I cannot help wondering whether Douglas Ross listened to a single word of the statement that I have just delivered to the Parliament. He gets up here and blithely, with an air of complacency, says, "Covid is now under control." The pandemic—he did not say this, but the implication is that the pandemic is over. Yes, we are in a much stronger position because—

Douglas Ross: That is absolutely not what I said.

The First Minister: He said that the figures show that the virus is under control. I then accepted that he did not say that the pandemic is over, but the air that he gives is that that is what he wants us to think.

I narrated a situation that, because of the sensible, proportionate measures that have been taken, is much better than it would have been, and experts and other countries across the world are all of the view, or many of them are of the view, that continued caution in the face of the risks and uncertainties is the best way to see us get through the remainder of the pandemic.

Douglas Ross asks me why it is that adults can go to the pub without wearing a face mask—I remind him that we are asking adults who go to the pub to wear face coverings as they move about in hospitality—but children have to wear one in school. Let me point out a couple of important differences. First, adults have a choice about going to the pub and mixing with other people. Children do not have a choice about going to school and mixing with other people. Secondly, children are still less vaccinated than adults, because the vaccination of children was recommended by the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation at a much later stage. Those are all the reasons why it is right to continue to take a precautionary approach to the protection of children.

In another context, one of Douglas Ross's members—I think last week, when the Parliament was talking about exams—had the question posed to her, "Don't you think the safety of children is the most important thing?" Her answer was, "No, I don't." That seems to sum up the attitude of the Conservatives.

We will continue, in line with the views of the advisory council that gives us expert opinion on these things, to take that cautious approach. Interestingly, it was last week, I think, that Douglas Ross quoted the chair of the National Parent Forum of Scotland at me. She said that it would be sensible to have a phased approach to the lifting of restrictions.

On the point about the bill, the Coronavirus (Recovery and Reform) (Scotland) Bill will bring public health protection powers in Scotland into line with public health protection powers that have been in place in England, under a Conservative Government, for the past 10 years. Douglas Ross calls the powers “dangerous”. Perhaps that is not a surprise, coming from the leader of the Scottish Conservatives, because one of the powers in the bill is to give continued protection to tenants. Here is what the homelessness charity Crisis said about that in the consultation:

“These protections can give private tenants more time and support to work through rent arrears and we welcome plans to make them permanent.”

Perhaps it is not a surprise that the leader of the Conservative Party describes that as “dangerous”.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I, too, send my condolences to all those who have lost loved ones.

As we begin the slow return to some form of normality, we cannot allow the children of Scotland to be left behind. Thousands of pupils across Scotland have endured two years of disruption to their education, but as Scottish pupils prepare to sit prelims, we are faced with high numbers of Covid cases in schools. Almost 33,000 children were not in school because of Covid-19 on just one day last week. Prelims are currently happening across the country, and many secondary 5 pupils have never sat formal exams before. They cannot afford to miss out at such a crucial time.

For months, Scottish Labour has asked the Government to address ventilation in our schools. At first, the Government offered money for carbon dioxide monitors to diagnose the problem, but there were few solutions to improve ventilation, other than to pop open a window. Pupils and teachers had to suffer through the cold months before Christmas in coats and scarves.

Three weeks ago, the First Minister announced £5 million to improve ventilation in schools, which is welcome, but with 2,476 schools and at least 25,000 classrooms across the country, that will barely touch the sides. If we are to live safely with Covid, we need to make our schools safe for pupils and teachers. That is why Labour has repeatedly called for high-efficiency particulate air filters in every classroom. That needs a fourfold increase in the budget and it will help to ensure that masks can be removed. Will the Government finally listen and deliver those filters, and will it do so urgently, to minimise disruption, so that thousands of young people are not further disadvantaged at such a crucial point in their lives?

The First Minister: First, trying to ensure that disruption in our schools is kept to a minimum is one of the reasons why we need to be cautious on an on-going basis about the mitigations that are in schools, including face coverings. As I think that Jackie Baillie and her party agree, to lift those would take us, potentially, in the opposite direction. The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills will make a statement later this afternoon, confirming our intention that exams will go ahead this year and setting out some further decisions about support for young people in the lead-up to that.

On the £5 million ventilation fund, it is important to say that it is not the case that every space in our schools or early years settings needs such measures. Based on the assessment of the number of spaces that may need some additional mitigation, the funding that has been made available would be adequate for the purchase of air cleaning or filtration units; it would also cover, for example, the need for small mechanical ventilation or extractor fan units; and it would allow for repairs, for example, to doors or windows, to improve airflow. That funding covers the need that has been assessed, but we will keep it under review with local councils as we continue to take steps to ensure that we can live with Covid much more sustainably and much less restrictively in the months ahead.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): We have just heard from Jackie Baillie why we need to limit the impact of Covid in our classrooms. That is why air quality and air flow matter. It was, therefore, astonishing to learn this morning, from the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills herself, that 2,000 classrooms in Scotland currently fall below standards for air quality.

In addition, this morning, I was passed a paper that was commissioned by the City of Edinburgh Council, but is confidential and has been kept from the public since last May, which shows the extent of the problem. All but two of the schools that were surveyed for that report failed air-quality CO₂ threshold tests. During all that time parents, pupils and teachers have been kept in the dark.

Does the First Minister recognise that she has not been open with us on air quality in schools, and will she now publish all the data that her Government currently holds about school classroom air quality, so that we can make up our minds about whether what I have described is just the tip of the iceberg?

The First Minister: No, I do not recognise that. Obviously, I will look at what information the Government can publish that is not already published. What I think Alex Cole-Hamilton is referring to, in respect of the education secretary's

comments, is that we have assessed that not all spaces in schools or early years settings require additional measures. In those that do, the measures might include—temporarily, because they are not the recommended long-term solution—air cleaning or filtration units. Longer-term solutions include mechanical ventilation or extractor fans, increasing the space at the bottom of doors and allowing windows to open. That is what the £5 million ventilation fund is for.

As I have said, we will continue to keep the matter under review. Making sure—not just in schools, although that is what we are talking about right now—that the right ventilation measures are in place is going to be a long-term issue, because we know that good ventilation is one of the best mitigations against Covid. The actions that we have taken to date demonstrate how seriously we take that; we will continue to take the matter seriously as we go through the months to come; and we will, of course, continue to report fully to Parliament on that.

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): Presiding Officer,

“failures of leadership and judgment”

and

“serious failure to observe not just the high standards expected of those working”

in

“Government but also ... the standards expected of the entire British population at the time”

are just a few of the points in the conclusion of the report that was published yesterday by Sue Gray. Does the First Minister have concerns that public confidence in the integrity of people who make decisions to safeguard the NHS and the economy might now be eroded, and agree that that risks undermining all the efforts that have been made so far?

The First Minister: Obviously, I have concerns about that. I would be surprised if not every member in the chamber shares those concerns. There is very little public trust remaining in the integrity and decision making of the Prime Minister and his Government over those matters.

The Sue Gray report that was published yesterday was obviously heavily constrained in terms of what it was able to say. However, what it did say in its conclusions, which were narrated by Evelyn Tweed, was very clear. It is also now impossible to reach any conclusion other than that the Prime Minister has seriously and serially misled the House of Commons.

It is always important that what people such as me and the Prime Minister say in the chambers of Parliament can be trusted—I, myself, have had

cause over the past year or so to reflect very carefully on such things. That is never more important than it is during times of crisis such as we are living through. I suspect that my views on these matters are shared by members across the chamber and—more important—by the vast majority of people across the country.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Yesterday, every MSP received a letter from the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Economy detailing some of the allocated spending for business support for omicron that was part of the £375 million package that was announced by the First Minister. This morning, the cabinet secretary confirmed to the Finance and Public Administration Committee that £103 million is still as yet unallocated. When will that allocation take place? Crucially, will it include the £2 million that was desperately sought—again, in a letter that was sent to all MSPs—by the outdoor education sector, which is desperate for support in the pandemic?

The First Minister: The remaining funding that is to be allocated will be allocated and distributed as soon as possible. We are, rightly, taking time to consult to ensure that the remainder of the support gets to the sectors in which it is needed most—perhaps to sectors that, without consultation, would not get the support and attention that they merit.

Liz Smith has previously raised the outdoor education sector in the chamber. The Government has provided support. Although I will not pre-empt decisions that are yet to be taken, we can see from our previous actions that the needs of the sector are very important to us, because they are important to children across the country. We will continue to take that into account as we reach final decisions.

Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): As we return to much greater normality in our lives, thoughts inevitably turn to the longer term. Will the First Minister advise on where matters stand on the possibility of a fourth Covid vaccine dose being required, and on the potential need for annual Covid immunisation?

The First Minister: We continue to follow Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation advice. I take this opportunity to thank the JCVI for all the advice that it has given us so far. Advice has evolved in line with evolving understanding of the virus and the JCVI’s consideration of how vaccination can help to reduce, in particular, serious illness and hospitalisation.

We will continue to be guided by the JCVI in the future, but I hope very much that we will get from it recommendations that will allow us to extend even further the scope and coverage of the vaccination

programme, including to more people in the five-to-11 age group.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): The easing of Covid restrictions is leaving immunocompromised patients facing an uncertain future. They may have needed to lock themselves—*[Inaudible.]*—agree that regular lateral flow testing is vital for everyone, but especially for that group so that they feel safe, and that free lateral flow tests are essential for that group? Will the First Minister say whether public health officials have estimated how long we might need regular testing?

The Presiding Officer: Did you hear enough of the question, First Minister, or would you find it helpful if Ms McNeill repeated it?

The First Minister: I think that I got the gist of the question. I think that Pauline McNeill asked me about the use of lateral flow devices generally, and in particular in relation to people who are immunosuppressed. Can she nod if I have got that correct? She is nodding.

Yes, I strongly agree with that. As I said in my statement, and have done for several weeks, we recommend regular use of lateral flow tests for everybody, as people go out and about and socialise. It is especially important that people who are at the greatest potential clinical risk take that precaution, so I strongly encourage it.

How long testing might be required is a difficult question to answer, right now. It is one of the things that we will consider on an on-going basis; our up-to-date understanding will be included in our updated strategic framework. My view is that it is one of the protections that we are likely to ask people to follow for longest, because it is such an important way of breaking chains of transmission.

Procurement of tests and whether they should continue to be provided to the public free of charge—as I believe they should—remain, of course, matters of on-going discussion among the four nations of the UK. I have made clear to the UK Government my view that no change to the approach should be made without the agreement of all four Governments across the UK.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): As restrictions ease, which is welcome, how will the First Minister continue to highlight the message, via social media and traditional media campaigns, that face coverings should still be worn in indoor spaces in order to increase protection and reduce transmission of the virus?

The First Minister: The most up-to-date polling, which is from December, showed that the vast majority of adults in Scotland—more than 80 per cent—believe that wearing a face covering is very

or fairly important, so support for the approach is already high.

It is important that we continue to emphasise the message. The “Living safely this winter” campaign is running right now; we will amend it as circumstances change. We will continue to ensure that there are strong and appropriate public health messages through mainstream media, including television and radio, and across social media. For as long as we are asking the public to do certain things and to change their behaviour in certain ways, it is important that there is good communication in order to make it clear to people what they are being asked to do. We will seek to ensure that in all our marketing and public campaigns.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): Hospital admissions for under-18s are second only to admissions for over-70s, which reflects the relatively high infection rate and low vaccination rate among the younger age group. As the First Minister acknowledged, the rising infection rate among 25 to 44-year-olds is, likely, a consequence of infections among children and young people.

That is causing concern among school staff, in particular. Does the First Minister acknowledge the heightened risk that adults face in indoor settings where there are large numbers of unvaccinated young people? What further assurance can she give to school staff, who have given so much of themselves throughout the pandemic?

The First Minister: I recognise that there is a heightened risk to people who are in indoor settings with a large number of people, particularly where some of those people are likely to be unvaccinated or not fully vaccinated.

That does not apply only to schools, although clearly it applies to schools, which are the subject of the question. That risk is one of the reasons why we are deliberately taking a very cautious approach to easing mitigations in schools. The guidance that is being updated today eases mitigations to do with bubbles and groupings within schools, and it eases the requirements around visitors to schools but—as I said—it also asks for the current requirements on face coverings to be continued. That is part of the cautious and sensible approach to ensure that, in settings where the risks are perhaps higher, for the reasons that have been set out, we are doing everything that we can to protect people. In addition, of course, the steps on ventilation are important.

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): What is the First Minister’s response to reports that almost 5 billion items of personal protective equipment that were procured by the

UK Government at a cost of £2.7 billion will be wasted because they are surplus or are unsuitable for safeguarding NHS staff?

The First Minister: We want to make sure that we have adequate supplies of PPE, as do all Governments. We work hard in the Scottish Government, at times in partnership with the other UK Governments, to ensure that we have supplies and use them to the full, and to ensure that we get the right PPE to the people who need it. That will be a matter of on-going focus for as long as the pandemic is with us. Indeed, it will be the case beyond that, because it is important in normal times, as well.

It is not for me to comment on the procurement decisions of the UK Government, although I know that many of those decisions are under great scrutiny and are being questioned. We will continue to take sensible procurement decisions in order to ensure that we have the right supplies of PPE and other items that the people who work on the front line of our national health service need.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): We have been told that restrictions will not remain in place for a minute longer than is necessary. Since Covid passports were announced, infection rates are lower, the number of hospital admissions is lower and the number of ICU admissions is lower. Does the First Minister agree that the time has come to remove that financially disastrous restriction on the night-time economy, which has been devastated by the pandemic, and to allow businesses to get back on their feet and properly protect the tens of thousands of jobs that are still at risk?

The First Minister: I wonder whether it ever crosses the minds of the Conservatives that case numbers are down, the number of hospitalisations is down and the number of people in intensive care is reducing at least in part because of some of the protective measures that we are taking, not in spite of them. Without those protective measures, we might not have been in as relatively positive a position as we are in now.

Did the member listen to anything that was reported today? Case numbers are down compared with the numbers at the turn of the year, and we are in a much stronger position than we might have been in, partly because of such measures, but the immediate future trends remain uncertain. In the past week, case numbers have begun to rise again. I reported on a subvariant that might be more transmissible. There are reasons to be very optimistic and confident, but common sense and experience tell us that there are also reasons to be cautious if we want to avoid setbacks.

The Conservatives have opposed virtually every protective measure that we have introduced. If we had not introduced them, no doubt they would have said that we should have done. The opportunism and the opposition for the sake of opposition speak rather badly of the Conservatives. For my part, I will just get on with taking the best decisions that we can to keep driving and steering the country through the pandemic as safely as we can.

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): Public Health Scotland's latest data indicates that the pandemic has resulted in a 60 per cent decrease in the number of people visiting NHS dentists. Although there is cause for optimism, the number of Covid cases remains high, and we need a cautious approach to the full resumption of dental services. Will the First Minister outline what engagement the Scottish Government has had with the sector to prepare for the safe remobilisation of dental services?

The First Minister: It has been very challenging for dentists, as it has been for others across the health service, to keep seeing patients during the pandemic, even during periods of recovery. We are assisting dentists in getting back to normal as quickly as possible. From this month, we are providing dentists with an additional £20 million of funding to help them to see more patients, and the 2022-23 budget delivers a 9 per cent increase in the budget for NHS dentistry. That is record investment.

We are moving forward with NHS dentistry recovery, and we aim to return to much more normal levels of activity as soon as the virus allows us to do so. We are also discussing with the British Dental Association Scotland how we can continue to support NHS dentistry in the longer term as we continue to secure a sustainable public service.

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): One of my constituents is a doctor who works for both NHS Scotland and NHS England. Although he had his first two vaccine doses in Scotland, he was given his booster dose in a hospital in England when he was at work. Due to that, his booster dose cannot currently be recorded in the Covid vaccination status app. As the First Minister might be aware, hospitals in England do not provide vaccination certificates or a QR code, nor was the particular hospital able to change the postcode on his vaccination record to his Scottish address. I would be grateful if the First Minister could advise what steps should be taken when Scots do not have a QR code but need to request an update to their vaccination record.

The First Minister: I thank Bill Kidd for his question. I will ask the Cabinet Secretary for

Health and Social Care to write to him to set out in full detail the answer to his question.

In general terms, the Covid certification scheme allows people who have been fully vaccinated to evidence that if they need to do so. If someone has received a Covid vaccine outwith Scotland, they can upload their QR code as proof of vaccination in that country to the Scottish vaccination record through NHS Inform. Where a QR code is not available, alternative evidence can be provided to the local health board.

In addition, work is under way to include booster information with the automatic transfer of information between Scotland and England, and that will allow individuals to receive a combined fully vaccinated status, which will serve both domestic and travel purposes.

That is the broad situation in general terms, but I am aware that Bill Kidd asked for some particular details, so I will ask the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care to write to him in a way that addresses any of the points that this general answer has not.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): The British Medical Association and the health unions are calling for the use of the better FFP3 masks, which the BMA has described as

“a matter of life and death”.

In a recent BMA Scotland survey, only 15 per cent of clinicians who responded said that they were regularly provided with FFP3 masks or respirators when working in clinical areas with Covid patients. Can the First Minister take action to ensure that sufficient supplies are obtained of FFP3 masks for all NHS staff who need them?

The First Minister: The guidance on the use of PPE and what PPE is appropriate in what circumstances is carefully considered and is based on the recommendations and advice of experts. I regularly ask my officials about the issue in order to assure myself that it is still as we would expect it to be, given the current state of the pandemic, and I will continue to do that.

I will write to the member, or ask the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care to do so, to set out the key components of that guidance. It gives a lot of latitude to NHS workers who feel that they should be using a particular grade of PPE to do so, and, obviously—to go back to an earlier question—it is the responsibility of Government to ensure that we are procuring adequate stocks of appropriate PPE.

I will ask the health secretary to write to the member with a bit more detail on exactly what the guidance says and the steps that we are taking through procurement to ensure that that guidance can be followed.

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): Emergency restrictions and protections were legislated for quickly when required during the pandemic. They were necessary and will have saved and protected lives. However, some people may feel that such provisions should only ever be temporary and be used only to deal with emergencies.

Although Scottish ministers have already removed many of the temporary measures that supported our country's response to the pandemic, what assurance can the First Minister give that the measures that are being kept are those that have delivered clear benefits and, therefore, merit being extended in the long term?

The First Minister: That is an important point. I can give the assurances that we will give at every stage of the progress of the legislation through Parliament. An important assurance to give right now is that the Coronavirus (Recovery and Reform) (Scotland) Bill is not emergency legislation; it is legislation that will be subject to the full normal and proper scrutiny of Parliament.

We have removed and will remove any of the emergency measures that rightly should be temporary and are not needed anymore. However, it is also the case that some of the measures that were introduced on a temporary basis have proved to be worth while for the longer term and, as I said earlier, retaining them will bring public health protections in legislation more into line with those that have been in place in England and Wales for some time. Earlier, I gave an example of the greater protection that the legislation will give to private sector tenants. It will also enable us to continue to allow for the remote registration of deaths and births, for example. Those are the kind of commonsense measures that we are taking—

Douglas Ross: Letting prisoners out early? Not much to say on that one.

The First Minister: —but we will continue to ensure that Parliament is fully consulted and that we continue to seek the right balance on this.

These are important issues, and it is important that everybody treats them seriously and responsibly. I am sure that most people—if not all people—across the chamber will do so.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the First Minister's statement. There will be a brief pause before the next item of business.

National Qualifications 2022

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a statement by Shirley-Anne Somerville on an update on the 2022 national qualifications. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interruptions or interventions.

15:10

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Shirley-Anne Somerville): As I reaffirmed in Parliament on 19 January, it is our firm intention that exams will take place this year. I restated the significant modifications to courses and assessments that the Scottish Qualifications Authority has already made to take account of the expected disruption to learning, and I set out the contingencies to support learners in the event of further disruption, as has been the position since we made the initial announcement in August last year. The SQA has been working closely with partners, including through the national qualifications group, to take account of the disruption that learners continue to face. Indeed, everyone involved in education—myself included—acknowledges that this year has been another exceptionally difficult one.

Two weeks ago, I advised that the SQA had indicated that a decision on the scenario 2 contingency was likely to be made soon, based on information such as national teacher and pupil absence levels. Although the number of full and partial school closures has been small, it is clear that many secondary schools have experienced, particularly in the first half of January, extreme disruption in the wave of the omicron variant in relation to student and teacher absences. We continue to refine our school safety guidance accordingly, based on evidence on risks and benefits, including in the changes published today, and we are keeping the data under constant review as we move forward.

Learners in the college sector have had to revert to a universally remote learning model rather than a hybrid model since late December.

Given the level of disruption and its impact on learning and teaching, the SQA board has now taken the decision to invoke the scenario 2 contingency measure, and the SQA will provide revision support to aid learners in their preparations for exams. The SQA will provide revision support for every course that has an exam. The type of support for each course will depend on the course and the modifications to assessment that the SQA made at the start of the academic session. Information is now available on

the SQA website that sets out the existing modifications and the type of revision support that will be provided for each course by subject and level.

The SQA will provide the full detail of that revision support in early March. That timing enables teachers to complete delivery of the full modified course requirements before learners turn their attention more fully towards revision in the run-up to the exams. The support is aimed at helping to reduce the stress for learners in preparing for their exams and allowing them to maximise their performance.

Today, the SQA has also announced its approach to exceptional circumstances, grading and appeals this year. Those measures have been developed in close consultation with members of the national qualifications 2022 group.

The exam exceptional circumstances approach is available to learners as exams are taking place. It provides a back-up for learners who are unable to attend their exam or exams due to illness or bereavement, or if there is disruption during the exam. That will include Covid-19-related absences. The service is based on the SQA's established annual process. If a candidate is eligible for exceptional circumstances, their centre will provide appropriate assessment evidence that has been gathered during the year, and the SQA will review that against the national standard and award the appropriate grade.

Once the exams have been completed and marked, the SQA will look at the outcomes through its standard processes to determine the 2022 grade boundaries that are needed to achieve an A, B or C grade for the specific subject and level. Senior SQA appointees, who are practising teachers or lecturers, will take an expert decision that is based on a range of evidence. That includes the reflections of markers and the senior exam team as they mark and review a wide range of candidate exam scripts; estimates that are provided by centres; and information such as the number of candidates entered and the number of centres presenting candidates for the course.

The key focus will be on reviewing how course assessments worked this session, as measured against the national standard. In recognition of the disruption that learners have faced over the past two years and of the different assessment approaches that have applied, the approach to grading this year's exams will look to factor in the impact of the pandemic on learners.

The grade boundary decisions will be applied at a national level. Individual local authority or school data will not be looked at, and no algorithms will be used in the process. The expectation is that the overall outcomes in 2022 will represent an

intermediary position between 2021 and pre-pandemic years.

Once the results have been published, learners will have free direct access to appeal their result. The appeals service in 2022 acknowledges the particular challenges for learners this year. For that reason, as well as conducting a clerical check on exam scripts for each appeal, SQA appointees will review alternative assessment evidence that learners have completed through the year. That will be the same evidence as that used for an exam exceptional circumstances request.

If, following that review of evidence, the SQA assesses that a higher grade has been achieved, that will be awarded. If the review of evidence results in a lower grade than that achieved in the exam, the exam grade will stand. Delivery of that approach, which has our young people's interests at its heart, will require working together by the whole system. The SQA has agreed with the national qualifications group what the SQA, centres and learners need to do if learners have not performed in their exam to the standard that was expected. Equality and children's rights impact assessments have been carried out and will be published in the coming weeks, alongside the full detail and guidance on the measures.

All the measures underpin the 2022 exam diet and balance the integrity and credibility of qualifications against the on-going impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on learners. They will also give clarity and reassurance to learners who have conditional and unconditional offers for colleges and universities.

In addition to those measures by the SQA, I am clear that more is needed to support our young people in their learning. I have set out the measures that the SQA is taking, but there is of course an important role for local support to learners. Schools are best placed to support individual learners to catch up on their learning and have the best chance to demonstrate their potential. Our teachers have continued to work tirelessly throughout these challenging times to deliver for their learners, and I offer my heartfelt thanks to teachers and all the staff in our schools.

To complement and enhance school-based support, Education Scotland continues to support young people who are studying for qualifications through the national e-learning offer, which every learner in Scotland from the age of three to 18 can access. Through glow, which is our national schools intranet, senior phase learners are accessing e-Sgoil's supported study webinars and resources. Last year, the e-Sgoil senior phase Easter study support programme was extremely popular, and it will be repeated this year to offer live webinars that will cover more than 60 courses

at a range of levels, from national 4 to advanced higher.

To build on existing provision, learners can attend online evening revision classes in a range of courses throughout the term. Learners from all 32 local authorities have engaged with that study support, and measures are being taken to target and engage with groups of learners for that support. In addition, e-Sgoil will offer specialised targeted study support, via referral from a headteacher, for young people who are considered to have been most impacted by Covid.

Learners from all 32 local authorities have access to more than 1,850 West Partnership online school videos to support senior phase learning via glow or their own local platforms. More than 21,000 unique users have accessed those videos. To complement that, learners are also accessing developing the young workforce live webinars and resources with more than 40 courses to choose from; they have had more than 16,000 learner attendances to date.

Working as part of the regional teams at Education Scotland, attainment advisers will continue to provide bespoke support to each local authority and, in partnership with local authority officers, to individual schools and clusters of schools. The support that is provided includes help for practitioners to use data and evidence effectively to identify where young people require support and to identify the actions that will have most impact.

Each year, many schools provide Easter study support provision to help learners who are preparing for their exams. Findings from an informal audit by Education Scotland established that, although some local authorities have a well-established offer, others choose not to deliver Easter sessions. In October last year, I committed to boosting in-person Easter study support provision.

Scottish Government officials have been working with local government and others to agree distribution of £4 million of funding to increase support where appropriate, particularly for learners from the most deprived backgrounds. It is anticipated that that funding will allow schools and colleges, or local authorities through authority-wide initiatives, to offer targeted sessions for learners over the Easter break. Where an Easter study offer already exists, the funding could allow schools or colleges to broaden their existing offer for targeted learners or, through promotion, encourage those learners to attend existing sessions.

The package of measures and support is designed to ensure that our learners are fully supported in their learning and preparations for the

exams this year, to help them achieve and demonstrate their full potential and to have that recognised in their grades on 9 August. I hope that colleagues across the Parliament will come together to welcome the measures and recognise that that work confirms our clear intention that exams will go ahead as planned.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The cabinet secretary will now take questions on her statement. I intend to allow around 20 minutes for questions, after which we will need to move to the next item of business. It would be helpful if members who wish to ask a question could press their request-to-speak button or place an R in the chat function.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of her statement.

Two weeks ago, the Scottish Conservatives called for the Government to commit to ensuring that the 2022 examination diet would go ahead in full. Despite warm words from the cabinet secretary today, we are no further forward. The plans are too little too late. The Scottish Government is setting out its contingencies without releasing the equality and children's rights impact assessment so that the Parliament can fully scrutinise it.

Recent reports have outlined that 80 per cent of pupils—I emphasise that figure—still do not have a digital device despite the Scottish Government having outlined its online support plans. In addition, many people will feel that starting revision support in March is far too late, especially for pupils who are catching up on lost schooling.

The Scottish Government has had two years to get it right and we are heading for yet another disaster. Pupils and teachers deserve better than what has been offered today. Will the cabinet secretary release the impact assessment this afternoon and ask the SQA to start the revision support sooner? When will our young people finally receive their digital devices, or is that yet another broken promise from the Scottish National Party Government?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I feel that we are having a bit of a groundhog day, going around some of the discussions that we had the last time that we debated the matter. However, I will quote something that Sharon Dowey said at the end of the Conservative debate. I know that Mr Kerr did not like this when the First Minister said it.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): It is a misrepresentation.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: It is important because it testifies to where we are at. Kaukab Stewart asked:

“The safety of our children is paramount—surely, Sharon Dowey agrees.”

Sharon Dowey replied:

“No, I do not agree”.—[*Official Report*, 19 January 2022; c 92.]

That, I am afraid, is where we are at.

Stephen Kerr: It is a misrepresentation. That is shameful.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: It is shameful.

Stephen Kerr: Shameful!

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Kerr, that is enough.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: It is our firm intention that the exams will go ahead. Just like every other member of the United Kingdom, we have a contingency if public health guidance does not allow for gatherings to take place. England, Wales and Northern Ireland have exactly the same contingency in place. However, it is our firm intention that exams will go ahead.

There is an important reason, which has been discussed with the national qualifications group, why some material will be made available now and some will be made available in early March. It is to ensure that there is no narrowing of learning and teaching that would negatively impact learners' breadth of course knowledge and understanding or the next steps of their learning. It is important that, at this stage, the learning continues. However, as we move closer to the revision phase, the full information will be made available to learners and centres. As I said, the SQA is also publishing ample information on revision support.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): Labour members send our best wishes to young people and staff who have been dealing with three years of unimaginable disruption.

There is much to welcome in the statement, extraordinarily late though it is. The cabinet secretary has finally listened to Labour's demands for an appeals system that is free, that takes into account exceptional circumstances and that is based on no detriment. We set that position out last year and once again in the Parliament two weeks ago. The Government rejected it. The position that it took on appeals for the past two years is now untenable. There must be redress for the Government's errors.

The statement also raises a number of questions. Will the appeals process be a right of direct appeal for pupils? Why must pupils and teachers wait an entire month from now for the guidance and support? On what needs-assessed basis will the Easter support money be allocated, and what is the rationale behind the figure?

Everything in the statement deals with the fact that young people have lost incredible amounts of learning during the pandemic and continue to do so. That has to be addressed somewhere in our education system. It is unfathomable that the Government refuses to conduct serious research to measure the impact of lost learning and develop a plan with resources that match the scale of the challenge. Will the cabinet secretary now commit to doing so?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Michael Marra raises a number of points, and I will try to get through them all.

Last year, there was a right of direct and free appeal for learners. If it was not clear in my statement, I am happy to clarify to Michael Marra that the direct and free appeal is available this year as well.

I have already responded about the information relating to revision support that is being made available by the SQA in early March and the reasons for that. In the interests of time, I will not go through it again.

The Easter support has been worked on with our colleagues in the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. It was finally agreed with COSLA leaders last week, hence our ability to announce it this week. The details of how much will be going to each local authority has not yet been determined, but I am happy to provide the information to Michael Marra and other members when it is available.

The impact on learners has been made clear, for example, in the most recent assessment for learning statistics, which have been discussed in Parliament already. Of course, the Government will keep a close eye on that as we continue to collect data.

Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): It is understandable that students and staff might be anxious about exams and need assurances that the process will be fair and the results that are awarded will reflect their hard work. What extra steps has the SQA taken to ensure that the appeals process takes account of the disruption that has been caused to learners?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Many other modifications, in terms of course work and revision support, will have been made before we get to the appeals part of the process. However, when it comes to an appeal, the approach goes further than it has in recent pre-pandemic years, and it builds on the approach that has been taken historically.

As I said in my statement, as well as conducting a clerical check on exam scripts, SQA appointees will review the alternative assessment evidence

that learners have completed throughout the year, which evidence will be the same as that used in exam exceptional circumstances. It is an important assurance for learners that the SQA has looked seriously at the matter and has consulted the national qualifications 2022 group on what more can be done. Therefore, I think that the approach during the appeals process will take into account any disruption that has been caused to learners.

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): Given the possibility that a greater number of pupils than normal will be subject to the exceptional circumstances approach, will the cabinet secretary confirm that pupils who are forced to miss exams due to Covid will not be subject to the same unfair grading system that has failed pupils for the past two years in a row?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As I set out in my statement, the exceptional circumstances service will be available to learners who have missed an exam, including due to Covid, and there is an established SQA process for that service. This year, the centre will provide appropriate assessment evidence that has been gathered during the year, which will be assessed against the national standard and awarded the appropriate grade.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: James Dornan joins us remotely.

James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP): I welcome the cabinet secretary's statement, particularly the fact that the SQA will recognise the disruption that has been caused to learners in its approach to grading exams this year. For the assurance of those learners, will the cabinet secretary reiterate her comment that their results will be based on their hard work rather than on historical data or an algorithm?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I confirm that award meetings will take place for each individual subject after the exam has been held, to ensure that the standard and level of demand of the assessment at each grade boundary is appropriate. The panel of subject experts who will do that are, of course, practising teachers and lecturers.

There is a recognition that learners have faced disruption during this year, but it is absolutely clear, as I said in my statement, that awards will be based on national data. The SQA will not consider individual local authority centre or individual learner data, and no algorithms will be applied as part of the process.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): It is a shame that, five minutes before the cabinet secretary rose to her feet, her statement was being discussed on the internet, following an SQA press release.

I thank the cabinet secretary for her statement. Much discussion has been had about the data that the SQA has used to reach its decision. Will the cabinet secretary confirm that that data will be identified and published? Will she also say how the SQA arrived at its rationale in changing its position from only two weeks ago?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As the member is aware, the SQA is independent from Government, and I am certainly not responsible for the timing of its press releases or when those are published on its website. However, I note his comment on that.

The rationale for all the decisions was gone through in great detail with the national qualifications 2022 group. There has been a great deal of discussion with stakeholders. There have been varying views on parts of this as we have gone through the process. However, I hope that members will agree that the SQA has recognised the disruption to learning and acted accordingly.

We have set out the rationale. The discussions have been about teacher and pupil absences, but another important aspect is the direct feedback from pupils, pupils' representatives, parents' representatives and teaching unions on the national qualifications 2022 group about the disruption to learning. Therefore, even if schools have remained open, the SQA, as well as looking specifically at the data, has been cognisant of that direct feedback about the impact on learning. I hope that that gives some reassurance to Mr Whitfield about the rationale behind the decisions.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): The SQA has taken the decision to move to scenario 2, which is to provide support to learners to aid them with their preparation for exams, with full details to be provided in early March. Will the cabinet secretary outline what learners can expect in March?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As I mentioned in my statement, the SQA has made significant modifications to courses and assessments to take account of disruption to learning. The revision support will complement those modifications, although that will vary across subjects and levels.

For example, the SQA will advise learners on some courses which topics, context or content will or will not be assessed in the exam, to allow learners to focus their revision on what will be in the exams. That additional information has already been provided for some courses. The SQA will provide study guides for other courses, with hints and tips to help learners prepare for their exams. In addition, a small number of courses will have study guides that learners can take into the exam, where appropriate. Full details and how the approach will impact on each topic and at each level will be provided on the SQA website.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): The education secretary has been slow-footed on moving to scenario 2, when it has been abundantly clear that that has been necessary for weeks as some pupils have had their learning repeatedly and excessively disrupted. Why on earth must they wait until March to find out what the guidance is for exams?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The decision to move to scenario 2 was one for the SQA to make. The board met at the end of last week, and the decision has been announced this week through my statement to Parliament and the SQA's publicity to centres.

Importantly, as part of the process, the SQA undertook due consideration of the data and discussion and consideration with stakeholders. That is exactly what members have asked for in the past.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): The Scottish Government has already announced an enhanced Easter study support study offer for learners, which is especially important for those from deprived backgrounds, as well as a specific £4 million cash commitment. Families in my constituency will be keen to know what that will entail as early as possible. What more information can the cabinet secretary provide at this stage?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: My apologies, Presiding Officer. Mr Doris was remarkably and unusually quiet, but I think that I got the gist of his question around Easter study.

What is delivered is a matter for local authorities. As I mentioned in my statement, many local authorities already have well-established Easter support provision. Others will perhaps look to enhance that in different ways. I am sure that each council will deliver further details on that to members of the Scottish Parliament, as they can work up their proposals now that the decision has been through COSLA and has been announced by the Scottish Government. I hope that it will ensure that greater support will be provided to many young people, especially those from deprived backgrounds, those with additional support needs and those who have suffered a particularly difficult time during the year because of Covid.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, cabinet secretary. I am sure that Mr Doris will write to you in the coming days if that was not his question.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): The improvements to the appeals process in particular bring this year's system far closer to respecting the rights of young people than was the case in previous years. I welcome that. What will be the options for appeal for the young people who have

been unable to complete 100 per cent of the course work that is presently stated by the SQA as being required?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As I said in my statement, if an individual would like to go forward for an appeal, they are encouraged to discuss that with their centre in the first instance. However, they can make a direct appeal. There are no specific requirements as part of that appeal process, but the evidence that has been built up and gathered over the year can be given to the SQA to be looked at.

I hope that that gives Mr Greer some reassurance around that point. The SQA is keen to make the appeal process as flexible as possible.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I recently spoke to a teacher who informed me that one out of 10 pupils in their school had been referred to child and adolescent mental health services, with the uncertainty over exams being a significant factor. Does the cabinet secretary recognise that the continuing uncertainty from the Scottish Government is affecting the health of children? What can the Scottish Government do to support pupils who are trying to take exams under the cloud of poor mental health?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: It is the Government's firm intention that exams will go ahead this year. That is what the whole education system is working towards. The statement went into great detail about what is being provided by the SQA, Education Scotland and other parts of the education system.

Given Mr Whittle's question about CAMHS, I mention the additional investment that has gone into supporting young people—through counsellors in every secondary school, for example—and the additional support that has gone into CAMHS, given the particular impact that the pandemic has had on young people.

Siobhian Brown (Ayr) (SNP): I welcome the fact that the SQA will provide additional study support for learners in March. Will the cabinet secretary outline how that will complement the wider support package that has been put in place, including course work assessment modifications and online learning resources?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The member raises an important point. Although much of the statement was focused on the SQA and much of the coverage concerns what happens in the SQA, a great deal of work is going on in other parts of the education system to support our young people. I have mentioned the work of the e-Sgoil, the West Partnership online school and others. Work also goes on to support our young people, day in and week out, in our schools and local authorities.

Together, that provides a sound package to support young people at this very difficult time.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): There is nothing in the statement about securing additional appropriate settings for exams. If distancing will be an on-going concern, what is the cabinet secretary doing to ensure that additional space is available to allow exam conditions to be satisfied in a controlled and managed way?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: With respect, there is nothing on that in the statement because it has been discussed at length by the national qualifications 2022 group. It has not been deemed an issue of concern by our stakeholders, given the distancing measures that are already in place for exam settings. The SQA will of course continue to have discussions with stakeholders and, if stakeholders see it as an area of concern, the SQA would act on that.

Point of Order

15:40

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I would be grateful for your guidance. How can I get on the record the fact that, this afternoon, both the First Minister and the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills have selectively quoted one of my colleagues out of context, grossly misrepresenting what was said in the chamber? The public watching the proceedings of the Parliament deserve better from senior members of the Scottish National Party Government. It is now an established pattern of engagement in the chamber to grossly misrepresent the views and opinions of colleagues who are members of this Parliament.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): You have answered your own question, Mr Kerr. That is now on the record.

Elections Bill

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-03009, in the name of George Adam, on the United Kingdom Elections Bill. I ask members who wish to participate in the debate to press their request-to-speak button now or as soon as possible.

15:41

The Minister for Parliamentary Business (George Adam): In 11 years, I have never once had a problem with my card until now—honestly.

The UK Elections Bill is highly complex and highly controversial. I am pleased that the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee agrees with my assessment that legislative consent should not be granted.

The bill will have a profound impact on voters and electoral administrators in Scotland, not just in relation to holding UK general elections here but by putting pressure on us to act in a similar way. It is therefore important for the Scottish Parliament to have the opportunity to discuss it.

I am strongly opposed to several of the bill's proposals for reserved elections. In particular, it is apparent to many people across the political spectrum that voter identification for UK general elections would disenfranchise a substantial number of people. I agree with Ruth Davidson—that is not something that members will often hear me say—on her description of the proposal as

“trying to give a solution to a problem that doesn't exist”.

I will not read the full quote, because, as you know, Presiding Officer, I do not believe in using bad language in the chamber, and Ms Davidson is very strong in her disagreement with the proposal.

Where is the need for such an expensive and disruptive change? What happened to promoting participation by our most vulnerable citizens? As the UK Parliament's Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee concluded, the evidence base

“simply is not good enough.”

The committee rightly called for a pause to allow “further research and consultation”.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): Does George Adam agree that the proposals have been supported by the Electoral Commission and other bodies, and that they are designed not to disenfranchise voters?

George Adam: The voter ID policy will, in effect, create another barrier for individuals going to a polling station. We would have completely

different scenarios for devolved elections and elections for Westminster. Furthermore, the Tories should not be talking about the Electoral Commission, because part of the problem is that they have already ridden roughshod over it.

I am concerned by the bill's proposal to require applications for postal votes for reserved elections to be renewed after three years. That is another example of people being disenfranchised. It would mean an end to voters being able to make one application for a postal vote for all elections. It represents a significant loss to many voters—our constituents. By unilaterally setting the period at three years for reserved elections, the UK Government is, in effect, pressuring us all to follow suit to avoid confusion for voters. That could be said about every single other aspect of the bill.

We should be proud of what devolution has already achieved in elections policy. For example, we have extended votes to foreign nationals and to 16 and 17-year-olds. We have developed the role of the Electoral Management Board for Scotland, which was vital in co-ordinating last May's successful election.

We should not be obliged to adapt our law to whatever the UK Government considers to be appropriate, especially where there is no evidence base or compelling argument for a change. That is especially so in relation to the proposals from UK ministers to issue a statement directing the Electoral Commission's work in overseeing elections. That seems to risk interference with the commission's independence.

Indeed, as Louise Edwards, director of regulation at the commission, said to the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee,

"The strategy and policy statement would put one political party—in essence, it would be one political party—in a privileged position of influence above all others and above all its political competitors. That is the point at which it would impact on confidence and on the integrity of elections, because it would impact on our independence."—[*Official Report, Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee*, 18 November 2021; c 11.]

That is the director of regulation at the commission saying how difficult—impossible, in fact—the commission's position will be made by this power grab by the UK Government.

Our legislative consent memorandum rejected the proposal that UK ministers should be able to include devolved elections within the terms of the statement. It is a reflection of the lack of respect for devolution that runs through the bill that there would have been a simple requirement only to consult Scottish and Welsh ministers in relation to devolved elections. Our views could have been entirely ignored and there would have been no

role at all for any of us in this building or for this Parliament.

Even with consent refused, any statement in relation to reserved elections could feed through to the commission's handling of devolved votes. My Welsh counterpart and I therefore suggested placing a duty on UK ministers to consult us in relation to the statement in its entirety. Even that simple concession was rejected out of hand. I would be happy to hear what Mr Kerr has to say about that simple concession.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): Will the minister confirm that the Electoral Commission actually endorses the measures in the bill? That is a statement of fact.

George Adam: That is a massive overstatement. The commission has endorsed some of those things. As the member has already made clear from a sedentary position, he knows all about alternative facts.

My final major concern is that the bill casually seeks to replace our existing legislation on digital imprints. We were the first part of the UK to require an imprint to identify the source of electronic election material. By taking an extremely broad view of the internet service reservation—a view that we continue to contest—the UK Government is effectively trampling over a law already made by this Parliament.

The bill includes a number of changes, for example on undue influence and intimidation, where I can see merit in having something similar in Scotland. But, as I explained to the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee, there is no need to rush. The first major devolved election after the UK bill becomes law will be held in 2026. We should take time to assess the proposals and consult during this year on the best way forward. For me, that would ensure the opportunity for full consultation with stakeholders to find the best way for us here in Scotland to take our elections forward and it would allow us to have our own legislation at a later date, in time for our Scottish elections.

It is clear to me that this Parliament should consider its own legislation on these issues. We should not accept unsatisfactory and troubling reforms made at Westminster simply as a matter of administrative convenience. We should be very aware of some of the threats that the bill makes to the Electoral Commission.

I look forward to hearing members' views on the bill from across the chamber.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees not to consent to the UK Elections Bill, as it is for the Scottish Parliament to legislate on electoral law in relation to Scottish Parliament and local

government elections; notes that the Scottish Government intends to consult on a number of electoral reforms later in 2022 with a view to bringing forward legislation; expresses its concern that proposals in the UK Elections Bill in relation to reserved elections risk disenfranchising voters, and threatening the independence of the Electoral Commission; notes that the proposal to require voter identification could infringe the human rights of people without a form of identification; supports the agreement of the Scottish Parliament Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee to the Scottish Government's position that legislative consent is required in relation to digital imprints in devolved elections, and opposes the moves by the UK Government to effectively replace existing Scottish legislation on digital imprints by applying an unacceptably broad interpretation of the internet services reservation.

15:49

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): My goodness, the minister is scraping the bottom of the barrel if he is creating a constitutional issue about a digital imprint. The reality is that this is a reserved bill. It is about issues reserved to the UK Parliament.

If the minister feels as strongly about this as he clearly does, he should be addressing his issues to his members who attend the Parliament at Westminster.

The bill that we are debating is about strengthening British democracy. Like many colleagues across the chamber, I have stood in many elections, and what I have learned over the years is that, regardless of the political context in which an election is fought, listening to the thoughts and concerns of voters is at the heart of every British election. That is ultimately because democracy is about politicians being accountable to people, and the people shaping the political direction of the country.

George Adam: On Mr Kerr's key theme of listening to the electorate, is it not the case that, if there was respect for the process of devolution, the UK Government would, while I was having discussions with it and my Welsh counterpart, have respected and listened to us and possibly given some ground on some of the many issues that we have problems with?

Stephen Kerr: Very often, in our discussions, the minister reminds me of his past profession as a salesperson. I greatly respect that, because I was also a salesperson. I think that he is underselling his ability to influence UK ministers by engaging with them. I think that he is being very presumptuous in the conclusions that he has arrived at as a result of the discussions that he has had.

I return to my theme: listening to the voice of our constituents. That voice is most effectively heard through the ballot box, which is why the UK

Government has a duty to ensure that UK-wide elections continue to be free and fair, and that is what the bill does.

The area that has received the most coverage—and the most attention from the minister this afternoon—is the plan to introduce voter ID to tackle election fraud, but that is not the only purpose of the bill.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): Can the minister tell me, out of 59 million electors in the UK in 2019, how many convicted cases of voter personation there were?

Stephen Kerr: I am very grateful that the member considers me to be ministerial material, given that he addressed me as the minister. I look forward to the day when that will be a reality. In answer to his question, there were examples of voter personation in this very city at the last Scottish parliamentary election.

Such is the sacred way in which we should view the right of a citizen to exercise their vote that protecting it in this way seems a very good idea to me. I am really at a loss to understand how any democratic politician could object to the idea that we protect those badges of citizenship—namely the vote and, of course, the passport, which is another issue.

George Adam: In my speech, I mentioned Ruth Davidson and her description of the idea of voter ID. Does the member agree with the former leader of the Scottish Conservatives, who is now in the House of Lords? She said that the provisions on voter ID are trying to solve a problem that does not exist.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Kerr, I can give you some time back for the interventions.

Stephen Kerr: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

Extraordinarily—this will be news to members of the Scottish nationalist party—it is possible in the Conservative Party for us to have honest differences of view. That is something that never happens in the SNP, because it is simply not allowed. SNP members have to think what everybody is told by the hierarchy or the high command of the nationalist Government. That is not how the Conservative Party is, and I am very proud of that fact.

There are so many positive aspects of the bill, including regulations on voter ID, improvements to accessibility for disabled voters and the empowering of British citizens who live overseas. However, all the areas that are devolved will remain devolved. I really do not know why the minister is getting so excited. It is my belief that the changes that the UK Government is proposing for UK general elections will strengthen British democracy.

In 2014, in a report entitled “Electoral fraud in the UK: Final report and recommendations”, the Electoral Commission concluded:

“based on the evidence we gathered during the review ... this risk”—

it was referring to the introduction of voter ID—

“can be managed and ... it is therefore right to make this change, for the sake of the benefits it will bring in terms of improving the security of the system.”

It noted:

“A similar requirement already exists in Northern Ireland, where ID to vote has been required since 2002, as well as in many other countries.”

That includes many other European countries. I would have thought that that alone would have sold the benefits to the SNP, which will follow anything that it thinks is being done in other European countries.

The Labour Party introduced voter ID requirements for Northern Ireland and, far from that dissuading people from voting in the 2003 general election, there was a higher turnout in Northern Ireland than in any other part of the United Kingdom. On that issue, Labour is scraping the barrel as well.

I am having so much fun that I have lost track of how much time I have left.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give you another minute, Mr Kerr.

Stephen Kerr: There is lots more that I could say, but I am not going to be able to say it. In all honesty, I say to the members of the Scottish Parliament that the bill is reserved and deals with reserved matters about UK general elections. There is no power grab from the UK Government. The only power grab that we witness in the Parliament is in the antics of the SNP, which gradually draws all power to itself and dispenses it on the basis of grace and favour. That is not the way that a democracy works.

That is why I fully support the measures that are contained in the bill that is before the UK Parliament—which, I repeat, will strengthen, and increase the security of, our democracy, which is one of the oldest and most successful in the world, in one of the most successful unions between countries in the history of the world.

I move amendment S6M-03009.2, to leave out from “not to” to end and insert:

“that the relevant provisions of the UK Elections Bill, introduced in the House of Commons on 5 July 2021, relating to various election improvements and modernisations, so far as these matters fall within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament or alter the executive competence of the Scottish Ministers, should be considered by the UK Parliament.”

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Neil Bibby to speak to and move amendment S6M-03009.1— for around five minutes, Mr Bibby.

15:56

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): That was a valiant effort from Stephen Kerr.

The word “disgrace” is often overused in politics, but there is no other word to describe the bill and the motivations behind it. I am afraid that it represents a Trumpian attempt to rig democracy in favour of the Conservative Party, which is desperately trying to cling on to power.

Stephen Kerr has said that the bill will strengthen our democracy, but it is an attack on fundamental democratic freedoms that is aimed at stifling opposition and deterring participation in the democratic process. Tory MSPs would not defend the indefensible in relation to Boris Johnson’s parties at Downing Street; Mr Kerr should not be defending the indefensible now.

Stephen Kerr: I have been very public about my views on the first subject that Neil Bibby mentioned. I have broadcast them to pretty much the entire United Kingdom.

What is “Trumpian” about facilitating things so that all disabled people have a right to vote according to their needs? *[Interruption.]* What is Trumpian about reducing undue influence and political finance and notional expenditure in this country? What is Trumpian about disqualifying people who intimidate candidates—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That is enough, Mr Kerr.

Neil Bibby: It is Trumpian to suggest that there is wide-scale voter ID fraud in this country, when there is not. I asked Mr Kerr how many convictions there were for voter personation in the 2019 general election. The answer is one—out of 59 million electors. It is Trumpian to suggest that there is wide-scale voter fraud, when that was the number of convictions in 2019.

Presiding Officer, you are literally more likely to get struck by lightning three times than to be convicted for voter fraud in this country.

Rachael Hamilton: Will the member give way?

Neil Bibby: No. I think that we have had enough.

The bill is not about tackling voter fraud but about voter suppression. Voter fraud is a red herring—it is a non-problem.

Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP): I will add to Mr Bibby’s assertion. According to David Davis, 88 allegations of in-person voter fraud were made between 2015 and

2019, out of 153 million votes. That includes three separate general elections. I do not think that there is a problem of voter ID fraud.

Neil Bibby: I completely agree. The bill is about voter suppression, not tackling voter fraud.

For millions of people across the UK, voting is about to become a lot more difficult. About one quarter of voters have neither a passport nor a driving licence—in many cases, because they simply cannot afford one. They will either have to spend money that they do not have on applying for one, or know to apply for a voter ID card in advance.

Early trials in some areas led to hundreds of voters being turned away from polling stations. That should tell us to stop because, as the campaign group Hands Off Our Vote has said, when those moves are rolled out, millions of people risk being locked out of our democracy.

It cannot be just a coincidence that those who are most likely to fall foul of the new laws are, overwhelmingly, groups that are unlikely to vote Conservative. Cynically and brazenly, the bill will hit the young, people on low incomes and those from the most marginalised communities. The Electoral Reform Society has said that the plans could lead to

“disenfranchisement on a massive scale.”

Stephen Kerr talked about the impact on people with disabilities. The Royal National Institute of Blind People has told the Scottish Parliament that photo ID requirements would

“disproportionately and negatively affect blind and partially sighted people”.

We should be encouraging people to vote and to engage in democracy and public life.

Rachael Hamilton: I am confused about your position. Was not it your Government that introduced voter ID in Northern Ireland? Are you talking down Northern Ireland and the Northern Irish voters?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Speak through the chair, please, Ms Hamilton.

Neil Bibby: The context in Northern Ireland was completely different. That was part of the peace process in 2002.

The Conservatives normally talk about wasting taxpayers’ money, but people have rightly pointed out that voter ID measures are a complete waste of taxpayers’ money. A Cabinet Office assessment reveals that it will cost £120 million over 10 years. At the same time as the UK Government cannot find the money for a pay rise for nurses, or to fund services to tackle actual crime, it wants to spend £120 million on an unnecessary and undesirable

voter ID scheme. The priority should be to spend money on public services.

The bill threatens the integrity of our democracy by allowing foreign political donations to flood our political system. The Conservatives are opening the back door to big-money donations from abroad, with overseas donors now being legally able to bankroll campaigns from offshore tax havens.

The bill will also, astonishingly, politicise the Electoral Commission, which is our independent democratic watchdog. That is an unprecedented move. The bill makes provisions for a power to

“designate a Strategy and Policy Statement”

for the Electoral Commission that will be drafted by the Government. The Electoral Commission is an independent overseer of our democracy; it is not for partisan ministers to direct its priorities; we have heard what the commission has told Parliament.

The bill is an attack on free and fair campaigning. Not only will it deter people from voting, it will, as the Labour amendment notes,

“undermine the ability of civil society organisations, charities and trade unions to engage and campaign in Scotland’s and the UK’s democracy”.

It infringes on the rights of working people to organise politically, and it represents a deliberate attempt to silence the trade unions that have a historical relationship with the Labour Party.

Remarkably, the bill gives the Minister for the Cabinet Office the power to amend or remove the types of organisations that are allowed to campaign in elections across the UK. That is completely at odds with having a level playing field and with having free and fair elections.

Those issues are just the tip of the iceberg. The bill is shameful and shameless and is straight out of the United States Republican Party playbook. That is an apt comparison, because surely that country, above all others, has in recent years taught us most about the dangers of complacency in relation to the fundamentals of democracy.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to conclude, Mr Bibby.

Neil Bibby: For people who might be tempted to say that we opponents of the bill are exaggerating or being hysterical, and that democracy in this country is safe and secure, I invite them to look across the Atlantic Ocean to see what happens when a political party starts to undermine the rules of the game and to abuse its power in order to try to rig democracy.

I move amendment S6M-03009.1, to insert at end:

“; believes that the Bill will undermine the ability of civil society organisations, charities and trade unions to engage and campaign in Scotland’s and the UK’s democracy, and regards the Bill as a costly and dangerous attempt by the UK Conservative administration to manipulate democracy in its favour.”

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am afraid that what time we had available has been exhausted, so interventions will need to be accommodated in speeches.

16:03

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): I rise to support the Government motion and the Labour amendment, and to oppose the UK Government’s Elections Bill, and I will tell you for why, Presiding Officer.

Mary Wollstonecraft, one of the most influential political thinkers that our islands have produced, famously argued for universal suffrage because of the simple fact that it gives us power over ourselves. Democracy gives each and every one of us power over our lives, our communities and our country. For that reason, it must be protected at all costs. That is why Liberal Democrats across the United Kingdom are horrified by the implications of the Elections Bill for our country.

At the last general election, more than 2.5 million Scots turned out to vote. They did so to send politicians to represent their interests in a Parliament that houses the representatives and ideas of our four nations. That practice is being put in great jeopardy by the bill.

The particularly startling measure that I will focus on first is voter identification. It is being introduced despite, as we have heard several times, there being manifestly low levels of voter fraud: there were only six cases at the last general election.

A driving licence costs £34 to obtain, a passport will set you back £75 and people will come up against additional accessibility barriers. International research has shown that photo ID requirements disadvantage marginalised groups. Graham Simpson today asked a topical question about the difficulties that people have had in obtaining bus passes due to photo ID requirements. Those are precisely the groups that, historically, have been continually marginalised and pushed away from the democratic process. It could cost up to £18 million to place further exclusions on our democratic system.

We have heard a lot about Republican politics in America, and rightly so. The inspirational Stacey Abrams said of Republican politics:

“Voter suppression works its might by first tripping and causing to stumble the unwanted voter, then by convincing

those who see the obstacle course to forfeit the race without even starting to run.”

We have to call the approach what it is: it is nothing less than voter suppression.

At the heart of Liberal ideology is the belief in unfettered free speech and democracy. That is why my colleagues in Westminster have been tirelessly fighting to expand the reach of democracy—not to restrict it, as the bill will do. They have voted against the bill at every turn.

Alongside that, Liberals in Westminster have fought campaigns to broaden the scope of proportional representation, to defend the Electoral Commission and to preserve the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011.

The main focus of the debate is, quite rightly, the Orwellian nature of the bill. However, we should also look at the inner workings of our democracy in Scotland. After all, no institution is perfect. The Scottish Liberal Democrats have for a while noted with concern that there is no process at Holyrood for the recall of an elected representative when that is appropriate. I take a moment to reiterate our call for the introduction of a recall system here. Moreover, my party has campaigned for a new contempt of Parliament rule, to ensure that Holyrood has the final say in the business of this Parliament.

Democracy, once it has been introduced in a country, does not become a permanent feature; it is an active process that requires continual growth, enfranchisement and protection. That is why Scottish Liberal Democrats stress the need to strengthen the links between local government and Holyrood, so that democratically elected councils can properly implement the decisions that their local communities elect them to take.

Democracy should never be taken for granted. People around the world, particularly women and members of marginalised groups, have fought and died for it, and continue to do so. As the bill makes blisteringly clear, we still have a fight for our democracy on our hands. Although the bill might not have a direct impact on this Parliament and this building, it will directly impact on our constituents and the votes that they cast in the next general election.

The UK Elections Bill represents an existential threat to our democratic system. We need to offer solidarity to, and to work hard with, our neighbours across the United Kingdom to ensure that our democratic institutions, here and in the rest of the UK, remain uninhibited and far reaching. That is the cornerstone of our society.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): Before we move to the open debate, I remind all members who want to speak in the

debate to check that they have pressed their request-to-speak buttons.

Bob Doris joins us remotely.

16:07

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): Let me start where there is agreement. Various aspects of devolved competence on elections might need revision, including clarification in law of what constitutes undue influence on voters, notional expenditure in relation to the application of the rules on campaign expenditure at devolved elections, regulation of expenditure for political purposes and disqualification of offenders from holding elected office. The Scottish Government and the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee, of which I am deputy convener, agree on that.

The UK Government sought consent to address those matters within a Westminster bill that is, in other areas, highly controversial and should be rejected.

The majority position of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee is that reforms should be agreed and implemented by Scotland's Parliament, and consulted on by the Scottish Government, with a view to introducing Scottish legislation that takes account of that consultation. The committee agrees that the Scottish Government should not recommend legislative consent.

A dark shadow looms over the UK Elections Bill. That shadow is the intention to bring in photographic voter ID for voters in UK elections. I acknowledge that, under the current constitutional arrangements, that is wholly a matter for the UK Government. However, the ramifications for voters in Scottish elections might be significant and cannot be ignored by Scotland's Parliament.

A policy to bring in voter ID suggests that electoral fraud is widespread in UK elections. However, research has shown that only 0.7 per cent of poll workers were concerned that there might have been electoral fraud at their polling stations—indeed, the issue was often confusion rather than actual fraud.

The case for reform has not been made and the result of voter ID pilots leads me to believe that a consequence—intentional or otherwise—of the approach would be voter suppression. Dr Alistair Clark, who is a reader in politics at Newcastle University, identified evidence from the pilots that showed that, in some areas, more than 30 per cent of voters who went to vote but were turned away did not return with their ID: they did not come back. In the pilots, 52.4 per cent of poll

workers reported turning voters away because they did not have appropriate identification. More than 23 per cent of poll workers encountered people who came to the polling station but decided simply not to vote because they did not want to comply with voter ID verification requirements.

Voter ID for UK elections will be a barrier to groups that already experience barriers to voting and are least likely to vote in the first place. I will mention just four such groups: many disabled people, people from black and minority ethnic groups, younger voters and voters from our most deprived communities. The introduction of voter ID will be wholly counterproductive to our efforts to encourage people who do not vote to do so, and to encourage those who are not even registered to vote—many of whom are our most excluded citizens—to take the first step in engaging with the democratic process.

There should be no doubt that the bill will have an impact on devolved elections. It will cause unwelcome confusion and will alienate many voters. Many voters might be deterred from registering to vote and from casting their vote in devolved elections. The UK Government's voter ID reforms have a whiff of voter disenfranchisement—deliberate or otherwise—about them. Our Parliament should have no association with a bill that is designed to deliver such disenfranchisement, so I support the Scottish Government's rejection of the bill.

16:11

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Contrary to a lot of the nonsense that we have heard in the chamber over the past half an hour, this debate is about a fairly modest piece of Westminster legislation—the Elections Bill—which is being utilised by the SNP to, once again, make a grievance out of everything that happens in the House of Commons.

The bill proposes a number of sensible improvements and modifications to the law around elections. It is curious that the Scottish Government, in refusing to give legislative consent, is objecting to changes relating to digital imprints. All that the bill does is propose a new UK-wide approach. I really struggle to see why the Scottish Government thinks that the whole bill should be defeated on the basis that there should be a distinct Scottish approach on digital imprints, given that we fight elections on a UK basis.

The issue of digital imprints is really just a fig leaf for the Scottish Government's objection to other issues that are properly reserved to Westminster. For example, the bill will change the law for overseas voters by removing the arbitrary 15-year limit on voting rights. It will allow

expatriate British citizens who live elsewhere to vote in British parliamentary elections as long as they retain their citizenship. All that that does is bring Britain into line with other countries including France, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, South Africa, India and the United States. Indeed, out of the 115 countries in the world that allow overseas voting, two thirds allow all their citizens who live overseas to vote. All that the bill does is bring Great Britain into line with mainstream democratic practice.

As we have heard, it is fair to say that the most contentious part of the bill is the need for identification to be produced at polling stations. One of the great positives of living in the United Kingdom is that, apart from in wartime, we have never had a requirement for citizens to prove their identity, so we can all walk down the street knowing that we do not have to carry identification to prove who we are. We cannot be stopped by agents of the state and asked to prove our identity. I think that, as a country, we are unique in Europe in allowing that freedom, which should rightly be cherished.

However, there are a range of transactions in which we, as citizens, are asked to prove our identity. It has always struck me as anomalous that we can exercise our right to vote for our political representatives and to elect a Government—which is one of the most important responsibilities and privileges that we have as citizens—without being asked to prove our identity at all. Currently, any person can turn up at a polling station, claim to be a particular individual and be handed a ballot paper, which they can then complete without any checks whatsoever as to their identity.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: This is a very pleasant fiction that Murdo Fraser is casting about our democracy, but is he not aware that, if someone does not have their polling card, they will be required to produce ID at a polling station and that there are means of identifying who is voting and who is not?

Murdo Fraser: That is absolute nonsense. I have attended many polling stations over the years, with and without polling cards, and not once have I been asked to produce ID. Indeed, I have seen many other people simply turn up, give their name and address and be handed a voting slip. The risk to the person who might intend to vote fraudulently is very small, because it involves only the possibility that the polling clerk might personally know the person whose name is given and realise that the person in front of them is not entitled to receive their ballot paper. Therefore, asking people to prove their identity at polling stations seems an entirely sensible and reasonable provision to help to avoid fraud.

Earlier, Neil Bibby raised the issue of the scale of fraud in voting. The problem is that we have no idea what the scale of fraud is, and it is almost impossible to calculate what the scale of fraud might be. It is highly unlikely that an individual who has not voted in an election will take the time to check the marked register afterwards to see whether a vote has been cast in their name, and an individual or any political group might quite easily find out who on the voting register might be away or indisposed at the time of an election, or who might never vote, and try to fraudulently exercise those individuals' votes in an attempt to influence the outcome of an election.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Could you bring your remarks to a close, please?

Murdo Fraser: When voter ID requirements were introduced in Northern Ireland, in 2013, there was no negative impact on the turnout for elections there.

There is nothing at all wrong with this bill. We are simply witnessing yet another grievance from the SNP Government.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind members that we do not have any time in hand. Therefore, if members accept interventions, which is entirely up to them, they must accommodate that time in their own speeches.

16:16

Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): When we think of the cornerstones of democracy, a few things come to mind. In the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the concept is projected in the statement:

“The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government”

In a free and fair society, it is the will of the people that prevails, and it is the will of the people that the UK Elections Bill seeks to undermine.

In September 2021, a report that was published by the UK Parliament's Joint Committee on Human Rights raised concerns about the introduction of voter ID. The committee stated:

“The Government must explain why they have concluded that a voter ID requirement at polling stations is necessary and proportionate given (i) the low number of reported cases of fraud at polling stations, (ii) the even lower number of convictions and cautions; (iii) the potential for the requirement to discriminate against certain groups; and (iv) the lack of any clear measures to combat potential discrimination faced by those groups, including disabled people and older people.”

I, too, am eagerly awaiting that explanation, and I am yet to hear a convincing argument that the proposals are, in fact, necessary and proportionate.

In a small number of pilots that were carried out at local elections in 2018 and 2019, more than 1,000 people were turned away for not having the right ID and subsequently did not come back.

Rachael Hamilton: Will the member take an intervention?

Kaukab Stewart: I am afraid that I do not have time. I am going to plough through.

It does not take much to imagine how those numbers would soar if we were to scale up that approach in a local election. In fact, the Electoral Reform Society, citing the UK Government's own statistics, says that 38 per cent of Asian voters, 31 per cent of people with mixed ethnicity and 48 per cent of black citizens do not currently hold any form of photo ID. Research that was carried out by the Cabinet Office found that it was also more common for respondents with disabilities to say that a requirement for photo ID would make them less likely to vote.

The information that I have given should be enough on its own to ensure that any person who is even remotely interested in preserving democracy and democratic integrity should denounce this bill for what it is: a tool of voter suppression that is guaranteed to affect the most marginalised communities in our society and, perhaps, as has been mentioned by my colleagues, the most bizarre case yet of Trumpian mimicry by the Conservatives.

I share the concerns that have been expressed by my friend in the Welsh Senedd, Rhys ab Owen. We have issued a joint statement setting out those concerns, and we would like to thank the #HandsOffOurVote campaign for its support in this area.

We have seen examples of measures to increase electoral participation such as extending the vote to 16 and 17-year-olds as well as to foreign nationals. Scotland has also introduced a fairer electoral system for local elections via the adoption of the single transferable vote. However, the Elections Bill signifies that the Tories would prefer to move in the opposite direction and force increased use of the already problematic first-past-the-post system, threaten the independence of the Electoral Commission and disenfranchise even more voters along the way.

In conclusion, one thing is clear in all of this: Westminster is not working for anyone right now. Amidst the shambolic display of disdain for the electorate that is currently being evidenced, the UK Government's insistence on pursuing an authoritarian and hostile agenda poses the greatest risk of all to our most basic freedoms. As the human rights activist Loung Ung declared:

"Voting is not only our right—it is our power."

We cannot let that power slip through our fingers.

16:21

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): Today's debate is crucial in showing that the Parliament does not support the UK Government's proposed changes to make elections less accessible and, quite simply, less fair. I hope that, today, the parties in this Parliament will—with one notable exception—unite and agree with the views that have already been supported by parliamentarians in the Welsh Parliament, who debated the issue last week. With the exception of the Welsh Tories, the parties in Wales united to condemn the UK Elections Bill and make it clear that no legitimate voter should be turned away from the ballot box. I hope that that view is supported by everybody across the chamber—apart from, sadly, the Scottish Tories, who continue to take their orders from the Johnson Government.

There is a deep hypocrisy in the Scottish Tory party today. It is supporting backward moves to introduce voter ID, and the real aim of that is to rig elections.

The UK Government's bill is nothing short of a shameful attempt to undermine democracy and further alienate those who are most difficult to reach to engage in our country's politics. Surely anyone who believes in the basic principles of democracy could not support moves that will make it more difficult for people to vote. It is a sad state of affairs that highlights how low politics has sunk in this country that we are having to debate the question of moves that equate to voter suppression.

I find it shocking that the Tories have come here today and have basically told the Scottish Parliament that it should simply listen to what it is told by the UK Parliament. It is clear that the Tory party has no respect for the people of Scotland or the views of its elected Parliament. Perhaps that is why the Tories are also bringing forward the voter ID rules—they simply do not trust democracy.

Murdo Fraser rose—

Alex Rowley: I am sorry—I have four minutes.

That said, perhaps the Tories should listen to the view of one of their colleagues from the UK Parliament. David Davis MP said that voter ID is

"an illiberal solution in pursuit of a non-existent problem"

and

"yet another unnecessary ID card approach from the government".

I agree with David Davis on that—and there is more. Dominic Grieve, the former Conservative Attorney General, has said:

“these new rules threaten to create a two tier electorate and discourage participation by the least advantaged.”

The Tories might also want to listen to the view of the Electoral Reform Society, which has said that the UK Government’s plans to spend millions of pounds on banning people who do not have ID from voting are nothing more than an “expensive distraction”.

Data from the Electoral Commission demonstrates that, in 2019, only one individual was convicted for using someone else’s vote at a polling station. On top of that, the Equality and Human Rights Commission has previously warned that voter ID requirements will have a disproportionate impact on older people, people with disabilities and those from ethnic minority communities.

I fully believe that all elections should be open and accessible and that measures should not be in place to disenfranchise groups of voters. In this country, we have a long-standing history of democracy. I will not support moves by the Tories to undermine our democracy for their own political gain, and I warn them that the people of Scotland will not support such moves when they realise what is intended.

16:25

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): I am delighted to speak in the debate. I was fortunate to be a member of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee when it considered the bill in detail.

The UK Elections Bill is first and foremost an attack on democracy by the UK Government—the UK Tory Government whose own Scottish party wants to change its own Prime Minister because it does not think that he has the moral authority to lead the UK. Belief in our democratic processes is of key importance to the governance of a healthy democracy.

In my short speech, I will focus on what I see as the main issue. There is no need for legislation on voter ID. Surely the need for any legislation should be evidence based, so let us look at that. Cases of voter fraud are almost non-existent, with just one conviction—that is one—and one caution being dealt out for personation offences at elections that were held in 2019.

Is the bill a tactic by Tories to secure their vote while shutting out citizens—particularly marginalised groups—from contributing to our democracy? Age UK has said that 500,000 older citizens would not vote if the scheme was introduced, and similar fears of disenfranchisement have been expressed by black, Asian and minority ethnic groups and disability groups.

It is estimated that between 2 and 4 per cent of the UK population do not have ID that would be suitable for the voting requirements under the bill, which represents 2.1 million people. Black and ethnic minority voters will be hugely affected by the plans; 48 per cent of black people in the UK do not hold a form of photo ID.

The bill is a serious threat to our efforts to build an open, inclusive and diverse democracy. At its heart, our democracy should make the voting process as easy as possible, but voter ID fundamentally makes the process harder.

In evidence sessions, the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee heard from various groups about accessibility issues. Numerous disability advocacy groups spoke strongly against the principle of voter ID and talked about how it would impact on disabled voters, who already find the process difficult. Other evidence was about the need to focus on how we reach areas that have a high level of deprivation.

We need to undertake and support initiatives that encourage people to vote. That is not just a personal view of mine. On 13 December last year, the UK Parliament’s Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee said:

“The introduction of the voter ID requirement will remove an element of the trust inherent in the current system between state and individual, and make it more difficult to vote. We are concerned that the evidence to support the voter ID requirement simply is not good enough.”

This Parliament’s Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee noted:

“There was significant concern among Committee members that there could be up to 150,000-200,000 voters in Scotland”

alone

“without the forms of identification that the Bill proposes would be required ... to cast a vote. The Committee is concerned that this will mainly affect those from disadvantaged backgrounds or disabled people and could act as an additional barrier to those voters.”

Proposed changes on voter ID and postal votes for reserved elections will also cause widespread confusion for Scottish voters. There is a danger that inconsistency between reserved and devolved elections on voter ID rules might impose even greater stress, confusion and cost on voters. Further confusion will be caused by the need for postal voters in UK Parliament elections to reapply every three years, whereas the requirement to reapply is only every five years in Scotland. The Scottish Government could face pressure to align the devolved voting system to match the reserved system, which would represent indirect interference in devolved elections by the UK Government.

Today, the whole Scottish Parliament—except the Tories—is against the bill. The move to voter ID is counterproductive and a barrier to a vibrant democracy and it should be resisted.

16:28

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): Elections are one of the cornerstones of our democracy. None of us would be here in this place without them. They are not the only thing that matters for this Parliament or any other Parliament, but that is not what we are here to discuss. We are talking about the UK Elections Bill, which, as others have said, is complex and controversial and is certainly not something that we can or should support.

This piece of flagship Tory legislation will introduce voter ID in general elections, grant British citizens who live overseas the right to vote and make a number of other changes to the way in which elections are run. It runs utterly counter to the direction of travel of Scottish legislation on electoral reform. Here, we are working to make the Scottish franchise as inclusive as possible and enabling as many people as possible to exercise their right to have a say in how they are governed. At Westminster, the Conservatives want to exclude more people from having a say in who runs the country in which they live.

I have serious equalities and human rights concerns about the bill. Most significantly, the voter ID requirements for UK Parliament elections will apply in Scotland. As Neil Bibby clearly stated, approved forms of photo ID currently all carry a cost. That is restrictive, not enabling. Yes, a free electoral identity card will be available on application from local electoral registration offices, but that is another hurdle to participation for many people—mostly those who are already vulnerable or marginalised and excluded from voting.

We know that, already, people who are eligible to vote are not always able to exercise their right because of current registration processes, so why put another barrier in the way? One answer to that is, perhaps, that the UK Government knows that the people who will be excluded because of those measures are unlikely to vote for the Conservatives. It is voter suppression, as we have heard.

We have also heard that electoral fraud is very low in the UK. There were only 164 cases, with one conviction, in the 2019 general election. With such low rates, it is unclear what else the driver might be.

Earlier, George Adam quoted Ruth Davidson. I will use more of that quotation. Last year, she said:

“I think it’s total bollocks and I think it’s trying to give a solution to a problem that doesn’t exist”.

I extend my solidarity to polling station staff who will, if the measure is introduced, have to deal with checking voter ID documents. That is not a job that many of us would relish, I am sure.

I am of the view that people who live here should have a say about how they are governed, which is in line with our commitment to a residence-based franchise, rather than a citizenship-based franchise. Why should people who have chosen to leave the UK and make their lives elsewhere continue to have more say in what happens here than those who live and work in the country?

Members have highlighted several other concerns with the bill, such as postal vote changes and digital imprint changes, so my last point relates to the independence of the Electoral Commission. To quote the commission’s own words on the bill:

“The existence of an independent regulator is fundamental to maintaining confidence in our electoral system. This is particularly important when the laws that govern elections are made by a small subset of the parties that stand in elections. The Commission’s independence must be clear for voters and campaigners to see. As currently drafted, the provisions in Part 3 are not consistent with the Electoral Commission operating as an independent regulator.”

We cannot endorse the bill. We must stand firm in the face of a UK Government that is determined to ignore us, our Parliament and our wishes. We must withhold legislative consent.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Rachael Hamilton, to be followed by Stephanie Callaghan. Given the fact that the debate has been truncated, Stephanie Callaghan will be the last speaker in the open debate.

16:33

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): Without a doubt, we need to build more confidence among the electorate that elections are carried out with the highest levels of transparency and are safeguarded against voter fraud. I disagree with Labour’s point. I disagree with Neil Bibby on the point that there was only one incident of voter fraud. I say to him that that is one incident too many.

The Elections Bill puts voters at the heart—*[Interruption.]* I am not sure why members find that funny. It is about safeguarding against electoral fraud.

The Elections Bill puts voters at the heart of Britain’s democracy by supporting them to make free and informed choices at elections. We all know that. I cannot see why the SNP would object

to bringing the UK into line with other countries that do the same. An important part of that is ensuring that electoral services—be they registering to vote, applying for an absent vote or applying for a voter card—are as convenient and accessible as possible.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: Rachael Hamilton talks about stamping out electoral fraud. How many cases of electoral fraud should we stamp out by disenfranchising many dozens more people who will be inhibited, deterred or stopped from registering to vote because of some of the barriers to access that her party intends to introduce?

Rachael Hamilton: What alternative methods does Alex Cole-Hamilton suggest to stamp out voter fraud in, for example, Edinburgh North and Leith? To address his point, the UK Government is committed to increasing participation in democracy and empowering all those who are eligible to vote to do so in a secure, efficient and effective way.

In the short time that I have today, I will briefly touch on voter identification and fraud prevention. On voter ID, back in 2016, Sir Eric Pickles undertook an independent review of electoral fraud. His final report includes recommendations about how the Government can prevent such crimes in the UK, one of which was the introduction of photo ID. If we look at the statistics, we see that around 98 per cent of people who are eligible to vote hold some form of photo ID, which is a stat that the SNP and Labour cannot deny.

As we all know, voters in Northern Ireland already provide an approved piece of photo ID before receiving a ballot paper, a measure that was first introduced by the Labour Government in 2003. The Electoral Commission has said:

“Since the introduction of photo ID in Northern Ireland there have been no reported cases of personation. Voters’ confidence that elections are well-run in Northern Ireland is consistently higher than in Great Britain, and there are virtually no allegations of electoral fraud at polling stations.”

As my colleague Stephen Kerr said, the requirement is not unusual, and many other countries across Europe already implement a similar policy. Therefore, I am surprised that the SNP is not jumping on the European Union bandwagon. The majority of EU countries require voters to produce ID at the polling station, which is a point on which the SNP must surely reflect.

With regard to the concerns of a few members in the chamber about individuals who currently do not hold a photo ID, it has been established that the bill provides that the cost of obtaining an ID will be covered, and the bill amends the Representation of the People Act 1983 to allow for that. Therefore, to prevent people without photo ID from losing their right to vote, local authorities will provide that photo ID.

We must also address the significant concern of voting fraud, with postal voting fraud remaining a greater concern to voters than polling station fraud. The Electoral Commission’s winter tracker is an annual UK-wide survey that is designed to provide an overview of public sentiment towards the process of voting and democracy in the UK. Overall, more than 90 per cent of those surveyed thought that polling stations were very or fairly safe from voter fraud. However, the equivalent figure for postal voting was just 68 per cent, and 21 per cent thought that postal voting was not safe from fraud. That is a significant point.

I am conscious of the time, Presiding Officer. Do I have extra time?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You should probably bring your remarks to a close, Ms Hamilton.

Rachael Hamilton: To conclude, the bill is about giving confidence to the electorate that fraud is being kept to a minimum. I support the amendment in my party’s name.

16:38

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): I add my thanks to my colleague George Adam for securing this important Scottish Government debate.

Despite the stark divide between my politics and those of the Conservative Party, I have always thought that we share a universal bond when it comes to upholding the fundamental right to vote. However, with the passage of the UK Elections Bill through the House of Commons, even that last bastion of consensus has been irrevocably undermined.

Across the world, throughout the modern age, people have fought, and even died, for the right to vote. As a young student in Hamilton, I door knocked on local streets to persuade people to register to vote. I am truly saddened by the attempt to reverse many years of hard-fought democratic progress. Such progress was demonstrated here in Scotland when we extended the election franchise to 16 and 17-years-olds and to refugees. The UK Elections Bill undermines Scotland’s progress of democracy by seeking to suppress votes and reduce the franchise to address a problem that, as many others have said, does not really exist.

As other members have pointed out, in 2019, there was only one conviction and one caution relating to proven voter fraud, but the bill risks disenfranchising millions of voters, including people with disabilities and those from ethnic minority backgrounds, as well as younger and older voters. It is nothing short of disgusting.

Many such points have been repeated, but they are very important, such as Age UK stating that 500,000 older citizens would not vote or the fact that up to 2.1 million people are without suitable ID. It is shameful that the digitally excluded, the vulnerable and many of those who are already living on the very edges of our society should be marginalised further. Yes, some things need attention when it comes to conducting UK elections, but one of those things should not be to exclude voters.

If the Tories were truly serious about wanting to improve our voting system, why do they not look at ways to ensure that the 9 million people who are currently missing from the electoral roll in the UK are brought into the democratic process? If they wish to protect our democracy, why do they not propose banning anonymous political party donations and investigating dark money? Why not implement the findings of the 2020 Russia report?

It is noted in the motion, and it has been mentioned many times, that the bill would give UK ministers new powers over the work of the Electoral Commission, risking the independence of the election watchdog at a time when trust in politics is at an all-time low. That is far from okay, for all the reasons that others have mentioned.

As with others, my concerns about the bill are heightened by the wider legislative agenda that the UK Government is pursuing. Its agenda is on a collision course with a whole series of democratic freedoms, from the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill and the Nationality and Borders Bill to proposed reforms of the Human Rights Act 1998. It seems as though the Tories are attempting a full frontal assault on our democracy while we are distracted by the hypocrisy and lies that are coming from all the partying in Downing Street. However, that is not going unnoticed.

The UK Elections Bill is horrific. It is a serious attack on our democratic traditions. I fully support the Scottish Government's motion and the Labour amendment. It saddens me that any member in this chamber should wish the Scottish Parliament to consent to such flawed legislation. The constituents we represent, particularly those who are directly impacted by the discredited Elections Bill, are counting on us to protect their voting rights and they are counting on us to resist this retrograde legislation. We in this chamber should not let them down.

16:42

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): It is a pleasure to close for Labour and, with my other hat on, as the convener of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee. It is a great pleasure to follow Stephanie

Callaghan's speech. I reiterate her point about the risk of marginalising further those who exist at the edge of our society—the very people who need this place, the very people who need Westminster and the very people who are at risk of being excluded.

I welcome the Scottish Government's motion, particularly the confirmation that a consultation on electoral reforms will start at the end of this year, which I hope will see legislation come before this place towards the end of the parliamentary session.

I am grateful to my committee for its report on the LCM for the Elections Bill. Given the nature of this debate, I urge everyone within and outwith the Parliament to read the report, because it deals in detail with a complex piece of legislation that, at times, strays across the devolved authorities but also deals with reserved matters.

I would like to deal with two aspects of that. The first relates to the introduction of a strategy and policy statement and the Electoral Commission's duty in that regard. Representatives of the commission who came before the committee talked about the risk that that poses not only to the genuine independence of the commission, but—this is perhaps more frightening—to the view that those outwith might hold as to the independence of the commission. It is vital that the organisation that monitors and oversees elections sits outwith the political parties and the Executive, in order to reassure people who might be disappointed with an election result that it was fair.

One aspect of the strategy and policy statement relates to the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission and, indeed, on the make-up of that Westminster committee. This is a tiny, nerdy point, but I find the fact that there is an attempt to alter the make-up of that committee extremely concerning. The change is hidden in the bill, and to a number of people who have looked at it, including those from whom the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee heard evidence, it is of great concern.

The other aspect relates to the consultative nature of bodies in Scotland. The Scottish Elections (Reform) Act 2020

“transferred financial responsibility from Scottish Ministers to the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body.”

There is a question about how relevantly and frequently the SPCB is consulted, and my personal view is that it is important that the SPCB has a role in that, because of its overriding role with regard to the financial aspects of Scottish elections.

The second point that I want to raise, in the short time that I have, relates to digital imprints—

the phrases that are stamped on electronic advertising, comments and quotes to point out where they originate from. The bill proposes that the imprint should exist at all times, rather than just during election periods. That is dealt with in the committee's report, which I urge people to read, but there is a serious question about why that matter is included in the bill. The power to take something down from the internet is reserved to the Westminster Parliament, but the power to deal with imprints is devolved. There is, indeed, Scottish legislation to deal with imprints in election periods. It would be beneficial for people at Westminster to look with more clarity at what is, and is not, devolved.

Finally, as we have heard from the deputy convener, the committee was in agreement with the proposal. However, some members of the committee dissented from the agreement. That information is contained in the report, and I urge people to read it. On the substance of what we have heard today, the bill is an appalling piece of legislation and it needs to be looked at again.

16:46

Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands)

(Con): At the heart of the debate is the matter of our electoral democracy and of ensuring that we not only maintain its integrity but look at ways in which we can continually enhance it. That is important—the bill is about making improvements. In my view, the bill does that in a number of ways, some of which have already been outlined.

The bill puts voters at the heart of our democracy by supporting them to make free and informed choices at elections. That will strengthen the delivery of UK Parliament general elections. It is disappointing, but not surprising, that the SNP has decided to oppose the bill and refuse consent. We are used to its manufacturing artificial rows with the UK Government and its opposing legislative consent, but some of the arguments that have been made against the bill are tenuous, to say the least. I hope to address some of them.

I believe that the provisions to introduce voter identification will reduce voter fraud. As many members have said, occurrences of voter fraud are rare, but they are hard to detect, they do exist and they are dangerous. A low conviction rate does not indicate the absence of a problem. That statement should not be controversial in this Parliament. We have seen instances of voter fraud—for example, in the recent Scottish parliamentary election in the Edinburgh North and Leith constituency. That is in large part due to the fact that the existing test of giving your name and address at the polling station is inadequate and antiquated.

Far from seeking to disenfranchise voters, as some people have argued, the changes that the bill will bring in are commonplace in many countries around the world. We have heard many expressions today, including “Trumpian”, “Orwellian”, “voter suppression”, “rigging elections”, “power grab” and “attack on democracy”. Frankly, those expressions demean the members who used them. The bill removes restrictions on people's ability to act as a companion to a disabled voter at a polling station; it requires local returning officers to provide support for a wider range of needs; and, as Murdo Fraser said, it brings in rules about overseas voting, bringing the UK into line with international practice. To describe it as disenfranchisement is absurd.

On voter ID, according to IFF Research, around 98 per cent of the adult population have access to an eligible form of ID. Among young people, who were mentioned by Neil Bibby, 99 per cent of 18 to 29-year-olds have access to ID. And the bill will require local authorities to provide photo ID free of charge. It states:

“No charge may be made for the issue of an electoral identity document.”

Everyone who is able to vote will, of course, still be able to vote under the provisions of the bill.

Neil Bibby: In 2018 and 2019, the Government undertook pilot studies on the issue, which showed thousands of voters getting turned away, so Donald Cameron's assertion does not stand up to scrutiny.

Donald Cameron: I do not accept that at all. To describe this as disenfranchisement is ridiculous. Those are the facts, and Neil Bibby should not be content to scaremonger through what he has suggested.

There is no little irony in the position of members on the SNP benches. They are so enthusiastic about vaccination passports, in which we show not just our ID but personal medical information, yet so unenthusiastic about voter ID. Perhaps they should reflect on that.

There are other measures in the bill that deserve mention. There are new measures to crack down on intimidation tactics that are used against campaigners and candidates at election time. I am sure that all members in the chamber and people elsewhere will have heard stories about or have had experience of that. That impacts everyone—activists of all political stripes. It is right that action is taken not only to deter people who might carry out acts of intimidation but to ensure that they are unable to be part of our important democratic process.

I want to address the concern about the independence of the Electoral Commission that was raised in Martin Whitfield's speech, which was a rare glimmer of light in a rather depressing debate. We believe that the Electoral Commission plays an important and impartial role in overseeing our democratic process, and the bill seeks to increase the commission's accountability to Parliament—as is already the case for other Government bodies—rather than to decrease it.

Stephanie Callaghan: Will Donald Cameron give way?

Donald Cameron: I do not have time. I have three seconds left.

The strategy and policy statement will be produced in consultation with not only the commission but the devolved Administrations, and it will be approved by the Parliament.

This bill will enhance our democracy and ensure that elections are more robust. On voter ID, it will bring us into line with many other countries that already require people to present ID in order to reduce fraud. On improving the accountability of the commission, the bill will ensure that it receives a similar level of scrutiny to that of other public bodies. It seeks to deter people who wish to attack our democracy, and it is a proportionate attempt to address various issues that have been left unchanged for far too long.

16:52

George Adam: Where to start, Presiding Officer, with everything that we have heard in the chamber today?

I have known Donald Cameron since he entered Parliament in 2016. He is a decent person, but he has to understand that it is not only SNP members and the Scottish Government who are saying these things; it is the whole chamber, across the parties—everyone bar the Conservatives. If someone was to take a cold, hard look at the issue, they would have to ask why, in the times in which we live, every single political party bar the Conservatives was agreed on the issue. It is logical to say that the bill is an attack on devolution and on what we have all stood for over all these years.

Let us all remember that it is for the Scottish Parliament to decide how we address devolved elections. If something comes out from our consultation on Scottish Parliament elections, which we will undertake later on this year, we will look at that for future election bills.

Stephen Kerr: Will the minister give way?

George Adam: I have a few points to make before I go any further.

The issue of voter ID has—rightly—taken up the vast bulk of the debate, because the bill will result in a type of voter suppression, as Neil Bibby said. Someone who had voted at the same polling station for 30 years would turn up there for Scottish Parliament and local elections to find a completely different process from that of a Westminster election held at the same polling station. Let us not forget that the UK Government has still not told us when the UK election would be—it might be close in time to one of ours.

On voter ID, let us talk about intimidation and suppression.

Neil Bibby: There would have been an issue on 6 May 2021, when there was an Airdrie and Shotts Westminster parliamentary by-election on the same day as the Scottish Parliament election. Voters would have needed ID for one election but not for the other.

George Adam: Mr Bibby illustrates my point. That situation would cause total confusion for the electorate and even more difficulty for the administrators who would have to deal with it.

The UK Government is bringing in the might of the United Kingdom civil service to create a voter ID system in response to three people being tried in 2019, of whom only one was convicted—three were charged, and one was convicted. That seems a lot of bother to go to for one individual. That individual might be sitting at home, watching this debate and saying, “Job done! I have managed to spend millions of pounds of UK money.”

Although the bill is limited to UK elections, as I said, it risks causing chaos in devolved by-elections.

Let me get some myth busters across. On engagement with UK ministers, I acknowledge that UK Government ministers have kept us informed during the development of the bill, but setting out what they intend to do without any room for debate is not collaboration in any shape or form. The UK Government has a take-it-or-leave-it approach. The barely stated message is that the devolved Parliaments should adopt the changes to avoid voter confusion and administrative challenges. That is not what I believe negotiation to be.

On working across the UK, I am not opposed to developing common election approaches across the UK, where that will bring benefits for voters and the administrators. There was constructive work between the UK, Welsh and Scottish Governments as part of preparations to hold elections safely last year.

I have had several helpful discussions with the Welsh minister responsible for elections policy. We agree on the bill. It is the UK Government that

is creating difference and divergence and that is unilaterally making radical changes to electoral law and pressuring all of us to follow suit.

Stephen Kerr: Will the minister accept an intervention on that point?

George Adam: Yes. I was just about to talk about Mr Kerr.

Stephen Kerr: What is radical about a digital imprint? The minister has lost all sense of proportion by working himself up into a rage about a digital imprint.

George Adam: With his hyperbole and overstated points, Mr Kerr once again behaves as if he is at Westminster. We take a more common, normal approach in the Scottish Parliament.

Stephen Kerr told us in his opening speech to listen to the electorate. He also said that I was understating my ability to sell our position to the UK Government. The problem for Mr Kerr is that no one is listening to him, and they will not change their minds. He still has not said whether he agrees with Ruth Davidson, who said that this is an attempt to solve a problem that is not actually there.

Mr Bibby made a passionate speech—as we are competitors in Paisley, it is not often that either of us has said that about the other. He said that voter ID is voter suppression.

The Joint Committee on Human Rights, which has members from both houses of the UK Parliament, said:

“Elections must be both secure and accessible ... Any discrimination in the enjoyment of the right to vote would fall foul of article 14 of the European Convention on Human Rights if there was no objective and reasonable justification for the measures imposed. Introducing a voter ID requirement would be a breach of article 14 as read with article 3 of protocol 1 unless it is both necessary and proportionate.”

Even Westminster committees have severe reservations about voter ID.

As I said, the SNP and Labour take the same position on this. I have worked with my Welsh colleague Mick Antoniw MS, the Welsh Counsel General and Minister for the Constitution. In a debate in the Senedd last week that was very similar to this one, he said:

“I have previously expressed my grave concerns about provisions in the UK Government’s Elections Bill which are a shameless attempt at voter suppression. Through the requirement for voter ID, the Conservative Party is brazenly seeking to limit participation in elections and to change the law for partisan advantage.”—[*Record of Proceedings, Senedd Cymru/Welsh Parliament*, 26 January 2022]

The Conservatives have managed to unite—with the exception of themselves—not just this Parliament, but the Welsh Parliament, where it has

been said that the bill is an absolute attack on those who want to go out to vote. If the Conservative Party was being reasonable and showing common sense, it would surely say to us that it would look at the matter again.

Alex Cole-Hamilton explained much of the threat—

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I ask the minister to conclude, please.

George Adam: —that the bill represents to our democracy, given the provisions on voter ID.

This has been a good debate. It has shown that this Parliament has a voice and that it is shouting towards Westminster that we do not want anything to do with the UK Elections Bill. When it comes to changing votes for our elections, it will be this Parliament—this place—that decides.

Public Service Pensions and Judicial Offices Bill

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of a legislative consent motion. I ask Keith Brown to move motion S6M-02975, on the Public Service Pensions and Judicial Offices Bill, which is United Kingdom legislation.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the relevant provisions of the Public Service Pensions and Judicial Offices Bill, introduced in the House of Lords on 19 July 2021 relating to enabling devolved judicial offices to be added to a judicial pension scheme at the request of the Scottish Ministers, the increase in the mandatory retirement age for devolved judicial office holders in Scotland to 75 and the addition of provisions on the determination and payment of allowances, so far as these matters fall within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament or alter the executive competence of the Scottish Ministers, should be considered by the UK Parliament.—[*Keith Brown*]

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

Committee Announcement (Town Centres and Retail)

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is an announcement by the Economy and Fair Work Committee on town centres and retail. I call Claire Baker, convener of the committee, to make the announcement.

17:01

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):

As convener of the Economy and Fair Work Committee, I wish to highlight the committee's inquiry into Scotland's town centres and the changing nature of retail, which has been launched today.

Our town centres have traditionally been the heartbeat of our communities, bringing people together to live, work, shop and socialise, but changing retail trends, including the growth in e-commerce and the expansion of retail parks, combined with the impact of the pandemic and the lockdown, are all creating a difficult trading environment that is placing many traditional town centres under pressure and under threat.

Our inquiry seeks to produce recommendations to demonstrate how Scotland's town centres can thrive in the post-pandemic world and be vibrant, resilient and accessible places that meet the economic, social and environmental needs of our communities. I encourage members to share details of the inquiry with interested stakeholders, including businesses and networks in their constituencies and regions, whose input will be of great value. I encourage them to respond to the call for evidence, which will run until mid-March. We aim to produce a report with recommendations by the Parliament's summer recess.

Decision Time

17:02

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 Stephen Kerr is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Neil Bibby will fall.

The first question is, that amendment S6M-03009.2, in the name of Stephen Kerr, which seeks to amend motion S6M-03009, in the name of George Adam, on the Elections Bill, which is United Kingdom legislation, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

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

17:03

Meeting suspended.

17:08

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: I remind members again that, if the amendment in the name of Stephen Kerr is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Neil Bibby will fall.

We come to the division on amendment S6M-03009.2, in the name of Stephen Kerr. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is closed.

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)
 Dowe, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 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)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)

Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 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)
 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)
 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)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (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)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-03009.2, in the name of Stephen Kerr is: For 29, Against 90, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-03009.1, in the name of Neil Bibby, which seeks to amend motion S6M-03009, in the name of George Adam, on the Elections Bill, which is United Kingdom legislation, 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 closed.

For

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

Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 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)
 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)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (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)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)
Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
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)
Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-03009.1, in the name of Neil Bibby, is: For 90, Against 30, Abstentions 0.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-03009, in the name of George Adam, on the Elections Bill, which is United Kingdom legislation, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed? Was that a yes?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you for that confirmation. There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I was not able to vote. I would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Callaghan. 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)
Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)

Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)
Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
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)
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)
Haughy, 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)
Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (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)
Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)

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

Against

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 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)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-03009, in the name of George Adam, is: For 91, Against 29, Abstentions 0.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees not to consent to the UK Elections Bill, as it is for the Scottish Parliament to legislate on electoral law in relation to Scottish Parliament and local government elections; notes that the Scottish Government intends to consult on a number of electoral reforms later in 2022 with a view to bringing forward legislation; expresses its concern that proposals in the UK Elections Bill in relation to reserved elections risk disenfranchising voters, and threatening the independence of the Electoral Commission; notes that the proposal to require voter identification could infringe the human rights of people without a form of identification; supports the agreement of the Scottish Parliament Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee to the Scottish Government's position that legislative consent is required in relation to digital imprints in devolved elections; opposes the moves by the UK Government to effectively replace existing

Scottish legislation on digital imprints by applying an unacceptably broad interpretation of the internet services reservation; believes that the Bill will undermine the ability of civil society organisations, charities and trade unions to engage and campaign in Scotland's and the UK's democracy, and regards the Bill as a costly and dangerous attempt by the UK Conservative administration to manipulate democracy in its favour.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-02975, in the name of Keith Brown, on the Public Service Pensions and Judicial Offices Bill, which is United Kingdom legislation, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the relevant provisions of the Public Service Pensions and Judicial Offices Bill, introduced in the House of Lords on 19 July 2021 relating to enabling devolved judicial offices to be added to a judicial pension scheme at the request of the Scottish Ministers, the increase in the mandatory retirement age for devolved judicial office holders in Scotland to 75 and the addition of provisions on the determination and payment of allowances, so far as these matters fall within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament or alter the executive competence of the Scottish Ministers, should be considered by the UK Parliament.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

World Cancer Day 2022

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-02749, in the name of Jackie Baillie, on world cancer day 2022. The debate will be concluded without any question being put. I ask members who wish to participate to press their request-to-speak buttons or to put an R in the chat function.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament recognises that 4 February 2022 is World Cancer Day, a day that unites people, communities and entire countries to raise awareness and take action on cancer; recognises that the theme of World Cancer Day 2022 is "Close the Care Gap", which is about understanding and recognising inequities in cancer care around the globe; understands that one in two people will get cancer in their lifetime, but that great progress in research has seen survival rates double in the last 40 years; congratulates Cancer Research UK on the 20th anniversary of its formation, following the merger of the Imperial Cancer Research Fund and the Cancer Research Campaign; expresses admiration for the way that it considers this institution has dramatically changed outcomes for people with cancer, through what it sees as the pioneering of more effective and kinder treatments, improving diagnostic methods, providing world-class information and campaigning for change, some of which takes place in Scotland; wishes Cancer Research UK well with its future work, and notes that MSPs can show their support for World Cancer Day through the wearing of a Cancer Research UK Unity Band.

17:19

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I am delighted to bring this members' business debate to the chamber today in recognition of world cancer day 2022, which is on 4 February. I encourage colleagues to wear their Cancer Research UK unity wristbands throughout the week, especially while in the chamber, to ensure that we raise awareness of cancer as much as we can.

I want to start by thanking Cancer Research UK for suggesting the motion and by congratulating the organisation on reaching its 20th anniversary this year. Its work over that period has been truly life changing for many people, and it has been at the front line of the fight against cancer.

I also want to thank Miles Briggs, who is the co-convenor of the cross-party group on cancer, alongside me, and who does tremendous work in helping to raise awareness and campaign for improvements to services.

I would genuinely be surprised if there is anyone in this chamber who has not been affected by cancer in some way, through losing a loved one, supporting a friend or family member as they receive treatment or having treatment themselves.

The importance of raising awareness of all types of cancer, as well as ensuring that everyone knows the steps that we can take to avoid and identify it, cannot be stressed enough.

We must celebrate the fact that great progress in research has been made. Survival rates have doubled in the past 40 years, and it is now the case that one in two people will survive their cancer for at least 10 years or more. However, there is always room for improvement in the fight against cancer, and that is why the theme of this year's world cancer day is "close the care gap". It is about understanding and recognising inequality in cancer care.

Achieving equality in cancer care means confronting the many differences in care and survival rates across Scotland, and, indeed, across the United Kingdom. It will come as no surprise to any of us that the most deprived areas of our country have far worse outcomes of cancer care and far worse survival rates than are found in the most affluent areas. Indeed, research confirms that areas with more deprivation have a higher prevalence of cancer risk factors. Many people in those communities are less aware of symptoms of cancer and are less likely to participate in screening programmes, and, shamefully, they report coming across many more barriers when trying to seek help and care.

Scotland's deprivation gap for cancer sits at 32 per cent, with mortality rates for all cancers being 74 per cent higher in the most deprived areas than in the least deprived areas. Those statistics are not new, but they should shock us all into urgent and robust action. There is simply no justification for a country that is as wealthy as Scotland to continue to have such deep health inequalities.

Cancer is still the leading cause of death in Scotland, with 34,000 people being diagnosed every year. I know that organisations such as Macmillan Cancer Support, which provides valuable services in my community, are hugely concerned that the delays in diagnosis due to pauses in the screening programme during the pandemic will soon lead to a sharp rise in the number of cases and their seriousness. Indeed, there are reports of people presenting at accident and emergency departments with stage 4 cancers that have simply not been picked up before.

The people in the Scottish national health service's cancer workforce do an incredible job, but staff and services have not been given the support that they need to keep up with the growing demand. Far too many people in Scotland are waiting far too long to receive a cancer diagnosis and treatment. Let me be absolutely clear: I do not think that the fault for that lies in any way with the hard-working staff.

Only 83 per cent of patients on an urgent referral due to a suspicion of cancer started treatment within 62 days. The 95 per cent target that was set by the Scottish Government has not been met for a decade, so we need to do things much better.

Macmillan Cancer Support and others are clear that, while the pandemic has undoubtedly added to the backlog in cancer waiting times, those services were already struggling to cope long before Covid-19 hit. Therefore, the Scottish Government needs to prioritise the delivery of the action plan for cancer services and make sure that the long-awaited health and social care workforce strategy addresses the urgent issue of workforce capacity, including by increasing the number of cancer specialist nurses. Cancer Research UK has said that there is genuine concern that, if action is not taken, we could see survival rates go backwards for the very first time.

I want to briefly mention the Blood Cancer Alliance, which is a coalition of 15 blood cancer charities from across the UK. I was surprised to find out that blood cancer is the UK's third biggest cancer killer, causing more than 15,000 deaths a year, and the UK's fifth most prevalent cancer, with 40,000 new diagnoses every year. Despite that, from awareness to diagnosis to information to care and support, blood cancer patients are less likely to have their needs fully met than patients with the four most common cancers: breast, colorectal, lung and prostate.

The number of blood cancer patients who had to see their general practitioners five or more times before being referred for specialist treatment is nearly double that of patients with other cancers in Scotland. The disparity between patients' experience of blood cancer diagnosis and diagnosis of other common cancers needs to be addressed urgently in order to improve blood cancer outcomes and to provide equity of patient treatment across the whole of the cancer sector. I hope that the Scottish Government will recognise that and ensure that there is a greater focus on blood cancers in the future, alongside all the others.

Finally, I want to touch on the impact that a cancer diagnosis can have on children, young people and their families. Every year in Scotland, around 320 children and young people are diagnosed with cancer. Studies have found that young people in Scotland and their families face an average round trip of around 68 miles to access treatment. Young people in remote and rural communities in Scotland can face a journey of more than 400 miles, which is by far the longest in the UK.

Research by Young Lives vs Cancer found that the expenses associated with a cancer diagnosis,

especially in relation to travel, food and energy bills, cost families around £600 a month extra during their child's cancer treatment, and that 61 per cent of parents had accumulated some form of debt. Some 42 per cent of parents had stopped working because of their child's cancer. That is also borne out by analysis by Macmillan Cancer Support that shows that 87 per cent of people with cancer experience a negative financial impact right from the point of their diagnosis. Help is there from Macmillan. I will quote its helpline number and encourage people who are affected to phone it: 0808 808 0000.

I also very much welcome the Scottish Government's young patients family fund. I hope that it will be reviewed and that its cover will be expanded to cross-national travel and to families of young people up to the age of 24.

This world cancer day, let us resolve not to go backwards. We need an ambitious catch-up plan. We need adequately resourced services. We need enough cancer professionals to meet demand. We need to get screening programmes back on track—and yes, I include in that breast cancer screening for women over 70. Above all, we need a laser-like focus on overcoming the barriers that are caused by disadvantage in order to close the gap in cancer care and, by doing so, close the gap in outcomes.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Baillie. I advise the chamber that the debate is heavily subscribed. Therefore, I would be grateful if colleagues could stick to their four minutes, as far as possible.

17:29

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I congratulate Jackie Baillie on securing this timeous debate. Covid has dominated the health agenda for some two years, and that has had a devastating impact on cancer diagnosis and care, as well on other serious, life-threatening illnesses.

It cannot be said often enough that one in two of us will get cancer in our lifetime. I also echo the statement that when someone suffers from cancer, it affects their entire family and their colleagues. Treatments have improved, early diagnosis had improved and progress has been made on research. We have come on strides in decades, but "cancer" is still a very scary word.

It is obvious that the impact of Covid has led to the postponement of treatment, diagnosis and follow-up examinations. There will hardly be a family that has not been impacted by that fact with stress and anxiety, and by the possibility that the delay might have increased the spread of the cancer, as Jackie Baillie referred to when she

spoke of stage 4 cancers being reported at A and E. Therefore, it remains crucial that we all keep Covid at bay to allow the NHS to treat those with life-threatening illnesses.

I want to talk about inequalities in people coming forward. Early diagnosis remains an issue; there is no doubt that in deprived areas and in some cultural communities there is a hesitancy about coming forward. We must take the screening to the people. Travelling breast cancer screening, which was brought to supermarkets, office car parks and nurseries, was excellent. The bowel screening programme, which I have also used, was another excellent thing. People talk to one another about such things, and there is nothing like one-to-one encouragement.

However, the fear that we feel when we hear the word “cancer” knows no class. One of the biggest issues is delay. Delay is dangerous; it is better to find out your diagnosis, so that you can prevent cells from turning into cancer or prevent cancerous cells from spreading, than to put your head in the sand. We should remember the statistics: one in two of us will suffer from cancer. Not one of us in the chamber is invincible.

Diagnosis and treatment is one thing, but emotional and psychological support for the person who has been diagnosed and their family is crucial—as is financial support, which Jackie Baillie also referred to. Organisations such as Macmillan Cancer Support have contacts on their websites for financial support and emotional support, and the local citizens advice bureaux and the local politician can help if you cannot find the information for yourself. I commend the websites of Citizens Advice Scotland and Macmillan Cancer Support.

The possibility that you may have cancer is very scary. You start by worrying about the day-to-day things in life, such as the next food shop or taking the dog for a walk, then suddenly you are at A and E. Next, you have a barium meal, MRI scans and a meeting with someone called an oncologist—that is another scary word. Can I tell you something, though? That is better than delaying. Fear is not your friend. Do not put it off. If people take anything from this debate, I hope that it is that if they think that they might have something serious that could be cancer, they speak to someone and get it checked. That is my key message.

17:32

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): I direct members to my entry in the register of members’ interests; I am a practising NHS general practitioner.

I thank Jackie Baillie for securing today’s important debate ahead of world cancer day on 4 February. I commend her for her efforts over the years to raise awareness of cancer, cancer research and cancer prevention. As she can see, I am wearing my wristband.

Cancer affects physical health. It also has emotional impacts. The first reaction to a cancer diagnosis is often shock and numbness. Patients hear nothing other than the words, “You have cancer.” It can take time for patients to accept the diagnosis, especially if they do not feel particularly sick. However, hearing the word “cancer” is really scary for everyone.

There is the worry about treatment, the side effects, test results, what will happen down the road, and how cancer will affect the family, work, independence, relationships and finances. Macmillan Cancer Support has found that 87 per cent of Scots with cancer are affected financially by their diagnosis—by £1,000 a month, on average.

For those who are diagnosed late, there is often anger: “Why me?” In fact, for everyone who is diagnosed, there is some anger: “Why me?” They may feel angry with family or friends, their doctor, the world or even themselves, perhaps because some cancers do not have symptoms in the early stages or those symptoms might have been explained as another condition. There is also the sadness, the loneliness and the overwhelming loss of control when cancer changes day-to-day life or when family and friends have trouble understanding and coping with a diagnosis.

The emotional rollercoaster starts with courage: the courage to seek help from a GP or to pick up the phone and call someone. There is the wait for test results, a referral or treatment. Every day seems like a week. According to Macmillan, a third of patients who are undergoing treatment worry that any delay could affect their chances of surviving cancer. There is a clear need for everyone who is diagnosed with cancer to have a personalised care and support plan and to be signposted to mental health and wellbeing support.

I recently saw a patient who had been diagnosed with bowel cancer, which is spreading. The cancer was only discovered because he was admitted to hospital with Covid. His symptoms were identified by doctors when they took a full history and could make a diagnosis. He had been suffering those symptoms for two years but was too worried about Covid to come and see me. It is too late to cure him. Sadly, his story is far from unique.

Cancer is the leading cause of death in Scotland. Around 34,000 people are diagnosed

with cancer each year. Cancer treatments and outcomes have greatly improved in recent years. Half of all patients now survive for 10 years or more, but that is dependent upon people coming forward early and upon our cancer services increasing their capacity.

Scotland has a strong cancer research base, including Cancer Research UK centres in Edinburgh and Glasgow, as well as Glasgow's prestigious Beatson Institute for Cancer Research. Over the past five years, Cancer Research UK has spent more than £188 million on research funding in Scotland across seven university research centres, thereby contributing to Scotland's vibrant and productive life sciences sector.

Despite that, there is a lot more to do. Some cancers are difficult to diagnose, as they have vague or non-specific symptoms. Those include cancers of the pancreas, liver, brain, oesophagus and stomach. More than 9,000 Scots are diagnosed with one of those less survivable cancers every year. Sadly, only 16 per cent of those diagnosed will survive for five years, because of late presentation. We must raise awareness among the public of those less survivable cancers and their symptoms, and encourage people to see their GP if they are worried.

I support Jackie Baillie's motion. I congratulate all those who are engaged in cancer research and fundraising, and recognise the importance of providing patients and their families with high-quality information, advice and support.

I have one thing to say to anyone who is watching. If you, or someone you know, has an odd symptom—something new, such as weight loss, a lump or bleeding—please come forward and see your doctor. It could just save your life.

17:37

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): This annual debate is important in reminding society of one of the greatest challenges that we face, which is finding a cure for cancer. I pay tribute to Cancer Research UK on its 20th birthday for everything that it has done over that time. Cancer survival rates have undoubtedly increased, which is no mean feat.

Every cancer survivor has a story to tell and can be an inspiration to others. The greatest part of their story is them going on to live the fullest possible life that they can.

Yesterday, I met Pancreatic Cancer UK and said that, once we are in an even better position regarding the global pandemic, I would like world Governments to re-double their efforts to find a cure for cancer. The pace of work and the finance

that was provided globally to develop vaccines to deal with Covid-19 shows that, where there is a will there is a way. The vaccines are helping us to deal with Covid but, thus far, will not eradicate it. Who knows what the future will bring in that regard, but, in terms of cancer, which is a wide and varied illness, we know that, despite the magnificent efforts that have been made and the huge amount of money that has been spent over many years, the problem still has not been solved. That unfinished business shows how great the challenge is.

The motion highlights this year's theme of closing the care gap. Members received various briefings for today's debate. Macmillan Cancer Support told us:

"The most recent cancer incidence, cancer staging and cancer mortality statistics all show that if you live in a more deprived area, you are more likely to have cancer and for it to be diagnosed at a later stage, and you are more likely to die from your cancer."

Jackie Baillie referred to the Macmillan support line. I will do that too. The more people who know that number, the better. The number is 0808 808 0000.

Macmillan also published analysis that showed that 87 per cent of people with cancer in Scotland experience some kind of financial impact caused by their diagnosis. For those affected, that reaches an average of £1,000 a month, on top of their usual expenditure. One in three people with cancer in Scotland are severely financially affected by their diagnosis, and more than three quarters of people with cancer, or 78 per cent, experience a loss of income.

As the MSP for Greenock and Inverclyde, which has an industrial legacy as well as some of the most economically challenging areas in the country, as highlighted by our position with Scottish index of multiple deprivation data zones, I know that the challenge facing many of my constituents will be all too clear for many. In our industrial past, people faced many challenges over the years, particularly in relation to asbestos-related health matters. The Parliament has acted to help those people, and I look forward to the publication of the Scottish Law Commission discussion paper on damages for personal injury. A constituent has already written to me about that.

I certainly hope that that paper will provide the positive basis on which Parliament can provide greater services and support to people in the future. The past two years has affected every aspect of society and I welcome the introduction of the cancer plan "Recovery and Redesign: An Action Plan for Cancer Services". Society clearly has a lot to catch up with as a consequence of the past two years, and the situation with cancer patients is no different.

Every MSP will have a close link or relationship with either a cancer survivor or someone who, sadly, lost their fight. Despite the pain and loss that cancer has brought, I am grateful for all the time and happy lifelong memories I have of all the great times and fun in those years.

For me, cancer is the challenge ahead and I know that if we can improve survival rates, we can ensure that many more people create many more memories and life-changing experiences. That is a fight worth fighting.

17:41

Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): I begin by thanking my colleague Jackie Baillie for securing this debate and for her work in Parliament to ensure that cancer and its diagnosis, treatment and holistic support remains firmly on the agenda.

I am pleased to be able to speak in this debate as we mark world cancer day on Friday. Many of us will have been impacted by cancer in our own lives, whether through a personal experience of the illness, or through walking with a family member or friend through it. The speeches that have already been made this evening show how deeply personal the debate is for many colleagues.

Cancer is the leading cause of death in Scotland—approximately 34,000 people are diagnosed with cancer in Scotland every year—so it is important that we take this opportunity to reflect on progress made, and to look at what more needs to be done, particularly in the context of Covid-19, to move forward in our shared aspiration to speed up progress and see three in four people surviving the disease by 2034.

That is Cancer Research UK’s ambition, and I thank it for its briefing in support of tonight’s debate and for its work in highlighting world cancer day, along with countless other charities, some of which I will talk about later in my contribution and some of which have already been referred to by colleagues.

As we have heard already, the theme of world cancer day 2022 is “close the care gap”, and it focuses on understanding and recognising the inequalities in cancer care around the globe. For many of the most marginalised in our society, their chances of getting cancer, and their experience and outcomes of cancer, are worse because of factors and circumstances beyond their control.

As we know, here in Scotland, mortality rates for all cancers combined are 74 per cent higher in the most deprived areas compared with the least deprived, and the past two years have exacerbated the challenges in diagnosis and treatment. Waiting times statistics show that too

many people are waiting too long for cancer treatment. Only 83 per cent of patients on an urgent referral for a suspicion of cancer started treatment within 62 days. The target is 95 per cent. Although some of the waits are due to backlogs and additional Covid-19 safety measures, cancer services were struggling pre-pandemic. Shortages in staff and equipment mean that cancer waiting time targets have been missed for years. Just last week in the chamber, I raised with the First Minister the issue of delays to cancer surgery in the region that I represent and the need for a dedicated cancer catch-up plan.

As we have heard tonight, this issue is a deeply personal matter for many people, and the worry that has been described by colleagues is what motivates us. I hope that the cabinet secretary will hear those calls and respond in his closing remarks.

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): I appreciate the member taking an intervention. We have heard about inequalities, and being in a rural area brings its challenges regarding cancer treatment. We have also heard about the importance of someone having a care network around them when they are receiving treatment.

With the member’s permission, I take the opportunity to call on the cabinet secretary to look at the situation in Dumfries and Galloway as a matter of urgency. People in Stranraer are still expected to travel to Edinburgh for cancer treatment, when there are facilities in Glasgow that are far closer. That has an effect on families’ budgets and the people receiving treatment lose the communities around them. It is a lamentable situation. I call on the cabinet secretary to look at the issue, because people are potentially having less good outcomes as a result—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Carson.

Paul O’Kane: I hope that Finlay Carson will repay my kindness at some point in the future. However, the point is well made. In her remarks, Jackie Baillie also made the point about rural provision, and I know that colleagues across the chamber recognise the need to have such facilities in place. I am sure that the cabinet secretary will have more to say on that.

In my remaining time, I will highlight the work of blood cancer charities in Scotland. I might repeat some of what Jackie Baillie said in that regard, but as I am the shadow minister in her team, she usually assures me that repeating what she says is absolutely the way to go, so it should be fine.

I met the Blood Cancer Alliance, which clearly articulated that blood cancers are often misunderstood and underdiagnosed. It can often

feel like the Cinderella service of cancer care, and awareness of blood cancer symptoms, care, and treatment remains limited relative to solid tumour cancers.

To focus on our theme of closing gaps in care, it is clear that as the NHS continues its recovery from Covid-19, it is important that we see parity in the care and resources that are given to blood cancers, including improvements to diagnosis, pathology services, patient support and the NHS workforce. That is a critical factor in improving all cancer patient outcomes in Scotland, and would have long-lasting benefits across the entire healthcare system.

I hope that the cabinet secretary will address some of that in closing, although he might be too busy to do so, given Finlay Carson's intervention. I am sure that he will write to me, or we will have the opportunity in the future to go into more detail on the matter.

On this world cancer day, as we continue to enter the new reality of life with Covid, we must put cancer diagnosis, research and treatment at the heart of that. I think that that is what those who are living with cancer, and their families, expect.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr O'Kane. Just to warn you, Ms Baillie might be luring you down a dangerous path.

17:47

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I am pleased to be speaking in the debate, and I congratulate Jackie Baillie on securing it.

As others have mentioned, the theme of world cancer day 2022 is "close the care gap". It is about understanding and recognising inequalities in cancer care around the globe and lobbying for improved outcomes and equal treatment for all persons with cancer. I am pleased that the Scottish Government has a commitment to improve cancer services across our country, including establishing a new fast-track diagnostic cancer centre at Dumfries and Galloway royal infirmary in Dumfries.

The Covid pandemic had, and continues to have, a direct impact on cancer services, and I look forward to seeing how that can be improved as we move out of the pandemic. However, we do not have to look too far from home to find inequality in cancer care. In my South Scotland region, some patients are not receiving equal treatment, and I am pleased that my colleague highlighted the issues that I am about to address.

In Dumfries and Galloway, 1,135 people are currently living with cancer, and around 530 people lose their lives to cancer each year. Dumfries and Galloway is a large rural region—

from Canonbie in the east to Kirkconnell in the north, Stranraer in the west to Whithorn in the south Machars—and we also have many challenges with the delivery of cancer services.

Since my election to Parliament, I have been actively lobbying for change to current cancer pathway arrangements for the region. Currently, although we in D and G are in the south-west of Scotland, we are not in the West of Scotland Cancer Network. NHS Dumfries and Galloway is part of the South East Scotland Cancer Network, which means that patients, particularly those who are in the west of the region and Wigtownshire and require more complex treatments and radiotherapy, must often travel north-east to Edinburgh for treatment. That is a 260-mile round trip from Stranraer, which can cause distress and discomfort, and exacerbate the negative effects of cancer treatment.

After continuous campaigning by local residents and elected members, including my efforts over a five-year period and those of colleagues across the chamber, and by the Galloway community hospital action group, which includes a campaigner who has highlighted the issue for more than a decade, in 2019 NHS Dumfries and Galloway agreed to change the existing arrangements so that a more flexible approach that was focused on patient choice could be taken to people's treatment destination.

However, constituents are concerned that very little progress has been made, and that patients are still being asked to travel to Edinburgh, without even being offered the choice of going to Glasgow for radiotherapy and other treatment. I understand the pressures that the pandemic has caused, but we are talking about a long-standing situation that the former health secretary said that she would help to improve. Similarly, in July last year, I was told by the current health secretary that NHS Dumfries and Galloway's cancer pathway arrangements would be addressed as part of the Scottish Government's modernising patient pathways programme. I have spoken to a few people in order to progress matters, but I have not had any response from the modernising patient pathways programme. I will continue to pursue the issue.

I ask the cabinet secretary to provide a commitment that I will receive an update on the work that has been undertaken regarding cancer pathway arrangements across NHS Dumfries and Galloway. I also ask the Scottish Government to impress upon the health board the importance of the work on cancer pathways being carried out immediately so that patients in the south-west of Scotland can be offered a choice about whether to be treated in Glasgow or Edinburgh, depending on their preference.

I welcome the debate, the work that the Scottish Government has done and the opening of the fast-track cancer diagnostic centre in Dumfries, and I reiterate the need for action to bring about equality with regard to cancer pathways for patients across Dumfries and Galloway.

17:52

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): I thank Jackie Baillie for bringing this important debate to the chamber.

I want to start by congratulating those who took part in an impressive fundraising achievement in the community that I am proud to represent. Last Tuesday night should have seen the biggest of Shetland's annual community events. Of course, it was cancelled because of Covid. However, community members decided to do a continuous overnight relay around Lerwick for 12 hours to raise funds for Cancer Research UK's relay for life. Those efforts have raised more than £13,000 for CRUK. The fact that such a sum has been raised in a small community demonstrates the strength of feeling and support for CRUK in Shetland.

Covid has had a large impact on community events, but it has also significantly impacted fundraising for charities such as CRUK. In addition, there has been a fall in the diagnosis of cancers in recent years. As the motion highlights, one in two people will get cancer in their lifetime. We all know someone in that position.

I have been urging those who are eligible to go for their cervical screening, following reports of a fall in attendance in Shetland and across Scotland. Over its 20 years, Cancer Research UK has done a great amount of awareness raising, which has saved lives. I say to people that, if they notice changes in themselves or their bodies that they are concerned about, please get them checked out. The NHS and their GP are there for them. As Christine Grahame said, do not delay.

Every year in Scotland, around 1,000 people are diagnosed with brain tumours and around 470 people die from brain tumours. I am wearing my Cancer Research UK bracelet on my jacket, but I am also wearing my wear-a-hat day pin to highlight the need to help to find a cure for brain tumours. Brain Tumour Research is a cancer charity that I hold particularly close to my heart.

Before the lockdown measures in March 2020, I was set to host an event here in Parliament with Brain Tumour Research. The charity was going to launch its manifesto, "Together we will find a cure". March is brain tumour awareness month. The manifesto called on the Scottish Government to invest more in brain tumour research, to improve the patient experience and outcomes, and

to drive improvements in the patient experience across NHS Scotland.

I wanted to sponsor that event because it would have highlighted inequities and because a member of my family has faced a brain tumour diagnosis. As with any cancer diagnosis, nothing prepares you for it. However, when you are faced with it, you look at the stark data. Brain tumours kill more children and adults under the age of 40 than any other cancer does, and they are the chief cause of cancer deaths in children and young people. Only 12 per cent of brain tumour patients survive beyond five years of their diagnosis, whereas 70 per cent of patients diagnosed with breast cancer and more than 40 per cent of those diagnosed with leukaemia survive beyond five years.

Historically, there has been underfunding of research into brain tumours, with just 1 per cent of the national spend on cancer research allocated to brain tumours, according to Brain Tumour Research.

I urge us to work together to support Cancer Research UK, Brain Tumour Research and other valuable cancer charities to close the care gap.

17:55

Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP): I thank Jackie Baillie for securing the debate. In just over two weeks, I will turn 55. I mention that because we lost my brother Andy at that age to a malignant brain tumour. Fifty-five was far too young. He had already achieved some amazing things in his life, and he absolutely lived his life to the full, but he still had much more to do. Time is an important point that I want to talk about.

At the end of the day, we all die one way or another. Immortality is not an option. The time that we have on this earth, the quality of the life that we lead, the personal goals that we set and conquer, and the people we get to touch in our time are the things in our lives that we can judge as important.

Andy was taken too young, but there are things that we can be thankful for. He was diagnosed with his tumour 15 years before it ended his life, and for at least 13 of those years, he lived every moment of it. As Beatrice Wishart pointed out, not too many years ago, he would not have survived for more than two or three years at most.

Had it not been for the genius of the surgeons who gave Andy the operation to remove most of the tumour, the chemotherapy that gave him another five years, the radiotherapy that extended his life even further, and the care and attention from the fabulous team at the Beatson in Glasgow, who guided him from the very beginning and gave him every chance and option, his illness could

have been much worse. They gave him precious, precious time.

Even when Andy knew that his time was coming to an end, he was fortunate enough to have a place in the Cornhill hospice in Perth, where the care, respect and dignity that the staff gave him and us were beyond words. He died as good a death as we could have hoped for. For that, all of us who knew him and got to spend time with him can be truly thankful. I intend to climb Kilimanjaro with a group of his friends and colleagues later this year to raise funds for the Cornhill hospice, as a tribute to Andy and in recognition of the utterly selfless and amazing work that the people who work there do.

My real point is that we have made huge strides in cancer care. Cancer is not always the death sentence that we once feared it was, and undoubtedly, we now have hope that we did not have before. Even when cancer wins, if we can give people more time, as Andy had, those precious days, weeks, months and years are invaluable.

There is no doubt that there is much more that we can and must do in trying to deal with cancer. Some of the groundbreaking work that is being done in Scotland is fabulous. The new early diagnosis centres are to be welcomed, and the sooner they are rolled out across the country, the better. As my colleague Christine Grahame said, early diagnosis is so important.

The elective treatment unit that is being built in the Perth royal infirmary will be transformational in allowing patients to be treated more quickly and effectively across Tayside. Again, the sooner the unit is completed, the better.

Cancer treatment, cancer care and cancer management are issues on which all members of Parliament and people across society can unite behind. Since coming into Parliament, one of the things that I have struggled to square in my own thinking is the big-picture stuff. I get that, as legislators, we have to look at the big picture and discuss details, budgets and statistics, but my mind always goes to the individuals we are affecting. They are somebody's mum, their granny, their uncle, their auntie, their brother, their sister, a wife or a husband, sons and daughters, and they matter to everyone who knows and loves them. Therefore, they matter to us in this chamber.

We should all try and do the very best that we can to make sure that those who are affected by cancer get the same help, support, care and dignity that Andy did, and which we would want for ourselves or any of our loved ones. *[Applause.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Well done, Mr Fairlie, and best of luck up Kilimanjaro.

I am conscious that there are many members who have pressed their buttons and wish to speak—take note, Mr Carson. I am therefore looking to accept a motion without notice, under rule 8.14.3, to extend the debate by up to half an hour.

Motion moved,

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

Motion agreed to.

18:00

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): I, too, would like to thank Jackie Baillie for bringing the debate to the chamber. I also thank those organisations that have provided briefings. My thoughts are with everyone who has lost a loved one to cancer, those who are going through treatment and those who live with the worry that their cancer will return.

As has been noted, the theme of this year's world cancer day is "close the care gap". The theme is timely, as the pandemic has highlighted the health inequalities that still blight Scotland and impact on cancer outcomes. According to a report published by Public Health Scotland, cancer mortality rates are 78 per cent higher in the most deprived areas than they are in the least deprived, incidences of cancer are 34 per cent higher in the most deprived areas, and people living in deprived areas are more likely to get cancer and less likely to survive.

Those horrifying statistics are a reminder of the lack of progress that we have made in tackling health inequalities. Some of the main causes of cancer include alcohol consumption, smoking, poor nutrition and diet, lack of physical activity, and air pollution, but as Christine Grahame pointed out, cancer knows no class.

We know that people living in deprived areas are more likely to be affected by those factors. This morning at the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, we heard from the Minister for Public Health, Women's Health and Sport about the extent to which inequality is a driver of poor health. We need to ensure that everyone has timely access to cancer diagnosis and treatment, but we must also address the root causes of cancer, which means reducing poverty.

The pandemic has placed enormous pressure on cancer services, and we know that workforce issues and waiting times were impacting cancer care before Covid. It is vital that we build the workforce to enable the NHS to work through the backlog of care that has built up over the past two years. The earlier that cancer is diagnosed, the more the chances of survival are improved. I do

not think that anyone could do more justice to how that feels than Christine Grahame did.

Cancer diagnosis involves a range of tests and a specialist workforce. Cancer Research UK has highlighted shortages of staff across radiology, radiography, pathology and endoscopy. Macmillan Cancer Support estimates that if the number of specialist cancer nurses stays at current levels, by 2030, the gap in the number of specialist cancer nurses in Scotland will be 348. I recognise that the Scottish Government has published its cancer recovery plan, and that a new health and social care workforce strategy is forthcoming. Cancer Research UK is calling for the strategy to include both short-term and long-term actions that will ensure that we have in place the right staff to detect, diagnose and treat cancer, and I would welcome any comments from the cabinet secretary on that.

In its briefing for today's debate, Macmillan highlighted the financial impact on people who are diagnosed with cancer. According to its analysis,

"87% of people with cancer in Scotland experience some kind of financial impact from their diagnosis"

and a third

"are severely financially affected".

I am sure that we all agree that no one should be financially penalised for being diagnosed with a health condition. However, for too many people, that is the reality of living with cancer. Financial penalties come in many forms, not just in the form of reduced earnings. Figures provided by Macmillan reveal that 47 per cent of people with cancer in Scotland see an increase in day-to-day living costs, 26 per cent experience extra costs of travelling to and from their appointments, and 19 per cent see their household fuel bills rise.

As many members already mentioned, Macmillan has a support line that is available seven days a week, 8 am to 8 pm, on 0808 808 0000, for anyone who has anxiety or concerns about their cancer diagnosis, including financial worries.

I would welcome any comments from the cabinet secretary about what more the Government can do to give practical support to people have been diagnosed with cancer.

I echo the pleas from my colleagues around the chamber for people to attend their screening appointments. From personal experience, I can say that they are never as scary as people think that they are. Our incredible nurse practitioners will be able to answer questions. Certainly, they put me more at ease.

People should also get their human papillomavirus vaccinations, if they can. There is

now a whole generation who are less likely to develop cervical cancer as a result of that vaccine.

This year's world cancer day also marks 20 years since Cancer Research UK was formed. I thank all the people at Cancer Research UK, who are working hard to raise awareness and improve outcomes for people with cancer. I have found their expertise and knowledge to be incredibly useful during my time in Parliament so far and I am sincerely grateful to them.

18:06

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this important debate and thank Jackie Baillie for securing it. Unfortunately, all members know someone who will be affected by cancer in some form, whether through a personal diagnosis or that of a partner, family member or friend.

According to NHS Research Scotland, every year, about 30,000 people in Scotland are told that they have cancer. Trends predict that that number is likely to rise to almost 40,000 by 2027. The impact of a cancer diagnosis is devastating for many people. It is vital that we get services back on track and maximise the support that is on offer to people with cancer and their families. We must then use that opportunity as a platform to transform the services that are on offer so that we improve them beyond the previous levels of our cancer plan.

I praise the excellent work of Macmillan Cancer Support and thank it for the briefing that it provided for the debate. I welcome what Macmillan is doing with the Scottish Government transforming cancer care partnership. That partnership will ensure that, by 2023, Scotland will be the first country in the UK in which every cancer patient has access to a key support worker and gets dedicated financial, practical and emotional support.

From my previous job as part of the nursing team at the St Margaret of Scotland Hospice in my constituency, I know about the full impact that cancer has on the physical, mental and financial welfare of people with a diagnosis. As inequality is a driver, the financial impact of cancer must not be ignored. Macmillan advises that 87 per cent of people with cancer in Scotland experience some kind of financial impact from their diagnosis. Therefore, a holistic support package is essential if we are to provide the best help at the time of greatest need.

I highlight the work of the Beatson Cancer Charity, which supports people affected by cancer every step of the way. It does brilliant work at the Beatson west of Scotland cancer centre and in the hearts of our communities.

In the past 20 years, the majority of cancers have shown improvements in survival rates five years post diagnosis. Cancer that is diagnosed at an early stage is more likely to be treated successfully. For instance, almost all women diagnosed with breast cancer at the early stage survive their disease for at least five years.

With the pause of screening appointments due to Covid, it has become even more imperative that the most vulnerable receive invitations as soon as possible. We must also fully understand why many people do not attend their appointments. It is not enough simply to urge people to attend appointments; we need to understand any unexpected barriers or misinformation that needs to be addressed.

In a recent debate to raise awareness of pancreatic cancer, I shared the experience of a constituent who, sadly, did not get an early enough diagnosis of their cancer. Their heart-breaking experience highlighted the need for early diagnosis and to have access to effective and compassionate care where it is needed most.

For world cancer day, let us unite around a cancer plan that gets beyond Covid, does more than pick up from where we left off, lets us reduce the barriers that are fuelled by poverty and inequality, and helps us to save lives.

18:09

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): As co-convener of the Parliament's cross-party group on cancer, I congratulate Jackie Baillie on securing this evening's debate, and for the work that she has done in Parliament during 20 years of campaigning on health issues.

I also thank those organisations that have provided us with useful briefings ahead of the debate. I specifically thank Cancer Research UK, which has supported the CPG for more than 20 years as our secretariat. As a member and co-convener of the CPG—I am sure that this is true of many of its members—I really enjoyed the work that we did during the previous parliamentary session.

One of my greatest concerns is the impact of the pandemic on cancer services. We have seen cuts to research projects and patient trials. We have also seen the huge amount of work that is going on across Scotland and the wider UK to support people living with cancer and their families being set back and undermined in many cases.

I do not think that we can overestimate the impact of the pandemic on cancer services and outcomes. We need to rededicate ourselves to turning that around, because, as has been mentioned, approximately 34,000 of our fellow

Scots are diagnosed with cancer every year, and that number is expected to reach 40,000 by 2027.

It has been estimated that more than 650,000 patients in the UK have had treatment disrupted during the Covid pandemic. We know that the pandemic has had a profound impact on cancer services, including on early diagnosis of cancer in Scotland, with screening programmes paused and a fall in urgent referrals from GPs; on cancer prevention measures, with reduced service capacity and delays to planned legislation; on cancer treatment, with surgery delayed or cancelled, and staff shortages; and on the care of patients, with many experiencing poor mental wellbeing and limited provision of the holistic support services that we have all campaigned to see improved.

As Jackie Baillie has outlined, it is clear that staffing is a significant issue and one on which we must focus all our attention if we are to see a proper recovery. The Scottish Government must develop and resource such a plan early if we are to meet the targets now and in future. We should also focus on the design of new services.

We should all be seriously concerned that Cancer Research UK estimates that, as Jackie Baillie has said, survival rates might go backwards for the first time in decades if we do not take action to address backlogs and deliver the workforce that we need. It would be absolutely disastrous, were that to happen. I hope that we can all be united in dedicating ourselves to ensuring that it does not.

I have consistently raised my concerns about, for example, the breast screening programme in Scotland not being fully recovered, and I have spoken out about the fact that women over 70 still cannot self-refer into the breast cancer screening programme. I hope that the cabinet secretary can update us on that in closing the debate.

In my remaining time, I want to talk about the future, because I think that that is what we should all be looking towards. Jackie Baillie said that we should

“resolve not to go backwards.”

I absolutely agree, so I want to talk about a piece of work that many campaigners have been doing during the pandemic. A lot of people who work in the cancer community have not let the pandemic get in the way of what they want to do. One of my constituents, Jen Hardy, was diagnosed with stage 4 breast cancer in October 2017. Many members in the chamber will have met Jen, who has been campaigning for many years to improve opportunities for people. During the pandemic, she developed Cancer Card. I recommend that members visit www.cancercard.org.uk. Cancer Card has looked at how we change and provide

the information that people need and are desperately looking for when they are diagnosed with cancer.

I hope that the Government will look at some of the work that has gone on during the pandemic, because there are a lot of positives to take from that.

On world cancer day, I hope that we can send out a message of hope and a call to action to the global cancer community to come together and for all of us once again to focus on working together to beat cancer.

18:14

Siobhian Brown (Ayr) (SNP): I thank Jackie Baillie for bringing the debate to the chamber and the other members who have spoken for their compassionate, heartfelt contributions this evening.

As we have heard, the theme for world cancer day is “close the care gap”. It is about recognising and understanding the inequalities of cancer care that can cost lives around the world. We know that every one of us has the ability to make a difference, large or small, for the people and families who are affected by cancer. Only by working together can we reduce the global impact of cancer.

Recently, I had the privilege of meeting staff from Ayrshire Cancer Support, which is a charity in Ayrshire that works tirelessly to provide emotional support and practical help to cancer patients and their loved ones. It provides a number of free services, including hospital transport, which it provided for close to 14,000 people from Ayrshire in the year 2019-20, over 80 per cent of whom had to travel to the Beatson in Glasgow. It also offers counselling, carers groups and specialist information and support. I would like to express my gratitude and admiration for the truly outstanding work that it does.

However, the charity faces struggles, particularly involving applying for local and national funding. Previously, it was possible for charities such as Ayrshire Cancer Support to apply directly to the Scottish Government for funds. Under the new system, charities must apply through the local third sector interfaces that distribute funding. That results in the charity having to apply three separate times to eight different local authorities in Ayrshire, each with its own processes, timescales and criteria.

To add to that, Ayrshire Cancer Support does not meet the national and regional criteria to access the Scottish Government’s cancer recovery fund or pain management fund, as the charity is viewed as being too local an

organisation. However, under the system for the local third sector, it fears that it is considered too large an organisation to receive funds at the local level.

If we are to have any hope of closing the cancer care gap, we have to make it easier for organisations such as Ayrshire Cancer Support to provide all the care that it does. We must help them and not hinder them. Without their work, health inequalities would rise, as patients would struggle to get to hospital for the treatment that they need. I ask the cabinet secretary to look into the funding discrepancy for charities such as Ayrshire Cancer Support.

Someone who knows how important that service is is Hayleigh Lawrie, who tragically lost her mum to cancer. Hayleigh will camp overnight at Ayr racecourse to raise funds for Ayrshire Cancer Support, which provided help with transport, mobility and counselling. I am sure that MSPs will join me in wishing Hayleigh the very best of luck with her big camp-out.

I also want to share the work my constituent Gaby Williamson, from Ayr. Gaby sadly lost her dad to oesophageal cancer in June 2020, when she was just 19 years old. Her mum, Victoria, is currently battling breast cancer. After the death of her father, Gaby found herself in a situation that would hit hard even the strongest of us, never mind a 19-year-old. Not knowing exactly how to deal with her emotions, Gaby started the blog “Let’s Blether” on Instagram, in which she could fully express her feelings and find support for other young people who found themselves in similar situations.

Realising the number of young people who struggled with grief, Gaby set up a fantastic initiative called the let’s blether box. The box contains a range of items, including practical advice and support strategies for children and parents, a journal, seeds for planting flowers in memory of a loved one, a memory jar and a lot of other things. With the backing of South Ayrshire Council, the let’s blether bereavement box has been distributed to young people in South Ayrshire who are experiencing grief or loss.

Gaby’s younger sister, Poppy, who is only 10, has started another initiative, called little bletthers, to reach out to the younger community who are going through long-term grief. Gaby’s mum Victoria told me:

“We sadly live with cancer every day in our household and it comes in many different guises, whether it is physical, emotional, or financial and practical management. We also deal on the bereavement side of it on a daily basis—all of which Ayrshire Cancer Support has been a great help with, living with Cancer and the challenges it brings”.

I believe that one day we will see a world that is cancer free, but that will not happen without people, such as Gaby, Poppy and the volunteers at Ayrshire Cancer Support, who dedicate their time to go that extra mile in providing care and hope for all those who face the many struggles and hardships of cancer.

Although cancer is an awful disease, it is hard to deny that it can bring out the very best in people and draw us closer together as we fight to close the cancer care gap and see a cancer-free world.

18:19

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank my fellow Scottish Labour colleague, Jackie Baillie, for bringing her members' business debate to the chamber. I could not be here today and not speak in it.

The theme of world cancer day 2022 is "close the care gap" and it is about understanding and recognising the inequalities in cancer care around the world. I am sure that members will agree that I am not shy about raising in the chamber the inequalities in prevention, care and access to treatments.

Health inequalities in Scotland and across the globe are very real. For many of the most marginalised in our society, the chances of getting cancer and the experience of the outcomes of cancer are worse because of factors and circumstances that are beyond their control. Acknowledging and dealing with the root causes that blight many of our communities is key to reducing cancer and cancer inequalities.

Across Scotland, we know that the most deprived populations have worse experiences and outcomes than those in the least deprived areas. Recently, of course, the Covid-19 pandemic has shone a light on health inequalities and their devastating impacts. The pandemic has impacted our lives in so many ways, and one of the most concerning impacts has been the reduction in cancer diagnosis at an early stage. Staff shortages, pressures on the NHS and long GP waiting times are among a whole host of factors that have contributed to figures that Cancer Research UK recently called "devastating". In Scotland, we have to act with purpose to reverse those concerning factors, resume early detection and give those who have cancer the best chance of life.

In the short time that I have in the chamber, I want to mention cervical cancer. Yesterday, I met a nurse from Kilmarnock who has many years of experience supporting women with health screening and family planning. She talked me through aspects of women's health and factors that may hamper people from coming forward for

screening. Cervical cancer is one of the most preventable and successfully treated forms of cancer if it is detected and diagnosed early and managed effectively. It is essential that we in this chamber battle to ensure that screening services are accessed and accessible. In my discussions last night with Nurse Kenyon, it was clear that encouraging women and explaining the procedures to them is important. If they understand their bodies and what is happening, they are more likely to attend. We should encourage everyone who meets the criteria for screening to ask questions. Our wonderful NHS staff are more than happy to walk people through what will be happening to them and the associated benefits.

Once again, I bring to members' attention the health inequalities that underpin survival rates for cancer. According to Public Health Scotland, there are links between increasing deprivation and poorer survival rates for cancer, as we have heard in the debate. It is unjust and unfair that that remains the case in 2022. Much more work needs to be done to address the clear health, social and economic inequalities that mean that a person's postcode can result in a stronger or weaker chance of survival from deadly diseases.

I know that everyone in the chamber wants to see improvements in the awareness of and outcomes for cancer. I thank members for their contributions and for their work. I thank Jackie Baillie again for bringing the debate to the chamber and I applaud world cancer day and the work of Cancer Research UK. I hope that we go on to work as hard as we can to eliminate cancer from society.

18:24

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I thank Jackie Baillie and I am grateful that we are debating her motion commemorating world cancer day on Friday. Like all members, I hope and pray for a day when humankind will find a way to defeat cancer in all its types.

Cancer is probably still one of the most dreaded words in the English language. I do not know how it feels to be told about a diagnosis of any type of cancer—at least, not yet—but I have sat beside the person whom I love most in the whole world as she was told that she had cancer. As I looked into her face, I felt more hopeless and useless than I had ever felt in my life—or have felt since. The moment is frozen in time for me. I did not know what to say or what to do. We held hands and we both trembled—but help came. The consultant and everyone at the Beatson provided much-needed medical treatment and, more especially, they freely dispensed hope laced with gentle kindness.

An effective cancer screening programme, with speedy call-back and diagnosis, makes all the difference. Colleagues have spoken about that eloquently tonight, with an expertise that I cannot muster. I simply echo everything that has been said in the debate. I urge everyone who receives a call to take part in the cancer screening programme to take up that invitation—please go.

I hope that the cabinet secretary is moving heaven and earth to ensure that all the cancer screening programmes in Scotland are quickly back to full strength. I hope that people who missed out due to the coronavirus restrictions get screened, get the diagnosis and, most importantly, get the treatment that they need—and quickly.

World cancer day is a day when we, collectively as parliamentarians and the elected representatives of the people of Scotland, should redouble our efforts to ensure that screening takes place and that diagnosis is made as early as possible. It is literally a matter of life and death.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call the cabinet secretary to respond to the debate.

18:26

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Humza Yousaf): As is customary, I start by thanking Jackie Baillie sincerely for bringing the matter to the Parliament and for facilitating such a good debate involving members from across the chamber. In particular, I thank members who have shared their personal stories. I am following a very powerful speech by Stephen Kerr and some excellent speeches from members across the chamber. I will touch on many of the questions that have been asked and the themes that have been raised.

I, too, will start with a personal anecdote. As many members have already said, one in two of us will be affected by cancer, and there is probably not a single person in the chamber who has not been affected in some way, shape or form by it. We know that a couple of our parliamentary colleagues have had, or are still having, recent challenges with a cancer diagnosis and are having, or have just completed, treatment. I am delighted that some of them are back with us in the chamber right now.

My story is about my uncle Azhar. He was the cool uncle—we all have one. That is no disrespect to any of my other uncles and aunties; I love them all, but even they would say that he was the cool uncle. He was the youngest of the siblings, and they are always the coolest—he says, as a middle child. In the eternal battle of children versus grown-ups, my uncle Azhar was always on the side of the children. It is always good to have an ally like him.

He was more than an uncle to me. He took me to my first Celtic match and taught me how to play football. Presiding Officer, you and I have been on the same football team, so I should say that the deficiencies in my playing are mine alone and are not the fault of my uncle. When he took me to the football, my mum would say, “He is not to have any more junk food, Azhar.” Of course, my uncle disregarded that instruction from my mum.

He also helped me to train for the half marathon—the only half marathon that I have ever run in my life—when I was raising money for Islamic Relief. He ran with me and helped to train me for the eight weeks prior to the run. When I crossed the finish line at Glasgow Green and keeled over through dehydration because I had not taken his advice and drunk enough water, he was the one who put the medal around my neck.

He was an extraordinarily fit individual and played every sport that you can imagine, so imagine my shock at the news. I was on a Government visit to Pakistan, in my role as Minister for External Affairs and International Development, when I got a phone call at two in the morning—a phone call at two in the morning is never good news—from my sister to tell me that my uncle, who had been complaining of stomach and back issues for a while, had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer.

I did not know much about pancreatic cancer—in fact, I knew nothing about it—so, of course, I did what anybody without a clinical background does and went on to Google. I will never forget the feeling as I doomscored down the page on my phone to find any semblance of good news about pancreatic cancer and found—I am afraid—that there was none. I remember that moment, and having to do Government visits the next day while being a hollow shell of myself.

My uncle battled with pancreatic cancer for two and a half years and eventually succumbed to it. Again, I will never forget that moment. In the Islamic tradition, it is often the children of the deceased who wash and prepare the body before it is laid in a coffin. I was asked to do that with my cousins, and I will never forget washing my uncle to prepare him, at just seven stones—a man who was a stocky 13 or 14 stones prior to his cancer diagnosis, but there he was, just skin and bones.

I mention that story because pancreatic cancer and less survivable cancers have been raised by many colleagues across the chamber. Dr Gulhane spoke very well from a clinical, and a human, perspective about the importance of early diagnosis of less survivable cancers. Marie McNair also mentioned pancreatic cancer in her speech.

I give a personal commitment and—perhaps more important—a commitment as the Cabinet

Secretary for Health and Social Care that we will move heaven and earth to ensure that we restore cancer services. That is important to me, and it is important to the Government. I suggest that there cannot be a more important priority for the Government or for me as health secretary than the recovery and remobilisation of our NHS. Right at the top of that priority pile must be the restoration—in fact, it is right to say the full restoration—of cancer services.

In relation to the less survivable cancers that have been mentioned by many colleagues across the chamber, it is important that the Government works with third sector organisations to raise awareness of the symptoms. I mentioned some of the symptoms that my uncle had when it came to pancreatic cancer. For many other less survivable cancers—as, I think, Jackie Baillie or one of her colleagues said—the symptoms can mean that it takes four or five visits to a GP to get a referral. Of course, by the time someone gets a referral, they can already be at stage 4, as my uncle was, so we must do more.

I hope that we can do so through the early cancer diagnostic centres that we have developed across the country. We look at the data from those centres daily. Jim Fairlie—who gave an excellent and powerful contribution, which I know that Andy would have been very proud of—said that he is looking forward to the centres being rolled out. I promise him that we are exploring that. We, of course, want to see the early data from the early cancer diagnostic centres.

We also have the national cancer plan. That document is backed by £114.5 million of investment and is not just to lie on a shelf.

The point about inequality was well made by every speaker. I will not repeat the statistics about the unacceptable care gap—which is, of course, the theme of world cancer day this Friday—because they have been well articulated in the debate. We are determined to not only narrow but close and eliminate that unacceptable inequality gap. Some of the money that we have already provided is being targeted directly at where inequality exists most obviously. I can give more details on that to any member who wishes them.

I am, of course, running over my time. There are lots of issues that I could talk about.

On screening, I am happy to have meetings with members about self-referral for over-70s. Our concern is that, if we were to resume such services at the moment, that would have a detrimental impact on people at the highest risk, because of our current capacity issues. However, the challenge from Miles Briggs and from other members across the chamber who raise the issue with me regularly is to get such services resumed

as quickly as possible. I promise that there is no delay on our part.

Our workforce is incredibly important, but I am the first to admit that there are challenges among the workforce. Although we have made strides forward, I promise that we will redouble our efforts, particularly in relation to shortages of medical oncologists. At the moment, such shortages are felt most acutely in NHS Tayside, but there are issues across the entire country.

I, again, thank Jackie Baillie and colleagues across the chamber for raising exceptionally important points. On any issue, but particularly on this issue, my door is always open for us to work together to close the unacceptable cancer care gap that exists around the country.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Whatever your football deficiencies, cabinet secretary, I know that you can lay claim to having scored a goal at Celtic park, because I was there to see it. I am sure that your uncle is enormously proud of that fact.

Meeting closed at 18:35.

Correction

Jenny Gilruth has identified an error in her contribution and provided the following correction.

The Minister for Transport (Jenny Gilruth):

At col 4, paragraph 3—

Original text—

As we went live, more than 117,000 online applications had been received and more than 55,000 cards had been issued, with a further 16,000 cards issued offline by councils.

Corrected text—

As we went live, more than 117,000 online applications had been received and more than 55,000 cards had been issued, including 16,000 cards issued offline by councils.

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

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