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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 20 January 2022

[The Presiding Officer opened the meeting at 11:40]

General Question Time

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Good morning. I remind members of the Covid-related measures that are in place. Face coverings should be worn when moving around the chamber and across the Holyrood campus.

The first item of business is general question time. In order to get in as many members as possible, I would prefer short and succinct questions and answers to match.

Budget 2022-23 (West Scotland)

1. Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government how the allocation of funding in its budget for 2022-23 will support local services in the West Scotland region. (S6O-00650)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Economy (Kate Forbes): The budget for next year delivers record levels of funding to help restore public services across the whole of Scotland including in West Scotland. It includes record funding for health, record funding to tackle child poverty and at least £2 billion in infrastructure initiatives. The local government finance settlement alone will provide more than £1.7 billion for vital day-to-day services such as schools and social care in the local authorities that are either wholly or partly within the West Scotland region.

Neil Bibby: Year after year, councils are targeted by the Scottish Government for core funding cuts and this year is no different, despite the council elections in May. The president of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities has said that both service cuts and council tax rises are “probably inevitable”. The cabinet secretary will know that all 32 council leaders, including Scottish National Party leaders, have unanimously condemned the Government’s budget as unacceptable. Some even say that it is the worst they have ever seen. Are those SNP council leaders wrong, and is the cabinet secretary really saying that every penny has been spent and that there is no more money anywhere in the budget to prevent service cuts and council tax hikes in the west of Scotland and across the country?

Kate Forbes: SNP council leaders do an exceptional job right across Scotland but, in terms of the overall budget, our position right now is

challenging. There is a 5.2 per cent reduction in next year’s Scottish budget versus this year’s budget and we have made it clear that we cannot inflation proof any part of the budget. For local authorities, we have ensured that we protect the core budget in cash terms—I have already made the caveat about inflation—and on top of that we are providing additional funding for the pressures that local government has identified, not least in social care and education.

Land Speculation (Carbon Offsetting)

2. Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government what measures it is planning to introduce to protect communities and ecosystems from land speculation associated with carbon offsetting. (S6O-00651)

The Minister for Environment and Land Reform (Màiri McAllan): Mechanisms already exist to support responsible investment in our land, including the Scottish land rights and responsibilities statement. However, I am very aware of concern about recent purchases and developments. Last year, I asked the Scottish Land Commission to review the rural land market and offer advice to the Government on how we can ensure that private investment in natural capital, which is needed to help Scotland to address the climate and nature crises, is done in a way that is helpful to our wider political priorities, including empowering and benefiting rural and island communities.

Maggie Chapman: We know that a range of companies and investors are already buying up land in Scotland to use for carbon offsetting. BrewDog and Shell are two examples. Private investment funds and asset managers are generating and selling carbon credits. Even the Scottish National Investment Bank is putting money into that. Will the minister outline how much land has been bought for such speculation, how much public money has been invested in such approaches and what we can do within our limited powers to ensure that Scotland does not get sold for carbon-offsetting greenwash and to protect communities from displacement by green lairds?

Màiri McAllan: I begin by stressing that I share many of Maggie Chapman’s views. My vision for a net zero Scotland is one in which more people can live and work sustainably on our land. The member is right to highlight the risks and I assure her that I am alert to them. I am determined that increased investment in Scotland’s natural capital will deliver benefits for our local communities in line with those important just transition principles. That is why I have commissioned the work of the Scottish Land Commission, which I await, and why

we are reviewing the Scottish land rights and responsibilities statement to ensure that it is as up to date as possible and that it addresses those contemporary challenges. I look forward to returning to Parliament to discuss those matters once I have that information in hand.

Video Doorbells

3. Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it has any concerns over the use of video doorbells in domestic properties. (S6O-00652)

The Minister for Community Safety (Ash Regan): Anyone who operates domestic closed-circuit television, such as a video doorbell, must ensure that they comply with the relevant laws and respect their neighbours' privacy. People who believe that their privacy and data protection rights are not upheld should attempt to resolve that situation with their neighbour, and have the right to make a complaint to the Information Commissioner if that is not successful.

Bob Doris: Video doorbells in communal areas of flats often record footage of anyone passing via motion sensors. That footage is accessed remotely. It has been my experience that that factor can exacerbate neighbour disputes and the impact on vulnerable individuals. The suggestion from the Information Commissioner's Office that those who are concerned about surveillance can request access to the footage that is held of them and ensure that it is deleted when it is no longer required is just fanciful.

Despite the reserved nature of data protection, how can we use existing powers over housing and community safety to work in partnership with housing organisations and Police Scotland to seek to review, regulate or restrict the use of video doorbells for residential flat properties?

Ash Regan: The member makes many valid points. Avenues exist for people to challenge a neighbour's use of a video doorbell. If they believe that domestic CCTV is used in an antisocial, harassing or intimidating way for instance, which might constitute a criminal matter, they will be able to contact the police.

The Scottish Government recognises that everyone has the right to feel safe in their community, which is why we are committed to tackling all forms of antisocial behaviour to create an inclusive and respectful society where individual and collective rights are supported and neighbour disputes are resolved fairly and swiftly. Police Scotland and local authorities lead on those interventions and a range of options are available to tackle this type of antisocial behaviour. We are

committed to ensuring that all the agencies have the power and resources that they need.

Rodent Glue Traps

4. Siobhian Brown (Ayr) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what it is doing to take forward the recommendations in the Scottish animal welfare commission's "Report on the use of rodent glue traps in Scotland", including the recommendation to ban such traps. (S6O-00653)

The Minister for Environment and Land Reform (Màiri McAllan): We are committed to maintaining the highest welfare standards for animals, including wildlife. We have carefully considered the Scottish animal welfare commission's findings, alongside all other relevant evidence, and I am pleased to announce today that we intend to end the cruel practice of setting glue traps. The commission's report is clear that the use of glue traps relates to significant animal welfare issues, not only for rodents but for non-target species such as wild birds. Therefore, we will introduce legislation to ban glue traps in this parliamentary term.

Siobhian Brown: I welcome that news. Glue traps are one of the cruellest methods of rodent control. As well as banning the use of glue traps, will we also ban their sale?

Màiri McAllan: Our intention is to ban both the sale and the use of glue traps. However, implications arise from the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020, which can undermine decisions that this Parliament makes, including in wholly devolved climate and environmental policy areas. We intend to work through those issues to achieve a ban.

Shotts Railway Station (Accessibility)

5. Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it and Transport Scotland have had with ScotRail and Network Rail regarding the accessibility of Shotts railway station. (S6O-00654)

The Minister for Transport (Graeme Dey): Transport Scotland has been in dialogue with ScotRail and Network Rail to discuss a feasibility study on improving accessibility at Shotts station, which Transport Scotland commissioned following a meeting with local representatives and the now disbanded Shotts community council.

Unfortunately, progression of the study was delayed because of restrictions that were imposed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. However, analysis of the report is under way and it is anticipated that further discussions will be held with Network Rail in the coming weeks to enable the details to be finalised.

Neil Gray: There has been previous work at Shotts railway station to install a new ramp, but its length and gradient are less than ideal, particularly in winter, for people who use wheelchairs or who have other mobility issues. As the minister suggested, I have previously contacted Transport Scotland about the issue on behalf of constituents, and there was agreement to conduct an accessibility review of the station. I understand that part of the responsibility for the matter is with Network Rail. Will the minister provide an update on the feasibility study and on whether the potential for a lift will be part of the review?

Graeme Dey: I commend Neil Gray and his predecessor, Alex Neil, for their diligence in this matter. All options for improving accessibility, including lifts, will be considered. I have asked my rail officials to keep Neil Gray updated as work progresses.

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): Has the Scottish Government had any communications with ScotRail regarding the impact on the most vulnerable rail users of reducing operating hours at Bellshill train station?

Graeme Dey: Ms Callaghan raises an important point. Clearly, technology has changed how people want to access information and buy tickets, but we must acknowledge that there is a place for staffed services on the ground where and when they are most needed.

The consultation offers the public the chance to have their say on how to provide an efficient and cost-effective service for the future. I encourage people to get involved—I include in that local MSPs and, in particular, groups that represent people who have support needs, because it is critical that we understand how any proposed changes might affect them.

Fuel Poverty

6. Joe FitzPatrick (Dundee City West) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the action it is taking to address fuel poverty. (S6O-00655)

The Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport (Michael Matheson): I know that the current situation with energy prices will cause many people to worry about the cost of their fuel bills. We share their concerns and, with the limited powers that are available to us, we are already taking action to address the situation, including through our £41 million winter support fund.

However, with powers over the energy market reserved to Westminster, there must also be action from the United Kingdom Government. I have written to it, suggesting a number of measures that we believe it should consider,

including a VAT cut and targeted support for people on low incomes.

Joe FitzPatrick: The fuel well scheme, which was introduced by Dundee's Scottish National Party administration and is supported by Scottish Government funding, provides financial support of between £90 and £150 to help those who are most in need with winter fuel costs. Does the cabinet secretary agree that, although the action by our SNP colleagues in Dundee is commendable, the UK Government, which has cut £20 a week from universal credit, needs to step up urgently and take responsibility for dealing with spiralling energy costs?

Michael Matheson: I absolutely agree. I commend Dundee City Council for its efforts to help people who are struggling with heating costs. That is an excellent example of the kind of schemes that local councils across Scotland have established through the winter support fund to provide vulnerable households with assistance.

Undoubtedly, the UK Government must do far more to protect households from the drastic increases in energy bills that are being talked about. Reversing the indefensible cut to universal credit would certainly help, but there are many other actions that we want the UK Government to take, including cutting VAT on energy bills, which would be one of the simplest short-term means of helping energy consumers. We need urgent action by the UK Government, because many households are already under severe financial pressure due to increasing energy prices.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): Only a tiny fraction of all the homes in North East Fife—fewer than 1,000 out of 40,000—have access to the Scottish Government's home insulation financial support packages. As we are in not only a climate emergency but an energy emergency, what will the Government do to speed up and expand that provision so that more people can access support?

Michael Matheson: The member might be aware that we have invested almost £1 billion in home energy efficiency programmes since 2009, and we have set out our commitment to invest more than £1.5 billion to decarbonise properties and make them more energy efficient in the coming years. I have no doubt that the area-based schemes that we are operating in North East Fife will continue to benefit his constituents. However, we want to see those schemes expanded and developed in the future, to ensure that we make properties more energy efficient and that we meet our climate change targets.

Access Bikes Scheme

7. Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what assessment criteria it will use to determine whether the access bikes scheme represents good value for money. (S6O-00656)

The Minister for Zero Carbon Buildings, Active Travel and Tenants' Rights (Patrick Harvie): The pilot scheme is designed to test whether providing interest-free loans can improve bike ownership and alleviate transport poverty. The fact that we have received 348 expressions of interest so far shows that there is demand for such provision. We will assess whether the scheme represents good value for money by the number of bikes that have been purchased by September 2022. Cycling UK will provide a report on the scheme's operation after year 1. The scheme is in its infancy, and we will judge its effectiveness after the pilot period rather than after a few weeks, as well as continuing to develop the scheme in the light of on-going feedback.

Brian Whittle: I thank the minister for that answer, but I do not think that it is unreasonable to ask why a scheme that has access to £390,000 of public funds to offer 500 loans has failed to provide even one loan three months after it opened. Set against that, I am speaking to the social enterprise East Ayrshire Cycle Station, which rescues unwanted bikes, refurbishes them and sells them to the public at a fraction of what they cost new. So far, it has done 650 bikes, and it would like to extend an invitation to the minister to join me on a visit at some point. The organisation has been hugely popular in encouraging many people in the area to take up cycling, but it is now struggling to obtain funds to go further. With that in mind, will the minister commit to making funds equal to or greater than that allocated to his loan scheme available to support existing successful local initiatives such as Cycle Station?

Patrick Harvie: We support a wide range of organisations, including those that provide cycle repair and refurbishment. I would be happy to explore that issue in more detail with the member if he has specific local examples that I should bear in mind.

I find it a little bit odd that, during the winter, the Conservatives were claiming both that we had splurged £400,000 and also that we had not issued a single penny. I congratulate them on the intellectual agility that is necessary to believe both of those false claims simultaneously.

UNESCO Biosphere Reserves

8. Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on the designation

of United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization biosphere reserves in Scotland as areas of significance for sustainable development and climate change. (S6O-00657)

The Minister for Environment and Land Reform (Màiri McAllan): There are two biosphere reserves in Scotland: Galloway and Southern Ayrshire, and Wester Ross, which together are home to more than 100,000 people. Both of Scotland's biospheres have received funding from our enterprise agencies, and we support the biosphere approach to community empowerment through the environment when that is chosen and sustained by a local community.

Elena Whitham: The Galloway and Southern Ayrshire biosphere, which covers my constituency, has had significant support from South of Scotland Enterprise, local government, a range of private businesses, environmental non-governmental organisations and community representatives. It is identified in the local development plans and regional spatial strategies for Ayrshire and southern Scotland. Does the minister agree that it is a great shame that the UNESCO biospheres appear to have been missed by the draft national performance framework 4? In recognising the importance of the key strategic values on which they lead—sustainability and contributing to the wider social, economic, environmental and tourism aspirations of the area—can the minister commit to ensuring that UNESCO biospheres are truly recognised and highlighted in the new NPF4?

Màiri McAllan: In line with the member's comments, the Scottish Government agrees that participation can build a community's ability to tackle challenges and sustain a healthy, vibrant community. UNESCO's man and the biosphere programme is based on that bottom-up, stakeholder-driven initiative; therefore, biospheres are inherently an initiative that must be developed and sustained locally.

Although the draft national planning framework 4 does not specifically name the two biosphere reserves, it clearly sets out that

"Local development plans should identify and protect locally, regionally, nationally ... valued natural assets, landscapes, species and habitats."

In addition to the current parliamentary scrutiny of the draft NPF4, we are consulting widely until the end of March and would welcome comments on our draft to support what I hope will be a finalised NPF4 that will address those issues, which we can bring back to Parliament for approval.

First Minister's Question Time

12:00

Covid-19 Restrictions (Christmas)

1. Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands)

(Con): Does the First Minister agree with Pete Wishart, who is currently the Scottish National Party's longest serving MP at Westminster, who said earlier this week that it was "a fair point" that her Government had imposed too many Covid restrictions over Christmas?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I am not sure that that is a fair representation of Pete Wishart's comments.

First, I want to take the opportunity to recognise that Pete Wishart is, I think, Scotland's longest serving member of Parliament, which goes to show what an outstanding service he does for his constituents. I am sure that Douglas Ross will join me in taking the opportunity to pay tribute to Pete Wishart's public service.

I think that we introduced a series of balanced protective measures over the Christmas period, which, coupled with the extraordinary response of the public in changing their behaviour and, of course, the extraordinary success of the booster programme, means that we are, thankfully, now in a better position than we might have been when we looked ahead before the Christmas period.

However, we are not in a position that allows us any complacency. Covid rates are still high and there are still significant uncertainties ahead, which is why doctors, nurses and national health service managers and trade unions all expressed some concern about yesterday's announcement by the Prime Minister to lift all restrictions at this stage, including the requirement to wear face coverings.

We will continue to take a proportionate and balanced set of decisions to get through the next—and, I hope, final—phase of the pandemic and to keep the country as safe as we can while we do so.

Douglas Ross: The First Minister said that what I put to her was not a fair representation of Pete Wishart's comments. It was a direct quote. When asked whether the First Minister in Scotland had introduced too many Covid restrictions over Christmas, his response was:

"That is a fair point."

He agreed with the premise of the question.

The First Minister went on to laud Pete Wishart's parliamentary career; perhaps she could listen to him, when he, an elected SNP

representative, said that the restrictions that were imposed over Christmas were too much.

The First Minister imposed restrictions that had a massive impact on jobs, businesses and people's mental and physical health, but we can now see that they were not needed. It was the Scottish public's actions, not the SNP Government's restrictions, that got this right. The First Minister has tried to build a reputation for caution during the pandemic, but she was far too gung-ho in imposing extra restrictions last month. Will she now accept that her Government went too far?

The First Minister: The public did comply—they complied with what the Government asked them to do.

I think that Douglas Ross is striking rather a desperate note right now. If he is seriously describing Pete Wishart showing—as all elected representatives should—some respect for the point that somebody was making to him as evidence that he agrees with Douglas Ross rather than with the Scottish Government, all that that says to people is that Douglas Ross is showing rather more political desperation than even we thought he might have done.

We have taken a balanced approach. Let me just say what I think.

"At the moment, this cautious approach is the one that we should be taking."

That is my sentiment, but those are not actually my words. Those are the words of Sandesh Gulhane MSP on BBC Scotland on 7 January. If Douglas Ross is basing his entire line of questioning to me on something that Pete Wishart said, what is his response to his own MSP saying that the cautious approach is

"the one that we should be taking"?

In addition, Professor Susan Michie, who is a member of the United Kingdom Government's scientific advisory group for emergencies, said:

"Scotland is doing something that is very good from a public health point of view".

The Scottish approach is in line with the Welsh Government's approach and the Northern Irish Government's approach. We are taking a sensible approach through this. That is why infection levels, although they are now, thankfully, dropping in all parts of the UK, are lower in Scotland than they are in England right now. Over the festive period, the number of people who were in hospital was proportionately lower.

We are not out of the woods yet, although things look far more positive. I will continue to take a cautious approach because, frankly, the price of throwing caution to the wind is not paid by

Governments; the price of throwing caution to the wind is paid by people across the country in ill health and, in some cases, serious illness and death. I do not think that I should impose that price on the people of Scotland.

Douglas Ross: Serious illness and death come not only from Covid; they come from restrictions being put in place that have a massive impact on people's mental and physical health.

We have been living with the pandemic for two years. The First Minister would do better to respond to the points that have been made. She may not like them, but she should answer those points and questions rather than launching personal attacks on Opposition politicians who raise them.

Not only did the First Minister impose unnecessary restrictions, but she actually wanted to go further. Throughout December, the First Minister repeatedly claimed that the UK Government was holding her back from putting Scotland into lockdown again. She wanted to close down the economy, no matter the impact that that would have on Scottish jobs and businesses.

When her restrictions were introduced, the First Minister promised compensation. Now that we are coming out of those restrictions, that compensation still has not been delivered to many businesses. They have not received a single penny. This week, the Federation of Small Businesses said:

"Thousands of Scottish businesses needlessly go under every year because of late payment."

Will the First Minister accept that her Government is currently the worst offender in Scotland in making late payments?

The First Minister: No. I say to Douglas Ross that it is the pandemic that is causing the serious impact on businesses and individuals across Scotland, the UK, Europe and the entire world. Much as we might all like to be able to do so—and, believe me, I would love to be able to do so—we cannot just magic that away. No country is able to do that.

Since Douglas Ross returned to this chamber, he has stood here at every key juncture in the management of the pandemic and has opposed the decisions that the Scottish Government has taken, even at times when exactly the same decisions were being taken by his colleagues in the Westminster Government. He has decided to take an entirely opportunistic approach to the handling of a global pandemic. People will judge that, and I do not think that they will judge it kindly.

If we had listened to Douglas Ross over the past months, we would not have had sensible

measures such as asking people to wear face coverings. We would not have had other mitigations in our schools. We would not have sensibly advised people to work from home. Therefore, we would not be in the stronger position that we are now, when we are able to lift those protective measures from Monday of next week. Given that Douglas Ross has called it wrong at literally every juncture of the pandemic, forgive me if I do not start listening to him now.

On business support—*[Interruption.]*

Incidentally, on the issue of Opposition politicians quoting people, Douglas Ross opened his line of questioning today by misrepresenting, in my view, Pete Wishart. Then he took issue with the fact that I used a direct quotation from Sandesh Gulhane. I will repeat that direct quote:

"At the moment, this cautious approach is the one that we should be taking."

On business support, much of that support will not be available to businesses suffering the same impacts south of the border. *[Interruption.]* If Douglas Ross does not think that they are suffering the same impact, I suggest that he needs to get out a little bit more.

All local authorities have begun processing payments. Some have made very good progress and say that they have already paid almost all the hospitality and leisure businesses that are eligible for support. All local authorities are on track to complete 100 per cent of payments to hospitality and leisure businesses that were affected by Christmas cancellations and physical distancing by 31 January. That is support that is available here but not available elsewhere. We will continue to do the right thing by businesses.

Douglas Ross: The First Minister needs to make her mind up. She accuses the Conservatives of opposing every measure that she puts forward, but then, in the same breath, she accuses the Conservatives of wanting a cautious approach.

It is not opportunistic to trust that the people of Scotland can learn to live with Covid rather than having to live with her Government's restrictions. Those restrictions are having a massive impact on jobs and on businesses and communities across Scotland, which are not getting the money or the support that they were promised.

The First Minister has got the big decisions wrong over the past few months. She was too quick to bring in unnecessary Covid restrictions, too late to launch mass vaccination centres, too late to change the self-isolation rules and too late to get funding to businesses that need it. The First Minister says that she does not shy away from mistakes that she has made in the handling of the

pandemic. Can she finally just admit that, by introducing the tough restrictions here in Scotland before Christmas and by wanting to introduce even tougher restrictions, she has simply made the wrong call?

The First Minister: I will let the people of Scotland judge the impact of the calls that I and my Government have made, but let me say this: right now, on first doses, second doses, third doses and booster vaccination doses, Scotland is the most vaccinated part of the United Kingdom. If Douglas Ross's proposition is that we left it too late, what on earth does that say about his colleagues in the Westminster Government?

The Office for National Statistics figures this week show that infection levels in England are over 20 per cent higher than those in Scotland. I do not think that it is a competition, but if Douglas Ross wants to make these comparisons, there is the data.

I say gently to Douglas Ross, because I know that he is having a tough time politically, that it is entirely inconsistent—there is no consistency in this—to say, as his health spokesperson did, that the cautious approach is the one that we should be taking, and then oppose every cautious measure that we choose to take, for opportunistic reasons.

I suggest that Douglas Ross gets his own house in order, perhaps suggesting to more of his colleagues that they obey the rules that are in place when they are in place, and leaves this Government to get on with steering this country responsibly and in a mature, grown-up fashion through the global pandemic.

Offshore Wind Projects (Human Rights)

2. Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): The First Minister has said that the auction of major offshore wind projects was

“one of the most significant days ... that Scotland had seen in a very long time.”

I welcome inward investment, but it should not come at a cost to the Scottish economy, our just transition or our values.

Let us be clear about what has happened. The Scottish National Party Government has sold, on the cheap, the right to profit from Scotland's energy transition to multinational companies that have questionable human rights records. One of the new owners of Scotland's sea bed was fined \$54 million for bribing Nigerian officials and \$88 million for bribing Indonesian officials. Another was found to have committed human rights abuses at one of its construction sites, destroyed villages in Myanmar and relied on forced labour and used slavery to build pipelines. Surely those are not

people with whom the Scottish Government should be doing business.

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Crown Estate Scotland made the decisions on the companies—the consortiums—that would be awarded the status to develop projects around our coast. It has appropriate processes in place to do due diligence.

However, the sale is one of the most exciting things for Scotland in a long, long time, which is probably why Scottish Labour is being so negative about it. Not only does it give us the potential to meet our own energy needs from renewable sources, but it positions us with the ability to be a major exporter of renewable energy, including green hydrogen, and it gives enormous potential for our supply chain. The estimate is that for every gigawatt of power that will be generated from the projects, there will be £1 billion of investment in our supply chain. For the first time, of course, the companies had to set out in statements what they will do to support our supply chain.

The sale is good news. Complicated consenting and planning processes lie ahead, but it offers massive potential to Scotland—potential that we intend to seize with both hands.

Anas Sarwar: I agree about that opportunity. However, values matter. Just last week, the Scottish National Party was right to accuse the Tory Government of tolerating human rights abuses as a “price worth paying” to secure deals for the United Kingdom. This week, the SNP has done the same. In effect, Nicola Sturgeon is saying that it is bad when the Tories do it but is okay when the SNP does it.

There is another concerning part of the deal. One of the new owners of Scotland's seabed is the Swedish state-owned energy company, which can now use its part of the Scottish sea bed to keep energy bills down for people in Sweden. The First Minister once promised a Scottish state-owned energy company. In fact, the SNP Government spent almost £500,000 of taxpayers' money on the project before scrapping the plans. Why is it that the people of Sweden now own a bigger stake in Scottish energy supply and distribution than do the Scottish people? The SNP is not “Stronger for Scotland” but stronger for Sweden.

The First Minister: Sweden is an independent country that has full control over energy—which, of course, this Government and this Parliament do not have. Anas Sarwar might want to reflect a little more on that.

Today, the Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport is talking about the opportunities and consultation on our plans for a

public energy agency to steer such developments in the future.

This is a thoroughly positive opportunity for Scotland. It is no wonder, then, that Scottish Labour just wants to gurn about it and be negative. That has characterised Scottish Labour for a long time and is why its members are sitting where they are, these days. They are not on the main Opposition benches, and they are certainly not on the Government benches.

I will just repeat what the opportunity is. It is an opportunity to meet our own energy needs from renewable sources and to keep energy costs down; to export renewable energy to other countries; to grow a supply chain and create thousands, possibly tens of thousands, of jobs; and, of course, to raise revenues for the Scottish Government, for public services in Scotland—£700 million from the lease options alone and then, when the projects are operational, rental fees in addition to that. This is a thoroughly positive opportunity, so perhaps, just for once, Anas Sarwar could find it within himself to be positive about the potential of Scotland.

Anas Sarwar: I have said that I welcome inward investment. I have said that I welcome and recognise that opportunity. However, that was such a desperate and poor reply.

The First Minister often accuses Opposition parties of demonstrating a brass neck. There was a brass neck being shown by the First Minister in that reply—accusing the Tories of having bad values on human rights, but accepting bad human rights values as being part of the price that is worth paying for Scottish opportunities.

It is about the Scottish supply chain, Scottish companies and Scottish jobs. The sad reality is that the SNP Government does not understand economic development. Scottish bridges are built with Chinese steel. Scottish wind farm turbines are built in Indonesia. Ferries are built not in Scottish shipyards but in Poland and Turkey. Now, Scotland's sea bed will be owned by foreign multinationals that have woeful human rights records.

We have heard before a list of promises from the First Minister. A state-owned energy company was promised but never delivered.

The Presiding Officer: Question, please.

Anas Sarwar: That Scotland would become the Saudi Arabia of renewables was promised, but never delivered. One hundred and thirty thousand green jobs were promised, but never delivered.

The Presiding Officer: Question please, Mr Sarwar.

Anas Sarwar: After 15 years, is not it the case that the SNP Government has sold out Scottish jobs, sold off Scottish assets and, now, sold out Scottish values?

The First Minister: I have been sitting here reflecting, almost disbelievingly, that Anas Sarwar has just accused me of behaving like a Tory, the day after his party threw open its doors to a Tory MP. There is now so little difference between Labour and the Tories that their MPs are interchangeable. When it comes to brass necks, I think that Mr Sarwar will be polishing his for the rest of the day.

Anas Sarwar and his many predecessors as Scottish Labour leader—I have to say that I have forgotten how many predecessors he has had—have been trotting out those negative talk-down-Scotland tropes for years, but all that has happened is that they have gone further and further down in the ratings in Scottish politics and lost more and more votes, while my party's share of the vote has increased. I came into this chamber today expecting political desperation from Douglas Ross; I think that I have seen even more from Anas Sarwar, which probably says all that we need to know.

I will get on with encouraging the potential for Scottish renewable energy, Scottish jobs and revenue for the Scottish Government, and I will be delighted, at the next time of asking, to put that record before the Scottish people. I am not so sure that Anas Sarwar will be quite so keen.

The Presiding Officer: We will now take supplementary questions.

Energy Prices

Fiona Hyslop (Linlithgow) (SNP): Increasing energy prices are of very real concern. What discussions has the First Minister had with the Westminster Government on help for families to combat the spiralling financial costs of the energy crisis?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): The energy and cost of living crisis is increasing on a daily basis. It is of deep concern to this Government, and we are taking a range of measures, including our £41 million winter support fund and seven new benefits aimed at low-income households. Shortly, we will double the Scottish child payment.

Of course, key powers remain reserved to Westminster. We have written to the United Kingdom Government countless times about poverty. Just last week, we set out further actions that it must urgently take to tackle rising energy bills.

If a Government, as is the case with the Westminster Government, is so busy trying to deal with self-inflicted sleaze and scandal, and daily defections and deflections, its focus is not on the cost of living crisis but on itself. That is both deeply regrettable and deeply serious, because right now the Westminster Government is neglecting the real issue that people are facing right across the country.

Diabetes

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Diabetes rates are rapidly increasing across Scotland, with diagnoses more than doubling in the past 20 years. Last week, Diabetes Scotland reported that access to the correct diabetes technology, such as insulin pumps, can be life changing for patients, but just over 10 per cent of 18-year-olds with diabetes use insulin pumps. The gap in diabetes outcomes between affluent and deprived areas in Scotland is widening. What urgent action can be put in place to ensure that that worrying trend is reversed?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): That is an important issue and we will work with Diabetes Scotland to take forward the findings of the report. Making sure that not only young people but people of all ages have access to insulin pumps is important, but it is also vital that they are used effectively. We have made improvements on that in years gone by, and we will continue to focus on making further improvements for the sake of people across Scotland who live with the condition.

National Insurance Contributions (Local Authorities)

Foysoyl Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): The First Minister will be aware of the anger in local authorities across Scotland that the Scottish Government is not planning to compensate them for the upcoming rise in national insurance contributions in the way that councils in England and Wales are being compensated. That will eventually cause further cuts to already-stressed services. How does the First Minister justify leaving Scottish local authorities worse off from this change than their English counterparts?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): The United Kingdom Treasury block grant to the Scottish budget does not identify consequential funding for national insurance contributions, so there are no identifiable consequentials to pass on. However, we are providing to local government a settlement that is fair and, crucially, affordable. The overall local government funding package of more than £12.5 billion represents an increase in real terms of 5.1 per cent and, in revenue alone, it is a real-terms increase of 4.9

per cent. We will continue to treat local government as fairly as possible and support it as far as we possibly can in delivering the services that people across the country rely on.

Livestock Worrying

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): As the First Minister will be aware, my Dogs (Protection of Livestock) (Amendment) (Scotland) Act 2021 is now in force, and it provides Police Scotland and the courts with greater powers to investigate those who allow their dogs to worry, attack or kill livestock in Scotland's countryside. Livestock worrying can have serious animal welfare implications as well as significant financial and emotional impacts on farmers. In light of the approach of lambing season, can the First Minister outline what action the Scottish Government is taking to promote public awareness of the updated legislation?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I again congratulate Emma Harper on her success with the legislation, which is extremely important. I can assure her that the Scottish Government will take appropriate steps to raise awareness of it and, of course, we will do everything that we can, working with partners as appropriate, to ensure appropriate enforcement of it. It is a significant step forward and one that I know will be particularly welcomed across rural Scotland.

Free Personal Care

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): Since the extension of free personal care to people under 65, no data has been recorded on the number of people who have now received such care. We have seen problems during the pandemic for people accessing care packages, with many care packages being removed or cut. More and more people are reporting that it is individuals with complex needs and life-limiting conditions who are not getting that care.

Will the Scottish Government agree today to establish a national recovery group, alongside the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, to ensure that people who are entitled to free personal care get that care, and that free personal care is fully restored and delivered across Scotland?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): First, everybody who is entitled to free personal care should get free personal care. Entitlement to free personal care in Scotland goes far beyond the situation in other parts of the United Kingdom.

I will not give a commitment today to the member's proposition. I will consider it carefully, but I will not say, before I have had a chance to consider it, whether I think that it is the right way forward.

I will also look at the issue of data and come back to the member with an indication of when data is likely to be published, which will give a sense of how many people are taking up free personal care entitlement.

Flammable Cladding (Lancefield Quay)

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): Constituents in Lancefield Quay in Glasgow are living with what have been deemed 22 intolerable risks to life as a result of flammable cladding on their building. They have been struggling to get a single building assessment on the cladding, which was promised in June 2021. What could the First Minister and her Government do to assist my constituents in obtaining that information, as a matter of urgency?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I know, from my position as constituency MSP, how important that is. The Government is taking steps to ensure that single building assessments take place. I will ask the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government to write to the member with a full update on that work and what the next steps are.

BBC Licence Fee

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): What is the Scottish Government's response regarding the impact on Scotland of reports that the BBC licence fee will be cut after the current funding deal ends in 2027?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I am sure that every member across the chamber will, from time to time, have gripes about or criticisms of the BBC, but it is an important part of our broadcasting framework and we should all defend the principle of public service broadcasting.

I am deeply concerned by the announcements, or hints of announcements, that we heard earlier this week from the United Kingdom Government. I suspect—there is some evidence—that that was an attempt to divert attention from the Prime Minister's troubles. Nevertheless, all of us have to stand up for those principles and guard against the UK Government and the damage that it seems willing to do to key institutions, often just to try to save its own skin.

Nationality and Borders Bill

3. Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): To ask the First Minister what impact the United Kingdom Government's Nationality and Borders Bill will have on devolved functions. (S6F-00675)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): The Scottish Government has profound concerns

about the bill. We are currently considering its potential impact on areas that are devolved. If we conclude that there is an impact on the legislative competence of this Parliament, we will lodge a legislative consent memorandum, setting out the relevant provisions. There is no doubt, however, that the bill will have significant impacts on devolved services, local authorities and communities.

The Scottish ministers have written to the UK Government in relation to the bill five times, outlining our significant concerns, along with the Welsh Government, which shares those concerns.

I note that the House of Commons Joint Committee on Human Rights said yesterday that the reforms to the asylum system that are proposed in the bill

“would fail to meet the UK's human rights obligations and risk exacerbating the already unacceptable backlog”.

We will continue to urge the UK Government to introduce a humane, effective and efficient system that delivers for people living in Scotland, including those who are fleeing war and persecution.

Maggie Chapman: The Prime Minister's intention to use the military to prevent asylum seekers reaching the UK is deeply immoral, as is the possibility of trading access to Covid vaccines for the right to open detention centres in other countries.

The First Minister will be aware of the appalling circumstances faced by many asylum seekers in Scotland, including in Aberdeen, in my region. They are accommodated in hotels, but not given basic support or things like toiletries, culturally sensitive food, language classes and so on. Although we do not have the powers to counter those racist policies, we can make sure that asylum seekers and refugees in Scotland are treated better.

I am sure that the First Minister will join me in condemning the plans by the Prime Minister and his cruel and inhumane Home Office. Will she also outline what lessons have been learned from the tragic death at the Park Inn in Glasgow, and say what more we can do to prevent the growth in the use of institutional accommodation across Scotland and improve the support available through local authorities so that asylum seekers are treated with dignity?

The First Minister: There is a lot of detail in that question and I undertake to ask the relevant minister to write to Maggie Chapman with more detailed answers than time will allow me to give today, including on the question of lessons learned from the dreadful circumstances around the Park Inn in Glasgow.

The UK Government's plans to divert vessels in the channel are dangerous. It is important that we are all clear that they will significantly increase risk to life. Médecins Sans Frontières has stated:

"Pursuing a policy of forced returns and engaging in pushback tactics is dangerous, inhumane and is in breach of international law. It puts lives at risk at sea."

People seeking asylum in the UK should be accommodated in communities where they can begin to rebuild their lives and have access to essential services and the support and advocacy that they need, and so that they can make a contribution to those communities. The UK Government is failing to provide that.

The Home Office has not yet shared its review of the tragedy at the Park Inn but, as I said, I will ask the Scottish Government minister responsible to write to the member with further details on that.

The comments that we saw at the weekend about the use of the military—a bit like the comments on the BBC—were an attempt to divert attention from the self-inflicted troubles of the Prime Minister. We should not be using the BBC, and we should absolutely not be using refugees and asylum seekers, in that way. I say "we", but it is the UK Government that is using refugees and asylum seekers in that way. It is utterly despicable and is another sign of the moral decay at the heart of the UK Government.

The Presiding Officer: Stephanie Callaghan is joining us online.

Care Home Places

4. Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's response is to Public Health Scotland's census data, which states that three out of four care home places are now provided by private companies. (S6F-00699)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Although the percentage of private sector care homes has increased, the overall balance of provision in care home places between the public and private sectors has not changed markedly over the past decade. The number of care home places has remained relatively stable, which reflects our policy to support people at home for as long as possible.

As we move towards the creation of the national care service, an ethical approach will be at the heart of how we commission and deliver services. All social care providers across Scotland from the independent, third and public sectors will continue to be subject to the same regulations, standards and guidelines, ensuring that the continuation of high-quality care home provision is and will

continue to be the priority of the Scottish Government.

Stephanie Callaghan: Given the prevalence of private care home provision across Uddingston and Bellshill, and Scotland more widely, how will the national care service deliver improved terms and conditions for private care home staff and ensure high-quality care for residents?

The First Minister: There is no doubt that the national care service will be the most significant change in public services, probably since the establishment of the national health service. We are committed to delivering a service by the end of this parliamentary session in order to ensure that everyone gets the high-quality care that they are entitled to, regardless of where they live in Scotland.

The consultation on the establishment of the national care service proposed that it will oversee the delivery of care, improve standards, ensure enhanced pay and conditions for workers and provide better support for unpaid carers, as well as supporting ethical commissioning of care. All of that will lead to better outcomes for those who rely on our care services. It is important, difficult and, in many aspects, controversial work. I hope that by the end of this session of Parliament it will be a significant public sector reform that future generations will look back on as fondly as we look on the establishment of the national health service.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Irrespective of the status of the sector, the employees in social care are predominantly female and are predominantly low paid—it is still the case that people can get paid more working in hospitality and retail. There were vacancies before the pandemic, and the situation has been made worse by the pandemic. Will the First Minister back the GMB and Unite the union in their campaigns to pay care workers £15 per hour, starting with an immediate rise to £12 per hour in April?

The First Minister: We are increasing the pay of those who work in the care sector. It is important that, while Jackie Baillie sets out the problem, as she always does, it is the Scottish Government that is delivering the solutions. We are increasing the pay of social care workers, and we will continue to do that. We of course have to do that within the bounds of affordability, and we will do so, but we are also committed to a national care service that will have absolutely at its heart collective bargaining and better pay and conditions for social care staff. We will continue to get on with doing the hard work that delivers the outcomes that Jackie Baillie calls for.

R100 Broadband Programme (Lot 1)

5. Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): To ask the First Minister whether she will provide an update on the delivery of lot 1 of the R100 programme. (S6F-00677)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Of course, broadband investment is reserved to Westminster. However, given the United Kingdom Government's failure to deliver on that, alongside its failure to deliver on many other things, we have had to step in and make a difference.

The R100 north contract was signed in December 2020. Despite the pandemic, a huge amount of preparatory work has been completed since then. A remodelling exercise ensured that every connection that is delivered will be full fibre. Survey work has been done for more than 5,000 properties and 16 subsea cables, which will deliver vital backhaul connectivity to 15 Scottish islands.

We anticipate that, by the end of June, the north lot contract will have delivered more than 4,000 connections. The R100 Scottish broadband voucher scheme also ensures that everyone who wants a superfast broadband connection can now have one. Around 750 connections have already been delivered in the north of Scotland.

Finlay Carson: I am not surprised by the First Minister's response. She will no doubt continue to try to fool the public into believing that the roll-out of broadband is reserved.

The Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport (Michael Matheson): It is.

Finlay Carson: The practical roll-out of broadband is devolved to the Scottish Government. Like the patience of people in rural Scotland, that line is wearing thin.

The Scottish National Party talked up the scheme as being about reaching 100 per cent, but rural communities are not getting what they expected. Nearly 37,000 properties in lot 1 will not get fibre from the main scheme, and the voucher scheme that the First Minister talks about is delivering nothing, with an uptake of only 4 per cent so far. Surely the First Minister should rename the R100 scheme that the SNP promised as the R40 scheme—and it is five years late. The SNP promised that its flagship R100 scheme would be delivered to everybody by 2021. Will the First Minister now apologise to people and businesses in rural and remote communities who might not get connected at all? Most of them will not get connected until 2027.

The First Minister: Through the R100 contracts, the R100 Scottish broadband voucher scheme and, of course, commercial coverage, we have ensured that every premises in Scotland can access a superfast broadband connection. Despite

telecommunications being reserved—that is not a matter of opinion; it is a matter of fact in the Scotland Act 1998, which Finlay Carson is free to check—to date, the UK Government's contribution to the R100 programme totals £31.5 million, which is 5 per cent of the total, compared with £579 million invested by the Scottish Government. The UK Government's own project gigabit has yet to award a single procurement contract.

Again, the Scottish Government is getting on with the job of delivering connections while all that the Scottish Conservatives can do is gripe and gurn about it.

The Presiding Officer: I remind members to desist from shouting across the chamber when we are trying to hear questions and answers.

ScotRail Ticket Offices

6. Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's response is to ScotRail's plans to cut ticket office opening hours at 120 stations and to close three ticket offices entirely. (S6F-00698)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): The aim of the review is, of course, the modernisation of railway stations. It is clear to most people that technology has changed how people want to access information and tickets, but we also need to acknowledge, of course, the importance of local staff services on the ground where and when they are needed. The consultation offers the public the chance to have their say on how to provide an efficient modern service for the future, and we encourage people to get involved in it. We will await the consultation findings before any final decisions are made on the proposals.

Neil Bibby: Ticket office staff play a crucial role in making our railways safe and accessible. Many of those workers go above and beyond, such as those at Dalmeir whose quick thinking recently saved a life. A properly staffed rail network is essential to reduce car use and meet Scotland's climate ambitions. However, under the Government, rail is being undermined. ScotRail is cutting 300 services per day, fares will be hiked up by 3.8 per cent next week, ticket desks are shutting, and there is still no fully integrated smart ticketing for passengers. To drive modal shift, the rail network must be more attractive and more accessible to passengers. Will the First Minister therefore stop these ticket office closures?

The First Minister: We will consult on what a modern system of railway stations and offices looks like. I absolutely agree on the importance of ticket office staff and, where they are necessary, it is important to recognise that. However, everybody knows that, in many railway stations, the ticket process is now automated. We have to

reflect that in how those services are delivered in future, and it is right that we consult properly so that we come to the right balanced decisions. We are investing heavily in our railways and we will continue to do so to ensure that they provide a service that the people of Scotland need and deserve, and have a right to expect.

To continue the theme of Opposition parties calling for things while this Government gets on with delivery, this Government is in the process of bringing ScotRail into public ownership, delivering the nationalisation that Scottish Labour only talks about.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): Given that passenger numbers on the railways are dramatically down, and ScotRail therefore depends on the public purse for an increased subsidy, does the First Minister agree that ScotRail has to look at its costs and reduce them if possible?

The First Minister: We have to make sure that we have a modern and efficient service and, of course, one that provides taxpayers with value for money. Right now, we are supporting our rail franchises with more than £1 billion, including £450 million of additional funding via the pandemic emergency measures. We will continue to do so in order to ensure that Scotland has the railway service that it needs and deserves. As I said earlier, we will bring ScotRail into public ownership, which I think the majority of people will welcome.

Covid-19 Restrictions (Cancer Diagnosis)

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): Fifty per cent of lung cancer patients are diagnosed at stage 4, and mortality rates for that cancer are high. During Covid restrictions, 25 per cent fewer people were diagnosed, and there were 25 per cent fewer people in treatment. Does the First Minister recognise that Covid restrictions have a significant impact on many other conditions that will be felt long after the Covid pandemic has passed?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Yes, I do. If memory serves me correctly, I think that we had an exchange on this important issue last week. Early diagnosis of cancer, and the earliest possible staging of cancer, is vital. That is why we are investing so heavily in the detect cancer early programme, and why we have established, or are establishing, fast-track cancer diagnostic centres so that people with less common symptoms of cancer can get the same fast-track access—and, we would hope, fast-track diagnosis—as those on the urgent suspicion of cancer referral pathway. That is really important, and we are absolutely committed to ensuring the earliest possible diagnosis.

Of course, staging is not the only important thing; we then need to ensure that people have quick access to high-quality care and treatment, and that is a big part of our focus in cancer services.

Child Poverty Targets

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): United Kingdom inflation is hitting a 30-year high and energy costs for households are spiralling, with no action from the UK Government, and the UK Government has cut the standard rate of universal credit by £20 per week. Will the First Minister outline what impact all that has had on her Government's ability to meet her child poverty targets, and say whether she supports the Poverty Alliance's campaign for the UK Government to scrap the punitive welfare cap?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I fully support the Poverty Alliance campaign. I will be blunt about it: the UK Government is making the poorest poorer, and it is doing so knowingly, which is utterly despicable. The removal of the £20-a-week universal credit uplift has impacted on some of the poorest families in our society. Those actions are making it more difficult for the Scottish Government to live up to our responsibilities to tackle child poverty.

However, we are doing more—for example, we are doubling the Scottish child payment. A payment like that does not exist in any other part of the UK and, having established it, we are now taking steps to double it. We are doing everything that we can, but if we were not up against a Government that is pulling in the opposite direction, we would be able to do more and have a much greater impact. That is, of course, a powerful argument for having all the levers in the hands of Scottish Governments and the Scottish Parliament, and not leaving them in the hands of Westminster Governments.

Nuclear Weapons Treaties

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The final item of business today is a members' business debate on motion S6M-02639, in the name of Bill Kidd, on the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. The debate will be concluded without any questions being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament recognises that the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) entered into force on 22 January 2021; notes that the first meeting of state parties (1st MSP) will take place in Vienna from 22 to 24 March 2022; further notes that the 1st MSP will determine the rules of procedure for observers and state participators, deadlines for disarmament, verification and removal of nuclear weapons, and victim remediation with an emphasis on the disproportionate impact on indigenous communities and women and girls; recognises that the Review Conference of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) will take place from 4 to 28 January 2022; understands that the UK is a state party to this treaty, and is accordingly bound by Article 6, which is to "pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament"; believes that civil society groups in Scotland, including in the Glasgow Anniesland constituency, consider that the decision to increase the UK's nuclear stockpile creates a higher risk of an accident on Scottish roads, as warheads are transported to and from Faslane, Coulport, and notes the reported calls from civil society groups for the UK Government to uphold its commitment to Article 6 of the NPT and to engage with the 1st MSP on the TPNW in Vienna next year.

12:46

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): I thank my fellow MSPs who join me in this debate to bring attention to the serious concern surrounding, and the continued importance of, the international implementation of nuclear disarmament.

Saturday marks the first anniversary of the entry into force of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. As the motion highlights, the 10th review conference of the parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons—the NPT review conference—was scheduled to take place this month. However, as members may be aware, it was postponed due to the pandemic. It is now likely that the review conference will take place in August.

I am determined to attend the conference in person as the head of delegation for Parliamentarians for Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament, or PNND—members can see why we use the abbreviation. [*Interruption.*] I laughed there because I thought that was funny. As the co-president of PNND, I will represent parliamentarians from across the globe who are

committed to seeing the implementation of total nuclear disarmament.

We are debating two international treaties: the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, which is otherwise known as the ban treaty. Both are critical to nuclear disarmament.

The NPT, which has been in force since 1970, is a landmark international treaty through which nuclear states committed to stopping the proliferation of nuclear arms. The United Kingdom, the US, Russia, China and France, all of which are permanent members of the United Nations Security Council—the P5—are nuclear states that have signed that treaty. It is a highly important international treaty that needs to be respected by all its parties, as it underpins critical international security structures.

The NPT commits its members to stopping the proliferation of nuclear weapons and nuclear weapons technology to other countries and to stopping an increase in their own nuclear weapon stockpiles. Moreover, in signing the treaty, the P5 members all committed in international law to furthering the goal of achieving nuclear disarmament and to actively working towards complete nuclear disarmament. Therefore, the treaty is hugely important. However, although the treaty entered into force more than 50 years ago, total nuclear disarmament obviously has not been achieved. Moreover, in recent years, there have been worrying instances of non-compliance among nuclear states, including the current UK Government.

As international security concerns heighten and the world changes, we need fresh impetus to encourage nuclear states to renew their investment in the nuclear disarmament process. That is where the new international Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons—the ban treaty—comes in.

The threat of nuclear arms has not diminished, and, although the commitment of nuclear states to "no first use" of those weapons is welcome, it is not enough. The nuclear disarmament debate needs to be reframed and diplomatic thinking needs to be renewed. Nuclear-armed states need to reconcile their security strategies with the moral question of whether it would ever be right to use nuclear weapons. Nuclear weapons are indiscriminate. They do not target only a military base; they devastate entire nations, including hundreds of thousands of civilians who, in any country, cannot afford to have to bear the weight of the actions of their leaders.

The ban treaty is, like the NPT, a landmark treaty. For the first time ever, non-nuclear states

and civil society led an international treaty on nuclear disarmament. That perhaps, ironically, helped the NPT in its 50-year-old commitment to stopping the proliferation of nuclear weapons to non-nuclear states.

The Scottish National Party has stood firm in its opposition to nuclear weapons, as the many invaluable civil society organisations in Scotland and MSPs from across the parties continue to do in our cross-party group on nuclear disarmament. As the convener of that cross-party group, I must mention that here, in the Scottish Parliament, we stand for the majority wish of Scottish people from across the parties in our commitment to rid Scotland of the nuclear weapons that are currently stored here against our will.

As many people will be aware, the international non-governmental organisation called ICAN—the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons—was the driver in getting the ban treaty into the United Nations and accepted and ratified in international law. ICAN won the Nobel peace prize for that work, and an atomic bomb survivor whom many of us have met—an incredible woman called Setsuko Thurlow—accepted the award on ICAN's behalf.

After the atomic bomb was first made, Albert Einstein, one of Thurlow's fellow Nobel prize winners, commented:

"I do not fear the explosive power of the atom bomb. What I fear is the explosive power of evil in the human heart."

As much as the deterrence argument can persuade some, I believe that it can never rule out or compensate for the reality that evil actions take place and can sometimes override the good governance of nations. The only way out of that is through total nuclear disarmament and continued oversight of international agencies on compliance.

Until recently, the cold war felt long gone and it was easy to push the matter to the back of our minds, but the threat of nuclear weapons has not diminished. We have a responsibility, whether Scotland is devolved or independent, to look at that reality head on. I am pleased that the majority of MSPs have signed the ICAN pledge to support the ban treaty. That means that there is enough political will and commitment within Parliament to stand together in working for an end to the danger to the world's long-term future that nuclear weapons stand for.

I take the opportunity to mention the work of all the organisations involved in the cross-party group on nuclear disarmament who have, over the years, continued in their efforts to promote the nuclear disarmament agenda among Scottish parliamentarians and the general public of our country. I must mention, in particular, Janet

Fenton, the ICAN Scottish liaison and chair of the Scottish Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, who has worked tirelessly in that regard and who has been a tremendous help to the cause.

Alongside those partners, I will—Covid rules allowing—attend the first meeting of state parties in Vienna this March, to develop the ban treaty rules further. I encourage my fellow MSPs from across the chamber to do likewise if that is at all possible.

12:54

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): I thank Bill Kidd for securing this important debate on the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, which came into force on 22 January 2021. I acknowledge Bill's long-standing commitment to nuclear disarmament, peace and justice. I will not call him a veteran campaigner—the last time I did that, he did not like it very much—but I will say that his perseverance is inspiring.

The TPNW entered into force on 22 January 2021 and, so far, 59 states have fully ratified it and are now bound by its provisions. Countries that have signed up to the treaty must never

"Develop, test, produce ... acquire ... stockpile ... transfer ... use, or threaten to use nuclear weapons".

They are also forbidden to host another country's nuclear weapons on their territory or to assist or encourage anyone else to engage in any of those prohibited activities.

I have to ask why anyone—or any state—would wish to use these abhorrent weapons, which are the most inhumane instruments of destruction ever created and weapons that, when they are deployed, incinerate human life. Close to 250,000 civilians met that unimaginable end in the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, and many thousands more have since died from radiation-related illnesses.

To date, the UK has continued to insist that it will not sign the treaty nor be an observer at the first meeting of the state parties to the treaty, in March. The UK has also—shockingly—decided to increase its stockpile of nuclear weapons, in clear breach of its obligations under the NPT. The TPNW, with its emphasis on prohibition and elimination, could rectify that deficit.

Safety and security are about more than the absence of violence and war. They are about creating a just and equal society in which everyone can achieve their full potential, in which no one is left behind and in which we help to nurture and support those who need it. The challenges and sacrifices that we have endured over the past couple of years have highlighted that

point more than ever—they have highlighted what is important. As we build back from Covid, recovery must include the end of nuclear weapons.

Nuclear weapons are, of course, immoral. However, it is not just immoral but economically illiterate to spend hundreds of billions of pounds on weapons of mass destruction when that money could be invested in a recovery that actually benefits our citizens.

Paragraph 4 of article 4 of the treaty has a clear relevance for Scotland. It states that

“each State Party that has any nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices in its territory or in any place under its jurisdiction or control that are owned, possessed or controlled by another State shall ensure the prompt removal of such weapons, as soon as possible”.

When the First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, endorsed the Scottish Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom’s covenant to support the TPNW’s entering into force, she said:

“While the Scottish Government is unable to become a party to the treaty, as First Minister I strongly support the principles of the treaty and the work of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom. An independent Scotland would be a keen signatory and I hope the day we can do that is not far off.”

As Bill Kidd pointed out, the majority of parliamentarians in Scotland have signed the ICAN parliamentary pledge, and our First Minister has spoken in support of nuclear disarmament. I believe that the only way to guarantee an end to nuclear weapons in Scotland is for us to regain our independence as a nation, and I look forward to the day when we do that.

12:58

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): I am a lone voice on the Conservative side of the chamber but I will do my best to contribute to the debate, which I am pleased to take part in.

I commend Bill Kidd not just for securing the debate but for his endless campaigning for nuclear disarmament. The name Bill Kidd is synonymous with that campaign not just in Scotland and the UK, but across the world. His letter to Joe Biden, the new president of the United States, is testament to that. I say to Mr Kidd that a Nobel gong is yet within reach and that, in my view, it would be well deserved. I suspect that some of my contribution might not always be in agreement with the premise of the motion, but I have a huge amount of respect for anyone who has a life-long passion such as that about which we have just heard. Politics with principles—who knew, Presiding Officer?

I am more inclined to agree with the motion than to disagree with it, because I do not want to live in

a world in which nuclear weapons are a live and active threat to humanity. However, the sad reality is that we do, and it is difficult to see the end of that scenario any time soon.

The black and white images of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, where hundreds of thousands of civilians died, are the sort of images that stick in spongy minds—certainly that of a modern studies student, which I was. The thrice-postponed NPT summit, which we will hopefully get around to, will be as tough and monumentally important as the 26th UN climate change conference of the parties—COP26—was last year.

However, there is a problem. The sad reality is that the NPT is plagued by a disarmament deficit. Five nuclear states that are parties to the treaty are currently not meeting their commitments, and tensions between the US, China and Russia are increasing—by the day—the unlikelihood of reducing that deficit.

The theory and the practice of disarmament are awkward friends. Bill Kidd is correct in saying that, for a safer world, all nuclear weapons should be dismantled—that is the theory, but the practice is different. The NPT must be worth more than the paper on which it is written. I agree with that. A treaty that was fit for purpose in 1968 is not necessarily fit for purpose in 2022—I note the absence from it of Israel, North Korea, India and Pakistan, although the last two are more likely to have a change of heart on the issue. However, reforms to legacy treaties such as this are difficult and will not come easily. Negotiations will take a long time to conclude.

The practice is different from the theory. Right now, there are serious geopolitical threats to not just Scotland and the UK but all our NATO allies. That is what they are—our allies. Mr Kidd is on the record recently as saying that the three big issues that the next generation faces—

Ruth Maguire: Will Jamie Greene take an intervention?

Jamie Greene: I do not have a huge amount of time, but I am happy to take an intervention if I will get some time back.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Yes, you will get time back.

Ruth Maguire: I thank Jamie Greene for taking an intervention, as I know that we are short of time. I am interested in hearing his reflections on whether rising global tensions reinforce the case for getting rid of nuclear weapons and perhaps make that more urgent.

Jamie Greene: They do reinforce the case, but the problem is that there are some very live active threats whereby the people who pose the threat are increasing their nuclear capability. Therefore,

acceleration is inevitable and hard to stop. It is hard to see an end to that.

Since 2007, Russia has been completely overhauling its nuclear capabilities, with underwater nuclear drones and hypersonic missiles. It does not take much more than a cursory look at Channel 5 television in the evening to see real-life examples of what our armed forces are doing out in the seas to stave off threats. The fact that, at this very second, Russian troops are lining up on the Belarus-Ukraine border shows that these are not just military exercises but a real threat. China's current hostility towards, for example, Taiwan—I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests—is testament to the fact that these are not academic or theoretical questions but live issues, and how we react to them is a valid question.

Back in 2020, in the space of just six days, planes from RAF Lossiemouth took to the skies on three separate occasions to ward off aircraft that failed to identify themselves. The unidentified aircraft were not lost. Was someone testing our response times and capabilities? I am pretty sure that they were and that those three occasions were only the instances that officials were willing to talk about.

The issue of the continuous at-sea deterrent is a complex one. The capability sits in my region. I have been to Faslane and have met personnel there. I am proud of them and have faith that they take their monumental responsibility extremely seriously. In my part of the world, there are very mixed views about the presence of the deterrent, but I genuinely do not think—this is where I disagree with Bill Kidd—that simply moving it across the border to Liverpool or north-east England will move the problem away or make Scotland any safer.

It is worth noting that the global number of nuclear warheads is down from around 70,000 in 1986 to just over 13,000 last year, but that is 13,000 too many, because it takes only one. Clearly, more has to be done. The UK has a role to play in that, and we must do better.

Notwithstanding our differences of views and opinions, I commend Bill Kidd on his efforts. We, in politics, could perhaps learn from him and the zeitgeist.

13:03

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): I thank Bill Kidd for securing the debate and for his long-term commitment to the cause.

Back in 1982, I was in the fourth year at Dunbar grammar school, sitting in class for my favourite subject, modern studies. We were asked to

choose a topic to study as part of our work that year. In 1982, we were in the middle of the cold war, with President Reagan and Margaret Thatcher on one side and President Brezhnev and then Yuri Andropov on the other. I decided that I wanted my study subject to be the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. I joined the CND that year and I have been a member ever since. It is a red line in my political beliefs and always will be. The phrase that stuck in my head from when we were researching the subject was “mutually assured destruction”—MAD. Let that sink in—mutually assured destruction.

Here in Scotland, we are the home of the UK submarine service, including the UK nuclear deterrent and the new generation of hunter-killer submarines. Hunter-killer—the name says it all. Those four submarines are permanently based at Faslane, at least until Scotland becomes independent and we remove nuclear weapons. We are told that Faslane was chosen to host those vessels at the height of the cold war because of its geographical position,

“which forms a bastion on the relatively secluded but deep and easily navigable Gare Loch and Firth of Clyde”.

The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons—the nuclear ban treaty—is an international agreement between countries. All countries that have signed or ratified the TPNW have committed to a complete global ban on nuclear weapons, and on all activities related to the creation or use of nuclear weapons. Today we are celebrating the first year of the treaty; to be precise, Saturday 22 January marks one year since the treaty came into force as international law.

The nuclear ban has already begun to change the world. Billions of pounds have been taken out of investment in nuclear weapons, with more than 100 financial institutions completely disinvesting from them. Countries continue to join the treaty, while a growing number of non-member states have committed to observing the first meeting of state parties. Cities and local authorities around the world are showing their support in growing numbers through the ICAN cities appeal, where parliamentarians here in Scotland and worldwide stand firm in support of nuclear disarmament.

Scotland cannot sign the TPNW unless we become an independent country. However, we can be guided by the principles of the treaty and can take steps to embed as much of it as possible into domestic law. We can prepare for a day when Scotland is able to achieve full nuclear disarmament and sign up to the global nuclear ban.

ICAN asked parliamentarians to sign the following pledge:

"We, the undersigned parliamentarians, warmly welcome the entry into force of the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons as a significant step towards the realization of a nuclear-weapon-free world.

We share the deep concern expressed in the preamble about the catastrophic humanitarian consequences that would result from any use of nuclear weapons and we recognize the consequent need to eliminate these inhumane and abhorrent weapons.

As parliamentarians, we pledge to work for the signature and ratification of this landmark treaty by our respective countries, as we consider the abolition of nuclear weapons to be a global public good of the highest order and an essential step to promote the security and well-being of all peoples."

I was proud to sign that pledge, and I look forward to the day when Scotland becomes independent and nuclear weapons are finally removed from the Clyde.

13:07

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): I thank Bill Kidd for bringing this important debate to Parliament. As the motion points out, article 6 of the non-proliferation treaty is clear. It calls for the

"cessation of the nuclear arms race",

but it also calls for "complete"—complete!—

"disarmament under strict and effective international control."

In addition, 120 countries have now signed up to the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, which proposes a total global ban on these weapons of mass destruction.

For the avoidance of doubt, these are treaties that carry with them binding obligations. We hear a lot about the rule of law and the rule of international law, so what about the observance of this international law? I have a long-held view that nuclear weapons themselves are illegal, and nearly 40 years ago, along with others, I tried to take Margaret Thatcher to court on the grounds that their possession is in direct contravention of international law because they destroy lives indiscriminately. They kill completely innocent women, children and men.

Today, we continue to witness the flouting of international law with no evidence whatsoever of meaningful negotiation, of material progress, or of anything resembling even a strategy for disarmament. We are told that these weapons are a deterrent. The nuclear deterrent is part of the language, the doublespeak and the propaganda of the debate on disarmament. Does anybody really believe that the threat of first-strike nuclear weapons or their location 80 miles from this Parliament makes us any safer? Incidentally, their relocation to 180 miles away in Barrow-in-Furness would not make them any safer.

In wilful or ignorant defiance of the non-proliferation treaty—who knows which?—Boris Johnson announced last year that he was escalating the number of Trident 100-kiloton nuclear warheads from 180 to 260. By any definition, that is not multilateral disarmament—it is unilateral rearmament. It represents a proliferation of ballistic missiles, but it also represents a proliferation of risk, lies and disinformation; a proliferation of nuclear waste, missile convoys and terror threats; and a proliferation of instability, curbs on civil liberties and austerity in every other public service.

So, the honest division in this debate is not between those of us who support unilateral nuclear disarmament and those who support multilateral nuclear disarmament. The honest division is between those of us who believe in nuclear disarmament and those who, frankly, do not. That is what the Trident debate is about. Of course, it is also about jobs. We need to understand that the £200 billion that is to be spent on Trident's replacement would create jobs—of course it would—but, with that kind of money, how many more jobs could we create to rebuild our manufacturing base, to invest in our national health service and to provide the education, health and environmental protection that the world is crying out for?

Finally, I am in no doubt that what we need at this time is political leadership, but I am equally certain that it will not come from the political elite whose heads are turned by the twin temptations of militarism and nationalism. It will come from the people, who will once again lead the leaders. That is what this debate—and the motion—is about. It is about summoning up a renewed spirit of popular resistance; it is about taking action in support of our moral objection to genocide to secure our common survival; and it is about grasping the historic opportunity to build a just, civilised and peaceful society in a just, civilised and peaceful world.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Bob Doris, to be followed by Maggie Chapman, who will be the final speaker before the minister responds to the debate.

13:12

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): I congratulate Bill Kidd on securing this important debate and pay tribute to him for his work over many years on nuclear disarmament. I also acknowledge his current role as co-president of Parliamentarians for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament.

This debate and, of course, the United Nations Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons,

which is the subject of it, are powerful reminders that there is nothing moral, normal, acceptable, palatable or humane about nuclear weapons and their use for human destruction and the destruction of the planet. Nations must raise their voices against them and, of course, meet their international legal obligations.

The UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons came into force almost a year ago. It is a sweeping treaty that was designed to outlaw and rid the world of weapons from a bygone, cold war era. Despite that, it is with great sadness that I note that the British Government has failed to ratify the treaty. Its failure to do so demonstrates the failure of the United Kingdom to be a world leader in the fight for nuclear disarmament. Westminster continues to fund a nuclear defence system that goes against the United Kingdom's long-established commitment to the United Nations. Unfortunately, that Westminster nuclear obsession includes the UK Labour Party, whose defence spokesperson describes the UK's nuclear weapons as "non-negotiable".

However, I acknowledge that members of all parties, including the Labour Party, and of the Labour movement and, of course, wider civic society, have, over many years, campaigned to rid our shores and the world of nuclear weapons. I wish to see an independent, nuclear-free Scotland. We must make common cause with all those who seek the elimination of nuclear weapons, and I commend the work on that of the cross-party group in the Scottish Parliament on nuclear disarmament.

The UK's position is wholly counterproductive. How can Westminster condemn the actions of foreign states in their development of nuclear weapons while demonstrating its complicit failure to act on eliminating its own nuclear arsenal, on the replenishment of which another £200 billion is to be spent, as we heard from Richard Leonard?

If the British Government's is not opposed to nuclear weapons for moral reasons, perhaps it ought to ratify the UN treaty on economic grounds. The annual cost to the UK of maintaining and running such a system is £18 billion, which equates to the state spending more than £30,000 per minute to continue the programme. That financial burden is itself a moral outrage. Such eye-watering sums could be better spent by helping those most in need at home and by contributing more to our overseas aid obligations, rather than cutting resources as the UK Government currently does.

It is the moral case that is at the heart of encouraging all nations to sign and ratify the UN treaty and to play their part in ridding the world of nuclear weapons.

I welcome the first meeting of state parties, which will take place in March this year. I am delighted that Bill Kidd will attend to discuss the continued strength of the UN's commitment to nuclear prohibition. I wish all participants well when they meet in Vienna and I heartily thank Bill Kidd MSP for his on-going leadership in seeking to advance the cause of a nuclear-free Scotland and a nuclear-free world.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call the minister, Ash Regan, to speak for up to seven minutes in response to the debate.

I apologise: the minister is looking at me with a confused expression on her face, and rightly so. I also apologise to Maggie Chapman. I got ahead of myself. I call Maggie Chapman to speak for up to four minutes.

13:16

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): That is no problem, Presiding Officer. Thank you.

I thank Bill Kidd for lodging his motion and for securing the debate. I share his enthusiasm for the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons and was delighted when it came into force a year ago. I also appreciate the detail that Bill and others have given about the prohibition and non-proliferation treaties.

It is absolutely right that we devote parliamentary time to this important issue. We have a role to play in educating ourselves and others. I thank Bill Kidd for his leadership in that and for acknowledging the work of Janet Fenton, who has been inspirational for so many in Scotland and further afield.

I am pleased to be able to contribute to the debate, although I wish that it were not necessary. Nuclear weapons are a stain on us all. They are the most destructive, inhumane and indiscriminate weapons ever created. They are unlike any other military force: they cause devastation in the moment and for generations, they are uniquely persistent and they spread genetically damaging radioactive fallout. They are weapons of indiscriminate intergenerational mass murder.

As if all that is not bad enough, use of nuclear weapons would destroy all forms of life, and their development disrupts life-support systems, including our climate. Use of less than 1 per cent of the nuclear weapons that currently exist in the world could disrupt the global climate and threaten as many as 2 billion people with starvation in a nuclear famine. The thousands of nuclear weapons that are possessed by just the United States and Russia would destroy the world. The

expression “nuclear winter” does not even come close to describing what would be experienced.

That those weapons exist and that Governments play politics with them should shame us all. Nuclear weapons epitomise the worst of politics. To use the threat of world-obliterating force means that politics has failed. It teaches us that violence is a legitimate answer to difficult questions and indicates that Governments care more about their egos and about making shows of strength and power than they do about life.

As a South African citizen, I am pleased that South Africa made the conscious decision to disarm. The South African Government dismantled all of its nuclear weapons and was the first state in the world voluntarily to give up all the nuclear arms that it had developed. The country has been a signatory of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons since 1991 and ratified the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons three years ago, thereby becoming the first country to have had nuclear weapons, disarmed them and gone on to sign those treaties.

For the many economic, humanitarian and moral reasons that have already been outlined by others, I wish that the country that I have chosen as my home could sign the prohibition treaty today. Unfortunately, it looks as if we must wait until Scotland is an independent country before we can do that. We must make sure that we do that when we can.

I agree with Jamie Greene and others. I do not just want nuclear weapons out of Scotland; I want them out of every country. We can, and should, use all our resources for good.

We must also use the powers that we have now, and powers that I hope we will have in the future, to restrict and stop the proliferation not only of nuclear machinery, but of the broader military-industrial complex. The two are related. As a priority, we should stop the preferential Government support for Raytheon, BAE Systems and other dealers in death. We can see in Yemen the damage that Britain, including Scotland, continues to do in the world through support for arms manufacture. We need to use all peaceful avenues that are open to us to prevent the UK Government from renewing its huge financial support for Trident and other nuclear weapons.

We can and must be a force for good in the world. We can be peace builders, we can be peacemakers, and we can say that we will never again use indiscriminate weapons of mass murder.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can, now, call the minister, Ash Regan, to respond to the debate. You have up to seven minutes.

13:20

The Minister for Community Safety (Ash Regan): I thank Bill Kidd for bringing his motion to the chamber for debate. I express to him and the wider cross-party group on nuclear disarmament my appreciation for their commitment and their work on this important issue, and I thank him for his powerful speech.

There have been thoughtful contributions from members throughout the chamber, including among others Ruth Maguire, Jamie Greene and Bob Doris. It is very good to see Ruth Maguire back in the chamber this week.

The Scottish Government is firmly opposed to the possession, threat and use of nuclear weapons. We are committed to pursuing safe and complete withdrawal of all nuclear weapons from Scotland and we have repeatedly called on the UK Government to cancel its plans for the Dreadnought programme.

Nuclear weapons are morally wrong—that point was made by a number of speakers in the debate—as well as being strategically wrong and economically wrong, as Bob Doris said. They are indiscriminate and devastating in their impacts, and their use would bring unspeakable humanitarian suffering and widespread environmental damage.

Nuclear weapons are obsolete, dangerous and impractical, yet last year the UK Government broke its commitment to the international community by increasing the nuclear weapon stockpile cap to no more than 260 warheads. That represents a 40 per cent increase from its 2010 commitment to having no more than 180 warheads. The move is completely at odds with article 6 of the non-proliferation treaty, to which the UK Government is a signatory. Two independent defence experts from the London School of Economics concluded that the UK’s increase of warheads constitutes a breach of article 6.

Nuclear weapons do not provide a meaningful deterrent to many modern-day threats, such as terrorist attacks, nor have they proved to be a deterrent to other nuclear-armed states carrying out atrocious acts on British soil. Rather than making repeated and damaging cuts to conventional military forces and capabilities, the UK Government would do better to use the £41 billion that it is spending on replacing Trident to invest in modern warfare capabilities that are relevant to today’s threats.

The Scottish Government supports the objectives of the international Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons and the non-proliferation treaty. We recognise the important role that the international community has in collectively creating the conditions for a world

without nuclear weapons. The three pillars of the non-proliferation treaty—non-proliferation, disarmament and peaceful use of nuclear energy—provide the international community with a balanced step-by-step framework for disarmament. We will follow the outcomes of both treaty conferences carefully in order to further our thinking on the nuclear debate.

Jamie Greene: I have a question for the minister that goes back to my concept of theory and practice. If every signatory to the treaty got rid of all their nuclear weapons, how would the world deal with the countries that are not party to the treaty and have not signed up to disarmament but still hold weapons or have ambitions to do so?

Ash Regan: Jamie Greene raises an important point. As I said, that is the how we need to look at such things, which is why the Scottish Government will follow the outcomes of the treaty conferences carefully to help to develop our thinking further.

I turn to transportation of defence nuclear material. The responsibility for transportation of nuclear warheads lies with the Ministry of Defence, but the Scottish Government expects that transportation to be carried out safely and securely, and has made that expectation clear to the UK Government.

As lead Government department for the response to a defence nuclear emergency, the Ministry of Defence organises regular training and exercises in respect of its emergency response planning and arrangements, and Scotland's emergency responders participate as appropriate. Although there has never been a defence nuclear transport incident that posed a radiation hazard, I understand public concern about those convoys, and I stress that we in the Scottish Government take the matter very seriously.

There is significant resilience planning in place. Scotland's three regional resilience partnerships include the local authorities, but are led by Police Scotland and the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and supported by Scottish Government resilience co-ordinator teams. Members might wish to note that those partnerships undertake risk and preparedness assessment processes regularly. The resilience register is maintained on an on-going basis, and the Scottish Government has published a range of guidance for the resilience partnerships, which enables them to identify and assess the main risks that are relevant to their regions, and to determine how prepared they are to deal with the consequences of those risks.

The MOD has provided assurance that transport routes that are adopted are carefully selected as part of a rigorous risk assessment process and are

regularly reassessed for their continued suitability. The MOD has also provided assurance that operational planning always takes into account other factors, including road and weather conditions.

There are well-established resilience structures in place to manage the consequences of any emergency, and they have been and continue to be robustly tested and proved by exercises and real events.

Ruth Maguire: Having seen the details of risk assessments, does the minister personally feel that there is ever an acceptable level of risk in having those weapons travelling on our roads and through our major cities at any time, but perhaps especially when we are in a pandemic and our emergency services are already stretched?

Ash Regan: Ruth Maguire raises a very understandable point. I completely understand public concern about the level of risk that nuclear weapons transport poses to communities in Scotland.

The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service has put in place plans and has made pragmatic preparations to deal with incidents that involve nuclear defence material, including convoys of such material. Similarly, Police Scotland can give assurance that up-to-date plans are in place to deal with all major incidents, including nuclear incidents, and its procedures for defence nuclear material are current. Its resilience staff liaise regularly with the Ministry of Defence Police on a range of matters, including what I have outlined.

As I said at the outset, the Scottish Government believes that nuclear weapons are immoral, illegal and a colossal waste of money. We wish to see the Trident replacement programme being scrapped and the billions of pounds of taxpayers' money put to better use, and we have called on the UK Government to do that.

The Scottish Government supports the objectives of the international treaties on nuclear weapons and we will work with partners to make an independent Scotland a nation that is free of nuclear weapons.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, minister; that concludes the debate.

13:28

Meeting suspended.

14:30

On resuming—

Portfolio Question Time

Constitution, External Affairs and Culture

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): I remind members that Covid-related measures are in place and that face coverings should be worn while moving around the chamber and the wider campus.

The next item of business is portfolio questions, and this time the portfolio is constitution, external affairs and culture. I remind members that questions 3 and 6 are grouped and that I will take any supplementaries on those questions after both have been answered. If a member wishes to ask a supplementary on any other question, they should please press their request-to-speak button at the point of the relevant question.

It will not surprise members to learn that we have quite a bit of interest in some questions more than others, so I would appreciate succinct questions and succinct answers from the ministerial team.

Creative Industries (Self-employment)

1. Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what assistance it is giving to people in the creative industries who are self-employed and may have work cancelled due to the Covid-19 pandemic. (S6O-00642)

The Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): The Scottish Government recognises the substantial challenges that the Covid-19 pandemic has presented to self-employed people and freelancers in the creative industries. We have already provided £240 million to the culture sector over the pandemic, which includes £65 million to help alleviate the financial pressures that individuals and businesses have been facing following cultural venue closures and event cancellations in the light of the omicron variant. That support includes the £10 million cancellation fund for creative freelancers, to support freelancers who are experiencing immediate financial hardship following cancellations. Self-employed individuals operating as a cultural organisation are eligible for the new £25 million Covid-19 cancellation fund for cultural organisations, via Creative Scotland.

Gillian Martin: How many freelancers have applied to the cancellation fund for creative freelancers since it opened in the first week of January? Does the money that freelancers can

claim extend to the hiring of equipment, which may have had to be cancelled? I know that that will be an issue for many freelancers in television production and live music, in particular.

Angus Robertson: The member is absolutely right. As of yesterday, 19 January, there have been 1,728 applications to Creative Scotland's cancellation fund for creative freelancers, requesting a total of £2.94 million. Sixty-one per cent of applications have been from freelancers in the music sector. So far, Creative Scotland has paid £1.05 million to freelancers.

For the freelancers fund, applicants need to evidence cancellations and they then self-assess the cost of cancellation, up to the £2,000 limit. To answer the specific question, a creative freelancer can include hire of equipment in their application, as long as the claim does not exceed £2,000.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): What flexibility is in the guidance to support people to stay in our creative industries? I am thinking especially of those who have had to juggle behind the scenes and work incredibly hard to try and get work in other sectors, because a lack of employment has meant that they have not managed to keep going.

Angus Robertson: I can give Sarah Boyack my absolute assurance about the assessment of funding that is being undertaken by Creative Scotland—to which I pay tribute, incidentally. A lot of hard work has had to go into getting the schemes up and running during the festive season, to deal with closures in December and January, and, eventually, through to March.

Flexibility is being shown in the assessment of claims that are being made, especially to home in on individuals and businesses who are facing insolvency. I assure Sarah Boyack and colleagues across the chamber that Creative Scotland's assessment process is ensuring that there is an understanding of the existential challenge that people and businesses are facing.

If colleagues are aware of any cases where decisions are not being taken as expeditiously as they might perhaps be in these extreme circumstances, I appeal to them to please raise them with me, and I will ensure that Creative Scotland will look at them. I have no reason to believe that that is happening, but I want to ensure that people are aware that a great effort is being undertaken to take these steps as quickly as possible.

Independence Referendum (Staffing Resources)

2. Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what staffing resources it has allocated to the

preparation work for a new independence referendum. (S6O-00643)

The Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): Work on the programme for government commitments to hold an independence referendum and develop a prospectus for independence in this session of Parliament is being co-ordinated by the constitution and cabinet directorate. Officials in teams across a range of portfolios will contribute to the work as part of their wider responsibilities to support the Scottish Government. I am pleased that Maurice Golden acknowledges, in his question, that there will be a new independence referendum. We intend that that referendum will be conducted during this session of Parliament.

Maurice Golden: Children's education has suffered, the national health service is stretched to breaking point and the economy is still fragile. Even the Scottish National Party must recognise that recovering from the pandemic is the real priority for the people of Scotland. Does the cabinet secretary not see that another damaging, disruptive, divisive referendum will put the recovery at risk?

Angus Robertson: I say gently to Maurice Golden, because he is clearly rehearsing the speeches that he was giving during the Scottish Parliament election campaign, that that question has been settled. His party and my party went to the public to ask for their support in an election. His party lost that election. The Scottish National Party and the Scottish Green Party were elected on a mandate to conduct a referendum during this session of Parliament.

Normally in democracies, Opposition parties try to hold the Government to account on delivering what the Government has promised to do in its manifesto. We were elected with a mandate to deliver a referendum, and I look forward to Maurice Golden ensuring that we do just that. I will be happy to deliver on a manifesto promise that we were elected to deliver.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Can the cabinet secretary advise the Parliament how staffing resources allocated to preparing for a new independence referendum compare to the number of staff who are currently dealing with Brexit, more than a year after we left the European Union?

Angus Robertson: As I explained previously, staff from a number of parts of the Scottish Government will be involved in work to prepare for a referendum on independence. To put that in context, civil servants from business areas all over the Scottish Government continue to work on matters resulting from the UK Government's

determination to pursue a hard Brexit against the democratic will of the people of Scotland. Such matters include the estimated £9 billion cut to Scotland's gross domestic product by 2030 and the damage to Scottish businesses that wish to trade with the EU as a result of their facing all sorts of unnecessary new barriers. That work has, for example, required some 98 separate pieces of secondary legislation alone just to keep the statute law working.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): Just because the Tories have got it wrong does not mean that the SNP has to get it wrong, too.

I cannot believe my ears. I shared a platform with the First Minister throughout the election campaign and I heard her say that she would not push forward with an independence referendum and campaign until the pandemic was over. We know fine well that the virus is still among us, but here we have a minister devoting scarce resources to an independence campaign. What on earth is he thinking?

Angus Robertson: I would have thought that somebody espousing liberalism and democracy would recognise an election result. Governments need to do a great many things, and one of the things that we will do, because we were elected to do so in a democracy, is to conduct a referendum during this session of Parliament. I am sure that Willie Rennie would be at the front of the queue if the preparation work was not being done in the run-up to that referendum.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I welcome the allocation of resource to honour the SNP's manifesto commitment to deliver a referendum in this session of Parliament. I welcome, too, the Scottish Government's programme for government. I wonder whether those preparations might include looking into whether the better together promises that were made in 2014 have since been honoured.

Angus Robertson: I can certainly raise that when we get to that stage of the preparations. I do not think that it will take a long time to research whether the promises and threats that were raised by the better together campaign of the Liberal Democrats, the Labour Party and the Conservative Party, who campaigned together, have been broken, because most of them have.

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): Can the cabinet secretary advise whether preparation work for an independence referendum will look at how the UK has fared economically and socially in the 21st century, compared to its neighbours in north-west Europe?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Can you be as brief as possible, please, cabinet secretary?

Angus Robertson: I give my colleague an absolute assurance that the answer is yes, and with good reason.

Afghan Refugees Resettlement

3. **Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its discussions with the United Kingdom Government regarding people in Afghanistan seeking resettlement in the UK who could be relocated in Scotland if they already have existing family connections, including in relation to correspondence from MSPs on this matter. (S6O-00644)

The Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): I thank Katy Clark for being persistent on this issue—I know that she cares about it deeply.

We engage regularly with the UK Government, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, individual local authorities and other partners to ensure that people are provided with the safety and security that they need in order to rebuild their lives in Scotland.

The UK Government is responsible for refugee resettlement and relocation, and the Home Office is responsible for the provision of accommodation. However, we continue to request that consideration is given to preferences, including where there are family and other connections, wherever possible.

Scotland is committed to playing its part in welcoming people fleeing Afghanistan. I am delighted that all Scotland's 32 local authorities have confirmed their participation in the scheme.

Katy Clark: My experience—and I suspect that it is the same for other members—is that the Home Office is not responding to correspondence from MSPs and MPs who are acting on behalf of individuals who are trying to get out of Afghanistan. An investigation by Open Democracy in December found that more than 99 per cent of calls to the UK Government helpline were unanswered and only 5 per cent of callers received the necessary assistance. Will the cabinet secretary use his role to take that up with the Home Office and ask for more resources to be put into that work?

Angus Robertson: The situation with the Home Office is hugely disappointing. People who find themselves in such circumstances deserve respect—their situation should be dealt with expeditiously and they deserve consideration and empathy.

I encourage Katy Clark and any other members who have had such experiences in relation to

constituency cases—it is not rare, unfortunately—to forward on any constituent correspondence to me and I will be happy to take it up with the Home Office. However, I have to say that I am not brimming with confidence that the Home Office will miraculously change its course in dealing with such matters.

Afghan Refugees Resettlement

6. **Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its discussions with the United Kingdom Government regarding the resettlement scheme for Afghan refugees who may be resettled in Scotland. (S6O-00647)

The Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government met with Victoria Atkins, the UK Minister for Afghan Resettlement on 10 January to discuss the launch of the UK's Afghan citizens resettlement scheme. At that meeting, the cabinet secretary raised the issue of property offers by local authorities that are waiting to be matched with Afghan families and the need to make that happen as soon as possible. She reiterated that funding provided by the UK Government to support Afghan families in Scotland needs to accurately reflect the need in Scotland.

It was agreed that more regular four-nation engagement will take place to discuss Afghan resettlement across the UK, and I know that the cabinet secretary is looking forward to that.

Mercedes Villalba: The United Nations High Commission for Refugees can only register Afghan citizens as refugees or asylum seekers once they are outside Afghanistan and in another country. However, there are still those in Afghanistan who remain at severe risk from the Taliban, especially if they are caught trying to travel to Iran or Pakistan to seek asylum through the UNHCR. Will the Scottish Government push the UK Government to clarify which safe routes will be available through the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme, particularly for those who would be at risk if they travelled to another country to seek asylum?

Angus Robertson: That is an entirely reasonable suggestion, although we also need to bear in mind that some of the routes for people leaving Afghanistan are cloaked in secrecy so that the Taliban are not able to pursue those seeking refuge in other countries. I will consider the member's request. We are in regular touch with the Home Office. We would all welcome having greater clarity on that, although we also accept that there is necessary secrecy around some of the routes through which refugees are safely able

to get out of Afghanistan in the current circumstances.

Performance Venues (Covid-19 Restrictions)

4. Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): To ask the Scottish Government what assessment has been made of the impact of Covid-19 restrictions over the festive period on theatres and other performance venues. (S6O-00645)

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am sorry, but we do not appear to be able to hear the Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development. Maybe you can start your response again, minister, and see whether the issue has been resolved.

I am afraid that the connection is still not working. Bear with us for just a minute, minister. In the meantime, we will go to the Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, External Affairs and Culture for a response to the question. We will try to resolve your microphone issues for the subsequent questions, minister, and come back to you.

The Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): The omicron variant has come at a particularly challenging time for the sector, in which recovery from previous waves of the pandemic was beginning and significant sales for Christmas shows were predicted. I have spoken to theatre groups and performance venues directly, and I receive daily updates about the impact that Covid-19 restrictions are having on the sector.

The Scottish Government has made available £31.5 million for support for cultural businesses, organisations, venues and independent cinemas and for grass-roots venues. The impact assessments associated with the restrictions, including a business and regulatory impact assessment, will be published in the coming weeks.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I am grateful to the cabinet secretary for understudying for his minister at short notice.

Capital Theatres in Edinburgh lost dozens of performances across the festive period. The King's theatre alone lost 36. That came after two years of missed Edinburgh festival performances. Those are paying months for Edinburgh's theatre industry. What more will the cabinet secretary's Government do to support the theatre industry in its revival?

Angus Robertson: Speaking as the cabinet secretary for culture and the MSP for Edinburgh Central and many cultural venues in the capital, I say to the member for Edinburgh Western that I

am absolutely seized of that issue. There is a challenge, the scale of which we understand. The fact that the Scottish Government reached very speedy agreement to find £65 million prior to Christmas to address the scale of the challenge evidences the seriousness with which we treat it.

I say to everybody in the chamber that, as we begin—I hope—with confidence the early stages of emerging from the omicron variant, we all have a role. We can support our cultural venues and attend shows, concerts, exhibitions and the like.

We need a two-pronged approach. We need to support our venues, which have suffered over recent weeks and months, but we also need to ensure that, as we are able to return and support the cultural sector, we do so whole-heartedly. I appeal to Alex Cole-Hamilton and everybody else in the chamber to join us in doing so.

Foysoyl Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): The city of Edinburgh was hit particularly hard when restrictions were imposed, with no notice to the culture sector, including our treasured theatres. Many were left in limbo without the financial support that was needed to keep the sector going. Can the cabinet secretary assure members and the culture sector that, if restrictions were to be imposed, adequate notice would be given to prepare the sector and financial resources would be ready to be disbursed to cultural venues?

Angus Robertson: That is a very important question. Throughout these circumstances, we have had the closest working relationship with the cultural sector. I have had many Teams calls with people throughout Scotland's cultural and artistic community. At the earliest point at which notice can be given of any public health measures, they are shared with the sector, as they are with the wider business community.

I hope—as I am sure Foysoyl Choudhury does—that there will be no necessity to return to any form of safeguards or restrictions that impact on the cultural community. In the meantime, we will do everything that we can to disburse the necessary funds to ensure that individuals, businesses and venues remain solvent and are able to bounce back.

I make the same appeal to Foysoyl Choudhury and all colleagues in Edinburgh and throughout the rest of the country that I made to my Liberal Democrat colleague. Please let us do everything that we can to give as much confidence to people who are returning in supporting the cultural sector and our venues. That will give them the greatest chance of success.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you for stepping in, cabinet secretary.

Culture-led Regeneration of Town Centres

5. Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions the culture minister has had with ministerial colleagues regarding culture-led regeneration of town centres. (S6O-00646)

The Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development (Jenny Gilruth): I want culture to play a crucial role in the regeneration of town centres as we look towards recovery from the pandemic. Mainstreaming culture across Government portfolios is a central part of our current work. The Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, External Affairs and Culture and I held ministerial bilateral meetings on that, both last week and only yesterday. Our discussion with the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Economy specifically explored culture's role in our commitment to ensuring that no places or people are left behind. I also intend to discuss that with Tom Arthur, who has ministerial responsibility for town centres.

Colin Smyth: From Wigtown book town to the Stove Network in Dumfries, which led to the development of the Midsteeple Quarter, there are many good examples of culture-led regeneration across Dumfries and Galloway. However, given the big crisis that our town centres face, does the minister share my view that we need to redouble our efforts by increasing the support that we give to culture-led community-driven regeneration? We need a town centre-first approach not just in planning but in funding new cultural facilities in our towns.

Jenny Gilruth: I broadly agree with the sentiment of what the member has outlined. As he will know, we have a manifesto commitment to develop a national towns of culture scheme. We have started scoping what that scheme will look like, and I think that there is a real ambition to create a network across Scotland that celebrates our towns and our unique stories. That is particularly pertinent given that 2022 marks Scotland's year of stories. The scheme itself will build on Scotland's long track record of taking a place-based approach to our cultural programmes, such as our innovative culture collective scheme, which was launched last year. I know that, in Mr Smyth's region, the Stove Network does fantastic work in the community and is currently benefiting from the support of our culture collective funding.

More broadly, with regard to funding and how we link up better across different Government departments, I hope that Mr Smyth listened to my original answer, in which I alluded to my meeting with Tom Arthur. I would like to speak to Mr Arthur about the regeneration of town centres to ensure that we get greater policy coherence. With regard to funding in communities, the cabinet secretary

and I are committed to driving a cultural recovery from the pandemic that is rooted in our communities.

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): In Renfrewshire, spending on culture and heritage decreased by more than a third between 2016 and 2019; Clackmannanshire saw a drop of 27 per cent, and Glasgow saw a drop of 18 per cent. How will the minister promote culture locally when some of her party's own councils are slashing their arts and heritage budgets by a third?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: As briefly as possible, please, minister.

Jenny Gilruth: Sharon Dowey raises an important point, which is the role of local authorities in the delivery of culture locally. One of the important ways in which we can do that while respecting the autonomy of local authorities is through the culture conveners group, which I met just before Christmas, and which I will meet again in March. I hope that that reassures Sharon Dowey that I take the matter very seriously. It is imperative that we look at the different approaches that local authorities are using and ensure equity of access across the country in terms of our cultural services.

Cultural and Arts Sectors (Worker Support)

7. Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on how it is supporting people working in the cultural and arts sectors. (S6O-00648)

The Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development (Jenny Gilruth): I appreciate that this is a difficult time for the cultural sector, even with the announcement of the easing of restrictions on Tuesday. The Scottish Government has previously provided £175 million of emergency funding to the culture, heritage and event sectors since the start of the pandemic. As a result of the recent restrictions, we announced an additional £65 million for the sector. That includes £31.5 million for cultural businesses, organisations, venues, independent cinemas and grass-roots venues; £2 million for the national performing companies, £10 million for freelancers; £19.8 million for the events sector; and £1.7 million for museums, galleries and heritage.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Following the First Minister's announcement in December requiring theatres to be restricted until next week, I have been contacted by constituents working for the Ambassador Theatre Group in Glasgow, who work across the King's theatre and the Theatre Royal. The ATG took the decision not to call up any of its staff on zero-hours contracts or its casual workers during the period of closure, which has meant that

150 of my constituents have lost out on at least four weeks' pay. Instead, the ATG recommended that, to ease the financial burden, they use their holiday hours. Fully contracted staff have continued to receive full pay—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We need a question, please, Ms Duncan-Glancy

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Those workers support moves to stop the spread of the virus. Does the minister agree that workers should not shoulder the financial burden of such decisions? Will she guarantee that any emergency funding that is offered to arts and events organisations is contingent on conditions that they do not use zero-hours contracts and that all zero-hours staff will be compensated for the loss of earnings?

Jenny Gilruth: I share Pam Duncan-Glancy's concerns about zero-hours workers not being supported for their losses as a result of theatre closures and am aware of the situation in Glasgow.

My officials have discussed the issue of zero-hours contractors in the cultural sector with Creative Scotland, which administers the funds, as Ms Duncan-Glancy will appreciate. As she will know, the freelancers cancellation fund excludes zero-hours contract staff. However, the cultural organisations cancellation fund does not exclude organisations from applying for costs for zero-hours contract staff. I expect any organisation that applies to the Creative Scotland cultural organisations cancellation fund to use any money that it receives to pay all staff it employs, and that should include any zero-hours contract staff. I hope that that reassures Ms Duncan-Glancy.

Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Will the minister provide any further detail as to what assessment has been made regarding the impact of the removal of furlough on people who work in the culture sector?

Jenny Gilruth: Jenni Minto is correct to point to the importance of the furlough scheme to the creative sector throughout the pandemic. It provided a layer of financial support that we, as a devolved Government, simply could not. Its removal has increased anxiety in the sector and led to many creatives simply walking away. The First Minister wrote to the Prime Minister on the matter in December and it was raised in the four-nations culture call on Tuesday last week.

Live Music and Night-Time Industries

8. **Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government when it last met representatives of the live music and night time industries sectors and what was discussed. (S6O-00649)

The Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development (Jenny Gilruth):

Since the pandemic started, the Scottish Government has engaged regularly with the live music and night-time industries to discuss issues such as guidance and business support. The Minister for Business, Trade, Tourism and Enterprise, Ivan McKee, who is responsible for the night-time industries, last met the Night Time Industries Association on 12 January. I met music industry representatives on 22 December, along with the Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, External Affairs and Culture, to discuss the impact of omicron. Most recently, I met Celtic Connections and Glasgow Life on 18 January.

Tess White: The live music, night-time economy and hospitality sectors in the north-east continue to suffer as a result of the vaccination passport scheme. The Night Time Industries Association has highlighted losses of up to 30 per cent in trade. When will the Scottish Government heed the calls of business owners and scrap that punitive scheme?

Jenny Gilruth: I apologise, but I cannot share the sentiment of the member's question. A number of the cultural organisations that the cabinet secretary and I have met welcomed the vaccination passport scheme because it allowed them to stay open safely. It is crucial to us reopening safely and allowing our cultural venues to open and succeed in the coming months and years. We very much hope that the challenges that the sector faced this Christmas will be behind it.

The vaccination passport system has not been rejected by people in the cultural sector, so I cannot agree with the sentiment of the member's question.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Due to the technical difficulties, I will let the item overrun a little further to allow a supplementary question from Stephanie Callaghan. I ask her to be as brief as possible.

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): We have already heard that event cancellations are having a substantial effect on the live music sector. Do the reinsurance schemes that are provided by the United Kingdom Government go far enough to protect the sector?

Jenny Gilruth: The Scottish Government has called for the UK Government to take action to address the market failure for events insurance since the pandemic began. The UK Government responded to those calls on 5 August last year with the announcement of an £800 million scheme, which extends to Scotland, but it is regrettable that it chose not to engage with the Scottish ministers on the scheme's development.

Many stakeholders have also indicated that the scheme is not working in practice. That means that event organisers cannot afford the cost of the UK Government scheme, which they argue is financially prohibitive. I reiterate our call on the UK Government to work with the sector to identify improvements to the scheme. I raised that matter most recently during the four nations culture ministers call.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions. There will be a brief pause while the front benches change for the next item of business.

Strategic Transport Projects Review 2

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a statement by Michael Matheson on publication of the second strategic transport projects review. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of his statement, so there should be no interruptions or interventions.

15:00

The Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport (Michael Matheson): I am pleased to announce the publication of the second strategic transport projects review and will set out some of the significant recommendations it makes that will provide real and lasting benefits for people and businesses in Scotland.

The report will inform the Scottish Government's transport investment programme over the next 20 years and help to deliver the vision, priorities and outcomes set out in the national transport strategy, in which we committed to reducing inequalities, taking climate action, delivering inclusive economic growth and improving our health and wellbeing.

The review's recommendations represent a repositioning of our transport investment priorities. The focus is firmly on how transport can help us to protect our climate and improve lives. It applies a balanced approach, covering all modes of transport and all areas of Scotland. It considers which measures can be best deployed to improve the greatest number of people's lives and make the biggest improvements to communities and our environment.

I want to highlight four key areas of investment that we have identified that will help us to make truly transformational changes to how we travel in Scotland. Those areas are mass transit in our biggest city regions, improved connectivity for transport in rural and island communities, decarbonisation of public transport and improving active travel infrastructure.

On mass transit, the Clyde metro project, for example, represents a multibillion pound investment that, when completed, could better connect more than 1.5 million people—from Clydebank to Cambuslang and from Easterhouse to East Kilbride—to employment, education and health services in the Glasgow city region. Having better access to affordable and reliable public transport in our city regions has the potential to significantly reduce inequalities and to enhance opportunities for many people who live and work in some of the most deprived areas of Scotland. The

project will make a substantial contribution to tackling climate change by reducing car-based trips and associated emissions. The difference that it could make to the lives of people and communities in the Clyde area is huge.

On rural transport, as well as significant investment in port infrastructure, we are recommending the further investigation of potential fixed links—bridges or tunnels—at the Sound of Harris and Barra, and between Mull and the Scottish mainland. Those could improve communities' access to goods and services and make those islands more attractive for people to live and work in and visit.

The review also recognises our strategic connections, including investing in cross-border rail as well as enhancing safety, resilience and reliability by making improvements to the A75 and A77 strategic road corridors, which connect into the port of Cairnryan.

We are already making real progress in decarbonising public transport. STPR2 takes that to the next level. We plan to renew and replace lifeline ferries, and progressively to decarbonise the fleet. We will also invest in more rail electrification and ensure that more low-carbon buses operate on the network. We will work to ensure that more freight is taken off the roads and support the delivery of infrastructure to assist in the transition to zero-emission vehicles.

We also want to see improvement of infrastructure that encourages more people to walk, wheel and cycle more often, and not just for short journeys. That improvement would have a huge range of benefits for the climate, the natural environment and the economy, and for people, neighbourhoods, communities and businesses. In particular, we want children and young people to benefit, and we will invest in measures to promote active travel for them and encourage safe and sustainable travel to schools.

STPR2 sits at the heart of our plans and efforts to ensure a green recovery from Covid-19 and a fair and just transition to net zero. The pandemic has shown that people have a huge appetite to change travel patterns if we get the policy and support right to help them to do so. We want to support more people in continuing to make the sustainable travel choices that have been seen during the pandemic, so that people can return to public transport and so that our economic recovery does not overly rely on road-based travel.

Transport policy has moved on since the first STPR in 2008, and big economic and social changes happened in that time. Therefore, this set of recommendations importantly reflects a more rounded, sustainable and environmentally focused

approach to transport, as the national transport strategy sets out.

The core of that thinking is to support two key policy pillars. The first is that, for most journeys, the natural and easiest choice should be active travel, then public transport. Even when a car is used, car pooling or sharing should be easier. The second is the sustainable investment hierarchy, which focuses first on measures that are designed to reduce the need to travel; secondly, on effectively maintaining and safely operating existing assets; thirdly, on making better use of existing capacity; finally, on targeted infrastructure improvements when they appear to be the only feasible solution.

We will no longer predict and provide road infrastructure for unconstrained growth in private car use. In short, the recommendations will contribute to the fairer, greener Scotland that we are seeking and that we all want to live in.

STPR2 has been a collaborative undertaking from the start. Early on, 11 regional transport working groups were established to inform the development of proposals. We have involved communities and transport users across Scotland. The online consultations in the Borders and the South West of Scotland received several thousand responses, as did the national feedback to phase 1 last February. I thank the wide range of people and organisations that were involved, whose contributions have added invaluable insight as well as vital local knowledge and experience at every stage of the process.

That undertaking has been significant. We have distilled 14,000 initial ideas or suggestions from across Scotland into a long list of 2,800 options that were then consolidated into 1,400 stand-alone proposals, which were collated into 80 similar groups. The detailed appraisal process resulted in 45 recommendations for transport investment, which we are now sharing with stakeholders and the public for their views.

As I have been speaking, the review, with its 45 recommendations, has been published on the Transport Scotland website. That publication marks the start of 12 weeks of public consultation, with the survey now live on Citizen Space. Now, people all over Scotland get to have their say, and we will do our best to promote the consultation and encourage people to get involved.

STPR2 has a crucial role to play as we lead a green recovery from the pandemic and as we seek to deliver on our net zero ambitions. We know that it will not be easy for people to make changes, which is why the review focuses on creating the infrastructure and connectivity and delivering the transport modes that will help people to change how, why and when they travel.

Transforming Scotland's transport requires a cohesive national effort and a repositioning of the type of transport investment that the Government makes. The 45 recommendations seek to achieve that. Some of the most important ones are the most local, but they are all focused on delivering outcomes that will make life better for us all.

As we embark on the next steps of the journey to transform how Scotland travels, by working and taking these crucial decisions together, we can create a Scotland that is fairer and greener for all.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The cabinet secretary will now take questions on issues that were raised in his statement. I intend to allow around 20 minutes for questions, after which we will move to the next item of business. It would be helpful if members who wish to ask a question would indicate that by pressing their request-to-speak button or placing an R in the chat function.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of his statement. However, a bit like last week's statement on cutting car mileage, this statement and its accompanying document raise more questions than they provide answers for. We can see the direction of travel, but we do not know how we will get there.

The cabinet secretary cheekily mentioned East Kilbride when referring to the Clyde metro project. He has a bit of a nerve, given that investment in the East Kilbride line is being cut. However, perhaps the situation has changed since he was last there, wearing a hard hat, for a photo call. I like the sound of city metro systems, but there is zero to say how and when that will be achieved or how much it will cost. Perhaps the cabinet secretary could clear that up.

Sticking with rail, why is there still no timescale for a smart ticketing system? Why is there only mention of talks, rather than action, on cross-border high-speed rail? What are the plans to improve the situation in the north? Will the far north line be dualled? There is no mention of that.

STPR2 was an opportunity to set out a different route for our failing ferry system, but there is nothing there. No multimillion pound investment has been set out. Where is it? Islanders are calling out for it. If we want our buses to be net zero, we need to spend more, but the statement says nothing about how we will achieve that. This is a series of missed opportunities and there remain a lot of questions.

Michael Matheson: I am grateful for Graham Simpson's comments, although I obviously do not agree with the sentiment behind them. As ever with Mr Simpson—in this case, on important measures to transform our country—the glass is half empty rather than half full.

STPR2 is a blueprint that will transform the way in which transport infrastructure is delivered in Scotland. The Clyde metro system is a good example of mass transit that will transform areas along the Clyde; it will make a meaningful difference to communities and the 1.5 million people who will benefit from it. I am sure that Graham Simpson will recognise that it is a multibillion pound, multiyear project. STPR2 is a 20-year programme, and delivering and driving forward the Clyde metro programme is part of our vision for the next 20 years, which will make a significant difference to people who live in that area.

I will pick up on the brass neck of the Tories coming here and talking about high-speed rail, given that high-speed rail is not only financially out of control in England but is being cut right back so that it does not go as far north as was intended. It is a bit rich of Graham Simpson to come here and start demanding that we take action on high-speed rail.

My final point to Mr Simpson is about bus investment. If there is one thing that this Government has done, it has invested in decarbonising our bus infrastructure in a way that the UK Government has utterly failed to do. We are helping to support crucial industries, such as in the example of ADL, through a really difficult period. That is why STPR2 sets out how we will continue to invest in our bus infrastructure so that it delivers for the people of Scotland.

Am I disappointed? No, I am not. It is not unusual for Mr Simpson to be disappointing and he has proven me right yet again.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of his statement. It has been a long time coming, but appropriately, when it comes to transport projects, we now have the very late publication of STPR2. Given the Government's track record on transport, few communities will believe that the vague commitments that have been made in the review will be delivered.

Given that the Government has cancelled not one but two Glasgow airport rail links in the past 14 years, why should communities believe the cabinet secretary when he says, "Some time in the next 20 years we might build a Glasgow metro. In the meantime, the public can continue to use the train services that we're cutting, at the ticket offices that we're axing"? After years of being the forgotten region, why should communities in Dumfries and Galloway and Ayrshire in the south-west believe the cabinet secretary when all they are being offered is vague commitments to possible improvements to the A75 and A77, with no commitments to recognising the strategic importance of Cairnryan to Scotland's economy?

On smart ticketing, the review says that the Government will continue the on-going development of fully integrated smart ticketing. I wonder where this on-going development is taking place because I have certainly not seen it. When will communities actually see the detailed timescale for when the projects will be delivered and the budgets for them? When will they be delivered?

Michael Matheson: I am grateful to Mr Smyth for his comments. He referred to the delay to STPR2 and he will be well aware that it was delayed because of the pandemic. In order to help the process, we published phase 1 last February to bed in some of the gains that we saw during the pandemic, particularly around active travel.

I will pick up on some of Mr Smyth's other points. He will be aware that we are at the start of the 12-week STPR2 consultation period, and at the end of that process, we will publish a delivery plan that sets out how we take forward the recommendations that are set out in STPR2. That includes areas in which I know he has a particular interest, such as the A75 and the A77, to which we have committed to improving in specific areas in line with the pre-appraisal work that was carried out on the south-west Scotland transport corridor.

One of the real challenges with implementing a smart ticketing system across the whole of Scotland is the number of operators of different scale. We have more than 200 bus operators, all utilising different systems for ticketing. One of the real challenges that we face is aligning all that work, alongside the shift that the public are making in using tap and go technology. It is about aligning all that to ensure that we have an integrated system right across the country.

Mr Smyth can be absolutely assured of this Government's on-going commitment to ensuring that we take forward that work to deliver the kind of smart ticketing system that he is looking for.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): The A737 is a major arterial route through North Ayrshire and Renfrewshire. Previously in the chamber, the cabinet secretary has assured me that the A737 will be considered for inclusion in the STPR2. With more than 8 million vehicles travelling along this increasingly congested road each year, is that still the case? Can we look forward to significant investment in the A737, not least for reasons of safety, during the current parliamentary session and beyond?

Michael Matheson: I can confirm that the A737 has been considered within STPR2 and that work has identified problems and opportunities to address congestion, particularly in Kilwinning, to which the member refers. The recommendations are that we should consider renewal and

improvements in reliability, including on the A737, and those improvements are anticipated to be part of the on-going work that we will take forward following the delivery plan for STPR2.

That being said, we have already invested a significant amount—£36 million—in this road; the construction of two new road schemes and the construction of the Dalry bypass and the Den realignment have also helped to improve safety and make for better journey times in those areas. I assure the member that the road has been considered and it continues to be one of the priorities for future investment.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): The document provides warm words, but no specifics around rail in the north-east. Will the programme of enhancements deliver the full 20-minute reduction in journey times to the central belt that the Scottish National Party has promised since the first STPR in 2008? Will the much-trumpeted £200 million be spent on that and, if so, when?

I see no mention in the document of relaying the Dyce to Ellon line. Is the cabinet secretary telling the people of the north-east that the Scottish Government will not be relaying any rail lines in the north-east?

Michael Matheson: It is clear that Liam Kerr does not understand STPR2, which is for strategic investment purposes—in other words, it relates to national projects and programmes, not rail enhancement programmes. Such rail programmes are dealt with through the rail enhancement programme, which is published on a five-yearly basis. We are presently in control period 6. It sets out the vision and the measures that we will take in that regard. [*Interruption.*]

The second thing to point out is that STPR2 recognises that the enhancements and improvements in the seven cities programme will be a key part of future investment. That includes investment in the north-east of Scotland, including in Aberdeen. The investment to which Liam Kerr referred is still committed, in order to help to reduce journey times on that route. The challenge relates to where that investment should go if the improvement in journey times is to be delivered. That investment to reduce journey times to Aberdeen might not necessarily be spent directly on areas in Aberdeen.

In relation to Ellon, Liam Kerr will be aware of the commitment to the rapid bus transport programme for Aberdeen, which is a very ambitious programme. It will extend all the way out to Ellon, so that the vision that has been developed by the North East of Scotland Transport Partnership, which we are helping to fund, can be taken forward. That will be transformative for the north-east of Scotland. That is another clear

example of how this SNP Scottish Government is investing in the north-east to ensure that it delivers for all the people of Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I encourage members to ask their questions, but not to provide a running commentary on the answers as they are being given.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I have continually lobbied for the strategically important A75 and A77, which connect Scotland to Europe and the rest of the UK, to be upgraded on the grounds of safety and efficiency. I have also called for improved rail and bus frequency and improved rail connectivity, which would be brought about by, for example, reopening Beattock station, to attract people and businesses to the south-west.

Will the cabinet secretary give examples of how STPR2 will improve transport infrastructure across the south-west, and reiterate how it will improve the attractiveness of public transport?

Michael Matheson: I acknowledge Emma Harper's long-standing interest in the matter and how she has pursued it diligently over many years.

I recognise the importance of strengthening our connections. One of the 45 recommendations of the review is on improving access to Stranraer and the port of Cairnryan. That includes a package of proposed targeted road improvements on both of the south-west routes that Emma Harper mentioned.

We have looked at realigning the route of the A75 around the villages of Springholm and Crocketford and we are targeting accident locations in order to further improve road safety in the area. Our work on the A77 is focused on resilience improvements, including provision of overtaking opportunities and expansion and development of areas around Turnberry, Girvan, Ballantrae and Cairnryan.

On public transport, we are looking at the option of upgrading or relocating the existing railway station at Stranraer in order to provide greater connectivity.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am conscious of the number of questions that we still have to get through. I again plead for concise questions and answers that are as concise as are possible.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): Glasgow city and region has not had a serious transport project under the SNP Administration since 2007, but we desperately need one. The proposal for the Clyde metro has no timescale and no serious funding allocated to it. It appears to be more of a concept in a document than a real and tangible transport project.

When is that project likely to start? When will it be a reality? Will it be in five years or 10 years, or is the cabinet secretary saying that it will take 20 years? I think that the people of Glasgow and the wider city region have a right to know.

Michael Matheson: I recognise Pauline McNeill's concerns about investment in transport infrastructure in Glasgow. The good news is that STPR2 will deliver that vision with the Clyde metro programme, which will cover an area reaching about 15km from the city centre. It will build on the work that has been done by the Glasgow connectivity commission, which was helpful in detailing improvements that could be made. We will build on that to put in place the work that is necessary to develop that programme.

That will include working not only with Glasgow City Council but with all the local authorities in the region. We work with a range of local authorities and other partners on how we can take forward that strategic investment programme over a number of years. I cannot give a specific timescale, other than to say that it will happen within the STPR2 period. That is because a detailed work plan for the whole proposal must be developed.

I assure Pauline McNeill that I believe that a project such as the Clyde metro could, if we get it right, be absolutely transformational for communities in Glasgow and the wider Clyde area. We are determined to drive that forward and will engage with all stakeholders to do exactly that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: My plea for succinct questions and answers appears to be falling on deaf ears, but I repeat it.

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): How does STPR2 seek to promote sustainable transport in Stirling?

Michael Matheson: Evelyn Tweed may be aware that STPR2 includes a strong commitment to active travel. To build on our active travel commitment, we are currently investing some £115 million per year on active travel, which is a significant increase, and we have committed to increasing that to more than £300 million per year by 2024-25, which is 10 per cent of our transport budget. Communities such as the member's constituency will benefit from that. Her constituency currently benefits from some £7 million that we committed to improving active travel, through the Stirling and Clackmannanshire city region deal.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): The plans to renew and decarbonise lifeline ferries are welcome. In the final First Minister's questions of 2021, the First Minister acknowledged the national strategic importance of the Unst space port. Unst is dependent on ferry travel. Fixed link

infrastructure, along with the space port, could transform north isles communities such as Unst. Given the concerns about depopulation of the outer isles, will the minister add to the Scottish Government's recommendations fixed links between islands?

Michael Matheson: That is not part of STPR2 in its present form. We have made a commitment to explore the provision of fixed links in the Western Isles and from the mainland to the island of Mull. I have no doubt that, during the course of the consultation, we will hear representations about other issues from communities across the country. However, what Beatrice Wishart asks for is not in the existing STPR2 document.

Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): The proposed Clyde metro is an exciting prospect for Glasgow and Glasgow Kelvin and the surrounding areas. It could prove to be key to Scotland hitting its net zero targets. Will the cabinet secretary set out some of the envisaged economic, environmental and social benefits of that project?

Michael Matheson: From an environmental point of view, the project has the potential to remove a significant number of cars from our roads and to increase use of public transport, which has clear environmental benefits. A multibillion pound project of that nature will drive economic benefit; improving connectivity can improve economic output.

From a social point of view, I note that some of the most deprived communities in Scotland have very poor transport connectivity. We must address that in order to improve opportunities and to give access to key services and employment. One benefit that could come from the Clyde metro would be the creation of connections to communities that currently have very poor levels of public transport. Doing so would transform those communities by providing greater opportunity for employment and connecting them to key public services across the city region.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): I warmly welcome the review. It is a clear shift in priorities towards public transport and active travel, and it will ultimately move millions of people in Scotland away from car dependency.

Will the cabinet secretary give a reassurance that the door will remain open for investment in smaller rail projects, such as Newburgh railway station, that are not specifically mentioned in the strategy, if strong business cases emerge for those projects?

Michael Matheson: STPR2's recommendations on rail focus very much on decarbonisation of the network and on maintenance, upgrading and safe operation of the existing network. However, there remains a path on which regional and local rail

projects can be brought forward, subject to a strong business case being developed. I understand the merits of local campaigns on such matters and I recognise Mark Ruskell's involvement in some of them.

A good example of the reopening of a railway line is the Levenmouth link, which came about through a local campaign. I had the pleasure of agreeing to the funding for it. There are other routes, at regional and local level, through which, for investment in the future, schemes can be developed and business cases forward.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): Despite the south-west Scotland transport study that was completed two years ago, which detailed dozens of viable options for long-overdue improvements to transport infrastructure in the south-west, the document that has been published today does not take us forward. Indeed, it might take us backwards, given its lack of any mention of bypassing of towns or villages on the A77 and the A75. It does not even reference the bottleneck at the Bellfield interchange. Does the cabinet secretary accept that the continued lack of commitment to any specific improvements in the south-west will come as a profound disappointment to long-suffering residents and businesses along those routes?

Michael Matheson: STPR2 builds on the south-west Scotland transport study, which identified a range of potential interventions and those that are viewed as being the most viable and appropriate to take forward. They are investment in the A75, investment in the A77, consideration of how we can improve rail connectivity into the south-west of Scotland, active travel infrastructure, and bus infrastructure. The south-west of Scotland will benefit from all those things through STPR2.

Brian Whittle might not like the fact that we are taking action to address those issues, but I have no doubt that people in the south-west of Scotland will welcome the action that the Government is taking and what is set out in STPR2.

Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): Will the cabinet secretary provide an update on how the recommendations support the shifting of freight from road to rail and how that will benefit the south-west?

Michael Matheson: As I mentioned, one of the key areas that we have focused on in relation to improvements to our railway infrastructure is enhancement and improvement of it through greater electrification and improvements to reliability. A key part of the reason for doing that is that it will allow us to increase the potential for freight capacity on the rail network. That is why we set out in STPR2 the key recommendation to improve and increase the level of freight on our rail

network. I have no doubt that people in the freight industry will very much welcome our commitment to driving forward further improvements in rail freight across the country, including in the south-west.

Prestwick Airport

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is a statement by Kate Forbes on Prestwick airport. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

15:33

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Economy (Kate Forbes): I will make a statement on the conclusion of the most recent sales process for Glasgow Prestwick airport and our ambitions for the business. Parliament was updated on the decision to retain the business in public ownership on 21 December last year, but I am aware that it remains a topic of interest, so I wish to provide as much information as I am able to.

We have been clear since the acquisition of the business that our intention is to return it to the private sector at the appropriate time. That position has not changed, nor has our commitment to securing a long-term future for the business, which would have ceased to operate in 2013 without intervention. In recognition of the legitimate interest in the future of the business, I will provide a timeline of the most recent sales process.

We received a credible expression of interest in acquisition of the business in November 2020. Any such commercial process benefits from competition so, following receipt of the expression of interest, we invited further bids on the open market.

We were encouraged by the fact that the process attracted three potential bidders that met our eligibility criteria. In summary, those criteria were that the business should continue as an operational airport, that bidders should develop and maximise the associated economic benefits and employment potential, and that bidders should demonstrate a strong financial capability and the ability to achieve their proposed plans for Glasgow Prestwick Airport.

One of the three potential bidders withdrew at an early stage, and two bids were subsequently received and evaluated, with input from independent legal and commercial advisers and support from the management team at the business. A preferred bidder was identified in February 2021, and more detailed negotiations commenced.

Commercial confidentiality prevents me from naming those bidders or disclosing the details of the bids. That is entirely standard practice in such a process, regardless of whether the parties involved are in the public or the private sector.

Members will, I hope, understand that important point. Nor would it be desirable for me to publicly discuss detail that might prejudice any future negotiation. However, I can say that much of the media speculation in recent weeks has been wholly inaccurate.

The commercial negotiation with the preferred bidder was constructive. Both sides committed significant energy and resource to the process of diligence and commercial negotiation. However, in May 2021, the preferred bidder withdrew from the process. For the reasons that I have outlined, I will not get into the detail of the underlying rationale for that decision, save to record that there was mutual agreement that that was the appropriate outcome.

That enabled us to re-engage with the second-placed bidder. A revised bid was submitted on 30 June 2021, and was given detailed consideration. Following detailed analysis over several months, various concerns were identified. Following a clear recommendation from the board, informed by independent advice, I determined that the bid should not be pursued further.

Presiding Officer, you will appreciate that those decisions were not taken lightly. However, I wish to be clear that ministers have a long-term commitment to the business. We wish to secure for it a sustainable future that recognises not just the commercial value in the business itself but the wider contribution that it makes to the local and regional economies that it serves. We want to return the business to the private sector, but that must be on the right terms and in the right circumstances. We remain open to any future credible expressions of interest. We are a willing seller—but we are not a distressed seller.

To look to the future, the business is performing well. It continues to steadily strengthen its position as a niche airport with a reputation for being innovative and flexible in meeting customers' needs. Significant progress has been made in winning a bigger share of the fixed-base operator market. Property around the campus has high occupancy rates. It supports a range of important tenants, including maintenance, repair and overhaul providers and search and rescue. As set out in the business's most recent accounts, a modest profit was achieved in 2020-21.

The success of the 26th United Nations climate change conference of the parties—COP26—has been a particular highlight. It showed, once again, that the business can handle traffic for global events. The entire Prestwick team is to be commended. Its members rose to the challenge of COP26 and delivered for their customers, thus further enhancing the global reputation of the business.

Members will recall that both the former chair of Prestwick, Mr Andrew Miller, and the former chief executive, Mr Stewart Adams, postponed their planned retirement dates to support the completion of the most recent sale process. That process having now concluded, both have retired. I put on record my sincere thanks to them for their significant contributions to the business in recent years. I also welcome the newly appointed chair and chief executive. Their role is to build on recent success and to drive the business forward, so that profitability can be sustained and Glasgow Prestwick Airport can continue to make an important contribution to Scotland's economy. I look forward to supporting them in that task.

As do all parts of the aviation industry, Prestwick faces challenges. Recovery from the pandemic will not be easy. However, I am confident that the business is in a much better shape than when the Scottish Government bought it eight years ago. At that time, we said that there were no quick fixes. We stand by our long-term commitment.

It is in the public interest to see Prestwick succeed, as it is in the interest of the staff who work there and the businesses that rely on it. Politicians from all parties have championed Prestwick over the years and I hope that that support will continue as the business grows in line with the ambitions that we have for it.

The Presiding Officer: The cabinet secretary will now take questions on the issues that were raised in her statement. I intend to allow around 20 ministers for questions, after which we will move on to the next item of business. I would be grateful if members who wish to ask a question were to press their request-to-speak buttons now.

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

I firmly believe that Prestwick can be a success, and we all hope for that. The Scottish Government bought Prestwick airport for £1 in 2013. Nicola Sturgeon said that the aim was

“turning Prestwick around and making it a viable enterprise”.

One has to ask why, more than eight years on, that has not happened. What is it that the Scottish Government is looking for from a buyer? What are the various concerns, which the cabinet secretary referred to, about the latest bid? I am not asking for figures or for her to betray confidences.

The latest accounts show an operating profit of £0.5 million, which is way down on the figure for the previous year. Freight held up, but passenger numbers plummeted and it may be a while before they recover. Can the cabinet secretary tell us

what the operating profit needs to get to in order for the airport to be put back on sale?

The latest doomed bid—which was from Train Alliance UK, although the cabinet secretary does not want to say that—was scuppered when it emerged that major repairs to the runway are required. Can the cabinet secretary confirm that the figure for those repairs was around £20 million, and can she say why the preferred bidders were not told about that but kept in the dark? If I am right about that figure—or whatever the figure is—is the Scottish Government going to pay for those repairs before the airport is put back on sale?

Kate Forbes: There were quite a lot of questions in there, Presiding Officer, so I hope that you will allow me to go into some of the detail.

The member set out the starting position that he wants Prestwick to be a success, as I do. He asked about the viability of the enterprise and where the profit needs to get to. I would suggest that that is not one of our criteria when looking for bids. As I said, we are a willing seller, as it were, so we will work with any expressions of interest, whether they emerge today, tomorrow or next year.

The finances are strong. The member will have looked at the annual report and accounts, which were published on 21 December. He cited the operating profit for exceptional items as being £500,000. The total profit after tax for the year was £12.8 million, which includes technical accounting for non-cash revaluation of assets. Overall, that was in a year in which every part of the aviation industry really struggled and was facing huge challenges.

The member talked about passenger numbers. That issue was not unique to Prestwick, but, under expert management and the help of the chair and the board, Prestwick has been able to develop a niche market. I would caution that the issue is not about the accounts, which are showing that Prestwick is a successful business that has great opportunities.

On the bids, I would caution the member that he is citing media speculation, much of which, as I have said, has been wholly inaccurate. We will obviously continue to respect commercial confidentiality in terms of the specific bidders.

The member also talked about the condition of the runway. The reason for any bidder ending their involvement in the process is a matter for them. However, I would say again that a lot of the reporting has been inaccurate. The runway and all other infrastructure at Prestwick is maintained and it is operating in accordance with regulatory requirements. An area next to the runway was the subject of discussion last year because of some damage caused by the jet blast of a departing

aircraft, but the damage has been repaired and the runway was not damaged in the process.

I hope that I have given a comprehensive answer to the member's comprehensive questions.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of her statement.

It is 10 years since Prestwick was bought by the Government, which claimed that its plan was to return the airport to the private sector. A decade on, we still do not have any clear explanation from the cabinet secretary of why every appointment by the Government of its preferred bidder ends in the same outcome, which is no sale.

We still do not know how close we were this time to an actual sale. The cabinet secretary has explained the latest bids that have been rejected and the timescale in which they were rejected. Can she tell us how many other bids have been received by the Government since it took ownership of the airport 10 years ago and when those bids were rejected?

The cabinet secretary says that Prestwick's finances are strong, but there is still no repayment plan for the millions of pounds of Government loans. We know that there is a need for significant investment in Prestwick airport. Given that we are no further forward when it comes to a new owner, will the cabinet secretary tell us where the investment will come from? Where is the Government's plan for the running of Prestwick airport, for delivering the sustainable future that she talked about and for securing the jobs that the Ayrshire economy desperately needs?

Kate Forbes: The latest accounts should not be dismissed, because this is a credible business with a credible plan that is proving its success, and it will continue to do so.

We will continue to work with the board to develop its strategy for the future of the airport. Just last week—if I remember my diary correctly—I met the new chair of the board, who has considerable expertise and vision for Prestwick airport. It has a refreshed operating board and we will work with that board.

The member asked specifically about investment opportunities. The board will focus on the development of new revenue opportunities, building on the airport's strengths. We will continue to engage with the board on how we support that work.

I emphasise that the three bids that we received were credible bids and that there are reasons why each bid did not come to fruition. Again, those are complex reasons, many of which have not been covered in any of the media speculation.

I have been through the timeline for the most recent bids, which I hope answers that question.

Siobhian Brown (Ayr) (SNP): I thank the cabinet secretary for the statement. Can she expand on the ways in which the eligibility criteria for bidders will ensure that the local community in Ayrshire benefits from the sale of Prestwick airport?

Kate Forbes: Yes. The criteria made it clear that the long-term continuation of Prestwick as an airport and a key Scottish infrastructure asset was essential. We also required a commitment to operate businesses directly relevant to Prestwick, including aviation, logistics, infrastructure and real estate and other services. Bidders were asked to demonstrate that they were capable of developing and maximising the economic benefits and—this is key for the local area—the employment potential associated with the business. That is why we originally bought Prestwick, and it is why we want to ensure that it goes to the right bidder.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): The preferred bidder withdrew their initial bid because of the omission from the Prestwick airport sales prospectus of the state of the runway. On resubmission of their bid, taking that initial omitted information into account, they were so frustrated at the lack of any response from the Scottish Government that they had no option available to them but to approach me and ask me to personally give a hard copy of their bid to the Scottish Government. I gave it to the Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport, Michael Matheson, who said that he would pass it on to Kate Forbes. Does the cabinet secretary think that that is the way to work with a business and a preferred bidder? Does she think that that kind of amateurish approach will encourage any potential future bidders?

Kate Forbes: We have engaged with all three bidders. I am happy to pick up with the member on his direct experience after this conversation. I am not sure that the dates that the member refers to, relating to when I assumed responsibility for Prestwick and the times at which certain bidders pulled out, are strictly accurate.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): The leader of North Ayrshire Council's Tory group, Councillor Tom Marshall, has called for Prestwick airport to be closed. Can the cabinet secretary say what the impact on the aerospace industry, the Ayrshire economy, local employment and local community would be if that profitable airport were closed down?

Kate Forbes: The clear understanding of the economic impact of closure is what caused us to intervene in 2013. We were clear that closure would have a significant impact on the local

economy, not just because of jobs lost at the airport but because various other businesses rely on the airport being operational, including maintenance, repair and overhaul facilities, which provide highly skilled engineering jobs.

Prestwick has always enjoyed cross-party support locally. We have heard that again today. I hope that we can get behind ensuring that it is not only returned to the private sector but handed to the right bidder and continues to grow in success.

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): The SNP Government's commitment to fair work is questionable at best, but the fact that a job advert released last year at Scottish Government-owned Prestwick airport advertised a job as paying less than the real living wage is simply shocking. Can the cabinet secretary tell us why, after almost a decade of the Government owning Prestwick airport, it still does not pay the real living wage and give its employees—many of whom live in my region—the proper wage that they deserve?

Kate Forbes: We expect all employers to pay at least the real living wage and to adopt fair work principles. That expectation has not changed. We are actively engaged in working with all public and private sector employers to ensure that they meet the standards in our fair work first policy.

Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): Does the cabinet secretary agree that the Scottish Government's recent support of a £4.8 million research and development infrastructure grant towards the development of the new aerospace innovation centre at Spirit AeroSystems in my constituency is to be welcomed, along with the Scottish Government's investment in the Ayrshire growth deal, both of which recognise the strategic importance of the aerospace design, innovation, manufacture and repair businesses, and the potential for the spaceport ambitions? Does the cabinet secretary agree that all of that is contingent on the continued operation of Prestwick airport?

Kate Forbes: I absolutely agree with Elena Whitham on all those points. As she will know, last September, the First Minister was delighted to open the new aerospace innovation centre, which will enhance the excellent capabilities in Spirit AeroSystems and support greater innovation across the aerospace cluster at Prestwick. It is one of the obvious immense opportunities. That is why we are working with the board to ensure that Prestwick gets such opportunities locally.

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I thank the cabinet secretary for the advance sight of her statement and for outlining what has happened in relation to the various potential buyers over the past couple of years.

We all know that air travel is a small but significant contributor to climate emissions, with emissions rising steadily prior to the pandemic. Will the cabinet secretary include in discussions with future potential buyers of Prestwick airport additional eligibility criteria that speak to being a climate-resilient airport, supporting and developing innovative low-carbon air travel technologies and the associated jobs, and reducing—not just offsetting—emissions that result from flights coming through the airport?

Kate Forbes: The member will know of the Scottish Government's commitments, backed by Parliament, to be net zero by 2045, in which every sector in Scotland has a role to play. Given that Prestwick is a publicly owned airport, it would be included in that. I am sure that that will feature in future discussions as part of our strategic approach to returning Prestwick to the private sector.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): The SNP-Green Government supports the expansion of Heathrow with a third runway, with 75,000 extra flights for Scotland. Part of the contract between the Scottish Government and Heathrow airport included the examination of the possibility that Prestwick could be included in the supply chain. How much of the future of Prestwick airport is dependent on the expansion of Heathrow airport?

Kate Forbes: The opportunities for Prestwick airport are far greater than the relationship with Heathrow. In my opening statement, I cited some of the opportunities for Prestwick airport. It has diversified its operations considerably, it has a stronger business model and it is continuing to adapt to changing circumstances. We are supportive of the business, and we hope that, under the new refreshed leadership, the chair, the board and the chief executive will continue to develop the strategy for growth.

The Presiding Officer: I call Rona Mackay, to be followed by Edward Mountain.

I believe that you may be on mute, Ms Mackay. Would you like to check, please, and begin again?

We are having difficulty hearing you in the chamber at the moment, Ms Mackay. We will work behind the scenes and, we hope, return to you. In the meantime, I call Edward Mountain.

Mr Mountain, it seems that we are having difficulty in the chamber hearing members who are joining us remotely. We will try to come back to you. Bear with us just now. We will move on to John Mason.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): The cabinet secretary said a bit about the previous bidding process. Will she say something about the future? As I understood it, she said that there was

an expression of interest followed by an opening out to bids. Is that broadly how she sees the process working in future? Would we wait for an expression of interest and then look for more bids?

Kate Forbes: We will carefully consider any proposal from credible investors with a positive vision and plan for Prestwick airport. Until then, the airport will obviously continue in Government ownership. We have not set any timeframe for disposal of the business, and we are not actively marketing it at this stage, immediately after the previous expressions of interest. As I said in my opening remarks, we are a willing seller, but we will do so only when the circumstances are right. We are open to credible expressions of interest.

The Presiding Officer: I give my sincere apologies to members who joined us remotely and with whom we have been unable to connect. We will continue to look into that matter.

Coronavirus (Discretionary Compensation for Self-isolation) (Scotland) Bill: Stage 1

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-02792, in the name of John Swinney, on the Coronavirus (Discretionary Compensation for Self-isolation) (Scotland) Bill at stage 1.

15:58

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery (John Swinney): I am pleased to present the Coronavirus (Discretionary Compensation for Self-isolation) (Scotland) Bill and to set out the rationale for introducing it.

I am grateful to the COVID-19 Recovery Committee for its consideration of the bill and for the opportunity to discuss the bill with it, and I am grateful to the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee for its assessment and valuable contributions. I am also grateful to the various stakeholders and members of the public who have provided their views.

The bill relates to provisions in the Public Health etc (Scotland) Act 2008, which confers a duty on health boards to provide compensation to people who have been notified to isolate as a result of an infectious disease and to carers of such people. That power was intended to apply to small-scale outbreaks, such as E coli outbreaks, in which a small number of households may be isolated for a short period of time and may lose out on income as a result. It was never intended to apply in a global pandemic such as Covid-19. Had the duty not been suspended at the start of the pandemic, health boards would have faced the need to deal with a significant financial and administrative burden, rather than managing essential care and fighting a pandemic.

For that reason, in March 2020, the UK Coronavirus Act 2020 modified the duty on health boards to pay compensation so that it became a discretionary power. Health boards now have the option to provide compensation to those who are isolating, and to their carers, should they wish, but they are under no obligation to do so. The bill maintains that position until the end of October 2022 for coronavirus isolation only, with regulation-making powers included for Scottish ministers so that they can either enable the early expiration of the modifications or prolong them as required. Should we want to keep them beyond the expiry date for which the bill provides—31 October 2022—an affirmative vote of the Parliament would be required.

The Scottish Government recognises that people who are notified to self-isolate as a result of Covid-19, especially those on low incomes, may require support. That is why we have put in place financial and practical support for people who are self-isolating. That support includes the self-isolation support grant, which is a one-off payment of £500 for those who are isolating as a result of Covid-19 and earn the real living wage or less, and practical support such as the local self-isolation assistance service, which helps with food and essential medical deliveries, social support and practical advice. That support has been distributed to those in most need on low incomes.

As of the end of November 2021, the latest month for which we have data available, 56,317 grants of £500 each have been provided to people on low incomes who have been asked to self-isolate. That means that more than £28 million has been awarded in self-isolation support grants. That established support for isolation as a result of Covid-19 will continue for as long as necessary. The bill relates purely to whether the current suspension of the compensation duty in the 2008 act should remain in place.

The Scottish Government has conducted an indicative analysis of what the cost to health boards would be should the bill not be passed and the original 2008 act compensation duty be restored. According to that indicative analysis, the cost of reverting to the 2008 act would be approximately £320 million per year.

In addition to the cost of compensation, health boards would require significant administrative resource for processing and evaluating each claim. Those are not additional challenges that health boards, which are rightly focused on managing pandemic pressures and providing essential care, should be required to meet, nor could the Scottish Government provide that financial support from within our fixed budget without a substantial impact on public services and on the financial support that we have provided to business in response to the pandemic.

The Scottish Government has conducted a public consultation and engaged with key stakeholders on the bill. A full consultation analysis and response is available on the Scottish Government's website. We have ensured that any requirement to extend the modifications of the 2008 act under the bill is subject to appropriate parliamentary scrutiny. Should the modifications still be required after October 2022, an affirmative vote of the Parliament would be required. Scottish ministers would also need to lay a statement of reasons before Parliament, explaining why the modifications were being retained for a further period of time.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP):

The point has been made that the 2008 act was not intended for pandemics. In the future, would it be good to have one act that covers both pandemics and minor outbreaks?

John Swinney: I am not sure that it would be necessary to have the provisions in one act. The provisions in the 2008 act for the purposes of a small localised outbreak are a perfectly sustainable and effective set of provisions. The gap relates to pandemic provisions, where there is a more extensive requirement. It is entirely fair and appropriate for Mr Mason to raise the longer-term issue.

The bill ensures that health boards are protected from the significant financial and administrative burdens that they would face if the modifications were not to be continued. I hope, therefore, that Parliament will agree to the general principles of the bill.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees to the general principles of the Coronavirus (Discretionary Compensation for Self-isolation) (Scotland) Bill.

16:04

Siobhian Brown (Ayr) (SNP): It is my pleasure to speak on behalf of the COVID-19 Recovery Committee on our stage 1 report on the Coronavirus (Discretionary Compensation for Self-isolation) (Scotland) Bill. I thank everyone who gave the committee evidence, which informed our stage 1 report and led us to support the general principles of the bill. I also thank the Scottish Government for providing its response to our report so quickly and in time for the debate.

As the Deputy First Minister outlined, the bill is needed to extend temporary modifications of the Public Health etc (Scotland) Act 2008 so that health boards have discretion as to whether to pay compensation for self-isolation in connection with Covid-19 rather than a duty to do so. The bill is needed as a consequence of previous temporary modifications made to the 2008 act by the United Kingdom Coronavirus Act 2020 expiring or ceasing to have effect.

In light of the increasing number of people who are being asked to isolate because of omicron and the fact that the existing modifications are due to expire in March, the committee understands why the Scottish Government has introduced the bill now and agrees that it is needed. That said, in undertaking our stage 1 scrutiny, we became aware of some issues relating to the availability of support for people who are asked to isolate, including the self-isolation support grant. I will talk briefly about some of those issues.

The Scottish Women's Convention told the committee that none of the 100 women who responded to a consultation exercise that was sent to more than 4,000 women had successfully accessed the self-isolation support grant or local self-isolation assistance services, even though they have been required to self-isolate. That is a real concern, particularly as we were told that some women did not know that the support existed and others said that they did not know how it would affect their benefits.

We also heard concerns about the eligibility criteria for the grant, particularly for people just above the low-income bracket, who do not qualify for it.

Having heard that evidence, although it is not directly related to the bill, we asked the Scottish Government to review the level of support that is currently provided and the eligibility criteria for people who qualify for it. We also urged the Government to consider how best to increase public awareness of the support that is available to people who are asked to self-isolate. I am pleased that the Scottish Government's response confirmed that those issues are kept under regular review and that it will continue to review its public communications on self-isolation support. That is to be welcomed.

The committee routinely considers regulations that put in place the continuing changes to health protection and travel restriction measures. It is, therefore, no surprise that we were interested in the powers in the bill to change the expiry date of the modifications by regulation. In light of the evidence that we heard, we recommended that, in the interest of effective parliamentary scrutiny,

"when making emergency regulations ... the statement of reasons"

that is required by the bill

"should also explain why it is necessary to make the regulations urgently".

I am pleased to note that the Scottish Government has taken that on board in its response to our report and will provide that information in such circumstances in future.

I look forward to hearing other members' views on the bill and to considering any amendments to it, as outlined in our report, if the Parliament agrees that it should progress to stage 2.

16:08

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests and remind them I am a member of the Law Society of Scotland.

I join the committee convener in thanking the bill team, the committee clerks and advisers, the Scottish Parliament information centre and everyone who gave evidence to the committee for its stage 1 consideration of the bill.

As we heard, the bill might appear to be technical and modest but, nevertheless, it deals with an important issue. The Public Health etc (Scotland) Act 2008 places a duty on health boards to provide compensation to a person whom a board has asked to quarantine or otherwise be restricted for the period for which they have to isolate. That is an important measure to deal with outbreaks of contagious diseases. It is important that people who are affected by such requests have financial compensation so that they are not put in difficult situations. However, in the context of Covid-19, had those provisions continued, they could have led to a substantial financial burden on the public purse.

Accordingly, in the original coronavirus emergency legislation, the obligation to provide compensation was replaced with a discretionary power. The bill that is before us will ensure that that discretionary power continues, even if the emergency coronavirus powers lapse. Therefore, the bill is about saving the national health service money. The financial memorandum estimates that the cost to the public purse in 2021-22 would be £380 million, if the bill were not passed.

We recognise that people who have to self-isolate due to Covid-19 should receive financial assistance. Presently, that is done through the Scottish Government's self-isolation support grant, which is administered by local authorities using the Scottish welfare fund statutory guidance. However, a protection is needed for the public purse to ensure that the total costs do not rise exponentially, given that, as the cabinet secretary said, the 2008 act was predicated on small outbreaks of diseases such as E coli, where it was expected that only very limited numbers of the public would be asked to quarantine. The bill provides that protection.

The committee's consultation showed general support for the principles of the bill. We heard some comments about access to the self-isolation support grant and concerns that numbers of people on low incomes were not accessing those payments for a variety of reasons. Sandra McLeod, who gave evidence on behalf of the Aberdeen city health and social care partnership, told the committee about experiences in Aberdeen, where there had been some concern from recipients that there was stigma and discrimination attached to claiming benefits and not enough publicity around access to the SIG. The committee also heard views that better transparency was needed around the reasons for

claims being rejected, which were not always provided.

The convener referred to one technical issue raised by the Law Society of Scotland in relation to the bill—namely, that a statement of reasons should be provided by the Scottish Government when making regulations under section 3(2) to extend the expiry date of section 1, or when making emergency regulations under section 3. I raised that in the evidence sessions and was pleased that the call was supported by the committee. I am also pleased that the Scottish Government has accepted in its response that the issue will be dealt with in a stage 2 amendment, which the committee will address next Thursday.

This is an important bill. Although it might appear modest in scope, it has significant financial implications. We need to keep supporting people who have to self-isolate due to Covid, particularly those who are in a financially vulnerable situation, and the bill will ensure that it is affordable for us to do that in future. For all those reasons, the Scottish Conservatives will support the bill at stage 1.

16:13

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Scottish Labour, too, supports the general principles of the bill. I add my thanks to the committee for its work and to all who gave evidence to the committee. We agree with the Scottish Government that separate legislation is required to ensure that help continues to go to the people who are most in need of it. I understand that failing to continue with the temporary modifications could have crippling financial implications for our health boards at a time when they are already struggling.

In March 2020, Covid-19 was a public health crisis of a magnitude that we had not seen before—certainly not in my generation. It was also an economic crisis, the consequences of which we will continue to live with for a period after the immediate threat to our health has been brought under control. The financial implications for both individuals and businesses have been devastating.

As with most things, it is the people on the lowest incomes who have been hit the hardest. Self-isolation grants are not only key to ensuring that people are not left struggling when they are required to self-isolate but vital in ensuring greater and more widespread adherence to self-isolation guidance. For workers on a low wage with a family to support, if they had to choose between self-isolating and going without an income, especially when they might be asymptomatic, or continuing to go into work so that they could get paid, I know that many would be forced into making the wrong

choice. The provision of self-isolation grants undoubtedly helps people who are low paid, but it also protects public health.

I understand that the Scottish Government awarded around 43,000 self-isolation support grants, coming to a total spend of £22 million, up to September 2021. Although I welcome the fact that people have been able to access that support, I fear that many more who have been eligible and in need of financial assistance have simply not known about it. I echo the COVID-19 Recovery Committee's recommendations that there must be a serious increase in public awareness campaigns about the availability of, and eligibility for, self-isolation support and that a review of the level of support should be provided. I hope to see details from the Scottish Government on how it plans to actively do that ahead of stage 2.

I have previously raised concerns with the First Minister about the speed with which self-isolation support grants are paid out. I raised in the chamber the case of one constituent for whom it took 11 weeks to receive the funds that I am sure we agree are required almost immediately to allow individuals and families to survive and meet their financial commitments.

I understand that local authorities make the payments, and I thank all those who are processing them. However, local authorities did not have adequate resources to respond quickly, especially when significant numbers of applications were coming in. Ensuring that local authorities build in surge capacity is critical, so that they can cope with the volume of applications and so that there are no further delays to the receipt of payments.

I would like to touch on the need for ensuring levels of transparency in Government, which is a point that other speakers have already raised. I agree with both the recommendation of the committee and the view of the Law Society of Scotland that the Government should produce a statement of reasons when making regulations to extend the expiry date or when making emergency regulations. Without an agreed definition of the term "emergency", it is essential to allow for proper parliamentary scrutiny and ensure that the necessary statement is provided. I welcome the fact that the Deputy First Minister has acknowledged that point.

The pandemic is not yet over, so it is only right to allow for an extension of those particular provisions. Scottish Labour is therefore happy to support the bill at stage 1.

16:17

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): Scottish Liberal Democrats will support the bill at

stage 1. For the time being, we support the retention of compensation for self-isolation as a discretionary policy.

During the strictest lockdown measures, there was not a great difference between self-isolating and staying at home. Other financial measures ensured that support was in place for those who could not go to work. For the small pool of people without financial support during their requirement to self-isolate, discretionary payments were a possibility.

Thankfully, we have moved on from those early days in 2020. As we continue through the pandemic, we might wish to return to the model that we had before Covid. I am pleased that the duty on health boards to provide compensation for isolation for reasons other than Covid will return. As we interact and travel more, there might be more cases of those isolation requirements for other reasons.

The policy that the bill extends has not been perfect, but we recognise that a balance has to be struck, which is not easy—that has been a theme throughout the pandemic, as we know. Although it would have been ideal to provide compensation to every case of requested self-isolation, it was less necessary at the start of the pandemic for reasons to which I have alluded. It would have also been a great financial and administrative burden on health boards, especially at the peak of infections.

Some people considered Covid-19 and lockdown measures as the great leveller, but that was simply not the case. Inequality and poverty have been laid bare during all that we have been through these past two years. Those who work in front-line roles with many one-on-one interactions are often paid less than those in jobs that could be done from home, yet they are more likely to be exposed to the virus through the volume and proximity of contact with others. Ensuring support to those with less means who are required to self-isolate is critical for those individuals and anyone they happen to support.

There are issues with the available financial self-isolation support, and I hope that the Scottish Government will consider the limited financial criteria, the lack of awareness of the grant among the public, the delays in receiving support and the practical barriers that leave claim rates low.

I will give an example of one of my constituents who tried to get support. Her son had a positive Covid test. My constituent and her partner did not test positive but, nevertheless, the household self-isolated. As a self-employed beauty therapist who works from home but who was unable to have clients in her house, my constituent had no income for 10 days. She applied for the self-isolation grant but was told that she did not qualify for several

reasons: she had not tested positive, her son is an adult and her partner's income rendered her ineligible. The latter criterion has a patriarchal feel to it.

Despite the impact of losing client bookings on her business, my constituent did the right thing by isolating, and I thank all those people who, when asked to do so, have self-isolated over the past two years, ensuring that they did not infect others. Compliance rates with all Covid restrictions have been high and we must thank the public for their great sacrifices to protect one another. We must ensure that, when financial support is needed, it is there.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We now move to the open debate. There is a wee bit of time in hand, if members wish to intervene or accept interventions.

16:20

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): Thank you, Presiding Officer. I am sure that we can all make an effort to spin it out, if you want. *[Laughter.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Mason, that is not what I seek.

John Mason: Thank you for the opportunity to speak. I am a member of the COVID-19 Recovery Committee, which has been through the bill fairly thoroughly. As other members have said, there is not really anything contentious in it. There is some suggestion that it is a technical bill, but I suggest that it is a little bit more than that. As Murdo Fraser spelled out, if we did not pass the bill, the NHS would face additional costs of some £360 million, which is quite a substantial amount of money. If we had a bill before us that would require spending £360 million, it would not be considered to be just a technical bill.

The convener has explained the background to the bill and the fact that this subject was previously covered by United Kingdom legislation but will now be handled by us. The Law Society is positive that it will be an improvement, because the bill deals specifically with Covid-19, rather than being a blanket modification of the Public Health etc (Scotland) Act 2008. Therefore, at least theoretically, if someone were to get Ebola or a similarly rare illness in the next few months and had to self-isolate, they would be entitled to the full compensation regime.

A number of points were made during our work on the bill and it is worth spending a little time considering some of them. When asked about the 2008 act, the Law Society said:

“the whole vista of emergency legislation needs some revision in relation to whatever emergencies there might

be.”—*[Official Report, COVID-19 Recovery Committee, 2 December 2021; c 10.]*

The committee broadly agreed with that point, as the 2008 act was clearly aimed at small numbers of people having to self-isolate and not at the possibility of a pandemic. The Government's comment was that the 2008 act was fit for purpose but that the intended purpose had been more limited. I feel that it would be better to have legislation in place that deals with both smaller cases and pandemics.

Another issue that came up was how many people self-isolated when told to do so. Many, 94 per cent, said that they self-isolated, but when that was studied in more detail, it was found that a lower proportion, 74 per cent, did so. Some people did not know about the compensation that was available, while others thought that it would impact on their benefits. Some people found compensation difficult to access and some were knocked back without reasons being made clear.

As we have just heard from Beatrice Wishart and other members, for people on low incomes, being off work for even a few days is a serious step and some employers are more supportive than others. In future, therefore, the level of compensation should be carefully considered. Although the bill is not about the specific support of £500, that figure was raised in the consultation process. Household incomes and circumstances vary greatly around the country, not least because the cost of living varies, and some households already face fuel poverty and food insecurity. Although £500 is a nice, round and simple figure, it could be more nuanced.

Practical support such as health and social care was also raised, and I understand that the Government has committed to considering that point.

In response to the committee's consultation, the Law Society pointed out that there was no definition of “emergency”, and that the Government should be proactive in setting out why regulations might

“need to be made urgently”.

In one sense, this issue is perhaps less important at this point as we are, I hope, coming out of the pandemic and the proposed legislation is of a temporary nature. However, the committee is also thinking ahead to future pandemics, and it would be good if we could have the best structures already in place when that happens. I think that the Government accepts that point.

Overall, I am happy to support the bill. To fully compensate everyone in the country for all their losses because of self-isolation or other aspects of the pandemic has not been, is not, and cannot be afforded or possible. A more limited and targeted

support scheme has been required, and the bill seeks to continue that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Sandesh Gulhane, who is joining us remotely.

16:25

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests, as I am a practising NHS doctor.

In all honesty, there is not a huge amount to say about the bill at stage 1. Basically, the public have done the right thing. People have isolated as appropriate and taken their vaccines.

Murdo Fraser eloquently expressed the concerns of the Law Society over a technical point, so I do not wish to go over that again.

The bill seeks to reinstate the duty on health boards to pay compensation requests for self-isolation for reasons other than Covid-19, which was, understandably, being done at the discretion of health boards during Covid. As has been said already, the 2008 act was intended to be used for people who were isolating because of diseases such as tuberculosis and was never intended to be used during a pandemic.

The bill looks to save £360 million and we should welcome that. We need to be clear, however, that help is available for people who need to isolate, and they can get that help through the Scottish Government's self-isolation support grant, although I must say that, having seen the papers and the application process, it is a rather daunting prospect to have to go through, and it would be good to streamline it, because some people might give up on the paperwork. I also agree with Jackie Baillie that the payments are required quickly by those who apply.

The bill's scope is narrow, and it is aimed at doing what is required. For that reason, the Scottish Conservatives and I will support it at stage 1.

16:27

Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP): Others who have spoken before me, particularly my fellow members of the COVID-19 Recovery Committee, have dealt with the intentions and implications of the bill in a more specific and detailed manner. I hope to avoid going over the same ground in my speech this afternoon.

In considering the bill at stage 1, the committee took a sufficiently wide-ranging selection of evidence from health and social care partnerships, the Law Society of Scotland, the Resolution Foundation, the Scottish Women's Convention

and the Scottish Government itself. We heard from the Deputy First Minister, the Scottish Government legal directorate and the team leader for Covid-19 legislation and daily contact testing, as well as from the head of contact tracing and supporting isolation policy.

In essence, the bill is a consequence of Covid still being with us and the desire to extend some of the unusual provisions relating to the way in which we are responding to the pandemic for a further six months. It is an acknowledgement of that fact. The provision allows the legislation to run until October instead of expiring in March, and, in agreeing to it, we are protecting the public purse from a potential 20-fold increase in cost, which, as we have already heard, would be about £360 million in year 1.

Covid has wreaked havoc with our economy, our social interactions and our day-to-day lives in so many ways that were almost unimaginable to us before March 2020. The need to insist that vast numbers of people isolate themselves for more than a week at a time was a big part of those previously unimaginable consequences. It was felt to be prudent to take that decision in 2020, and I am not convinced that we are sufficiently free of the threat posed by the on-going pandemic to cast that protection aside just yet. This is a short-term legislative bill to prevent a long-term financial bill.

It is essential that we bear it in mind that, as has been said, the requirement to compensate that is contained in the 2008 act was not introduced with a worldwide pandemic in mind. It was intended as a response to outbreaks that were far more limited in geography and scale. However, that is not the position we are in. We are far from that right now.

That does not mean that the Scottish Government does not recognise the importance of providing financial support to those who are most in need and are required to self-isolate as a consequence of the virus, and I welcome the fact that, in the year to September 2021, the Government awarded self-isolation support grants totalling almost £28 million.

As a committee, we were not without questions and concerns about the contents of the bill, but I am satisfied that the Scottish Government's responses to those concerns properly addressed and dealt with any misgivings that we had.

We recommended that, separately from the bill, the Scottish Government should review the level of support that is currently provided and the eligibility criteria for all those who qualify for that support, and we were assured that the Government will keep those criteria, and the level of support, under constant review. I welcome that.

We recommended that the Scottish Government should consider how best to increase public

awareness of the support that is available to those who are asked to self-isolate, and we received an assurance that that, too, will be kept under review. The importance of messaging in that regard is probably one of the biggest messages that the COVID-19 Recovery Committee has taken out of this process.

The most complex of our recommendations was probably the one that related to an issue that was, perhaps inevitably—I apologise to the lawyers in the chamber—brought to our attention by the Law Society of Scotland, which led to the concession by the Scottish Government that, should a statement of reasons be required in relation to regulations being required in urgent circumstances, that statement will contain an explanation of the nature of that urgency as well as of the proposed extension that is required. I welcome that. When it comes to regulations, it is nice to know why they are being made.

Finally, we recommended that, at an appropriate time, when the emergency nature of the current deliberations is behind us, the compensation provisions that are contained in the 2008 act should be revisited to ensure that they remain sufficient for the purposes for which they were intended—for isolated examples of self-isolation. That relates to what John Mason said. I, for one, certainly hope that never again in our lifetimes will we find ourselves in the position of having to distribute large-scale levels of financial support as a consequence of a global pandemic, but we never know.

The bill allows for support for people who are required to self-isolate to be targeted at those who need it most. There may very well be a case for the level and the scope of that targeted assistance to be amended, upgraded and improved, but that is for another day.

Compliance with the self-isolation requirements has, in the main, been very high, and I pay tribute to all those members of the public who, over the course of nearly two years, have toiled the impositions that have been put upon them with a remarkable level of stoicism, fortitude, community spirit and understanding.

16:32

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): For the past 22 months, as a result of the requirements to stay at home or to self-isolate, we have all temporarily given up our freedoms and some of our human rights—our rights to liberty, to education, to work, to health, to free assembly and to respect for private and family life, to name but a few. Although we have all experienced the same restrictions, the impacts have not been shared equally.

I believe that it is incumbent on all of us to work tirelessly to do all that we can to ensure that no one's human rights are disproportionately restricted during, or after, a pandemic. That means that we must do everything in our power to ensure that, when we restrict rights, it is proportionate, justified and managed in a way that, as far as possible, protects people from hardship and inequality.

Self-isolation is a proportionate means of achieving a legitimate aim—that of protecting lives—but that does not make the curtailment of rights any nicer or easier for those who are forced to curtail them.

It is also crucial that we remember that some find self-isolation harder than others. That is why, when we restrict rights, we must have regard for the disproportionate impact on some groups, especially low-paid workers, women, unpaid carers and disabled people. For many, self-isolation means more than just a curb on their freedom to leave the house or see other people. Without proper Government intervention, for them it can be a choice between self-isolating and being able to pay the bills, and there are some groups who find it harder than others because of structural inequality.

The Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee heard evidence of the significant and disproportionate impact that the pandemic has had on low-paid workers, and specifically on women, who are more likely to work on the front line and risk contracting Covid-19, as well as being more likely to work in insecure jobs and on zero-hours contracts. As we have heard, the COVID-19 Recovery Committee found that women who work in those conditions and sectors are concerned about the impact that self-isolation might have on their ability to get shifts following their isolation period.

Many people cannot afford to self-isolate without jeopardising their ability to feed their family, pay their rent or cover the cost of rising energy bills. The self-isolation support grant is available to those who earn less than the living wage, but many people do not access it or are not awarded it. The latest figures suggest that only 49 per cent of people who have applied for the grant have been successful in getting it, and the amount that is provided to people who get it is often very low.

As it stands, the grant is capped at £500. To put that in perspective, for a worker who earns the minimum wage of £8.91 per hour and works for 35 hours a week, self-isolation, even with the grant, would mean losing almost £130 over 10 days of isolation. For people who are already on the cusp of poverty, that could be the difference between making ends meet and not doing so. We must ensure that the available support is sufficient and

reaches the people who need it most. To prevent entrenching inequality further, the Government must also listen to people who are impacted and must act to identify and then mitigate any unequal consequences that are caused by restrictions.

Although more than 1 million Covid cases have been recorded in Scotland, uptake of the self-isolation support grant has been only around 6 per cent of that number. That support must be not only increased and improved but promoted, and I welcome that suggestion in the committee's report. People cannot claim support that they do not know exists. Television adverts promote the importance of self-isolation but do not highlight the self-isolation support grant, although that could be a key opportunity to remind people of the help that is out there.

The Government should promote the grants to the people whom we know are most negatively impacted, such as women and those working in care, hospitality and the creative sector. We have asked the Government to do that, and I hope that it will today set out its intention to do so. People must be offered the grant at any and every opportunity, beginning with the moment when they are told that they should self-isolate.

I know that many people are concerned that the support available and its promotion vary across the country. It cannot be left to a postcode lottery; the Scottish Government must issue proper standards and guidance. For as long as self-isolation is used as a mechanism to contain the spread of the virus, we must make adequate, provide and relentlessly promote all the financial support that is available, and we must seek to mitigate the unequal impact of restrictions at every turn. The Scottish Government must do all that it can to encourage and empower people to comply with its guidance and ensure that no one has to choose between protecting themselves and others and paying their bills.

16:36

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green):

The bill is a vital piece of legislation that will protect health boards from facing unaffordable self-isolation payments. As has been observed, the Public Health etc (Scotland) Act 2008 was not written with a global pandemic in mind. Health boards would be severely financially impacted if the mandatory compensation power in the 2008 act were to resume. The Scottish Greens therefore support the general principles of the bill and agree with its intention. I agree that it is not financially sustainable for the power contained in the 2008 act to resume. However, I have some points regarding eligibility for the self-isolation support grant.

Several eligibility issues were raised during the COVID-19 Recovery Committee's consideration of the bill at stage 1. In its response to the call for views, Shetland Islands Council acknowledged the targeted nature of the support provided by the self-isolation support grant but said that it

"would like to highlight the potential socio-economic impact on those with lower incomes or in areas where there is a significantly higher cost of living if this bill is passed and no consideration is given to reviewing the self-isolation support grant scheme, qualifying criteria and financial support".

The Scottish Greens have long made the case for comprehensive financial and practical support for people who are self-isolating. There are financial and practical barriers to self-isolation, and addressing those will help to boost compliance. The Scottish Government's own literature review of the evidence of compliance with self-isolation and quarantine measures found that

"Rates of compliance are heavily influenced by financial constraints and are dependent on income support, job protection and support with accommodation."

We are two years into the pandemic, and the cost of living is rising. There have been serious financial consequences for individuals and their families. Many people are undoubtedly worse off than they were before the pandemic. Although I recognise that the 2008 act is not the appropriate means of providing financial support for those who are self-isolating, support must be on-going and should be regularly reviewed to ensure that it continues to be adequate.

The need for better communication of what support is available has been highlighted. In its response to the Government's consultation on the bill, the Scottish Women's Convention said that none of the women to whom it had spoken had successfully accessed the self-isolation support grant or the local self-isolation assistance service. Many women said that they had not heard of the scheme, and those who had heard of it did not think that they would be eligible. They also said that the application process could be daunting and confusing.

During the pandemic, many people have had to apply for benefits for the first time in their lives and were unfamiliar with the process, while many public and third sector services that would previously have assisted them were closed or reduced. I would therefore be grateful to hear from the cabinet secretary what steps can be taken to better publicise the grant and simplify the application process.

I will finish by focusing on the need for further pandemic-related legislation. The bill is intended to address a very specific issue, but we must consider the on-going relevance of the 2008 act. It was highlighted to the committee that, if it was not drafted with a global pandemic in mind and is not

suitable to be invoked in that context, there needs to be a review of all pandemic-related legislation.

In an evidence session on the bill, the Law Society of Scotland said:

“We have recommended that the whole vista of emergency legislation needs some revision in relation to whatever emergencies there might be ... We need to consider a law for emergencies and make sure that it is fit for purpose and flexible enough to meet every contingency.”—[*Official Report, COVID-19 Recovery Committee*, 2 December 2021; c 10.]

We need to consider what further legislation is required to prepare us for future pandemics and ensure that we are ready to respond, as far as possible, without the need for emergency legislation.

As many others have done, I take this opportunity to thank the public for their efforts in self-isolating and keeping one another safe.

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

16:41

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank everyone who has spoken in this necessary debate for their contributions. I thank Siobhian Brown, who spoke on behalf of the COVID-19 Recovery Committee. I hope that she will take back to the committee an account of how we have progressed through the debate and the fact that everyone wants to get the bill through stage 1, so that we can offer people support.

As many speakers have noted, the evidence tells us that Covid is responsible for the greatest shifts in our health service, our economy and our society for generations. I thank Jim Fairlie for his remarks on that. Few other things have wreaked the damage that the virus has, and we will require significant legislation both now and well into the future to deal with it. I note Murdo Fraser’s points about legislation, which Gillian Mackay also commented on. I think that we all agree that we are glad that we are getting on with the job and will support the bill at stage 1.

As many of us have continued to say throughout the pandemic, and as has been remarked in this afternoon’s debate, the pandemic is not only a health crisis but an economic one, too. The startling effects that multiple lockdowns, limits on travel and unpredictable self-isolation rules have had on businesses and workers are truly incredible. Nearly two years into the pandemic, we still cannot fully grasp the extent of the damage, and it will be felt for many years to come.

As has been mentioned, the damage is always felt the most by those who bear the brunt of other things—people who are underpaid, overworked

and, often, underappreciated. For a minimum-wage worker to have to self-isolate and take on all that that entails continues to be a harrowing experience. Such people have desperately needed our support and they still need it now. Far too few people even knew about the grants. Siobhian Brown made a very good point about women not knowing that grants were available and therefore not accessing them. I have also heard that the lengthy process that people require to go through in order to receive them has put many people off applying. We have talked about the fact that that inefficiency has to change, and I hope that the cabinet secretary will address that.

It is important that no one feels that they have been penalised simply for doing the right thing. Properly administered self-isolation grants will enable people to self-isolate without having to worry. Equally, they will provide great benefit to the rest of society, as they will maintain the number of people who follow self-isolation rules, simply because people will know that they can afford it. That is essential for us all. Jackie Baillie and Dr Gulhane spoke about that. We all, perhaps, know someone who has worried when they have been required to self-isolate. Such people may have had no desire to breach the rules, but the financial consequences of self-isolating may be too much for them. Low-wage workers, the self-employed and precarious workers are just a few examples.

The grants therefore represent an investment in us all and in public health. They are not, as some might have characterised them, a handout. As such, I reiterate my party’s position that we broadly support the bill at stage 1. The Scottish Government is correct in its intention to introduce separate legislation so that we can distribute help to those who have faced the sharpest end of the problem, but we must do so with full recognition of the extent of the financial penalty that so many have faced.

We will continue to scrutinise the bill as it progresses, to ensure that it is fit for purpose—and, in particular, to scrutinise how the Government will raise awareness of the grants. Many members spoke about that. If we cannot adequately inform people of what they are entitled to, we cannot be surprised when they fail to take on board what they require to do.

I thank everyone for the debate.

16:45

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I am pleased to close the debate on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives. It is one of those debates that, on the face of it, seems more technical in its content. However, as my colleague and fellow

COVID-19 Recovery Committee member, Murdo Fraser, suggested, it covers some very important issues.

As was mentioned by the Deputy First Minister in his opening remarks, the Public Health etc (Scotland) Act 2008 was not put in place with the current Covid situation in mind. That act put a duty on health boards to compensate any employee asked to isolate or quarantine. As Jackie Baillie pointed out in her contribution, the Covid-19 pandemic could have put significant financial pressures on health boards, to the tune of some £360 million, if they had been required to compensate those who needed to isolate. Given that potential pressure, the obligation to compensate for the requirement to isolate was replaced by a discretionary power in the UK Covid emergency legislation. The essence of the bill that we are considering is that that support will continue even if the emergency coronavirus powers lapse.

As Murdo Fraser also mentioned, there was broad support for the bill in the COVID-19 Recovery Committee, albeit that a few amendments will be required. I note the Government's willingness to address at stage 2 those concerns, including the committee's conclusion that the Scottish Government needs to be more transparent on eligibility for application and on reasons for rejection.

The convener of the COVID-19 Recovery Committee has highlighted that, in evidence, some issues were raised on the accessibility of the self-isolation support grant and that numbers of people on low incomes were not accessing those payments as they should have done. The convener also highlighted the difficulty that some applicants had had in accessing the grant, despite having to self-isolate. For example, none of the 100 applicants in the test group that we heard from was successful. Pam Duncan-Glancy pointed out that only 49 per cent of applicants had been successful. The Scottish Government needs to ensure that those who require support can receive it, and can do so timeously.

We heard evidence from recipients that stigma and discrimination were attached to claiming benefits. In his contribution, John Mason raised the issue that some potential claimants thought that applying for the grant could impact on their current benefits.

We note that more could be done to highlight how the grants are targeted, in order to destigmatise those who need to access them, especially in the demographics that are shown to be least likely to access those grants but in which they are most needed.

The bill may appear technical and to have a narrow scope, but it is nonetheless an important bill with significant financial implications. It ensures support for those who need to isolate due to a positive Covid test. It is right that we continue that support, especially for those who are in a financially vulnerable position. For all those reasons, the Scottish Conservatives will support the bill at stage 1.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call John Swinney, the Deputy First Minister, to wind up the debate for the Scottish Government.

16:48

John Swinney: I thank colleagues for their contributions to the debate and I welcome the clearly evident support from all parties for what is a practical and pragmatic bill that will address an issue that could distract health boards from their central purpose and from the demands that are placed on them at this very challenging time.

A number of members have highlighted and paid tribute to members of the public for their willingness to self-isolate and fulfil their obligations when it comes to the relevant provisions. In particular, Beatrice Wishart and Jackie Baillie made that point. I associate myself and the Government with those remarks. We are indebted to members of the public who have fully co-operated with the self-isolation requirements, which has helped to interrupt circulation of the virus. It is a commitment and contribution that individuals who have self-isolated have delivered for all the rest of us.

As Pam Duncan-Glancy made clear, the implications of that aspect of the pandemic, just like those of every other aspect of the pandemic, have not been felt equally across the population. In particular, the impacts of self-isolation have been particularly profound on people on low incomes and on women. That is widely understood within the Government. That is why the Covid recovery strategy, which I launched in Parliament in October, is focused exclusively on intensification of our efforts to tackle inequality. So much of the Government's attention and thinking is focused on ensuring that we use the Covid recovery strategy to address some of the inequalities that existed in our society before Covid but have been highlighted and exacerbated by it, and which must be addressed in its aftermath. I give that commitment to Parliament today.

The committee convener, along with Pam Duncan-Glancy, Gillian Mackay and Jim Fairlie, made a number of comments about awareness of and accessibility of the self-isolation grant. That issue concerns the Government. Research that

was undertaken on the Government's behalf by ScotCen—the National Centre for Social Research—shows that more than 80 per cent of participants in its study who had contact with their local authority indicated that they were satisfied that their support needs had been met.

Many opportunities to raise awareness of the schemes that are available have been taken in the briefings and the statements in Parliament that ministers have given, and in promotional campaigns, such as the text messages that have been sent to individuals when they have come forward in the testing infrastructure.

I have two observations to make about all that. First, I do not put those points on the record to say that the situation is perfect. I hear members of Parliament, and if the feedback is that those measures have not been adequate, we will have to look at the situation again.

Secondly—this point has been made by a number of members in the debate—as well as increasing awareness of grants, we have to make it clear to people who are in fragile low-income situations that they can safely take them up without jeopardising their wider financial position. It is all very well to have awareness, but it has to be awareness with a certain depth of understanding, so that individuals realise that jeopardy will not be caused to their financial circumstances if they take up the grants. I will take those points away from the debate.

A number of colleagues, led principally by John Mason, Jim Fairlie and Gillian Mackay, discussed the wider legislative framework, which raises a number of issues. As we would with any emergency of the nature that we have experienced in the past two years, we have to review the experience of it and its impact, and consider whether we had in place all the arrangements to deal with it when it happened to us.

Obviously, a huge amount of new legislation has had to be put on the statute books in Scotland and in the United Kingdom Parliament to deal with the practical issues of the emergency. We have to look in retrospect at whether the statute book needs to be revised and strengthened to ensure that we now have in place all the necessary arrangements. Indeed, the Government is consulting on some of the provisions. They have not gone down perfectly with all sides of opinion in Parliament, but I hope that we will navigate ourselves through that with the usual persuasive style that I bring to these discussions, to try to assure members of Parliament—[*Interruption.*]. I have not come to Ms Baillie's remarks yet, but I shall.

The substantive issue that we have to examine is whether the legislative framework is adequate for all circumstances. In his intervention on me, John Mason asked whether the provisions for self-isolation support in a small and compartmentalised local outbreak need to be in the same legislative framework as those for a pandemic. We need to look at all such questions.

John Mason: Am I right in thinking that the Law Society is pushing for a wider review of the law in relation to pandemics and so on? Is the Deputy First Minister open to such a review? Who would carry it out?

John Swinney: We have to look at all those issues. I dare say that we probably also have to consider carefully what comes out of the public inquiry into the Covid emergency in order to understand what issues we might need to consider in a wider review of the legislative framework. As I have announced to Parliament, Lady Poole will progress the inquiry on the Government's behalf.

There are short-term steps that we can take, such as the bill that we are considering today, which the COVID-19 Recovery Committee and Parliament will consider at stages 2 and 3. However, there will be other deeper questions. I have more legislation to introduce; it will be the subject of more detailed consideration than is the case in the expedited process that we are going through for the Coronavirus (Discretionary Compensation for Self-isolation) (Scotland) Bill.

I have absolutely no idea why Jackie Baillie felt the need to raise issues of transparency relating to the Government. As she knows, as a result of voluminous amounts of parliamentary questions, freedom of information requests and letters that she submits to the Government, we are transparent about everything to Jackie Baillie.

Jackie Baillie: Will the Deputy First Minister take an intervention?

John Swinney: I shall do so in a moment, given that I have thrown out such provocation. The Government has accepted in its response to the committee the importance of setting out the rationale for using an emergency procedure to extend the provisions in the bill. Obviously, the Government will introduce amendments to that effect at stage 2.

Jackie Baillie: Far be it from me to remind the Deputy First Minister that some people in this chamber served on a committee in the previous session of Parliament from which information was actively withheld. However, I do indeed welcome any recent conversions to transparency by the Deputy First Minister.

John Swinney: I encourage Jackie Baillie to get over the difficulties that she had in the previous

session of Parliament, because the Government was more than transparent and open with Parliament. I encourage her gently, in the nicest possible way, to move on. She will have a happier life if she does so.

I thank members of Parliament for their engagement on the issue. It is a substantial issue, because there was a danger that the important work of our health boards in focusing on and addressing management of the health emergency could have been diverted by the application of provisions that would have been an administrative and financial burden on them. I appreciate that members across the political spectrum have recognised the importance of that point and are committed to supporting the bill.

The Government will engage on the issues that arise at stages 2 and 3. I look forward to engaging on those points with Parliament, in due course.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): That concludes the stage 1 debate on the Coronavirus (Discretionary Compensation for Self-isolation) (Scotland) Bill.

Coronavirus (Discretionary Compensation for Self-isolation) (Scotland) Bill: Financial Resolution

16:58

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of motion S6M-02771, on a financial resolution for the Coronavirus (Discretionary Compensation for Self-isolation) (Scotland) Bill.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament, for the purposes of any Act of the Scottish Parliament resulting from the Coronavirus (Discretionary Compensation for Self-isolation) (Scotland) Bill, agrees to any expenditure of a kind referred to in Rule 9.12.3A of the Parliament's Standing Orders arising in consequence of the Act.—[*Kate Forbes*]

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

Motion Without Notice

16:58

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I am minded to accept a motion without notice, under rule 11.2.4 of standing orders, that decision time be brought forward.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 11.2.4 of Standing Orders, Decision Time on Thursday 20 January be taken at 4.58 pm.—
[George Adam]

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

16:58

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There are two questions to be put as a result of today's business.

The first question is, that motion S6M-02792, in the name of John Swinney, on the Coronavirus (Discretionary Compensation for Self-isolation) (Scotland) Bill at stage 1, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees to the general principles of the Coronavirus (Discretionary Compensation for Self-isolation) (Scotland) Bill.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-02771, in the name of Kate Forbes, on the financial resolution for the Coronavirus (Discretionary Compensation for Self-isolation) (Scotland) Bill, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament, for the purposes of any Act of the Scottish Parliament resulting from the Coronavirus (Discretionary Compensation for Self-isolation) (Scotland) Bill, agrees to any expenditure of a kind referred to in Rule 9.12.3A of the Parliament's Standing Orders arising in consequence of the Act.

Meeting closed at 16:59.

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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