



OFFICIAL REPORT  
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

# Meeting of the Parliament

Tuesday 16 May 2023

Session 6



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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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# Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 16 May 2023

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

## Time for Reflection

**The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):** Good afternoon. The first item of business is time for reflection. Our time for reflection leader is Dr Kamyab Givaki of the Scottish Iranian Association.

**Dr Kamyab Givaki (Scottish Iranian Association):** Presiding Officer and members of the Scottish Parliament, I thank you for the opportunity to address you today.

As an Iranian-born Scot, I feel a deep sense of responsibility to speak about the challenges that are faced by the people of Iran.

Cyrus the Great, the founder of the Persian empire, was the first leader in history to recognise the importance of human rights and freedom of religion. He famously freed the Jewish people from captivity in Babylon and allowed them to return to their homeland, setting a precedent for the protection of minority groups. Cyrus the Great's legacy has endured for centuries and has inspired many people to fight for their rights and for the rights of others.

Last September, a 22-year-old Iranian woman was detained by Iran's morality police for alleged non-compliance with the country's dress code. Tragically, she lost her life while in custody, sparking widespread outrage and protests that persisted for months.

When the "woman, life, freedom" movement in Iran began, I was overwhelmed with a sense of hopelessness and fear. As I observed events unfold from a distance, I felt a strong sense of duty to act and support the Iranian people as they fought for their rights on the streets. I created a petition advocating for the movement, which gained more than 38,000 signatures, highlighting the widespread support for the cause among people in the United Kingdom. That experience reminded me of the importance of using my voice and reminded me that, by doing so, I could help to echo the voice of the people of my motherland and beyond.

The struggle for human rights transcends geographical boundaries and impacts us all. The Iranian diaspora in Scotland is heavily impacted by the events in Iran, experiencing mental health challenges as a result of the on-going struggle for their families and their motherland, and some have even been threatened by the Iranian Government

for their activism. That has led to sleepless nights, anxiety and even panic attacks for many members of the Iranian diaspora. I believe that we in Scotland need to support those who are suffering and to recognise the challenges that they face. We should certainly enhance the quality of life of those living in Scotland, and empower them to live a life of freedom, purpose and hope.

I extend my sincere appreciation for your kind attention and support. Thank you.

**The Presiding Officer:** Before we move to the next item of business, I invite members to join me in welcoming to the gallery Her Excellency Marie Chatardová, Ambassador of Czechia to the United Kingdom. *[Applause.]*

## Business Motion

14:03

**The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):**

The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-08981, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, which sets out changes to this week's business.

*Motion moved,*

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) to the following revisions to the programme of business for—

(i) Tuesday 16 May 2023—

after

*followed by* Topical Questions

insert

*followed by* Ministerial Statement: Ferguson Marine Due Diligence

(ii) Wednesday 17 May 2023—

after

*followed by* Scottish Labour Party Debate: Tackling Scotland's Mental Health Crisis

insert

*followed by* Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee Debate: Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee's 10th Report, 2023 (Session 6)

delete

5.10 pm Decision Time

and insert

5.30 pm Decision Time

(b) that the Social Security (Residence Requirements) (Sudan) (Scotland) Regulations 2023 [draft] be considered by the Parliament.—[George Adam]

*Motion agreed to.*

## Topical Question Time

14:04

### Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland

1. **Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the reported comments made by the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland that the Scottish Government has "absolutely" failed to deliver for children. (S6T-01375)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth):** I thank Bruce Adamson for all that he has done as Children and Young People's Commissioner, but I do not recognise the picture that he paints. This Government introduced the game-changing Scottish child payment to tackle child poverty; we are delivering 1,140 hours of funded early learning and childcare to all three and four-year-olds and eligible two-year-olds; we have introduced free bus travel for all under-22s; and we have the most generous provision of free school meals in any part of the United Kingdom.

We are doing all that as a devolved Government, within a fixed budget. Despite that, we will continue to make real progress in delivering for our children in what have been, and continue to be, very challenging times.

**Pam Duncan-Glancy:** The children's commissioner is hugely respected and has long shown his personal and professional commitment to the rights of children and young people, for which I thank him.

He is fundamentally correct in saying that the Scottish National Party Government has failed to keep its promises to children and young people. It has failed on the attainment gap, free bikes, child poverty, counselling in schools and free school meals—and the list goes on. Does the cabinet secretary accept that it is time for the Government to stop patting itself on the back and to start working to improve the lives of children and young people in Scotland?

**Jenny Gilruth:** I, too, have great respect for Bruce Adamson and, in fact, sat on the panel for his appointment back in 2017, when I was a back bencher.

Pam Duncan-Glancy will appreciate that I have been in this post for just six weeks. I would certainly welcome the opportunity to discuss those matters with the outgoing children's commissioner, who I understand will demit office from tomorrow. I have asked to meet him to discuss the points that he has raised in the press. The role of the children's commissioner is fundamentally about

improving the lives of our young people, and I very much look forward to working constructively with the new children's commissioner, Nicola Killean, when she takes up her post later this year.

I must rebut some of Pam Duncan-Glancy's suggestions. It is also important to look at the context of the debate. The latest poverty statistics, which were published in March, show that child poverty rates in Scotland remain 6 per cent lower than in the UK as a whole, at 24 per cent compared with 30 per cent in 2021-22. In England, 31 per cent of children live in poverty, as do 28 per cent in Wales and 22 per cent in Northern Ireland respectively. Those statistics cover a period in which the pandemic was having a significant economic impact and also show the devastating impact of the UK Government's decade of austerity and its welfare cuts for many Scottish families.

I think that I heard a member from the Conservative seats say, "For heaven's sake!"

I listened very intently to the children's commissioner's interview.

**The Presiding Officer:** Please be brief, cabinet secretary.

**Jenny Gilruth:** He mentioned the fact that the United Nations rapporteur Philip Alston has spoken about political choices. It was the UN special rapporteur who spoke about the limits of devolution in mitigating Westminster austerity.

**Pam Duncan-Glancy:** Context matters; although the cabinet secretary has been in post for only six weeks, we have had an SNP Government in Scotland for 16 years.

The commissioner's defence of human rights has clearly struck a nerve. Does the cabinet secretary agree that this Government has delayed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Bill and has refused immediate commencement when that bill does come back because it is avoiding responsibility for its own shortcomings? That is exactly the bill's purpose—to ensure that the Government is truly accountable for upholding the rights of children and young people.

**Jenny Gilruth:** I hate to say this to Pam Duncan-Glancy, but the Scottish Government and the SNP are not responsible for Covid, nor are we responsible for the impacts of the cost of living crisis. She might wish to look elsewhere for the source of the challenges that have been presented to this Government by those external factors. If members listen to what the children's commissioner said, they will note that he acknowledged that there have been external factors in those challenges.

There has been no prevarication in relation to the UNCRC bill. Fixing the bill is really complicated, and we must address the Supreme Court judgment. Back in 2021, when this Parliament voted unanimously for the legislation, the UK Government challenged it. We respect the outcome from the Supreme Court, but it is hugely important to go back to fix the legislation to ensure that we improve the rights of children and young people and that we do so as quickly as possible. There is a responsibility on this Government, and our officials continue to engage on that, but there is also a responsibility for the UK Government. I hope that Pam Duncan-Glancy will respect and acknowledge that point.

**Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con):** There has been a failure to close the poverty-related attainment gap and to amend the bill incorporating the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. There has been a failure to reduce the pupil teacher ratio, with fewer teachers—including maths and English teachers—and fewer classroom assistants in fewer primary, secondary and additional support needs schools. Many school buildings are unsuitable for modern teaching and more than 1,000 schools have not been inspected in the past 10 years.

There has been a failure to reduce class sizes, the number of violent attacks or the exodus of staff from private and voluntary nurseries. There are fewer childminders, and 11,000 childminding places have been lost. The Promise is not being kept. Entries for higher exams in science subjects, English and maths are at a five-year low. Teachers have been sidelined in educational reforms, and key recommendations about the reform of the Scottish Qualifications Authority have been rejected. Standards of literacy and numeracy are falling.

**The Presiding Officer:** Ms Gallacher!

**Meghan Gallacher:** Curriculum for excellence is an unmitigated failure.

There is clearly not enough time to go through the list of failures by the Scottish National Party Government. Where are the laptops and bicycles? That is the legacy of an SNP-run Scotland. My question is simple: what mess created by her predecessors will the cabinet secretary focus on first?

**Jenny Gilruth:** What a dispiriting question from Meghan Gallacher. I do not really know where to start. [*Interruption.*]

I spend a lot of my time speaking to teachers and others who work with our children and young people. I spent a lot of time on Friday and Saturday speaking to the Scottish Secondary Teachers' Association's conference and at the NASUWT's conference in Aberdeen. More

broadly, it is incumbent on us all to remember that this is about our children and young people and not to politicise the issues, as Meghan Gallacher has sought to do. Reading out a list of policy areas in no way helps to improve children's lives in Scotland.

**Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con):** Policy failures, actually.

**Jenny Gilruth:** In my view, talking about failure is not the place to start. [*Interruption.*]

**The Presiding Officer:** Members!

**Jenny Gilruth:** Working constructively with Government is the way in which we can improve children's lives. That is why, later this week, I will meet Ms Gallacher's colleague and my Opposition counterparts in the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats. I will work across party boundaries on the issue, because it is absolutely important that we get it right for Scotland's children and young people.

**Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD):** Another area on which the outgoing children's commissioner successfully challenged the Government was the age of criminal responsibility. In 2019, to much fanfare, the Government changed it from the lowest in the world at eight to just 12. During the passage through the Parliament of the Age of Criminal Responsibility (Scotland) Act 2019, as the cabinet secretary will remember, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child uplifted that de minimis position from 12 to 14. We did not even get to the bottom and, still, there was celebration.

Is the cabinet secretary content that we are still behind Russia and China on the age at which we hold children criminally responsible for their actions? When will her Government address that so that we at least come up to the floor of international expectation?

**Jenny Gilruth:** There might be split ministerial responsibility with the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs on that matter. I recall some of the debates during the bill's passage through the Parliament. I will be more than happy to write to Alex Cole-Hamilton directly on the points that he has raised.

**Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP):** Presiding Officer,

"there should be no doubt Nicola Sturgeon made huge progress putting in place the building blocks needed to end child poverty in Scotland."

That is the assessment of the director of the Child Poverty Action Group, John Dickie. However, the Scottish Government is working with one hand tied behind its back. What analysis has it carried out into the impact of UK welfare reforms, and how

many children could be lifted out of poverty in Scotland if those key policies were reversed?

**Jenny Gilruth:** I go back to my response to Ms Duncan-Glancy. It is important that we have context about the powers that the Government has in this Parliament and the external factors that undoubtedly impact on our children and young people.

Our analysis, which was published in April last year, estimated that reversing key UK Government welfare changes that have taken place just since 2015 could lift an estimated 70,000 people in Scotland, including 30,000 children, out of poverty this year. That is why we have consistently urged the UK Government to match our ambitions in tackling child poverty head on through reversing, for example, its policies such as the benefits cap and the bedroom tax and introducing game-changing benefits similar to our Scottish child payment.

I look forward to working with the UK Government on those issues, recognising that responsibility for some of the powers rests at another Parliament.

### Violence in Schools

**2. Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what steps it is taking to reduce violence in schools, in light of reports that three teachers and a 14-year-old pupil have been injured in a disturbance at a Renfrewshire school. (S6T-01384)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth):** I hope that Jamie Greene appreciates that I cannot comment on the specifics of an on-going police investigation.

However, no teacher or member of staff should suffer verbal or physical abuse at their place of work. It is for schools and local councils to respond to specific instances of challenging behaviour.

Notwithstanding that, I discussed the matter with the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland only last week. I also chaired the Scottish advisory group on relationships and behaviour in schools on Thursday, with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and trade union representatives.

We are currently gathering evidence that will help us to better understand behaviour in our schools at national level through our research on behaviour in Scottish schools, which will report by the end of the year. That will ensure that future policy, guidance and support for our schools' staff reflects the current challenges in our schools and what is working well.

Finally, I have been engaging with our trade union partners on the issue—most recently, at the Scottish Secondary Teachers' Association and NASUWT conferences, which were held at the weekend.

**Jamie Greene:** Naturally, I will not comment on the specifics of the case. We wish those who are affected a speedy return to the classroom.

However, I will comment on the sad reality that that incident is not unique. There have been 75,000 incidents of physical or verbal attacks by pupils against teachers and school staff over the past five years, not including this year. Last year, there were nearly 20,000 such attacks, including 191 incidents that involved the potential carrying of a dangerous item or weapon. Of those, 64 were so serious that they were reported to the police.

We have been raising the issue in the Parliament for years, because the problem has been on the rise for years. Something has to change. My question is, therefore, what will change and when will it change?

**Jenny Gilruth:** Jamie Greene will recognise that I take a keen interest in the matter, given my professional experience before I was an MSP.

As I think I mentioned in my initial response, the issue was raised at both teacher conferences that were held over the weekend.

Fundamentally, we need first to recognise that Covid has changed the culture in schools. It is changing relationships, behaviour and things including attendance. We need to be cognisant of the broader changes that are happening in our school communities, and we need to support our school staff better in responding to such incidents when they are extreme.

Secondly, we also need to provide context. In my experience as a teacher, examples such as Jamie Greene cited were few. Yes, they happen—but they are not the norm in terms of behaviour in schools. We need to be careful about how we politicians characterise behaviour in our schools, because we do not want to send a message that is indifferent to the daily reality in our classrooms up and down the country, which is that teachers are equipped with the necessary skills and expertise to defuse challenging situations as and when they happen.

Thirdly, when we talk about specific incidents, we should be mindful that we are talking about the impacts not only on staff but on our children and young people. As a former teacher, I always think about that when it comes to responding to incidents.

We politicians must be careful not to use specific examples to form policy. That is why, in my initial response to Jamie Greene, I talked

about the national evidence base. That evidence was last gathered in 2016 and has not, as a result of the pandemic, been updated. A number of weeks ago, I asked for an update on it, but I will not be able to access the data until the autumn. At that time, I will share with the Parliament the updated national picture on behaviour in our schools.

**Jamie Greene:** I say with respect to the cabinet secretary that the problem with that response is that 75,000 is not a “few” incidents. The incident that I mentioned is not unique or isolated. Such incidents are in the tens of thousands.

If the cabinet secretary does not believe me, she should listen to the Educational Institute of Scotland, which represents a body of teachers. Its former president, Heather Hughes, said:

“Violent incidents are happening more and more in our schools because the young people and teachers are not getting the support they need”.

It is nothing whatsoever to do with Covid. Heather Hughes said that a year ago.

The reality is that teachers are at their wits' end. They should not be afraid to go to work in the morning. I agree that other pupils and young people have to bear the brunt, in disruption to their learning and their wider school experience.

I am afraid to say that the cabinet secretary is just one of many education ministers who has promised action on the matter. To say that it is just a matter for individual schools or councils simply does not wash any more; it is a national problem, which requires a national solution. When, therefore, will there be a comprehensive plan from the Government to deal with the rising violence in our schools?

**Jenny Gilruth:** Jamie Greene cited evidence from the EIS. Of course, I am a former member of the EIS, so I recognise its views on the subject and have already spoken to it on the matter. If Jamie Greene had listened to any of the interviews that I have given or to my comments on the culture in our schools, he would know that the issue is at the forefront of my mind in respect of recognising how the Government can respond.

However, my point to Jamie Greene is that local authorities have a statutory responsibility to deliver education in our schools at local level; therefore, they, too, have responsibility in responding to extreme events. When extreme events occur in our schools—I accept that they occur, although they are not the norm, in my experience—it is important that local authorities support their staff and their young people in responding to them. I am working with COSLA on that. In my initial response, I outlined the action that I am taking with COSLA, in relation to SAGRABIS and in

relation to the behaviour in Scottish schools—  
[*Interruption.*]

Stephen Kerr is heckling from a sedentary position. I have to say that he probably would not have been able to do that in my classroom. Nonetheless, I have outlined my plan—  
[*Interruption.*]

I was going to go on to talk about promoting positive behaviour, so I look to the Conservative members in hope and with encouragement that they, too, respond to that call.

More seriously however, I say that there is a request and a call to action to the Government, but there is also the point that I made to the teaching unions at the weekend about the call to the teaching workforce to tell me what they think will work in our schools. I do not—neither as cabinet secretary nor as a former teacher—claim to have all the answers on that. The teaching workforce knows exactly what it needs in terms of the support and guidance that we provide for teachers in schools. We can provide some of that at the national level but, actually, our local authority partners will be key to tackling the issue.

**Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab):** It is right that the local authorities have responsibility in the matter, but interpretation of what is a violent incident varies across Scotland. That means that bringing together statistics will be almost impossible; that responsibility surely rests with the Government.

The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 state that employers must carry out risk assessments

“to protect employees from exposure to reasonably foreseeable violence.”

What discussions has the cabinet secretary had with local authorities about improving violent risk assessments so that she can compare like with like, and what discussions has she had about providing resources to support mental health provision for students, given that mental health challenges lie at the base of a significant number of the conflicts that occur in schools?

**Jenny Gilruth:** As I said in my response to Mr Greene, I have already met COSLA to talk about its role in the matter. I met COSLA most recently last week, as part of the Scottish advisory group on relationships and behaviour in schools. It co-chairs that group with the Government and I have asked the group to come back with recommendations on the action that we can take.

The data that I mentioned in my response to Mr Greene will not be forthcoming until the autumn. That, unfortunately, is because of the datasets that our researchers have used. I accept the need for the Government to act, but the Government needs

to act in partnership with our local authorities. Therefore, more broadly, the member’s point is an important one.

Martin Whitfield has made important points about mental health and support for our young people: there is an issue, there. We have, of course, provided funding in the region of £16 million to provide secondary schools with access to counselling services. However, the solution is not just about having specialists in our schools; it is also about our classroom teachers and it is about our learning assistants and behaviour support assistants, who are often paid much less than our classroom teachers. We need to recognise that the situation requires whole-school and whole-community responses. Yes—that includes Government, but as the member said, it also includes our local authority partners. That is why I am really keen to take the work forward with COSLA and our trade unions.

**Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD):** I hope that the cabinet secretary has the matter at the top of her priorities list, because teachers and pupils are sick to the back teeth of how they are being treated in our schools. It is a huge problem that is causing massive issues for management of our schools.

However, my real concerns are that the previous cabinet secretary did not attend the advisory group back in December and that the survey that the current cabinet secretary has talked about will not be available until the autumn. I fear that the Government is not moving fast enough. There has been a mushrooming of cases since the pandemic. There has been a problem in respect of mental health, through lack of resources or additional support. Those issues should be at the top of her list. What can she say to reassure me that she fully understands the problem that exists in schools?

**Jenny Gilruth:** Mr Rennie really does not need to tell me what teachers think. I spend most of my time, if I am not speaking to my political colleagues, speaking to my former friends and colleagues who work in education. They tell me very clearly exactly what they think, so I very much recognise the challenge.

As I said in my response to Mr Greene, there is wider national work going on, which is really important. Mr Rennie previously—at an episode of First Minister’s question time, I think—raised a specific case from his constituency. We, as politicians, need to be careful to look not at the specifics but at the national picture and what it is telling us. We do not yet—[*Interruption.*] We do not have that data because it has not been gathered since 2016. I want to look at it in more detail.

My second point is that the SAGRABIS work is really fundamental to the endeavour. The group will work with COSLA and with our trade union partners. On Friday and Saturday, I got real encouragement from our trade union partners that they are part of the solution in respect of identifying how we can better support our schools. I hope that that gives Mr Rennie reassurance.

I have spent much of my time as cabinet secretary over the past six weeks looking at the issue and trying to get the granular information that we do not yet have. However, as I said, it is important that we do not necessarily look just at the specifics of the extreme cases but instead that we look to support our local authority partners on the ground and, fundamentally, that we help to support those who work with our children and young people. They include teaching staff, but they also include learning support assistants and behaviour assistants.

**The Presiding Officer:** That concludes topical question time.

## Urgent Question

### NHS Grampian (Baird and ANCHOR Units)

14:24

**Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to reports that NHS Grampian was warned about, and failed to address, “significant” issues on the Baird and ANCHOR—Aberdeen and north centre for haematology, oncology and radiotherapy—units almost three years before announcing delays.

**The Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care (Michael Matheson):** National health service boards are responsible for the commissioning and day-to-day management of their capital projects. Previous experience found that the nature and complexity of those projects meant that an additional layer of external assurance was needed to ensure that the specialist requirements of such healthcare facilities and their sites are fully addressed. That is why we created NHS Scotland Assure in June 2021 to provide critical oversight for projects being carried out by local health boards.

The report that is being referred to today was conducted by NHS Scotland Assure and demonstrates the value of it having a greater role in such projects. A crucial element of any large capital project is on-going review and refinement of the agreed design, in particular the mechanical, electrical and infection prevention and control aspects. Those are now all independently reviewed by NHS Scotland Assure for projects that are carried out by local health boards.

**Liam Kerr:** What will hugely concern the people of the north-east is that this situation was warned about three years ago and patients are paying the price. Despite members of the Scottish Parliament requesting details of the assessment from 2020 that there were problems, it has taken a freedom of information request to drag that information out today. When was the Scottish Government first made aware that there might be issues with the ventilation systems? I am not asking about the report, just about Government awareness. What action was taken by the Scottish Government following that awareness?

**Michael Matheson:** I can only refer to the report that I am aware of, which is the report that was carried out by NHS Scotland Assure, which was established by the Scottish Government to undertake the type of key review work that is necessary for complex NHS facilities of that nature. It is now the responsibility of the local NHS board, which is now carrying out the project and

ensuring that the report's recommendations are effectively implemented.

The other aspect that I can assure members about is that no new NHS facility will open until it has completed the final checks for which NHS Scotland Assure is responsible. That is to make sure that once the facility is open, it complies with all the necessary standards that are set and that it meets the required level of patient safety.

I assure the member that we are determined to make sure that NHS Grampian learns lessons from this situation and that it implements the recommendations in the NHS Scotland Assure report.

**Liam Kerr:** The cabinet secretary, of course, avoided the question of precisely when he became aware. I suspect that is because he is basically admitting that he has not been made aware, which is an extraordinary admission of a lack of involvement and interest on the part of this Government, especially given that this is far from the first hospital project to be beset by infection control problems—one thinks immediately of the Queen Elizabeth in Glasgow and the Edinburgh sick kids. I appreciate that the cabinet secretary is new in post, but his two predecessors presided over what are now four projects that had patient safety problems, overran in time and bust their budgets. What consequences will former ministers face for their incompetence? Precisely what steps will the Scottish Government take to understand the causes of and learn lessons from those failures?

**Michael Matheson:** Given the length of time that he has been in the Parliament, I am somewhat surprised at Mr Kerr's lack of knowledge of how NHS capital projects are carried out. Local health boards are responsible for the delivery of NHS capital projects. If the member was listening to my answer, which I suspect that he was not, he will have heard that we set up NHS Scotland Assure back in June 2021 specifically to address issues around complex health projects being delivered effectively. That is exactly what it is there to do and its report demonstrates the effectiveness of that process, which is why NHS Grampian is responsible for carrying out its recommendations.

**Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab):** It is concerning that we have another hospital with serious health and safety issues. An inquiry is currently investigating the construction of Scottish hospitals including the Scottish Government's flagship hospital, the Queen Elizabeth university hospital.

Patients and staff will rightly be outraged by the latest development in NHS Grampian. What discussions, if any, have been had with trade

union colleagues to ensure that the workforce has confidence in the safety of the hospital that it will be expected to work in?

**Michael Matheson:** Carol Mochan raises an important issue. However, let us deal with the way in which the matter is dealt with at the local level.

The NHS board is responsible for taking forward and delivering the capital project. In June 2021, because of experience with some other capital projects that were being taken forward by boards, including at the Queen Elizabeth university hospital and the sick kids hospital in Edinburgh, we created NHS Scotland Assure, which has the responsibility for providing the final level of oversight of how an NHS board takes forward a project. Its review of the NHS Grampian project identified a number of areas in which actions now need to be taken in order to address the issues that it highlighted around infection control measures and ventilation aspects. It is now for NHS Grampian to ensure that those actions are implemented.

There is a final process that that project will have to go through before it can start to receive patients, which allows NHS Scotland Assure to check that the recommendations have been implemented. In effect, that assures it that the actions that it has recommended have been implemented to make the environment safe for staff and patients. People can have that level of assurance right from day 1, including Carol Mochan's colleagues in the trade unions.

**David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP):** NHS Scotland Assure was established by the Scottish Government to improve the quality and management of healthcare construction and refurbishment projects across NHS Scotland. How can it be used to ensure that we have the wide range of skills and expertise—not least expertise in ventilation engineering—required for the construction of those particularly complex structures?

**Michael Matheson:** Healthcare establishments are complex capital projects that require a significant level of specialist technology to be deployed within them for a whole variety of reasons, particularly in clinical settings, from theatres to intensive care units. They all require specialist equipment and ventilation and other infection control measures to be implemented.

We set up NHS Scotland Assure to provide us with confidence that boards, in delivering projects, are implementing the right measures in order to ensure that the buildings comply with the standards and guidance that have already been set out for healthcare establishments. NHS Scotland Assure provides expertise to all boards in order to give them the confidence that they need

that the buildings meet the required standards. It is there to support all our health boards throughout the country in delivering their capital projects. It is extremely important that, when a local health board is taking forward a capital project, NHS Scotland Assure's recommendations are fully and effectively implemented before the building can be opened to staff and patients.

**Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab):**

In the sick kids hospital example, the issue was that a standard of four cycles an hour was applied to four bedrooms rather than 10, and the fact that those four bedrooms had critical care beds was overlooked. It sounds like a similar mistake was made in this instance.

As the cabinet secretary has said, NHS Scotland Assure has picked up a mistake, but a mistake was made nonetheless. Is there an issue with the way in which standards are held or with the way in which those standards are implemented in the design and planning of hospitals, such as the Aberdeen one?

**Michael Matheson:** Daniel Johnson raises an important point. There are a couple of factors. One is that the project predates some of the changes to guidance recommendations that have been implemented since we learned lessons from Edinburgh and Glasgow. There is a crossover between those projects and the application of the new standards. Obviously, there is also the creation and implementation of NHS Scotland Assure, which started in June 2021.

I have already flagged up through my office the need for us to ensure that, at the very outset, when NHS boards are taking forward projects, they are very clear about the process and the standards that they are expected to meet. That is what I am looking for. Of course, sometimes those might be revised during the course of a major capital project, such as the one in NHS Grampian, but it is important that boards are alive to those and respond to them immediately rather than waiting for the implementation of the key review process from NHS Scotland Assure. I have asked for assurance that all boards that are taking forward capital projects are aware of those. Equally, it is reassuring that the NHS Scotland Assure process identified the issue and has been allowed to flush it out at a stage that allows the board to take the rest of the action to address those concerns.

## Ferguson Marine

**The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):**

The next item of business is a statement by Neil Gray on Ferguson Marine due diligence. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of his statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:35

**The Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy (Neil Gray):**

Today's statement upholds the commitment given by the former Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Economy some time ago to update Parliament on progress in the building of the MV Glen Sannox 801 and hull 802 at Ferguson Marine Port Glasgow, and to do so in an open and transparent way.

Today, I will update members on the future resourcing and delivery of vessels 801 and 802, but before I do so, I wish to remind Parliament of our three key objectives when we brought Ferguson Marine into public ownership: the completion of vessels 801 and 802 in order to provide sustainable, high-quality lifeline services to our island communities; to support a highly skilled and dedicated workforce; and to ensure a sustainable future for the yard given its importance to the local economy and the resilience of Scotland. Those objectives remain as valid today as they were then, and I continue to be impressed by the way in which the workforce in the yard has worked so hard and with such pride to deliver the vessels—often in difficult circumstances. I thank all of those working at Ferguson Marine for their tireless efforts and hard work.

In September 2022, the Parliament, through the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee, was advised by the chief executive officer of FMPG of his forecast relating to an increase in the cost of delivery of both vessels. His forecast at that time was that the total cost to complete both vessels would be £202.6 million, which included a £6.2 million contingency. That meant a forecast cost to complete for Glen Sannox of no more than £97.5 million, and for vessel 802 of £105.1 million.

Significant due diligence has been undertaken on the CEO's revised estimated cost to complete each vessel in line with the requirements of the Scottish public finance manual, which follows on from the requirements of the Public Finance and Accountability (Scotland) Act 2000. That is right and proper, particularly given the current pressures on public expenditure and our budget as a whole.

The process of due diligence has focused on regularity, propriety and the value for money of

continuing to complete the vessels. Given the complexity of the build programme and the importance of a full and thorough assessment to support any approval of public expenditure, the due diligence process has been supported throughout by independent external commercial advisers as well as internal expertise within the Scottish Government. While that process has been undertaken, we have ensured that Ferguson Marine has been able to continue to meet its obligations and to maintain progress on the build of each vessel.

As a consequence, the former Deputy First Minister, John Swinney, announced to Parliament two uplifts to the 2022-23 Ferguson Marine budget of £15 million in December 2022 and £6 million in March 2023. That took the total budget allocated to Ferguson Marine for 2022-23 to £61.1 million. That met the 2022-23 requirement for additional funding set out by the chief executive in September 2022, and it was right and proper that we did that while the due diligence work progressed. I should be clear that the increase in costs is extremely disappointing and I recognise that the building of these ferries has been hampered by delays and cost overruns.

As Mr Swinney set out in March of this year, that due diligence was then nearing a close; it has now been completed. As a consequence, I now provide Parliament, at the first opportunity, with an update on our decisions relating to future funding for Ferguson Marine. I am pleased that we have completed the assessment fully in line with the Public Finance and Accountability (Scotland) Act 2000, the Scottish public finance manual and the green book. Officials have advised me that as a consequence of that due diligence, the regulatory and propriety of completing vessels 801 and 802 under the existing contracts is met.

I can also confirm that with respect to vessel 801, the value-for-money case for completing that vessel is also met; the cheapest option open to ministers is to complete 801 at Ferguson's. However, the case for vessel 802 is more challenging, and I have accepted the judgment of the Scottish Government accountable officer that the narrow value for money case has not been made.

Having said that, in making a decision on the way forward, I am guided by a wider set of considerations relating to the original policy objectives and the impact that any decision might have on people, communities and national resilience. It is also important that I consider the impact on Ferguson Marine. These matters cannot be taken into account in a pure value-for-money exercise, but it is clear that they are matters of the utmost importance.

From the very start, we have been clear that our island communities deserve to be supported by two new energy-efficient vessels with the capacity and reliability that is required to support vibrant island economies. Although I accept that the pure value-for-money assessment concludes that it could be cheaper to reprocur a new vessel, that work also shows that doing so would result in significant further delays.

A new vessel could not be deployed until May 2027 at the earliest—four years from now, and two and half years from the current delivery timescale. I do not consider that it is acceptable to ask our island communities to wait that further period.

Vessel 802 will provide lifeline connectivity to the mainland, ensure that people on Arran are supported for day-to-day needs around health, education and commercial activity and provide a resilient service to support the tourist industry, which contributes so much to the island's economy.

Recent issues with the reliability of an ageing island fleet and the costs associated with hiring replacement vessels in order to maintain services have merely added to the compelling case for delivering additional capacity as quickly as possible. I am committed to supporting the workforce at Ferguson Marine and recognise the importance for jobs, skills and the opportunities for future generations that the yard provides.

More immediately, of course, the continuing delivery of vessel 802 through Ferguson Marine ensures that the local economy benefits from the company's spend on salaries, subcontractors and taxes, which support the local labour market and businesses in the wider Inverclyde area and beyond. Those benefits would be lost if we did not proceed.

Finally, I remain committed to supporting a sustainable future for Ferguson's. I believe that confirming our intention to deliver vessel 802 at the yard provides a platform on which future success can be built.

Put simply, if vessel 802 was not delivered at Ferguson's, the very future of the yard and the hundreds of jobs that it supports would be in jeopardy. On the basis of the cost projections in our due diligence, I have therefore provided written authority to the accountable officer to secure the continued build of vessel 802 at Ferguson's. In the light of that decision, I also confirm the preliminary budget set out by the then Deputy First Minister for Ferguson Marine for 2023-24 to support the continued completion of vessels 801 and 802, and I have advised the CEO of that position.

Our due diligence work has identified a number of inflationary and other significant pressures that

could increase the cost to complete. As part of our on-going control and scrutiny, the chief executive will undertake a detailed review of remaining costs in the light of that due diligence and will update Parliament in due course.

I am also formally asking Ferguson Marine to do everything possible to improve productivity, maximise operational efficiency and ensure that there is a tight control on costs, as well as to focus on delivering the vessels as quickly as possible. I expect Ferguson Marine to provide detailed scrutiny of the forecast costs and expenditure incurred and provide monthly progress on that and the anticipated delivery dates.

In the meantime, I also reluctantly accept the revised delivery dates set out by the Ferguson's CEO on 16 March of autumn 2023 for vessel 801 and late summer of next year for 802. I am also committed to securing a sustainable future for Ferguson's. We have already made progress on the work that the CEO has done to secure some initial contracts with BAE Systems.

To support its progress on a route to a sustainable future and to ensure the highest levels of internal accountability and oversight, I have also separately confirmed an additional £120,000 for cybersecurity improvements, internal audit and civil engineering that the CEO of Ferguson Marine has set out as essential.

These two ferries, dual fuelled and energy efficient, will support the Clyde coast communities for future generations. They will increase capacity, make it easier for island businesses to send and receive freight and provide a boost for the tourism industry that is so vital to the islands and our country as a whole.

To reiterate, when we took Ferguson's into public ownership in 2019, we did so to ensure the delivery of 801 and 802 and secure the future of the yard and its workforce. We did so because of the vital significance of the vessels to our island communities and of the yard and its workforce to the local, regional and national economy. The decisions that I have outlined today deliver on those commitments.

**The Presiding Officer:** The cabinet secretary will now take questions on the issues raised in his statement. I intend to allow around 20 minutes for questions, after which we will move on to the next item of business. I would be grateful if members who wish to put questions could press their request-to-speak buttons now.

**Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con):** I say to the cabinet secretary that, so far, his Government has delivered absolutely nothing. I thank him for advance sight of his rather embarrassing statement.

The building of ferries 801 and 802 has been a shambles from start to finish. In fact, "shambles" is not a strong enough word: it has been a scandal. The vessels are six years late and three times over budget, with the cost now standing at £300 million-plus. In March, the Auditor General said that the final cost of vessels 801 and 802 remained unclear. After today's statement, that remains the case.

What will the final bill—I stress the word "final"—be for vessel 801? In his statement, he told us that finishing vessel 802 at Ferguson's would not represent "value for money", although it might be quicker. How much cheaper would it be to buy a new ferry elsewhere, compared with finishing vessel 802 here?

**Neil Gray:** I do not need to remind Graham Simpson that the decision that I have taken secures the future of Ferguson Marine and ensures that we will deliver vessels 801 and 802, which is exactly what we promised that we would do. That response is typical of the Conservatives, who know the cost of everything but the value of nothing. Of course I must consider the narrow value-for-money considerations here, but I have a duty to ensure—*[Interruption.]*

**The Presiding Officer:** Members.

**Neil Gray:** I have a duty to ensure that I also consider the wider implications of my decision making. That is why I am ensuring that we fulfil our commitment to our island communities to deliver the ferries as quickly as possible and that we continue to deliver for our shipbuilding communities, too. Without that decision, and without ministerial direction, that would not be possible.

I will not take any lectures on ministerial direction from the Conservatives. The decision guarantees the future of the yard and will ensure that we deliver ferries for our communities. Ministerial directions from the Conservatives at Westminster led to the failure of the garden bridge project, which is an embarrassment for the Conservative Party.

As regards the costs, ministers have been very clear—*[Interruption.]*

**The Presiding Officer:** Members.

**Neil Gray:** —over a long period of time, that every effort must be made by Ferguson's to deliver the vessels in the most cost-effective way possible. There are always risks around the delivery of first-in-class vessels, and Ferguson's continues to incur costs related to design decisions that were taken some time ago under previous ownership. I am also conscious of the impact that inflationary pressures in the wider

economy have had on capital and operational costs.

Our due diligence has identified a number of inflationary and other significant pressures, such as design gaps and deficiencies that could increase the cost to complete. As part of our on-going control and scrutiny, the chief executive will undertake a detailed review of remaining costs in the light of that due diligence. Today, I have asked him to update Parliament in due course.

**Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):**

Given where we are with this sorry saga and the desperate need to get the ferries operational for our island communities, there is little option but to aim for the swift completion and delivery of vessels 801 and 802.

What was missing from the cabinet secretary's statement was an apology to the islanders and to the workers at Ferguson's, who have been so badly let down, and to the people of Scotland, for the outrageous mismanagement of public funds and public contracts. That is what we should have had from the cabinet secretary.

We have had five, six, seven or eight ministers who, at some point, have had responsibility for the delivery of the new ferries. Will the cabinet secretary be the one to take responsibility for seeing the project through to its completion? In the future, will he make a further statement setting out the long-term plan to ensure the sustainability of the yard at Port Glasgow?

**Neil Gray:** I thank Alex Rowley for what I think was tacit acceptance that the decision had to be made to ensure that the yard has a future and that we deliver on vessels 801 and 802. He did not say that explicitly, but I hope that that is the case; otherwise, Labour members will not be able to look constituents in shipbuilding communities and island communities in the eye on the question of ensuring a viable future for them.

Labour used to understand the need for such an approach; a precedent is that ministerial authority was given in 2002 in relation to the Campbeltown to Ballycastle project, which was deemed to represent very poor value for money, given its probable cost and economic benefit. Nobody really knows what Labour stands for now, but I hope that Alex Rowley was tacitly accepting the need for my decision.

As for an apology, Mr Swinney has previously apologised, and I of course apologise today to our island communities for the unacceptable delays in the delivery of vessels 801 and 802. As an islander, I more than understand the need for a secure ferry network to serve the islands. However, I will not apologise for taking the decision to ensure that we deliver on 801 and 802 and give the yard and its workforce a future.

**Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley)**

**(SNP):** Workers' representatives have acknowledged that the Scottish Government has saved the yard and the jobs of hundreds of workers at Ferguson Marine. To look forward, I understand that Ferguson's has said that it will look to offset any cost increases through income that is generated from commercial work. Will the cabinet secretary provide an update on the yard's progress in securing that additional important commercial work?

**Neil Gray:** Ferguson Marine is actively pursuing a range of commercial opportunities and, as shareholder and as a Government, we will do everything that we can to help it to secure those opportunities.

As the former Deputy First Minister informed Parliament on 16 March, Ferguson Marine has been seconding workers to BAE Systems since January to support the delivery of its type 26 frigate programme; we have provided a working capital loan to Ferguson Marine to support that contract. Ferguson Marine has recently commenced a larger-scale phase of work for BAE to fabricate three steel units at Port Glasgow, which will support the type 26 programme. We welcome the securing of those projects, which shows that Ferguson Marine is back to being a serious contender for future work.

**Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** This morning, the Finance and Public Administration Committee questioned the Deputy First Minister and the permanent secretary about the complete lack of transparency of decision making on the spending of public money. Ferguson Marine is the prime example of that problem. The Auditor General holds exactly the same view. What action will the cabinet secretary take, within his role, to ensure that such a scandal never ever happens again?

**Neil Gray:** On transparency, I am making a statement to Parliament at the first opportunity after the decision has been taken. I am offering myself for scrutiny to Liz Smith and other colleagues for the decision that I have taken, which is the right one to ensure that the yard has a future and that our island communities are served by good vessels as timeously as possible.

It is clear that there are lessons to learn from the unacceptable delays and unacceptable cost overruns. We have been up front about that, and we continue to work hard with Ferguson's and other interests to ensure that such situations do not happen again. I will continue to offer myself to Parliament for scrutiny on the decisions that we take.

**Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde)**

**(SNP):** A lot has been spoken and written about

Ferguson Marine in recent years. Opposition politicians criticised the awarding of the work on hulls 801 and 802 to the yard, in addition to making criticisms when work did not go to the yard.

I appreciate how difficult the decision was for the cabinet secretary, but my constituents who work in the yard will be pleased to know that their jobs are safeguarded. Does he agree with union representatives that how the issue has been discussed and the impact that that has had on the workforce's reputation and morale has been less than helpful? Will he provide an update on how many jobs have been directly and indirectly safeguarded by today's welcome decision?

**Neil Gray:** I thank Stuart McMillan for his continued stout defence of our shipbuilding tradition on the Clyde in his constituency and for the engagement that he has had with the workforce.

He is absolutely right that the workforce is doing a very difficult job in difficult circumstances. I pay tribute to the workers and I am looking forward to having the opportunity to meet them as soon as possible, not least to respond to the GMB's letter and the public discourse around the issue, which Mr McMillan has highlighted. We want to continue to support the yard and the workforce going forward, and, in tandem with Mr McMillan, I will continue to do so.

On the number of jobs at the yard, there are around 340 in place currently. Those jobs are one of the primary reasons why we intervened to save the yard in the first place.

**Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab):** The minister has mentioned the importance of improving efficiency at the yard. Alex Rowley and I were at Ferguson Marine yesterday, and both the GMB representatives and the chief executive stated the importance of investing in facilities at the yard to improve efficiencies and to help win future work.

Given that the Government owns the yard, what will the minister do to improve efficiency by investing in facilities there? People are rightly angry at management receiving bonuses for ferries that are late and over budget. Will such bonuses be paid on the minister's watch? If so, for what?

**Neil Gray:** I share Neil Bibby's anger and that of John Swinney at bonuses having been paid. There are contractual obligations that made the payment of bonuses unavoidable, but the chair and the chief executive of the yard are looking at how those contracts can be renegotiated to ensure that that does not happen again.

I also concur with Neil Bibby's comments on the need to support the workforce, and I welcome the fact that he and Mr Rowley had a meeting at the yard. I am looking to do the same thing. I want to get to the yard so that I can meet the workforce and understand workers' concerns. I also want to meet the chief executive in person, too. For understandable reasons, including the decision that I needed to take, I had to ensure that any meetings happened after my decision.

On Neil Bibby's point about investment, we will look to ensure that the yard continues to be as competitive as possible in securing future work. We are considering what further investment can be made, but, obviously, we must consider state aid and subsidy rules. We aim to ensure that there is a sustainable future for the yard, and we will be taking those decisions as quickly as we possibly can.

**Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP):** On their completion, the vessels will have a vital role to play in reducing the pressures that existing services are under. Will the cabinet secretary provide any further details as to how the vessels can best be deployed to reduce those pressures?

**Neil Gray:** The confirmation that has been given today on the delivery of MV Glen Sannox and hull 802 sits alongside our commitments to accelerating investments in new major vessels. The four vessels that are under construction in Turkey are intended for deployment on the Islay routes and the Little Minch routes from Uig to Lochmaddy and Tarbert, creating the opportunity for significantly increased capacity and resilience for the communities that are served. It also allows consideration of all options to deploy hull 802 on alternative routes, including potentially alongside MV Glen Sannox to provide additional capacity to and from Arran during the peak season. All options will be discussed with island communities at the appropriate time.

**Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD):** Presiding Officer, does it not show utter contempt for this Parliament, the taxpayer, the workers and the islanders that the transport minister left in the middle of this statement? He did not even have the courtesy to listen to the questions that are being answered. But who cares? In for a penny, in for £1,000,000.

We have had eight years of this utter fiasco, in which the Government has soaked the taxpayer, betrayed the islanders and utterly humiliated the workers. We have had six ministers in that time but none of them, including the current First Minister, has lost their job over that fiasco. Will anyone ever face the music for this disaster?

**Neil Gray:** I am literally standing here today being accountable for the decisions that are being

taken. Is Willie Rennie seriously suggesting that, on the questions whether to progress with 801 and 802 and whether to maintain the future of the yard, he would take a different decision? Is that what he is saying to our islanders and shipbuilding communities? If it is, he will not be able to look them in the eye again.

**Ivan McKee (Glasgow Provan) (SNP):** What work is the Scottish Government doing to secure the yard's long-term future by seeking to find a partner with the necessary expertise and experience in the sector for a joint venture or to buy the yard?

**Neil Gray:** As I confirmed to the Economy and Fair Work Committee last week, we will seek to return Ferguson Marine to the private sector. That is consistent with our position since nationalising the business. Although we are open to an approach from any credible buyer, we will divest our ownership of Ferguson Marine only when the time is right and when there is the right offer, for the taxpayer and for the workforce, that meets the Scottish Government's objectives.

I recognise the historic opportunity that programmes such as ScotWind represent, including in relation to the supply chain for support vessels. We know that such vessels are already on Ferguson Marine's radar, and the business is building relationships with a view to taking advantage of the opportunities that lie ahead.

**Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green):** In his statement, the cabinet secretary recognised the anger and frustration felt by our island communities about the quality and reliability of ferry services. Further delays to replacement vessels will heighten that anger and frustration still further. Can he assure me that he will work closely with colleagues, including the Minister for Transport, to ensure that the way in which lifeline ferries are identified and introduced is never again subject to the kind of failure that we have seen in this instance?

**Neil Gray:** I absolutely understand, acknowledge and appreciate the anger and frustration. I have already apologised for the unacceptable delays and the cost overruns that have been incurred. Continuing with the completion of both vessels will ensure that island communities receive new ferry services more quickly than they would through the procurement of either vessel. As I have made clear, I have impressed upon Ferguson Marine the importance of there being no further slippage in the delivery of either vessel.

I will continue to encourage Ferguson Marine to pursue all relevant market opportunities for the yard. An assessment of the new vessel options for routes across our network is being led by

Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd, Transport Scotland and the relevant operators. The two vessels that are under construction at the Turkish yard are progressing well—they remain on time and within budget. Recent milestones, including those relating to steel cutting and keel laying, are very welcome and bring us another step closer to adding new ferries to the fleet that serves the Clyde and Hebrides.

**Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con):** I politely say to the cabinet secretary that his hubris today will be met with palpable anger on islands such as Arran on the west coast of Scotland. Of course, we need new vessels—we all agree on that—and, of course, we need jobs on the west coast of Scotland. However, it is not controversial to say that we also need the vessels to be built at value for public money, given that the Government so often complains about a lack of money and that our islands are haemorrhaging cash through a lack of reliable and resilient ferry services right across the west coast of Scotland.

I have been in the Parliament long enough to have seen what has happened to Prestwick airport, with the Government's problems in returning it to the private sector. How will the cabinet secretary ensure that history does not repeat itself?

**Neil Gray:** Jamie Greene does not recognise that what he is saying is not too far away from the decision that I have taken. A narrow value-for-money assessment considered a narrow set of circumstances in relation to reprocurring 802 instead of continuing at Ferguson Marine. As minister, I had an obligation to consider the wider economic implications of that decision. I have done that, and I have assessed that it is better that our islands communities are served by those vessels as quickly as possible, which can happen only with the continuation of 802, and that our shipbuilding communities need the yard to have a future. I do not think that my position and Jamie Greene's position are too far apart in relation to that being the right decision for the people of Scotland.

**Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP):** Can the cabinet secretary provide an update on the planning that is under way for crew familiarisation training to ensure that the vessels can go into service at the earliest possible opportunity upon their completion?

**Neil Gray:** A normal process is being undertaken to ensure that the workforce is familiar with the new vessels. It is normal for training to be carried out so that that is the case.

The Scottish Government values the voice of the workers at Ferguson Marine. Throughout the period of public ownership of the yard, there has

been regular contact with union representatives, and I am happy to commit to such contact continuing. I very much look forward to speaking to the workforce as soon as possible.

**Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** I do not need to add to the comments that have been made about the feelings of betrayal among islanders. Vessel 802 is not going to be value for money, but does the Government still intend to commission it with the ability to use liquefied natural gas fuel, which the yard thinks would be a mistake?

**Neil Gray:** We are continuing to ensure that we have a dual fuel approach to the vessels and that they arrive as timeously as possible.

Edward Mountain speaks about betrayal. I would say that our island communities would have felt betrayal if I had taken a different decision, resulting in a further delay in the arrival of the vessels. I think that we have made the right decision for our island communities and for our shipbuilding communities, to ensure the on-going viability of the yard.

## Covid-19 Vaccination Programme

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur):** The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-08948, in the name of Jenni Minto, on celebrating the success of the Covid-19 vaccination programme. I invite members who wish to participate in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons now or as soon as possible. I call Jenni Minto to speak to and move the motion. You have around 13 minutes, minister.

15:06

**The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto):** I am delighted to open this debate on the Covid-19 vaccination programme. The Covid-19 pandemic brought tragedy and isolation to many individuals and families across Scotland and the rest of the world. Many of us lost people we loved and were separated from friends and family—we must never forget that human cost.

I am sure that we all remember the early days of the pandemic and our sense of fear and nervousness when, having seen the horrific news stories from China, Italy and Spain, we wondered whether that was going to happen here, too. The discovery of an effective vaccination felt very distant at that time. I am sure, too, that many of us will remember the sense of relief when, just seven months after the start of clinical trials, it was announced that United Kingdom regulators had granted authorisation for the use of the Pfizer-BioNTech Covid-19 vaccine. Before the end of 2020, the vaccination programme had begun in earnest.

The development of that and other Covid-19 vaccines represented a remarkable achievement in scientific innovation and collaboration. The vaccines were developed using innovative approaches and were made possible by unprecedented collaboration between scientists, Governments and the private sector. The vaccines' success in reducing the spread of the virus has been remarkable. They have provided a path out of the pandemic, which is key to economic and social recovery.

Much of what it was impossible to do three years ago we are now free to do, and the principal reason for that is the success of the vaccination programme. However, the discovery of a vaccine was just the start. Getting the vaccine into the arms of those who were at greatest risk of serious ill health and doing so as early as possible was a herculean task. Arguably, it was the most logistically challenging national endeavour since the second world war. I pay tribute to all those who played their part in that, from those who scheduled

the appointments to the drivers who delivered the vaccine to vaccination centres right across Scotland and to the vaccinators themselves, who included volunteers and members of the armed forces.

Most of all, I thank all the people who came forward to be vaccinated. It is thanks to them that Scotland has consistently had higher uptake rates than those in other parts of the UK. More than 15 million vaccines have now been administered in Scotland, which is a truly staggering number.

**Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD):** I agree with many of the minister's points about the success of the vaccine programme, but does she recognise that many of the Scots to whom she has just paid tribute were very frustrated in the early days of the programme? Although there was much good will in helping to get the vaccine into arms, unnecessary bureaucratic hurdles that were not a problem south of the border slowed down the vaccine roll-out in Scotland.

**Jenni Minto:** I am not sure that I recognise the point that Alex Cole-Hamilton is making. I certainly know from my own communities the strength of feeling and positivity that there was about the fact that the vaccine was being rolled out, as well as about the continual information that was coming from the previous First Minister, informing people of the whole process of how were going to recover from Covid-19.

**Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** Will the member give way?

**Jenni Minto:** No. I would like to make some progress, please.

Eleven days ago, we got the very welcome news that the World Health Organization no longer sees the Covid-19 pandemic as constituting a

“public health emergency of international concern”.

However, although it is no longer a public health emergency, we remain in a global pandemic that is a significant threat to health across the world. Vaccination—the tool that has brought us to this much-improved position—is one of the most effective ways of ensuring its continuing management.

The road from vaccine discovery to this destination has not always been smooth. There was the emergence of the omicron variant in November 2021 and the need to respond to the advice of the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation to vaccinate everyone over the age of 18, not just those over the age of 40, as had been previously advised. Literally overnight, health boards had to revise their scheduling plans to include far more people and to provide a

vaccination opportunity to everyone before the end of 2021.

Members might remember the boosted by the bells campaign to encourage people to get vaccinated and the reopening of many mass vaccination clinics. In the period of the omicron outbreak, at the end of 2021, an incredible 1.45 million vaccinations were delivered in the space of one month.

**Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con):** Will the member give way?

**Jenni Minto:** I would like to make progress.

I acknowledge how difficult that time was for health board staff and vaccinators. Much was asked of them, but they responded fantastically, as they always do.

I want to thank colleagues across the chamber for their support for the vaccination effort. I am sure that I was not the only one of us who was photographed getting their injection to publicise the programme.

**Stephen Kerr:** Will the member give way?

**Jenni Minto:** If I can just finish this point, I will give way.

There are many subjects on which we will disagree, but the need to protect those at greatest risk of serious ill health is not one of them.

**Stephen Kerr:** The minister has made a very long list of people who—quite rightly—deserve appreciation and praise for their part in the astonishing achievement of the vaccine roll-out, but she has not mentioned the important and strategic part that the United Kingdom Government played in procuring the vaccines in the first place. It made bold decisions, early on, to invest in research projects and bring together collaborations that resulted in the vaccines. Will she now take the opportunity to express all our appreciation to the United Kingdom Government for making that happen?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Minister, I can give you time back for both of those interventions. *[Interruption.]*

15:13

*Meeting suspended.*

15:14

*On resuming—*

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I ask the minister to resume. There is quite bit of time in hand, minister, so I can give you the time back for that interruption and for the earlier interventions from members.

**Jenni Minto:** I turn to the people in the public gallery first. I understand the issues that some are experiencing, and my sympathy goes to those who are affected. It is important that health boards take those issues seriously and support patients in their management of, and recovery from, their symptoms.

With regard to Stephen Kerr's intervention, I acknowledged in my opening remarks the importance of the collaboration between scientists, Governments and communities.

The landscape today looks better than it did previously, and it is certainly far better than it was in March 2020, when our lives were changed in many fundamental ways. However, there remains a need for those who are at greatest risk of ill health to continue to take up the offer of vaccination against Covid-19.

The spring Covid-19 booster programme began on 27 March with care home vaccination, followed by appointments for those aged 75 and above, beginning on 11 April, and for those with a weakened immune system aged five and over, from 24 April. The latest data, as of 7 May, shows a national uptake of 85.4 per cent among older adult care home residents and 51.3 per cent among those aged 75 or above. Appointments for the spring booster are available in every health board, and I encourage those who are eligible and who currently do not have an appointment scheduled to get one before the offer ends, at the end of June.

**Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** Will the minister take an intervention?

**Jenni Minto:** If the member does not mind, I would like to continue.

After 30 June, healthy individuals aged between five and 49 will no longer be eligible for any Covid-19 vaccination. We therefore encourage anyone who has not completed their full primary course—that is, a first and second dose—to come forward to complete their course of vaccination while the opportunity exists.

As the spring booster and primary course offers draw to a close, and as the programme reduces in a proportionate and safe response to the move away from public health emergency status, the number of vaccination clinics will reduce as we vaccinate smaller numbers of the population.

Although those who are eligible for future vaccination will still be invited to attend their nearest clinic, it is possible that they will be offered different options to those that were previously offered. While that may impact on travel options, it is a consequence of the success of the vaccination programme, and it will allow staff to be deployed in other areas of health support. We also

now have a more sophisticated appointment scheduling system that acknowledges that the closest vaccination centre as the crow flies might not actually be accessible—it might even be on a different island—and it will schedule accordingly.

Earlier this year, the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation recommended that children aged between six months and four years who have specific medical conditions that place them at greater risk from Covid-19 should be offered a Covid-19 vaccine. Those appointments will begin from 29 May. Parents and carers of children in that category will be contacted by NHS Scotland with details of an appointment in due course.

Looking a little further ahead, we know that there will be a Covid-19 booster programme for autumn and winter 2023-24, but we await further detail from the JCVI on which groups will be invited for vaccination.

Scenario planning with health boards to operationalise the final advice is already under way, and, given the success last winter of offering a flu vaccine at the same time as a Covid-19 booster to those eligible for both, I am sure that that option will be being considered again for next winter.

Although overall vaccine uptake figures have been impressive, we know that uptake across some groups and communities is lower than we would like it be. Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, my officials have worked with health boards, third sector organisations and community groups to ensure that the Covid-19 vaccine programme reaches every community and to understand practical and attitudinal barriers to vaccination. Generally speaking, the easier it is to access vaccination, the more likely people are to take up the offer.

We put in place practical solutions such as more accessible venues, we provided funding for transport, we put information materials into a huge number of accessible formats and languages, and we provided translator services. In order to support the needs of people with learning disabilities, autism, sensory impairments and mental health conditions, we provided quieter spaces, allowed more time for appointments and offered smaller clinics, as well as providing appropriate staff training.

Health boards across Scotland are still building on the fantastic outreach work that we saw during those first pandemic phases, with partnerships across civic society to ensure that everybody was able to access vaccination without any barriers. Clinics that were held in community venues such as mosques, gurdwaras and churches, as well as mobile units that were provided by the Scottish

Ambulance Service, helped people to get their vaccines in trusted and convenient locations.

The success of the vaccination programme has allowed Governments here and elsewhere to ease—

**Edward Mountain:** Will the minister take an intervention?

**Jenni Minto:** Yes, of course.

**Edward Mountain:** One reason why vaccinations worked so well in the Highlands was that general practitioners were allowed to deliver them, which went against the GP contract. Will the minister commend GPs for delivering vaccinations, and will she support their doing so again if we ever face a pandemic in the future?

**Jenni Minto:** Given that I live on an island in the NHS Highland health board area, I recognise the point that the member makes. However, it is right that local health boards make decisions in the context of the contracts that they have with GP practices.

**Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP):** Following on from that point, GPs in Nairn, in my constituency, very much want to continue providing vaccination services. There is a procedure to exempt them from the requirement in the GP contract, but that was taken away. Will the minister and the cabinet secretary look at that again? It would be a better solution for patients and for health, and it would be far cheaper, saving millions of pounds.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I can give you the time back, minister.

**Jenni Minto:** I note that the majority of GPs preferred the change in the way that vaccinations were delivered.

The success of the vaccination programme has allowed Governments here and elsewhere to ease a range of the restrictions that were introduced to halt the spread of infection and to mitigate its worst effects. International travel has largely resumed, and we are now no longer required to wear face coverings in most settings or to test for the virus. We have moved to a steady-state model that can respond to increased threat, and, although it is still possible to access testing in certain circumstances, our contingency and variant planning does not envisage a return to population-wide testing. However, that position should not be misrepresented as complacency.

The Scottish Government, in common with other Governments across the UK and elsewhere, has always had plans in place to deal with health pandemics. The many lessons that we have learned from the experience of the past three years have been applied. We continue to work

with partners and key stakeholders, including Public Health Scotland and health boards, and we are working across the four nations to prepare Scotland to identify and respond to future infectious disease and pandemic threats. National preparedness arrangements include stockpiles of clinical consumables, personal protective equipment and medicines; a contract for access to pandemic influenza vaccine; and a national pandemic influenza service at four-nations level to distribute antivirals.

The staff who have been responsible for putting needles into arms and for protecting us from the virus come from across the health workforce. One innovative approach was the deployment of an extended vaccination workforce to deliver the Covid-19 and flu vaccination programmes. The vaccination workforce in Scotland includes a significant number of level 3 and level 4 healthcare support workers who received specialist training to competently and safely deliver flu and Covid-19 vaccinations. Those workers enabled us to deliver the vaccination programme at huge scale, and the programme, in turn, provided valuable training and development for healthcare support workers, improving their skill set and learning as they worked.

I received my first vax on Islay, where there was an almost ceilidh-like atmosphere in the centre at Bowmore hospital. People had not seen each other for a while, so it will not be difficult to imagine the hubbub of chat and laughter that filled the centre while healthcare staff and volunteers provided the information and reassurance that were so necessary and appreciated. We believe that retaining the ability to deploy that vaccination workforce not only is a sensible use of resources but will have significant benefit to the public health protection system.

I end with a thank you and a plea. The thank you is to every single person involved in the vaccination effort, including those who came forward to be vaccinated when they were invited to do so. The plea is for those who are invited for a Covid-19 booster in the future to come forward for that vaccination. Each of the available vaccines offers great protection against the virus, but that protection fades over time, so it is important that it is topped up for anyone who is in any of the groups at greatest risk of serious ill health from the effects of Covid-19.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises the success of the COVID-19 vaccination programme; notes that over 15 million vaccines have been administered and that tens of thousands of deaths have been prevented; agrees that vaccination has led to the World Health Organization (WHO) declaring an end to the public health emergency; recognises that COVID-19 has not gone away and offers condolences to all those who have lost a loved one during

the pandemic; agrees that the success of the vaccination programme has allowed people to be kept safe, while the country lives with COVID-19; encourages those who are eligible for vaccination to come forward when called, in order to protect themselves and others, and thanks the dedicated health and social care workers who continue to deliver the vaccine.

15:24

**Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con):** More than 17,000 Scots have died after contracting Covid-19, and I offer my condolences to all those who have lost a loved one. I hope that our debate does not stir painful memories.

I understand that, for many people, it might bring little comfort when I say that our Covid-19 vaccination programme has been a success. However, the Scottish Government needs to acknowledge that it has not succeeded in ensuring that ethnic minorities take up the vaccine. In fact, we have areas of terrible uptake.

I cannot praise enough everyone who helped to deliver the life-saving vaccines: dedicated health and social care workers, thousands of volunteers who stepped up and, of course, members of our British armed forces, which were deployed to support a national roll-out. Faced with a global pandemic, the sure way out of cycles of lockdown restrictions is via a vaccine, not the disastrous, frankly unworkable and highly ignored Scottish Covid passport scheme. That was a waste of time and money. Let us not forget the Scottish Government's advice to cut the bottom off doors as well.

The trouble is that the normal process for vaccines takes about 10 years. Imagine waiting a decade to get the vaccine. We would be making decisions that we absolutely would not want to make. However, unprecedented co-operation, focus and funding led to the development of multiple effective and safe Covid-19 vaccines in less than a year and created a blueprint for future vaccine development. It was an extraordinary success and a brilliant example of what we can achieve when we work together.

The UK Government moved fast and early on in the pandemic. It supported research and ordered millions of vaccines. It was also criticised at the time but the decision was clearly a great one. The UK Government set up a vaccine task force in April 2020 and procured 367 million doses from seven vaccine developments with four different types of vaccines. My alma mater, Imperial College London, helped in the trials of Covid-19 vaccines. That was supported by £41 million of UK Government funding.

Margaret Keenan, a 90-year-old lady, was the first person in the UK to receive the Covid-19 jab. She said that she never considered not having it

but she suffered one major side effect: she was unable to go home that night because television crews were set up in front of her door.

So began the UK-wide roll-out. In December 2021, more than 10 million vaccine doses were administered in Scotland alone. Edward Mountain and Fergus Ewing were correct to say that having some specific GPs providing vaccines was the only way to reach lots of people. To be frank, the minister's response was confusing. Although it is okay that, in the central belt, the majority of GPs feel that the way that the roll-out was done was fine, exceptions must be made and GPs must administer the vaccine where that is appropriate.

**Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab):** Is it not right that one solution does not fit all and that we are at our best when we are able to use localised decision making and delivery systems to work for our individual communities?

**Sandesh Gulhane:** I could not agree more. That is why, in the Highland areas, centralisation does not work but, in the central belt area, of course it does.

There is a wealth of talent on these islands and a can-do attitude. Scotland was one of the first countries in the world to begin vaccinating its population, along with the other three nations—four nations in total—of the United Kingdom, which benefited from our combined strength.

**Stephen Kerr:** I hope that my friend Sandesh Gulhane does not mind my saying to him that, although we have proposed an amendment in his name to the motion, we should welcome the fact that the Scottish National Party Government is embracing something of scientific value. Would it not be a good idea if its attitude to science was completely overhauled in that respect and it was less anti-science? Perhaps it could embrace gene editing and the environmental benefits of clean energy sources such as nuclear power. Does he agree that being pro-science would be a good change of heart for the SNP Scottish Government?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I am not sure that the point is relevant to the debate, Sandesh Gulhane, but I can give you the time back for the intervention.

**Sandesh Gulhane:** Thank you.

Yes, I agree with Mr Kerr. In fact, if the Scottish Government did everything that Europe does—as it says that it wants to—we would be stuck with not getting the vaccines quickly.

In my first speech in the Parliament, on 27 May 2021, I implored the Scottish Government to act to support people who were suffering from long Covid, because not everybody in Scotland was fully protected by the vaccine. Today, they still

suffer from a complex mix of extreme fatigue, breathlessness, pain, heart failure, brain fog and mental health problems. I explained the bespoke set-up in England. I even created a meeting with that set-up for the Scottish Government.

We need the Scottish Government to help, to care and to fund such clinics. However, it has not done so. The SNP-Green Government published its long Covid strategy paper in September 2021, when 79,000 Scots were suffering from long Covid. Eight months of dither and delay later, in April 2022, £3 million was allocated to long Covid projects. By then, the number of long Covid sufferers had doubled. That was a year ago and long Covid pathways have still not been set up. In fact, I have heard of no Scottish Government commitment to rolling out long Covid clinics. Frankly, that is an abject failure.

**Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP):** Does Sandesh Gulhane remember that Humza Yousaf, when he was the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care, said that he had no objection to any local health board setting up a long Covid clinic if it chose to do so?

**Sandesh Gulhane:** The Scottish Government has totally failed to look after patients with long Covid. Saying that money is available does not matter. What matters is what is done—the implementation. It does not matter what the rhetoric is. We can see that in other things, such as the ferries. We need the Scottish Government to implement things that work. Maybe Jim Fairlie will reflect on that. The reality is that 175,000 people now suffer from long Covid. That is shameful.

There is also a lot of shame when it comes to the stewardship of other things that the Scottish Government has direct responsibility for. The pan-UK Covid vaccine programme has been a success. Governments worked together to get the job done. However, in devolved areas such as dental services, the story is very different. Instead of the Scottish Government patting itself on the back, it should talk about the things that matter to the people of Scotland, such as dental services.

At the conference of Scottish local dental committees in April, David McColl, chair of the Scottish dental practice committee, underscored that the current statement of dental remuneration was unfit for purpose. He said that it is a barrier to patient care and that the Scottish Government has done hee-haw to address that. Those are the types of issues that we should discuss. It is a drill-and-fill model—not one that looks after patients. We also hear the Scottish Government trying to argue about dentistry remuneration being swings and roundabouts. Frankly, those should be in the playground, not in a clinic.

We have had a reduction in the number of dentists who are working and the output that they produce. In fact, the Minister for Public Health and Women's Health, Jenni Minto, was at the conference that I mentioned, and she announced to delegates that NHS dentistry is recovering well and in a sustained way from the pandemic. As you may imagine, there was considerable scepticism in the room, to put it politely. One dentist, Robert, responded:

“NHS dentistry is broken and your party have broken it.”

I hope that, given the current meetings with dental representatives, a model emerges whereby dentists are able to provide preventative healthcare. As a GP, I fully understand the importance of dental care when it comes to our overall health.

To conclude, although there is much to applaud in the development and delivery of our UK-wide Covid vaccination programme, we must avoid falling into the trap of making self-congratulatory statements while ignoring deeply uncomfortable truths about other key Covid-impacted devolved issues. Given that a new Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care is in place, we on the Conservative benches hope to see a marked improvement in performance, compared with that of his predecessor.

I declare my interest as a practising NHS doctor and move amendment S6M-08948.2, to insert at end:

“notes that the UK Government's procurement strategy allowed Scotland to become one of the first countries in the world to begin vaccination, and recalls that, at the time, the Scottish Government wanted to join the EU vaccine scheme, which distributed vaccines far slower than the UK scheme.”

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Thank you, Dr Gulhane. Although I anticipate that the debate will tend to stray into other areas, I encourage members in their contributions to stick as broadly as possible to the text of the motion.

15:34

**Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab):** Before I begin, I put on record my party's gratitude to everyone who played any role at all in the long and on-going fight against Covid and, in particular, those front-line health and care workers who risked their lives and the welfare of their families to keep as many of us as safe as possible.

That, of course, includes those who worked for unending hours to push through the vaccination programme that has successfully brought us to a point where we can proudly say that we can begin to see an end to lives being lost from that terrible disease. Those vaccinators and everyone involved in the significant effort that went along with it really

are modern-day heroes and we owe it to them to say so as much as we can.

I hope that, in time, Scotland will properly commemorate the thousands of people who risked so much to help us, taking into account the fact that many of them still work in our NHS and social care sector and that they currently feel that they are underpaid and undervalued by Governments. Let us show true gratitude and address that disparity, too, during this session of Parliament.

Let me return to the wider fight against Covid-19. No one can doubt that Governments across the world were wholly unprepared for a pandemic as far reaching and lethal as Covid-19, but it is our responsibility to learn from it to best prepare ourselves for the pandemics to come, as well as to properly manage the continuing damage and potential threat from new Covid strains and long Covid.

That preparation demands that we are honest about the failures that happened. Many people could not get a vaccination appointment anywhere near where they lived, and we have heard of children being given the wrong dosage altogether. Of course, the public expect that in such an unprecedented event, there will be errors, but it is clear that many of those things were avoidable with better planning. It is important that the Government reflects on those matters. I am glad that, since that time, there seems to have been an effort to rectify some of the issues and look at some of the problems.

Despite that, we are currently seeing a concerning number of over-75s failing to get their spring booster jab and a general lack of understanding among the population about where the vaccination programme will go next. Indeed, throughout the vaccination process, there were particular groups that had a much lower uptake of the vaccine than others. Properly understanding the economic, social and cultural reasons behind that is key to ensuring that we get it right immediately in the future. However, I must press the point that, in order to address the issues for good, they have to be recognised as failings first, not swept under the carpet. We need to be honest about what happened and what is happening.

**Martin Whitfield:** Would the member agree that one of the deep sadnesses about the situation is that there does not appear to have been enough retrospective view of what happened during those early days of Covid—the early days of the vaccination programme—to drive what we do going forward, and that that is a lost opportunity?

**Carol Mochan:** I thank my colleague for that intervention. That is absolutely part of the point that I am making. We must not sweep things under the carpet and we must be honest.

Perhaps larger than all of that, however, is the continuing failure to properly address the situation faced by those who are suffering from long Covid. We believe that there are as many as 172,000 people across Scotland suffering from that debilitating condition, with a significant number unable to work because of it. Many of those people continue to report that they are victims of a postcode lottery for treatment and medication—a completely unacceptable situation for anyone in a country as wealthy as ours. We also know that this Government has not matched the support that has been provided in England and Wales to those who are suffering from the condition—a fact that I find incredible and one that should be more widely known and spoken about.

To avoid errors like that, we must properly process and understand the findings of the Covid inquiry when they arrive, not cower away. When necessary action requires to be taken, we must address it. We must prepare for a future in which a pandemic could plausibly happen again. In order to do that, my party is calling on the Scottish Government to meet people who are suffering from long Covid and experts in the field to discuss the long-term funding that is needed to treat the condition and to ensure that the most vulnerable people in society can access antiviral medications and prophylaxis.

In the long term, our Government must work cohesively with scientists, researchers, stakeholders and Governments across the world to utilise the most up-to-date and cutting-edge discoveries in immunology, epidemiology and wider healthcare. Scotland should be at the forefront of that charge. With its world-leading academic institutions and pharmaceutical research, it can play that role decisively. We should not shy away from celebrating the success of industry and workers across the UK and in Scotland when doing so. After all, investment is key to all of this.

As we know, co-operation across the United Kingdom was exemplary during the pandemic. It acted as a fine testament to what can be achieved when Governments work together sensibly and in the best interests of the many. For many people across Scotland, there was a great sense of solidarity and collective fortitude as the pandemic rolled out from knowing that families in Aberdeen and Southampton alike were going through such an awful situation and, sadly, having first-hand experience of losing loved ones, while fighting it together on a shared footing. I know that that gave me strength during the pandemic and, if it ever happens again, I feel confident that, as the United Kingdom, we are ready to tackle it once more while thinking of others across the nation.

In conclusion, the development and the delivery of vaccines were the jewels in the crown of Scotland's efforts to fight Covid. We can only be thankful that so many hard-working and committed individuals took up the fight without fear and got the job done. I dread to think where we would have been without them.

I move amendment S6M-08948.1, to insert at end:

“; recognises the importance of the cooperation and pooling of resources by the four nations in the procurement and roll-out of vaccines; accepts that lessons must be learned from the COVID-19 vaccination programme, with concerning evidence of lower vaccine uptake in minority ethnic groups, those living in the most deprived areas, younger people and pregnant women; considers that the Scottish Government's support for those with long COVID and those formerly on the Highest Risk List is inadequate, and calls on the Scottish Government to meet with people with long COVID and experts to discuss the long-term funding needed to treat this condition, and ensure that the most vulnerable in society can access antiviral medicines and prophylaxis.”

15:41

**Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD):** I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in such an important debate, and I thank Jenni Minto for securing it. I am not sure that we have had an exchange such as this previously, so I welcome her to her position.

As we have heard several times this afternoon, the Covid pandemic is the biggest challenge that we in the Parliament have faced collectively as well as for those who were making decisions around the world. Overnight, the inconceivable became the everyday. In the face of an unknown and deadly disease, we were separated from our loved ones and confined to our homes.

The virus claimed the lives of thousands of people in Scotland alone. They were our friends, family and loved ones. Most of us in this chamber will never begin to know how difficult it was to be on the front line of that national emergency. Our healthcare workers provided the life-saving services that held our country together. We owe them a debt that we will never fully repay.

It is right that we highlight and celebrate the fact that the availability of Covid vaccines may have prevented thousands of deaths. Although we should mark that achievement, we must recognise that there were serious issues with the roll-out in Scotland. I say that not for political reasons but for the lessons that we must learn for the likely event that we in this chamber or the generations that follow us face another pandemic. The people who administered vaccinations were all too often let down by a lack of clarity from the Government. Let us not forget that we had the slowest vaccination roll-out of the four UK nations or that the Scottish

Government was often chaotic in its approach to the vaccine's dissemination. The latter issue led to delays in getting vaccines to the people who needed them the most, which might have cost lives.

I intervened on the minister to ask about the frustration that was felt by healthcare professionals. I remember that a general practitioner who lives in my constituency and has a busy practice in Fife said that, in a flu season, they can shift vaccines into the arms of 90 patients a day. Imagine their frustration when they were told by the organising hub that they were allowed to administer a maximum of nine Covid-19 vaccinations per day. There was no real reason for that because we had the vaccine stockpiles. In England, they trusted their GPs—knowing that they deal with the flu season every year—to book halls and get the jabs into arms.

There was a severe lack of transparency, with little clarity about how many vaccines had been ordered, when they would be delivered and who would be vaccinated first. The Government did not do enough to make vaccination accessible to those who were unable to get it through traditional channels, nor did it provide the necessary information to give the public full confidence in the vaccines' safety, turning instead to the counterproductive and illiberal shambles of the vaccine passports, the back of which we saw through the help of Liberal Democrat opposition.

Although we celebrate the breakthrough that the vaccines represented and we should recognise the huge part that they played in saving lives and getting us out of the crisis in which we found ourselves, let us not pat ourselves on the back. Let us learn lessons for pandemics to come.

We would be forgiven for thinking that the Scottish ministers discovered the drugs. The credit belongs to the scientists who worked day in and day out to deliver the treatments in record-breaking time.

Part of the reason why the UK made such great strides with the AstraZeneca programme was our world-class universities, the labs that they host and the expertise that they nurture. That highlights the danger of the Government's £20 million cuts to universities' budgets this year, amid warnings from the sector of a managed decline. Instead of hamstringing our universities, we should reward them with everything that they need to carry out the necessary research to get ahead of the next pandemic. Scottish universities have to play a vital part in that.

As an internationalist, I believe that our efforts with vaccine research should benefit not just people on these shores but people around the world. What happened to the promises of the

richer countries to help to vaccinate the rest of the world? That help was all too often lacking at the height of the pandemic. Going forward, our strategy must be to include those in need around the world, particularly in developing countries. We have the capacity to do so, if only we can find the will.

Let us acknowledge that Covid has not gone away. Sandesh Gulhane and others have mentioned that. No one knows that more keenly than the 175,000 people in Scotland who are currently battling long Covid, many of whom are children. The Scottish Liberal Democrats, with others, have consistently pressed for the Scottish Government to deliver desperately needed support to people who are suffering from an often debilitating and life-changing condition.

During his leadership bid, Humza Yousaf said that he would look to increase the spending for long Covid. Those who are suffering are watching, and they are waiting.

The threat that long Covid still poses is one reason why we need to ensure that anyone who wants a vaccination can get one as soon as they need it and wherever they are, and that those who are eligible are able to access a booster jab.

Over the past few months, I have been contacted by many elderly constituents who have been distressed because they have been asked to travel across the city to receive the dose that they are eligible for. One constituent who is physically and mentally fragile was asked to travel 10 miles rather than receive her dose at home, which she would usually do with the flu vaccine. People who care for or live with vulnerable relatives are unable to get the vaccination when they ask for it because they do not fit the age profile.

That is why the Liberal Democrats want booster jabs to be available at accessible places, such as pharmacies, as the flu jab is. We also want the Government to learn from the experience of the pandemic and ensure that there is a dedicated vaccination workforce in place to help with future vaccination campaigns. During the pandemic, clinical staff were taken away from other parts of the service to administer vaccinations, which had a knock-on effect on waiting times and other services. A dedicated vaccination workforce would help to ensure that we can respond quickly and effectively to future emergency vaccination programmes.

I am aware of my time, Deputy Presiding Officer.

Finally, as uncomfortable as this might be, it is vital that we acknowledge that we fell well short during the pandemic and that we listen to those who are feeling let down. Those who fail to learn from the past are doomed to repeat it.

15:48

**Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP):** I am speaking today in a personal capacity rather than as the convener of the COVID-19 Recovery Committee.

I welcome Jenni Minto to her new role as the Minister for Public Health and Women's Health and thank her for this debate, in which the Parliament is acknowledging many people and organisations in Scotland that have contributed to the incredible effort in rolling out the Covid vaccination programme. The minister mentioned that in her opening remarks.

We all have personal memories of that time. Unfortunately for me, the event that sticks out was the passing of my mother. Instead of there being a normal funeral, we were restricted to very few who could attend the ceremony, and we then went home. We all recognise that lack of opportunity to grieve together in the normal human way and to share the most difficult of human experiences and the prolonged effects that such losses have. Those moments are seared in the minds of us all. However, we must remember why we accepted those sacrifices. We collectively took responsible decisions in difficult times to help the NHS, the Scottish Government, armed forces personnel, local authority colleagues and third sector partners to mobilise and roll out the vaccine.

In my Perthshire South and Kinross-shire constituency, fantastic groups such as Letham4All showed us the best, by ensuring through the efforts that they put in that people who were in need of any manner of supply and support received day-to-day support. I give huge credit to those community heroes, who did not do it for profit but were motivated by making a difference and helping people when they needed it the most. I am sure that colleagues from across the parties can think of examples in their constituencies, too.

Our ability to get back to as close to normal as possible is undoubtedly because the vaccine is saving lives and helping those who get infected to be less affected. Studies by the University of Edinburgh show us that the likelihood of serious illness and death is reduced by 90 per cent for those who are vaccinated compared with the unvaccinated population.

Nevertheless, we still face challenges. There are perhaps questions to be asked about how we ensure against vaccine fatigue for people who still need the vaccine and, conversely, about how people can access a vaccine if they are unable to purchase one and are not in the eligible categories. People might want a booster for reasons such as travel or for their own piece of mind, and it must be available to them. We must

ensure that we maintain vaccination uptake and access for people who might require it.

My mind harks back to when I was growing up and I heard the famous quote of the then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, whose brutal assessment was that

“there’s no such thing as society”.

Well, if we have not just witnessed the very best of society, I do not know what we have just seen.

It is correct to thank the Scottish Government, who steered us through the worst of the crisis, for its long hours and effort. I do not think that anyone envied the brutal, round-the-clock burden that the former First Minister bore with such determination to do the absolute best to deliver the calm, reassuring message that the Scottish Government was doing everything that it could to guide us through the crisis. She was there at a time when people needed to hear a reassuring message, and she did it in a way that reflected the mood and the moment—she will forever deserve huge credit for doing that.

Conversely, the behaviour of Boris Johnson and certain members of his Government helped to give rise to—and was subsequently proven to be the continuing source of—the public feeling of one rule for them and another for us. I note with immense disappointment that the Tory amendment implies that Scotland is the only country in the world that would not be able to navigate its way through a genuine international crisis without the guiding hand and paternity of a Westminster Government. Although I give credit to that Government for buying up the vaccine, its behaviour at that time undermined the messaging that was needed to hold the UK’s collective responsibility together.

What Scotland did not and does not need is a UK Government to manage this for us. This is just what normal, independent countries did around the globe. I dare say that we will continue to tackle this and other challenges in a way that reflects the needs of the people of Scotland.

**Alex Cole-Hamilton:** Jim Fairlie has just told the chamber that we do not need the UK Government to manage this for us. General practitioners in my community did not need the Scottish Government to manage their vaccination roll-out either, but, instead, the Government got in the way and slowed the roll-out down. What does he have to say to that?

**Jim Fairlie:** I would say that there are a lot of lessons to be learned right across the country. However, to tell people that Scotland should not be an independent country on the basis that we needed a vaccine is ridiculous.

The Labour amendment has various issues in it, some of which I agree with, particularly the

comments on the messaging around reaching minority ethnic groups, those living in the most deprived areas, younger people and pregnant women. It should be an on-going task of the Scottish Government to make sure that Covid-19 vaccination, and any vaccination, is properly taken up.

**Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con):** Does the member agree with my colleague, Dr Gulhane, who said that we have far more to do in attacking the approach to those areas with minority communities to ensure that we get the same vaccination uptake that we saw in wider Scotland?

**Jim Fairlie:** Yes, I made that point.

We are all aware that tens of thousands of Scots are still suffering the effects of what is known as long Covid. Obviously, it is a new phenomenon and the research to get to the bottom of it is on-going.

I was a member of the COVID-19 Recovery Committee when the inquiry into long Covid was launched, and I now convene that committee. I will share with the Parliament that we have concluded our inquiry and have reported to the Scottish Government. Our report is focused on three key themes: awareness and recognition; therapy and rehabilitation; and study and research. We heard many harrowing things during our inquiry and learned about the complex nature of symptoms from people who are living with long Covid and from a range of health professionals and academics. The report makes several clear and considered recommendations, and I look forward to the response from the Scottish Government.

15:54

**Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con):** I appreciate the opportunity to speak in the debate at a time when the World Health Organization has just downgraded the Covid-19 virus. Covid has so dominated our lives over the past few years that it is difficult to recognise what life was like before the pandemic.

I find it extraordinary to think about the lengths that the public were prepared to go to in order to comply with Covid restrictions. At one point, we were allowed out of our houses for only one hour a day, to take some exercise. I still cannot quite get my head around that. The only person whom I would see in a day was my youngest daughter, when I picked her up and we went to do a bit of running in the park for an hour. My youngest grandson was born during Covid. He lives only 40 minutes from me, but I did not see him for the first six months of his life.

When I think through those dark times, I smile about how resilient we humans can be, and how

we always find a way. My old athletics buddies formed a Friday evening virtual pub night at which we all got together online for an hour for a beer and a chat. I always thought that it was interesting that the more we chatted, the better we used to be.

The UK Government produced a package of financial support that was unheard of, which kept businesses afloat so that we had an economy to return to, and for once the Scottish Parliament came together when called on to support Government decisions. The four devolved nations put aside constitutional differences—for a while at least—and recognised that a joint and unified approach to tackling Covid-19 would give us the best chance of protecting citizens across the United Kingdom.

All the while, we listened to the talk of developing a vaccine, which was the only way out of the global emergency. We hoped and prayed for that kind of end to the nightmare. I will be honest, Deputy Presiding Officer—I was sceptical about whether we would be able to develop a vaccine in the timescales that were being cited. That was before we had even considered how we would produce it, or the numbers of people that would be required to distribute and administer it. I was, in all honesty, preparing to dig in for a while longer, or to have to step back to some kind of normality with Covid still being a major threat, because the lack of economic activity could not be supported by the country for any longer.

However, as my colleague Dr Sandesh Gulhane eloquently detailed, it took less than a year to develop and produce a safe and effective vaccine that was procured in the UK and distributed across the four nations at a pace that has never been seen before. If we set that against the usual 10 years timescale that is the norm for developing, testing and deploying a vaccine, the scale of the achievement comes into sharp focus.

**Stephen Kerr:** The previous speaker, Mr Fairlie, characterised Sandesh Gulhane's amendment somewhat strangely. He said that the amendment says that Scotland could not manage without the UK. In fact, it says that because the two Governments worked together—the UK Government did what it did and the Scottish Government and the Scottish people did what they did—we had a successful roll-out. Does Brian Whittle agree that Jim Fairlie repeatedly lets himself down by seeing every issue that comes before members as being a matter of constitutional politics, when clearly that is not the case?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I can give you the time back.

**Brian Whittle:** Stephen Kerr is right. It was the ability of our four devolved nations to pool our resources, work collaboratively and set aside our differences that enabled Scotland, along with the rest of the United Kingdom, to have one of the most rapid and comprehensive vaccine programmes in the world. It saved thousands of lives across our small island and allowed normality to come back into our lives much more quickly than we could have imagined.

If ever there was an example of why the union is so important and unique to all the countries in the UK, it must be the way in which we were able to tackle such a disaster together.

**Martin Whitfield:** I echo Brian Whittle's sentiments about the four nations of the union. To tread on slightly more dangerous ground, is that also a very good example of why politicians should perhaps listen to scientists' input and advice on matters in which the scientists are the experts?

**Brian Whittle:** We should listen to scientists. It was interesting that during Covid we evolved the science as we went. Politicians then looked back to what some scientists had said and at some of the actions that politicians had taken and they beat each other with big sticks; they did not recognise that we were living in unprecedented times and the science was evolving on a day-to-day basis.

Covid has not gone away, though, and we live with it daily. It has left us with another set of issues, a couple of which I will touch on in the time that I have remaining.

Last Friday, I again met the chief executive of NHS Ayrshire and Arran. The issues that we discussed have stuck with me, so I want to raise them in the chamber today. First, the way in which we discuss our healthcare professionals is having an impact on retention and recruitment. Quite rightly, we always hold them in high regard, and we recognise their incredible efforts during the Covid pandemic. They were on the front line day in, day out, under the most extreme pressures, while keeping us safe. However, we then always seem to go on to talk about them as being underpaid, undervalued and burning out. It is little wonder, then, that we have a retention and recruitment problem.

About a decade ago, my daughter applied for place on a midwifery course at university. There were 44 places and more than 400 applicants for them, so universities could choose. Perhaps this would be a good time for me to declare an interest, in that my daughter now works in a neonatal unit in the Scottish NHS.

Last week, the chief executive of NHS Ayrshire and Arran highlighted to me that, for the first time, it has had to go through the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service clearance process to

fill its vacancies. On top of that, the drop-out rate on such courses is appallingly high: in some cases it is as high as 60 per cent. Something is therefore going wrong with the Scottish Government's retention and recruitment process, and that must be addressed. Perhaps speaking about NHS staff being part of a caring solution rather than using massively negative descriptions of their roles would be a start. The Scottish Parliament has a responsibility on that. Thousands of places remain unfilled.

Finally, during my time on the Parliament's Health and Sport Committee in session 5, and now in the work of the COVID-19 Recovery Committee, there have always been calls for healthcare professionals to be trained in this or that condition—ME, Lyme disease or Huntington's disease, for example. Most recently, it has been about recognising long Covid. However, Covid robbed our medical professionals of opportunities for continuing professional development, in respect of which they have yet to recover. Such opportunities are crucial for the benefit of public health and to training and retention of our healthcare professionals, who for so long have had to focus on a single issue. We must work to reintroduce that crucial element to their roles. As the Scottish Government is so fond of saying, there is still work to be done.

16:02

**Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP):** I, too, offer my condolences to people who lost family, friends and neighbours because of Covid, and I recognise the situation of people who are still suffering from long Covid. For them all, none of this is over and Covid is still very much with us. A colleague whom I met at the weekend has just come down with it. I, myself, evaded the virus until late last year.

I also record my thanks to everyone who has been involved in delivery of health services and in caring settings. We might not be clapping and rattling pot lids at 8 pm any more, but I have not forgotten—and never will forget—the debt that our society owes them and Governments across the globe for their joint efforts to combat the virus. I also record the enormous commitment of the former First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, whose daily updates were valued by many people, whether they supported her Government or not.

However, I must take Sandesh Gulhane and other members to task over what they presented as the purer-than-pure role of the UK Government during the Covid pandemic. What about Randox Laboratories, for example? Owen Paterson MP, who is a former Cabinet minister, received £500,000 to advise Randox, which—strangely—was awarded, without competition, a £137 million

contract for Covid-19 testing. That contract was later renewed despite 750,000 Covid tests having to be recalled because of safety concerns.

What, too, of the contracts for personal protective equipment that went to the Tories' pals on the VIP fast-track list, who had no experience of PPE, and what of the some £4 billion-worth of unusable PPE that was bought in the first year and had to be incinerated?

Who can forget the scandal in which a company that was associated with Michelle Mone, who had previously been elevated to the House of Lords, was awarded a PPE contract worth more than £100 million, which shocked even Rishi Sunak? Let us put some context around how the UK Government acted during the pandemic.

I turn to the vaccines, which have been our saviours. As other members have said, we were told that developing and testing vaccines for application would take a decade at the very least, as had been the case in the past. It took a global pandemic for Governments, together with the scientific community, to have Covid vaccines developed in a highly accelerated fashion. That shows that it can be done and, perhaps, could be done in other areas of medicine. Where there is a will there is a way.

As others have said, that underlined how much we should thank our scientific communities. It is not breaking news that they collaborate on research. My son is a research scientist—although not in the field that we are debating—and he collaborates internationally. I give those communities my gratitude.

I am in the over-75 age group, so I benefit from the vaccine programme. Just yesterday, when I also had the pneumococcal vaccine, I received my sixth Covid vaccination. My previous Covid vaccinations were accompanied by shingles and flu vaccines—I have arms like a colander. Only with the first vaccination did I have a reaction, which was to shiver violently for hours. That was then, and I have had no reaction since. I say to others—especially people in my age group, and people who are not in my age group who are frightened of vaccines—please get vaccinated and, like me, take the other vaccines that are on offer, if they are suitable.

Delivery is much improved. In the early days, I found myself in a long queue with a two-hour delay before people were being taken in, so I left and came back on another date. Those days are gone; yesterday, I went straight through.

I agree with the minister that there is more adaptability applied to what constitutes a convenient place for vaccinations. However, my vaccination yesterday was at Ocean Terminal, where signage was poor and there was quite a

long walk to the facility. That was fine for me, but it proved to be a challenge for some people with mobility issues. Also, locating the site became a bit of a mystery tour for me and others. Perhaps the NHS could ensure that the authorities review signage and accessibility.

As for the future, I note that the World Health Organization has downgraded Covid so that it is no longer a global emergency, although I believe that some nations are working on an international protocol to prepare for an outbreak—I hope that one does not occur—in autumn and winter. Given that health is a devolved issue, has the Scottish Government been engaging with the UK Government, along with the other UK nations, on that protocol?

When I was isolated at home for 12 weeks, I wrote a Covid diary—partly as therapy, but also to remind me of what it was like for me and others and to remind me to be grateful that, somehow, we collectively worked our way through it. One day, my grandchildren might find it interesting.

16:07

**Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab):** I, too, welcome the minister to her place. It is a pleasure to follow Christine Grahame, even with her slight colander arms from the vaccinations that she has received. Her message about reaching out to people to have the Covid vaccination and the other vaccinations that are available is a very important one. The Government and individual members have a responsibility, and our communities should make a commitment, to support people to receive the on-going vaccinations.

Covid-19 vaccination was a game changer that has allowed us to return to a certain normality and to learn to live with the virus. As others have done, I thank all who have been involved in that. There are far too many of them to single out individuals, but every one of those people is a hero. That army of vaccinators deserves our utmost thanks for getting the vaccine into millions of arms.

The manufacture, procurement and roll-out of Covid-19 vaccines is one of the great successes of our four nations working together, but let us be under no illusion about that, because the roll-out was far from perfect—that goes from the countless stories of people having to travel miles for a vaccination appointment to the children who were given the wrong dosage. Lessons must be learned.

To echo the point that I made in my intervention, it is a shame that the lessons that should have been learned do not appear to have been learned. I am thinking, in particular, of the dynamic response that allowed our GPs to be involved, of

how we should look to the role of our pharmacies and of how we should be encouraged to trust areas to solve problems in a way that works for them.

**Brian Whittle:** Does the member agree that it is crucial that, when we look back at and investigate how we responded to Covid, we are as open and honest as we can possibly be, and that we ensure that there is no retribution, so that we can have that honesty?

**Martin Whitfield:** Brian Whittle is right. When the inquiry starts—I urge that it starts as soon as possible—and we look back, it cannot be about seeking retribution. It must be an inquiry about learning, and one that is a fitting tribute to those who, sadly, died during the pandemic, those who are still living with long Covid and those who are still feeling trapped because they are unable to leave their house as a result of being immunosuppressed.

However, it is also right to say that we do not have to wait until that inquiry has been completed to learn from the problems and to implement some of the solutions that we have found. That includes reaching out to those groups who had low rates of vaccination and who struggled to accept the vaccine. That can happen now.

**John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP):** Does the member accept that, however many lessons we learn or however much we prepare, if we have to vaccinate around 5 million people several times, mistakes will happen, people will have to queue and letters will go to the wrong address?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I will give you the time back for both interventions, Mr Whitfield.

**Martin Whitfield:** I am very grateful, Deputy Presiding Officer.

Yes, the reality of any roll-out is that errors will be made and there will be mistakes. However, we must learn from those so that they are not repeated time and time again. I can think of a case that is close to my heart in which a young person attended for a vaccination but was told that he could not have it because he was supposed to have it at school, which was contrary to the advice that he had been given.

Empowering people in relation to the delivery of the vaccination programme and empowering health professionals in an area could have been done with relative ease if the individuals who were making those decisions had confidence that they would be supported because that was medically the right decision to make.

**Edward Mountain:** One of the issues that came up in the Highlands is that none of the services was included in the initial vaccination programme,

so people in the services were completely excluded from it.

Does the member believe that local GPs' contact with patients who had not gone to vaccination centres led to our achieving a 98 per cent rate with the first round of vaccinations? We never managed to achieve such a high rate again.

**Martin Whitfield:** The member is right. I think that he also understands my position that we need to empower people to carry out community-based and community-focused solutions to get the greatest success.

Not just on Covid but on so many matters, the concept that a single solution can solve all the problems everywhere has proven to be incorrect time and time again. Instead, we need to empower and trust our communities. We need to trust those people who are taking the medical decisions.

**Stephen Kerr:** Will the member give way?

**Martin Whitfield:** Yes.

**Stephen Kerr:** I am grateful to Martin Whitfield for being so generous with his time. Does the member agree that the upshot of our experiences of the past couple of years should be that we move quickly to upgrade our health service from an analogue system to a digital-based system in which all parts of the NHS work together, speak to one another and share information systems?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I will be equally generous, Mr Whitfield—you can have all that time back.

**Martin Whitfield:** I am very thankful, Deputy Presiding Officer. I am also thankful for that intervention, because it speaks to future needs and the NHS that we must have to support our communities and our people. Part of that must involve digitalisation and the ability to transfer information.

I want to highlight some of the high-risk groups. Although life has returned to a new normal for some people, that is not the case for the immunocompromised or the 180,000 people who are still on the shielding list. Far too many patients still live in fear and are being deprived of transformative antiviral medication by the SNP Government. Only a tiny fraction of those who are shielding are eligible for antiviral medication. Even those who are eligible face a real challenge in terms of time and sometimes cost in getting access to the drugs. I am referring, of course, to Evusheld, which is for pre-exposure prophylaxis. That means that it can be taken to prevent Covid-19, before there is a risk of acquiring an infection.

I would like the minister to set out the Government's intentions regarding those people who still find themselves trapped at home,

frequently alone, who are desperate to find a way of returning to the normality that some members have referenced. Those people still cannot share that normality with us.

It is right to mention long Covid, as a number of members have done already. It is estimated that 172,000 Scots are living with long Covid. Concerns have been raised that that group has been forgotten. Those concerns have been raised in questions, debates and statements. It is the Scottish Government's responsibility to offer those 172,000 Scots a map to get them out of their situation.

It is right that we celebrate the vaccine. All too often, it has felt as though medical science is something that goes on behind the scenes that we do not fully understand or—dare I suggest?—value. However, the Covid vaccine has changed that, and we need to remember that change of view. Science needs to be part of the Government's thinking, and the role of our universities is crucial.

The last thing that we want to do is suggest that Covid is over, because it is not—far from it. Health inequalities continue to persist across Scotland, so we need to redouble our efforts to drive them down.

16:16

**John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP):** I am very happy to take part in today's debate, having been on the COVID-19 Committee before the 2021 elections and the COVID-19 Recovery Committee since then. In fact, the previous committee was kept in place during the election period in case something new arose and needed to be dealt with urgently.

When the Covid pandemic got going, many of us assumed that it would take a very long time to develop vaccines, so, as others have said, we owe a huge debt to the medics, the scientists and others who worked together incredibly effectively to produce the vaccines so quickly. Just the other week, as the committee considered preparedness for a future pandemic, we heard that the hope is that, in the future, vaccines could be produced in 100 days, obviously with testing time on top of that.

The latest figure that I heard was that more than 20 million lives had been saved worldwide by the vaccines, and I am sure that the figure will be much higher by now. On top of that, many others were protected from serious illness.

It is hard to have this debate without considering some of the misinformation and disinformation that was around during the pandemic and continues today. One such issue related to whether the

vaccines would or would not prevent transmission. I well remember Jason Leitch speaking to the committee on that subject. He made the simple and straightforward point that, if fewer people had Covid, logically, fewer people would pass it on and fewer people would catch it, so it was true that vaccination reduced transmission.

There are always things that, when we look back, we might have done differently if we had the chance again, but we should remember that Governments and health services were having to make multiple decisions every day. On the whole, I think that the vaccination programme went well. However, at the same time, some constituents were sent too far away to get their jags or did not get notification of their appointment, and there were sometimes lengthy queues when people turned up.

The committee spent a fair bit of time considering uptake of vaccination among different age groups and communities. Generally speaking, uptake among older people was very high, but it reduced as we moved into younger age groups, and it was also lower in poorer areas. As of 2 April, 90 per cent of older adults in care homes had had their winter booster, whereas the figure for front-line health and social care workers was only 48 per cent. There were also geographical differences. NHS Orkney reported that 80 per cent had received their booster, whereas the figure for NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde was only 69 per cent.

Among ethnic minority communities, fewer people took the jags. Various explanations have been given for that. For example, they might distrust the Government in the country of their background, from where some people would get their health information. I know that attempts were made to tackle that reticence. Faith and other minority ethnic leaders came out strongly to encourage their communities to go ahead and get their jags. BEMIS also worked with ethnic minorities to promote uptake. Having one of the Glasgow centres in the central mosque was a good move and sent out a strong signal—I had one of my jags there.

However, more negatively, a lot of misinformation and disinformation have been spread on social media and elsewhere. Some people say that Covid never existed at all, while others exaggerate the level of vaccine injuries—I continue to see a fair amount of that, especially on Twitter. Sadly, some people have a serious reaction to the vaccine, perhaps because of underlying health conditions, and we must do all that we can to support them. However, the vast majority of people have a sore arm and might have flu-like symptoms for 24 hours but are completely fine after that. For example,

anaphylaxis after vaccination is rare, at approximately five cases per million doses, while myocarditis seems to have been highest after two doses, with between 52 and 106 cases per million among younger males. However, those cases varied in their seriousness. One of my staff was taken to hospital by ambulance with that but has been right as rain ever since.

Going forward, we want to encourage all those who are eligible to continue to take up the chance of boosters, possibly annually. NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde is currently promoting the spring booster, which is for those who are over 75 or those with a weakened immune system. At one stage, teachers and other front-line workers wanted to get vaccines earlier, because they were in contact with so many people every day. However, it was decided to focus on age, with the addition of particularly vulnerable groups.

Obesity has long been considered a risk factor, too. I was interested to see in *The Herald* on Friday a report on a study on that topic involving Aziz Sheikh of the University of Edinburgh. It seems that vaccines are less effective on overweight patients, such as people with a body mass index of more than 40—that is, those who are morbidly obese—who were 76 per cent more likely to get severe symptoms.

Another issue going forward is the advice from the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation. That advice was given to all the nations of the UK, and we all tended to follow it faithfully. That had the advantage of consistency, including for the media, but it is worth looking at the issue for next time round. For example, we could consider whether obese people could be supported more to get vaccines, if that is desirable.

Another issue is that of making vaccines available all round the world. There were some successes in that regard, and I know that, among leading politicians and professionals such as Jason Leitch, there was a strong commitment to international fairness. However, I think that the sense persisted that the richer countries were grabbing what they needed first while developing nations were allowed the leftovers.

Overall, however, the vaccination programme went better than many of us expected. Once again, we should give our grateful thanks to those who developed, produced and distributed these marvellous jags.

16:22

**Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP):** I, too, welcome this important debate. As colleagues have done, I start by expressing my condolences to all those who lost

loved ones as a result of the pandemic. The debate is important for a number of reasons, but, initially, it gives us the opportunity to remember those who were affected and to recognise those who continue to be affected by and suffer from long Covid. The debate gives us an opportunity to reflect collectively on what more we can do to support them. I know that colleagues are looking at those issues through various avenues in the Parliament.

My first experience of a pandemic was in 2003, during the SARS—severe acute respiratory syndrome—pandemic, when I was teaching conversational English in China. I had hoped that it would be my last such experience. When the Covid-19 pandemic began, in the early months of 2020, there was a sense of fear and anxiety about what it could become, but little did we know in the early weeks how quickly the situation would move on. Within days, we were suddenly in a lockdown scenario. At that point, I remember hearing commentary from politicians and others asking whether there would be a vaccine, as that was unclear. Then, through a combination of global collaboration, science and Government administration, by the end of 2020, we got to a place where the first shots of this remarkable discovery were administered and we began the fightback against this awful disease.

In Edinburgh, the way in which NHS Lothian, working with central Government, the UK Government and local government, rolled out the vaccine was imperfect but remarkable. I pay tribute to not just all the volunteers and front-line staff to whom members have made reference, but the administrative staff, who sometimes perhaps do not get as much praise and attention. Their organisation and the way that those blue envelopes were cascaded out and fell through our letterboxes as a symbol of hope made such an important contribution to the national mission and the achievement of administering the vaccines.

As others have done, I want to say thank you to those who took the vaccine, and I continue to urge those who are eligible to take their vaccines. As Martin Whitfield made reference to, we need to bear in mind those who have had the vaccine but still feel vulnerable. That is an important consideration, and campaigns are being undertaken to remind us of it and encourage us to think carefully about how we support those individuals.

On those who did not take the vaccine, John Mason rightly pointed out the challenges with regard to misinformation and social media. I would be interested to know how the Government is listening to those who did not take the vaccine about why they did not. The reasoning often seems irrational to many of those who did take it,

but we will do better in persuading those people in future scenarios if we understand the consideration that people gave to the matter and work to encourage them to take the vaccine. It was the collective acceptance of and enthusiasm for the vaccine that gained us the freedom from the virus that we are enjoying now.

Of course, the virus is still around, which is why we need to continue to encourage people to take the vaccine. However, the difference between the scenario that we are in now and the scenario in 2020 and 2021 is almost night and day.

One of the reasons why people struggled to take the vaccine is geography, as others have expressed. For example, in the initial phases of the roll-out, people in Edinburgh had to go west of Edinburgh, to the Royal Highland Centre, to get their vaccines—I had two there. In time, NHS Lothian managed to gain other venues. A very important one for my constituents that NHS Lothian and the health and social care partnership managed to secure was Ocean Terminal.

I take the fair criticism from another member that the signage might need to be improved, but I can tell members that the creation of a vaccination centre in Ocean Terminal made a massive difference for my constituents in Edinburgh Northern and Leith. It is accessible by bus routes, and a tram route that goes there is about to open, so I take this opportunity to ask the minister to consider this suggestion. That location has been excellent as a vaccination centre. My constituency is experiencing some of the most rapid population growth in the whole of the country. The NHS Scotland resource allocation committee formula that funds NHS spending is not getting ahead of population growth in Edinburgh. Ocean Terminal would be an excellent site for a GP practice if we could obtain the capital and resourcing for it, in order to get ahead of population growth in Edinburgh Northern and Leith.

I welcome Ocean Terminal's use as a vaccination centre, and I want to see it continue to deliver well for those who are getting the vaccine. I encourage people to get their vaccines and to get them at Ocean Terminal if they are one of my constituents and that is where they are allocated to. Thereafter, I would urge the Government to seriously consider creating a GP practice at Ocean Terminal, because it would make an important difference to my constituents, and, more widely, it would make an important difference as we continue to provide healthcare for people in the times ahead.

16:29

**Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con):** I am pleased to have the chance to speak in the debate and

highlight the fantastic work that the UK Government did to make the Covid-19 vaccination programme such a success. Thanks to the UK Government, we were one of the first nations in the world to be vaccinating people. We vaccinated millions of Scots, protecting all of us from coronavirus. Meanwhile, Sturgeon was overseeing a stagnant and stuttering vaccine roll-out until the UK Government intervened and sent the British Army and other military forces to assist the Scottish Government in vaccinating Scots.

The Covid-19 vaccination programme was an unmitigated success in the end and a perfect example of what can be achieved when we work together. The success of the vaccination programme not only saved lives but contributed to the gradual reopening of the economy, the resumption of educational activities and the restoration of—very much needed—social interactions. It truly was the triple-helix model of innovation in action, as the vaccine task force, comprising academia, the universities, industry—we should not forget industry's involvement in the process—and Government, worked at pace to scale up the successful Covid vaccines that were identified by the University of Oxford and Imperial College London.

**Stephen Kerr:** Sue Webber is right to say that, when we all work together and pool our resources, we get things done. Could we also learn lessons from the Covid experience to help us to tackle a persistent, long-standing issue such as malaria? Up to 500,000 children die every year from malaria. We could surely do something together to solve that problem on the basis of the lessons learned from the Covid vaccine development that Sue Webber has described.

**Sue Webber:** I wonder whether the member has read my speech—if he can hold on for a second, I will come to that precise point.

The Covid-19 vaccines manufacturing task force played a key part in supporting efforts to access UK supply chains and get ready for the mass vaccination effort that would be needed upon the identification of a suitable vaccine. To reinforce how successful that approach was—as other members have stated—the development of a vaccine takes, on average, 10 years from being discovered to being accessed by patients.

While the UK Government had success, however, we cannot ignore the SNP's mistakes during Covid. For example, the SNP wanted to join the European Union's vaccine scheme, which failed. The SNP U-turned on its vaccine passports, and the launch of the vaccine passport scheme was a disaster. In addition, John Swinney was reported to the UK Statistics Authority for sharing a false Covid graphic on his Twitter account.

The accelerated vaccination programmes from AstraZeneca and Oxford have had a positive impact on delivering life-saving vaccines for other diseases, too—there you go, Mr Kerr. For example, the new world-changing malaria vaccine, which was invented at the Jenner Institute at the University of Oxford, marks the culmination of 30 years of malaria vaccine research at Oxford with the design and provision of a high-efficacy vaccine that can be supplied at adequate scale to the countries that need it most. Ghana has recently taken up the vaccine and is delivering it to the country's young children.

Although we fully appreciate the value of the vaccine and the positive knock-on effect that it has had, there are several issues in the health service that we would rather the SNP Government focused on. Those are the issues that matter now and that are causing distress and anxiety across the country.

Scots across the country—adults and children—are waiting far too long for mental health treatment. Our children and young people, many of whom suffered significantly from the unintended consequences of the response to the pandemic, are still being failed by the SNP. Child and adolescent mental health services are the main route to assessment and treatment for children and young people who are seeking help with their mental health, yet, to this day, the SNP's CAMHS target has never been met.

In the first half of 2022, more than 4,500 children were refused mental health treatment and, between January and June this year, 4,640 referrals to CAMHS were rejected. What support is there for those people? Social Work Scotland has said that

“long delays”

in accessing treatment can lead

“to more entrenched difficulties by the time”

a young child or person is able to

“access a service.”

Drug deaths are another issue that we want the SNP Government to focus on. Under the SNP, drug-related deaths have spiralled out of control and Scotland still has the highest drug death rate in Europe, which is 3.7 times higher than the UK rate. The SNP's strategies to help those struggling with addiction have failed and are still failing. The target to have medically assisted treatment standards fully embedded across the country by April 2022 has passed, and those seeking treatment are still waiting. Annmarie Ward from Favor says:

“You keep talking, we keep dying.”

That scandal is Scotland's national shame. Lives are being lost and families are being torn apart. The SNP Government must finally start listening to front-line experts and must back our right to recovery bill.

After 16 years in Government, the SNP seems to be quite out of ideas for tackling those issues head-on. We need a fresh approach that incorporates modern, efficient and local solutions to healthcare.

16:35

**Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP):** On 5 May, the World Health Organization declared an end to Covid as a global health emergency. Although that news was welcome, I stress that the WHO still considers Covid to be an on-going global health issue. Nevertheless, that was the first time that Covid's status had been downgraded since 30 January 2020, which I think we all agree seems like a distant memory.

It would probably be fair to say that—except for those in our community who lived through the 1940s—this has been the biggest challenge that many of us have faced in our lifetimes. The global response was unparalleled. In many countries, including here in Scotland, the approaches that were taken to react to the virus had never before been seen. The WHO reported more than 750 million cases of Covid, which caused just under 7 million deaths. Our thoughts and condolences are with all those who have lost a loved one and with anyone who has been adversely affected by any aspect of the pandemic.

Since those uncertain and, frankly, frightening times in early 2020, we have all seen the roll-out of the Covid-19 vaccine, which has been the largest mass vaccination programme ever undertaken. As at many points in humanity's history, great hardship has brought great scientific and technological advances.

This debate celebrates the success of the Covid vaccination programme and its uptake. More than 4 million people living in Scotland have now received the recommended first, second and booster doses of the vaccine and more than 85 per cent of older care home residents in Scotland have received their spring 2023 booster, with that number growing weekly. This successful vaccination programme means that many people who were previously considered to be at highest risk are now far less likely to become seriously ill with Covid-19.

Throughout the pandemic, decisions were taken to prioritise different cohorts for vaccination in order to protect those who were most at risk of serious illness or worse. Decisions to prioritise one

population group over another were not taken lightly, nor were they straightforward: many in the chamber will remember the debate that we had about police officers. That is why the Scottish Government's prioritisation decisions have been, and will continue to be, guided by the independent expert advice that is provided by the JCVI and senior clinicians. As with previous campaigns, vaccinations were first offered, and will continue to be offered, to front-line health and social care workers and those who are most vulnerable to the effects of the virus.

We can celebrate the success of the vaccination programme while also acknowledging the areas where we can improve. Other members have spoken well about that. As was the right thing to do, an independent Scottish public inquiry into Covid-19 has been established to provide scrutiny of the handling of the whole pandemic and to learn lessons from that.

We must learn lessons from a range of voices, including, as others have said and as we heard during the demonstration in the public gallery, from those who remain sceptical about vaccination. The minister's response to those who were in the gallery was very balanced and took the right tone.

**Brian Whittle:** Will the member take an intervention on that point?

**Fulton MacGregor:** I will develop this point before I let the member in.

We need to do more to work with, appreciate and understand people's concerns and to understand the albeit rare but recorded adverse effects that I think the people in the gallery were talking about. We must understand the impacts on various groups, including those who have previously reacted to vaccination and pregnant women. We in here, and those in the scientific community, might feel that the evidence and advice are clear, but that may not always be the case out there.

Children are another population group. Do we have an understanding of the benefits and risks for children? There are many concerns about that. Why were so many adults willing to roll up their own sleeves at the first opportunity but, when it came to their children, asked, "Should I or shouldn't I?" If there is another pandemic, or if there is another variant of Covid, we need an understanding of where people are with those questions.

Also, a big thing is the misinformation that you find on the internet. John Mason talked about that. We need to find a way to challenge it, because there is no doubt that people are getting sucked in.

**Brian Whittle:** Does Fulton MacGregor agree that we need not so much to look at vaccine

scepticism but to pay attention to the minority who have had a bad reaction to the vaccine and understand why that has happened?

**Fulton MacGregor:** Brian Whittle has a point. As MSPs, we will all have had people come to our surgeries who feel that they have had an adverse effect from a vaccine. We need people who are medically qualified to understand what is going on and help to identify those people so that they can be protected. Others have made that case. As Jim Fairlie and others said, we need to bring on board the groups that were represented in the gallery and talk to them as we try to understand where we go.

Although the World Health Organization has declared an end to the global health emergency, we are still faced with a number of post-pandemic challenges, such as backlogs in numerous industries and economic fallout. However, as others have done, I will speak about the effects of long Covid.

The Parliament has often discussed the effects of long Covid and I welcome any measures that we can introduce to support people who suffer from the condition. The Office for National Statistics has noted that just over 3 per cent of people across the UK are self-reporting long Covid symptoms. They include one of my constituents, Jonathan McMullen, whose mum has contacted me several times to explain her son's debilitating symptoms.

I had more to say on that, but others have covered it and I can see that I am running out of time.

I fully support anything that we can do to support people with long Covid. I ask the minister to take it seriously. This country—the world, actually—has shown how we can quickly find an effective vaccine for Covid. That has saved millions of lives. Surely, we can now come together and find treatments or solutions for long Covid as well.

**The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):** We come to winding-up speeches.

16:42

**Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab):** On behalf of the Labour Party and in the spirit of the motion that was lodged by the Government, I say thank you to the volunteers, healthcare workers, armed forces personnel and all others who were involved in the roll-out of the Covid-19 vaccines. It was a collective endeavour of community in this country unknown in my lifetime and the lifetime of many of us.

What happened in those weeks and months as the approach was rolled out is not just about a

reaction. We have had the extraordinary, long-term benefit of our university and pharmaceutical research communities, without whom we would never have had the vaccines in the first place. I believe that that feat of urgent and quiet ingenuity and the scale of the scientific achievement that it represents will, in time, come to be compared with the cracking of the Enigma code in the second world war.

The long-term roots of that achievement—the roots of mRNA technology—are in open collaboration between scientists in many of our most advanced economies and communities across the world. That was scaled up by industry to a huge and unprecedented level.

**Sue Webber:** Does Michael Marra also accept that, uniquely, access to data and clinical papers was given free during that time so that the medical community across the world could share the information very quickly?

**Michael Marra:** Sue Webber makes a good point. There is much that we can learn about the advances in scientific research practice that took place over those months. I refer not only to open access to data and the turbocharging of collaboration but to the way in which the scientific testing and proving of the vaccines was accelerated. There have been calls from across the chamber to replicate those approaches for the rapid development of new vaccines for other conditions. The point is well made.

However, all those scientific careers come back to outstanding public education and true discovery science that is beyond the risk of private enterprise. To celebrate that science—to treasure it and really champion it—means funding it. However, in recent days, the head of Universities Scotland has described the Government's approach to universities as being one of "managed decline". That should worry every one of us when it comes to the subject that we are talking about. In future years, will we genuinely be able to play our part? We will not, if we continue on the route of managed decline that has been condemned in the Government.

We should not forget that lockdowns bought time for our scientists to bail out our Governments. I do not recognise part of Ben Macpherson's characterisation of the early days of the pandemic. The approach of the Scottish and UK Governments was out of step with international best practice and with the evidence that was put in front of them. However, they were in lockstep together. Only when communities came together in a spirit of collective self-sacrifice did we managed to contain the virus, which gave us time to turn the situation around.

People have met huge personal costs as a result—not just in the loss of loved ones and of their own health but in the wide-ranging impacts on our communities, our economy, our public services and the way in which people live our lives.

Brian Whittle touched on one of those issues. He was correct to identify the problem of the recruitment of nursing students across the UK. There is also a problem in the recruitment of teaching students, because people's attitudes to the kind of work that they do, and the strains and stresses that come with it, have changed as a result of the pandemic. An examination of those workforce problems would be a good use of Government time, both in the chamber and elsewhere, because it is a societal problem that will challenge us all in the coming months and years.

The Labour amendment mentions that the vaccine uptake has been lower for certain groups. That has been discussed by various members. Everyone has touched on the need to continue to learn the lessons of why that is. We also need to explore and invest in prevention. The Government has still done almost nothing on ventilation in schools, despite the Labour Party raising that time and again over the past two years. The long-term record in that area is very poor.

According to the published data, vaccine uptake among NHS and social care staff in winter 2022 was very low. Only 39 per cent and 20 per cent respectively took the winter booster. The minister was right to highlight those issues and to talk of the importance of dealing with them.

Alex Cole-Hamilton was right to highlight the issue of transparency when he talked about vaccine hesitancy. We have to build confidence in our public institutions. That is part of the daily work of politics. People have touched, as Christine Grahame did at some length, on the identification of a litany of corruption that ran through the UK Conservative Government from top to bottom—from the VIP lane to the ministerial lobbying scandals. Those have laid low the reputation of Government and politics in this country. Frankly, that will recover only when that Government is kicked out of office.

When will we learn the substantive lessons of the pandemic? Stephen Kerr made a very clear point that the UK Government had made the right bet on the procurement of vaccines. He was correct in that regard. Many mistakes were made but, on that occasion, the UK Government got it right, and we were lucky that it did so.

On long Covid, Carol Mochan called on the Government to meet the sufferers and to recognise their plight. I listened to the debate

between Sandesh Gulhane and Jim Fairlie. We have to recognise that the care has not taken place. People are still suffering. Whatever the reason for that and wherever the lack of planning or lack of money sits, people are suffering as a result.

**Brian Whittle:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Michael Marra:** I do not have the time, I am afraid. The Presiding Officer is indicating as much.

When will the inquiry start? How slowly does the Government move when the threats of other pandemics are present—when those could come at the speed that Ben Macpherson talked about, so that things can turn in a few months and we find ourselves back in such situations? Would the best tribute to the people whom we have all thanked today not be to announce a date for the inquiry, who will lead it and when we will begin to formally learn those lessons and change the way in which we prepare, so that we can make sure that we do not have to deal with such grievous consequences again?

16:49

**Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** This debate has been an opportunity to celebrate the success of the Covid-19 vaccination programme. As we have heard during the debate, it was a considerable success. Scotland, as part of the United Kingdom, was a world leader in delivering the Covid-19 vaccine, thereby protecting the population and reducing the incidence of Covid. There is no doubt that lives were saved as a result of the programme.

Everybody in the debate has agreed with that basic point about the success of the programme. In that context, I find it curious, as Sandesh Gulhane said at the start of the debate, that we are spending the best part of two hours debating the subject. It has not really been a debate, because there have not been any points of disagreement, to any great extent, among members.

There are many other serious issues in the NHS that we could have spent the afternoon debating: the crisis in primary care, with a lack of GPs and surgeries closing across the country; the growing waiting times for cancer treatments and other vital treatments; the crisis in child and adolescent mental health services; the crisis in NHS dentistry, into which the Covid-19 Recovery Committee will shortly inquire; the long waits at accident and emergency departments; and ambulance response times. The list goes on.

Our time would have been better spent on those issues than on patting ourselves on the back or

looking at something in the past, which—welcome as it was—is not now going to change as a result of the debate.

I will address some issues that have been raised by various members during the debate.

Sue Webber made an important point about the UK's decision to go it alone and not to join the EU vaccination programme. She reminded us that, at the time, the SNP was calling on us to do just that. That is a very important point that Jim Fairlie, in his contribution, seemed to forget. The former Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, External Affairs and Culture, Michael Russell, said that it was “idiotic” not to join the EU programme. He actually went further than that and said that lives would be lost as a result. The then Minister for Mental Wellbeing and Social Care, Kevin Stewart, said that it was “lunacy” and “irresponsible” not to join it. Michael Russell is no longer here, but Kevin Stewart is still in ministerial office and we have yet to hear an apology from him for such ridiculous scaremongering from a Government minister.

The reality is that the UK vaccination programme was a success and that we were among the world leaders in delivering it. We had development of the Oxford AstraZeneca vaccine, 100 million doses of which were ordered by the UK Government. We saw mass vaccination centres quickly being opened. An enormous logistical exercise had to be put in place really quickly, and it worked extremely well.

I agree with John Mason that there were, on occasion, errors. I am sure that we all heard about those from our constituents, but that should not take away from the overall picture of a great success.

I agree with Ben Macpherson that we should pay tribute to those who were working very hard behind the scenes to administer the programme. We also had many people on the front line—thousands of volunteers came forward and were prepared to staff vaccination centres and give up their free time to help others. We should also acknowledge the input of the UK armed forces, which stepped in to assist the NHS and to provide vaccination support in locations across the country.

Other issues came up. Sandesh Gulhane, for example, mentioned the question of GPs being allowed to deliver the vaccine. Like Alex Cole-Hamilton, I think that there were a number of areas of the country where GPs being allowed to deliver the vaccine would have avoided difficulties that some people, especially people in rural areas, had with having to travel large distances.

We still have the problem of long Covid, which Carol Mochan referenced. Lots of promises have been made about helping long Covid sufferers, but

as the COVID-19 Recovery Committee heard during our recent inquiry, too many of them still feel that they have been badly let down. One of the saddest things that the committee heard from long Covid sufferers was about the difficulty that they had when they went to their GPs. In too many cases, their GPs were not well informed of the symptoms of long Covid. In some cases, individuals had no alternative but to pay privately to see a GP who had expertise. That is an area in which the Scottish Government needs to do much more.

The vaccination programme continues. I was vaccinated back in the autumn, through my now being in the over-50s group, and I know that take-up of the offer was high. We will need to consider whether vaccinations will be offered for the coming winter season, perhaps in combination with the flu vaccine. It is encouraging that people still recognise the value of vaccination and are willing to participate.

However, there are still issues, including ethnic minority groups—in particular, people from the Afro-Caribbean community—not having taken up the vaccination, which a number of members mentioned. The Polish community seems also to have had a particular issue with regard to access to vaccinations. The Government needs to do a lot of work to reinforce to various groups the absolute necessity of having the vaccination.

I certainly do not think that we should pay much attention to the anti-vax brigade, but we should recognise that people have legitimate concerns about the side effects of some vaccines. Brian Whittle made that point earlier. It is an area in which proper investigation is needed. I hope that, when it gets going properly, the Covid-19 inquiry will spend some time taking evidence from individuals who have been affected by vaccines and their side effects, and that it will look at the whole question. There is, for example, some evidence, and it is well recorded, that the AstraZeneca vaccine might have caused blood clotting in a tiny minority of individuals.

It is important that we retain confidence in the vaccination programme, but when individuals have concerns about a particular vaccine, they should be offered an alternative. I recently raised that issue with NHS Fife on behalf of a constituent. I hope that NHS boards across Scotland will be prepared to be flexible so that when people have legitimate concerns about the potential side-effects of a vaccine, they are given an alternative vaccine rather than the one that they are concerned about.

To close, I note that even with a small minority of patients demonstrating side effects, the reality is that the overall benefits of the vaccination programme outweighed the risks. The vaccination

programme allowed the country to get back on its feet much more quickly than might otherwise have been the case. It has been a real success story for Scotland and the whole UK, so we should congratulate all those who were involved in delivering it.

16:56

**Jenni Minto:** I thank all members for contributing to what has been a helpful, reflective and constructive debate. When we have a Scottish success story, it is only appropriate that we acknowledge it in the chamber, so I am grateful to everybody who has taken part.

There are always lessons that can be learned, but one of the reasons why our vaccination programme was so successful was that lessons were learned at every stage and the programme was adapted accordingly. It was built from scratch three years ago: nobody should underestimate the size of that achievement or the fact that Scotland has consistently had the highest uptake in the UK.

It is also worth reflecting on the digital response. The success of our vaccination programme was as much to do with our investment in digital capabilities as it was to do with our people. It would not have been possible for us to achieve what we achieved without robust digital planning. Thanks to our national vaccination scheduling system, we offered, for the first time at national scale, true choice and flexibility for people in deciding where and when they were vaccinated. However, I have noted Christine Grahame's point about signage.

The vaccination programme is an example of a service that was built around people, as Fulton MacGregor said. However, I was extremely sorry to hear Alex Cole-Hamilton's point about what his constituent experienced. If I can be of any help, he should provide me with the details, please.

For the first time, we offered people in Scotland access to their Covid vaccination record through Covid status certification, and we are committed to extending that service for health records more broadly, as Stephen Kerr said in an intervention.

As other members have said, the success of the programme is measured first and foremost by the lives that were saved, as well as by the social and economic freedoms that were returned to us when restrictions were eased as the effectiveness of the vaccination programme took hold.

This week, when I was at home on Islay I passed by the Co-op. During lockdown, I shopped there for a number of people. As a result, I knew what was on every shelf and my shopping was done in the sequence that was set out by the very clear one-way system. As easing of lockdown

began, one of the ladies whom I shopped for asked me whether I would take her to the Co. We had our masks on and we made our way around the shop, following the one-way route and keeping 2m apart. I could sense that she was apprehensive—which touches on the point that Martin Whitfield made—but all the protocols that were in place helped her. I know that she enjoyed the freedom to choose her own meals based on what was on the shelves and not on what was on the list that she had given to me. It is the small things that we had taken for granted prior to Covid that we cherish now.

Also, as Jim Fairlie and Brian Whittle said, lockdown really impacted on important family times: we need to acknowledge family and friends having been unable to come together.

I acknowledged in my opening remarks that uptake of the vaccinations in Scotland, although it was impressively high overall and consistently above uptake rates in the other UK nations, was not uniform across all groups. That has been highlighted by the vast majority of speakers in the debate. Over the course of the vaccination programme, relationships with key community leaders representing various groups have been fostered, developed and strengthened. That means that information about the vaccines is presented in a way that is more likely to encourage groups to take up the offer of vaccination, and it means that vaccination is offered to them in environments in which they feel comfortable.

It is always helpful to hear about individual experiences of the vaccination programme. I am sure that I am not the only one who attended their very first Covid vaccination with a mixture of trepidation and excitement. My knowing the prize that was on offer—a return to something resembling normal life—meant that there was never any question that I would not turn up to be vaccinated then and for every subsequent jag.

However, I am aware that, for a number of reasons, some people choose not to come forward and that, for some people who have come forward, the experience was not as smooth as they and I would have wanted it to be. Although such experiences were not the norm, I know that such individual experiences led to improvements at every stage of the process, from the invitation to vaccination to the vaccination itself. I refer again to my remarks in my opening speech about people who have been impacted negatively by the vaccination. We need to listen to them.

**Murdo Fraser:** I made a point about individuals who have had negative side effects from a particular vaccine and do not want to repeat it. Does the minister agree that NHS boards should

offer an alternative vaccine to people who are in such circumstances?

**Jenni Minto:** I do not feel that I am clinically aware enough to answer that question. However, it is required that we examine the impacts of vaccines on people.

In conclusion, I repeat my heartfelt thanks to all those who were involved in the vaccination effort at every stage of the process.

**Ivan McKee (Glasgow Provan) (SNP):** Would the minister care to join me in recognising the work of Scotland's very strong life sciences sector and the dozens of Scottish companies that contributed to the vaccine manufacture supply chain and the test supply chain not just here, but in their contribution to the global fight against Covid?

**Jenni Minto:** I agree with my colleague Ivan McKee on the importance of the Scottish supply chain and the life sciences industries, and on the support that Scottish companies gave with regard to PPE, which was very important.

In many ways, the flu vaccine and Covid vaccination programme was an example of how vital but hugely complex projects should be run. It was no accident that it won the best programme award at last year's Holyrood public sector awards.

However, the work is not done. As Carol Mochan said, spring booster vaccinations are available until the end of June, as is the initial offer of Covid-19 vaccination. Once again, I encourage people who are eligible but have yet to come forward to do so in order to maintain their level of protection against Covid-19 infection.

It is also worth recognising the range of other vaccinations that are offered to us in Scotland throughout our lifetimes by our wonderful NHS. It is important that people receive their immunisations at the right age in order to ensure maximum protection, from the first immunisation appointment—which is scheduled at two months of age—continuing through to the teenage years and throughout adulthood, and in pregnancy to protect mothers and their babies. I thank Fulton MacGregor for his considered thoughts on that. Diseases can be particularly serious in young babies, so it is important to ensure that they are protected as early as possible in order to prevent them from contracting potentially dangerous illnesses including measles, which can have very serious consequences.

Although we have not talked about the other vaccines as much as we have talked about the Covid-19 vaccine in the past few years, it is just as important that when people are called for their shingles, pneumococcal or human papillomavirus

vaccines, they attend and get protected. We are pleased to be applying our learning from the pandemic to those wider vaccination programmes so that we improve everyone's experience, no matter which health intervention they are accessing. I thank Christine Grahame for emphasising that.

We are currently supporting the transition of operational responsibility for the flu and Covid-19 vaccine programmes to Public Health Scotland. That will take place after the spring. That will allow a public-health driven approach to be taken and will build on our world-class vaccination service. Alongside that, we are working in collaboration with a range of partners, including the other three UK nations, to consolidate and improve all of our vaccine programmes, with a focus on high uptake, good systems and a reduction in health inequalities.

Several members touched on the issue of long Covid. The Scottish Government recognises the significant impact that long Covid can have on the health and wellbeing of those who are most severely affected across Scotland. We are making £3 million of our £10 million long Covid support fund available over this financial year to support NHS boards to increase the capacity of existing services to support people with the condition. We are considering the recommendations of the COVID-19 Recovery Committee in its report.

**The Presiding Officer:** You must conclude now, minister.

**Jenni Minto:** I am concluding my speech.

The Covid-19 vaccination programme in Scotland was a success story that saved literally tens of thousands of lives. I urge MSPs across the chamber to acknowledge that success—which was achieved through partnership across the Scottish Parliament and across the country—by rejecting the Opposition amendment and supporting the Government motion.

## Committee Announcement (Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee)

### The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is an announcement by the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee on the report on the Scottish Government's air quality improvement plan and wider air quality issues. I call Edward Mountain, the convener of the committee, to make the announcement.

17:07

**Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** I am pleased to speak on behalf of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee, to share our assessment of the Scottish Government's air quality improvement plan.

As a committee, we agreed that requesting an announcement was important because it sets a strong precedent that improvement plans should be looked at differently from a typical affirmative instrument.

To give a bit of context, the plan is the first to be considered under the new post-Brexit arrangements for environmental law in Scotland, and it follows an improvement report issued by Scotland's new environmental watchdog, Environmental Standards Scotland. The focus of ESS's investigation was how nitrogen dioxide levels were being managed by local authorities within the current system of local air quality management and how they were being monitored.

ESS recommended a number of steps that the Scottish Government should take to speed up the tackling of air quality at a local level. The improvement plan has looked to address ESS's recommendations through making guidance to councils and the Scottish Environment Protection Agency more robust.

We are broadly satisfied that those actions represent a step forward and hope that the guidance provides local authorities with the clarity that they need in undertaking their stewardship of air quality. However, we also have a number of concerns.

If we expect local authorities to deliver the necessary improvements to air quality, the Scottish Government must ensure that they are funded accordingly. A lack of resources means that councils may continue to struggle, which risks hindering realisation of the improvement plan's aims.

Councils also face unprecedented staffing challenges. Without enough planning or environmental health officers, the Scottish

Government will not be able to achieve its ambitions on air quality. Our report calls on the Scottish Government to set out how it will increase uptake of those professions.

We are also not convinced that updated policy guidance will ensure that SEPA delivers the desired approach to the monitoring and enforcement of local air quality standards, and we are unclear whether the agency has the relevant powers and resources to undertake its additional oversight role to full effect.

The committee also chose to take the opportunity to consider wider air quality issues. I would like to set out briefly some of our key findings.

First, we assessed the effectiveness of the Scottish Government's cleaner air for Scotland 2 strategy. We found that, although the strategy has ambition, there has been a lack of progress in implementing some of its key promises to mainstream air quality across policy agendas and deliver a modal shift towards sustainable forms of transport.

We also looked at low-emission zones. We found that LEZs were a significant development in tackling air pollution in our urban spaces but that they were not a silver bullet on their own. Instead, a wider package of interventions must be looked at to combat air pollution, particularly in more rural areas, where LEZs were unlikely to provide a solution.

Finally, we looked at best practice in tackling air quality. We were encouraged by the idea of establishing a programme of continuous improvement to make incremental progress towards achieving the challenging 2021 World Health Organization guidelines. Our report calls on the Scottish Government to set out those pathways as part of its upcoming review of the cleaner air for Scotland 2 strategy.

In conclusion, Presiding Officer, the air that we breathe is essential to our wellbeing. By tackling air pollution, Scottish people can enjoy a better quality of life with reduced health risks. We hope that the implementation of the Scottish Government's air improvement plan will help to achieve that aim. It is not perfect, but it is a step in the right direction. We therefore recommend that it be approved by the Scottish Parliament.

## Decision Time

17:11

**The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):**

There are three questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that amendment S6M-08948.2, in the name of Sandesh Gulhane, which seeks to amend motion S6M-08948, in the name of Jenni Minto, on celebrating the success of the Covid-19 vaccination programme, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

**Members:** No.

**The Presiding Officer:** There will be a division.

There will be a short suspension to allow members to access the digital voting system.

17:12

*Meeting suspended.*

17:14

*On resuming—*

**The Presiding Officer:** The question is, that amendment S6M-08948.2, in the name of Sandesh Gulhane, which seeks to amend motion S6M-08948, in the name of Jenni Minto, on celebrating the success of the Covid-19 vaccination programme, be agreed to. Members should cast their votes now.

**For**

Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)  
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)  
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)  
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)  
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)  
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)  
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)  
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)  
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)  
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)  
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)  
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)  
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)  
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)  
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)  
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)  
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)  
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)  
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)

Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)  
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

**Against**

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)  
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)  
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)  
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)  
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)  
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)  
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)  
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)  
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)  
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)  
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)  
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)  
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)  
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)  
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)  
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)  
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)  
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)  
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)  
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)  
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)  
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)  
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)  
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)  
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)  
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)  
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)  
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)  
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)  
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)  
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)  
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)  
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)  
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)  
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)  
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)  
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)  
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)  
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)  
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)  
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)  
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)  
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)  
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)  
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)  
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)  
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)  
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)  
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)  
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)  
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)  
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)  
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)  
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)  
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)  
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)  
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)  
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)  
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)  
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

**Abstentions**

Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)  
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)

Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)  
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)  
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)  
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)  
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)  
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)  
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)

**The Presiding Officer:** The result of the division is: For 31, Against 60, Abstentions 19.

*Amendment disagreed to.*

**The Presiding Officer:** The next question is, that amendment S6M-08948.1, in the name of Carol Mochan, which seeks to amend motion S6M-08948, in the name of Jenni Minto, on celebrating the success of the Covid-19 vaccination programme, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

**Members:** No.

**The Presiding Officer:** There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

**Shirley-Anne Somerville (Dunfermline) (SNP):** On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My apologies. [*Inaudible.*] I would have voted no.

**The Presiding Officer:** Thank you. We will ensure that that is recorded, Ms Somerville.

**Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab):** On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

**The Presiding Officer:** Could we have Mr Leonard's microphone on, please?

**Richard Leonard:** Presiding Officer, my device disconnected. Had it not done so, I would have voted yes.

**The Presiding Officer:** Thank you. We will ensure that that is recorded.

**Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP):** On a point of order, Presiding Officer. [*Inaudible.*] I would have voted no.

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

**For**

Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)  
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)  
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)  
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)  
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)  
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)

Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)  
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Dowe, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)  
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)  
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)  
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)  
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)  
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)  
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)  
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)  
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)  
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)  
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)  
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)  
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)  
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)  
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)  
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)  
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)  
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)  
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)  
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)  
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

**Against**

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)  
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)  
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)  
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)  
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)  
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)  
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)  
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)  
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)  
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)  
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)  
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)  
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)  
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)  
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)  
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)  
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)  
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)  
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)  
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)  
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)  
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)  
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)  
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)  
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)  
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)  
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)

Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)  
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)  
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)  
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)  
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)  
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)  
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)  
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)  
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)  
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)  
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)  
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)  
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)  
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)  
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)  
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)  
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)  
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)  
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)  
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)  
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)  
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)  
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)  
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)  
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)  
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)  
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)  
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)  
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)  
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)  
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)  
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)  
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

**The Presiding Officer:** The result of the division is: For 49, Against 60, Abstentions 0.

*Amendment disagreed to.*

**The Presiding Officer:** The final question is, that motion S6M-08948, in the name of Jenni Minto, on celebrating the success of the Covid-19 vaccination programme, be agreed to.

*Motion agreed to,*

That the Parliament recognises the success of the COVID-19 vaccination programme; notes that over 15 million vaccines have been administered and that tens of thousands of deaths have been prevented; agrees that vaccination has led to the World Health Organization (WHO) declaring an end to the public health emergency; recognises that COVID-19 has not gone away and offers condolences to all those who have lost a loved one during the pandemic; agrees that the success of the vaccination programme has allowed people to be kept safe, while the country lives with COVID-19; encourages those who are eligible for vaccination to come forward when called, in order to protect themselves and others, and thanks the dedicated health and social care workers who continue to deliver the vaccine.

**The Presiding Officer:** That concludes decision time.

## Highly Protected Marine Areas (“The Clearances Again”)

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur):** The final item of business is a members’ business debate on motion S6M-08590, in the name of Rhoda Grant, on “The Clearances Again”. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

*Motion debated,*

That the Parliament congratulates Donald Francis (DF) MacNeil, and Skipinnish, on securing a top ten iTunes download position for their song The Clearances Again; understands that this was achieved just 24 hours after the song’s release; further understands that this song is a protest song, which seeks to raise awareness of the Scottish Government’s proposed Highly Protected Marine Areas; believes that these proposals will ban inshore fishing and all marine activities and impact on the economy of the Highlands and Islands, and notes the view that the Scottish Government should heed the reported concerns and revisit this policy.

17:20

**Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):** I thank the MSPs who signed my motion, which has allowed the debate to take place. I make no apology for bringing the issue of highly protected marine areas back to the chamber. The impact that they will have on the whole of my region is unprecedented and the Scottish Government must listen to and, more importantly, hear the concerns.

It is a signal of those concerns that “The Clearances Again”, the song by Donald Francis MacNeil and Skipinnish, has achieved such success. I understand that it was a roaring success at the concert that coincided with the Scottish fishing expo in Aberdeen last weekend. The song spells out the dismay of our fishing communities at distant decision makers destroying their livelihoods and incomes at the stroke of a pen.

The economy of much of the Highlands is dependent on the sea. However, every aspect of life on our islands is governed by the sea. That includes their economies and connections to the mainland. The fishing community is obviously dismayed. The impact that HPMA’s could have on fishing is devastating. Even the most sustainable and environmentally friendly forms of fishing would be affected.

The success of the no-take zone in Lamlash bay is quoted to us. However, the Clyde Fishermen’s Association, which was instrumental in setting up the zone, tells us that the success is unmeasured. There have been no comparative studies to show whether the policy has worked. We also have the no-take zone in Broadbay, which has not worked

well. We must have robust science to guide our management of the seas.

**Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con):** I am grateful to Rhoda Grant for bringing the debate to the chamber and for taking the intervention. She gets to the crux of the matter. I am sure that she agrees that the point is that, if we are going to have an effective policy, we must understand the science behind it. The effect of marine protected areas has not even been considered and, until such time as the Government is prepared to gather evidence and take communities with it, the HPMAs policy will be a bad one.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I can give you the time back, Rhoda Grant.

**Rhoda Grant:** I agree absolutely with Brian Whittle. It is also important that those who live and work on the sea have their evidence recorded, because they have a huge amount of anecdotal evidence to add to the debate. They need to manage their fishing to maximise their catch while leaving enough behind to ensure that they have income and employment for the future. The communities concerned have, by their own initiative, taken measures to conserve stocks, such as the V-notching of spawning lobsters to protect females from being harvested. They are not people who damage the environment but people who need to work with it and protect it.

**Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green):** Rhoda Grant has been talking about low-impact fisheries. Would she support establishing area-based fisheries management zones, including low-impact-only areas, alongside HPMAs?

**Rhoda Grant:** The important point is that the measures be taken with the agreement of, and in consultation with, local communities that know their own seas. Many communities have said to me that they want the management of their own fishing grounds and, indeed, marine environments to be devolved to them. We should do that rather than have a top-down policy that causes fear and alarm in communities.

The Government must revisit the policy. It cannot impose HPMAs on communities and say that the only communities that will be exempted are the ones that are vehemently opposed because that ramps up the pressure rather than calming it down and enabling negotiation with communities so that we can find out what is workable.

**Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP):** Does Rhoda Grant agree that every single local authority in the Highlands and Islands is opposed to HPMAs? The seafood industry is entirely opposed. The whole marine tourism industry is opposed. Therefore it appears that there is

vehement opposition—at least throughout the Highlands and Islands. On the First Minister's own logic, that surely means that he has already agreed that there can be no HPMAs, because of such opposition.

**Rhoda Grant:** I agree that there is vehement opposition throughout the Highlands and Islands and, indeed, beyond. However, asking communities to demonstrate such opposition rather than sitting down and working with them is the real issue. We should be spending this time on considering how we protect our seas instead of on demonstrating vehement opposition.

Fergus Ewing mentioned a number of organisations and industries. Most of the debate surrounding the issue has been about fishing, but it is about much more than that. As he said, other industries are equally dismayed by the policy. For instance, will fish farms be allowed to stay where they are? Will they be exempted in the way that ScotWind sites have been, or will they have to move from their current sites? If they have to move, what timeframe will they be given to gain the consents that they will need to enable them to move to other sites, and what impact will that have on fishing in those new areas?

There will also be an impact on seaweed harvesting, which is another important industry that supports our rural economies and jobs. If it is also banned, will we lose prime Scottish brands such as ishga and Hebridean Seaweed? Will they no longer be able to harvest seaweed for their products? Less well known than the use of seaweed in other products is its use to replace plastics with a more environmentally friendly substance.

Seaweed is also used for fertiliser. That practice is well known in the crofting communities, as the Scottish Crofting Federation's response to the consultation highlighted, but now large sustainable brands such as Hebridean Seaweed are providing fertiliser worldwide. Given what is happening to supplies of fertiliser around the world due to the war in Ukraine, we cannot view the policy in isolation.

Tourism is promoted throughout our coastal communities, and it is a growing industry. However, the policy will impact on that, too. The proposals go so far as to suggest that swimming could be banned in some areas. If we take it to include canoeing, kayaking and wildlife boat trips, the impact will be huge. It also begs the question: if people cannot swim there, should anyone be allowed to run a ferry there? Of course, that might be the object of the exercise, given the current lack of ferries and the daily disruption to their operation. Simply to ban them might provide the Government with a valid excuse for the lack of ferries at the moment.

Not all areas will be designated, and that means that we will be funnelling activity into smaller and smaller areas. The culmination of such activity in small areas will be to create damage, so that impact must be assessed.

The song by Donald Francis MacNeil and Skipinnish talks about the clearances happening once again. The clearances are not something that is easily evoked in the Highlands and Islands, yet in this instance the comparison is valid. People are already selling up, any investment has been shelved and families are already moving out. The policy will cause depopulation and will clear people off the land. People will not accept that.

Donald Francis comes from Vatersay—an island that was made famous just over a hundred years ago, when his forefathers fought for their land. The Vatersay raiders were jailed for their temerity in cultivating the land and building homes there. Despite their imprisonment, their actions led to the Government of the day buying the land forcrofting. They were among the very early land reformers, fighting for their right to survival. The song evokes this:

“My people, my language, my Island  
And the rights that our forefathers won  
To remain on the soil of our homeland  
By the sweep of a pen will be gone”

Surely it should not take modern-day Vatersay raiders to overturn this decision.

17:30

**Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP):** I warmly commend Rhoda Grant for bringing the topic to the chamber again, and for her eloquent expression of the anger that is felt at the proposals in our fishing communities. In the debate last week, I talked about our fishing communities. Tonight, I will focus on the impacts on our newer industry: aquaculture.

Aquaculture is a tremendous success story: it is supported by the main parties in the chamber and provides 2,500 direct jobs and no fewer than 10,000 indirect jobs, with a staggering turnover of £1,000 million a year. Our salmon has attracted the accolade of the Label Rouge—which is, incidentally, rarely handed out by the French—and provides no fewer than 850 million high-protein, healthy, enjoyable, nutritious rich meals a year.

At a time of burgeoning growth in the planet's population, with no chance of more agricultural land becoming available onshore, the world's seas should surely be used, over the rest of the century, to help feed the world, and in particular the poor. Fish farms will be fewer in number in the future, and—as in Norway—they will move from the estuaries out into deeper waters. HPMA should

not hamper or prejudice that environmentally friendly development.

The industry is now characterised by innovation, high-quality marine engineering and higher standards of fish health and welfare. In addition, it supports a growing onshore supply chain. In my constituency alone, we have Gael Force Marine, AKVA Group, Benchmark Packaging and Pharmaq Analytiq, which are all significant Inverness employers. There are many good well-paid jobs—not just on our coast, in Inverness and on our islands, but throughout Scotland—sustained by aquaculture. For example, there is DFDS, which has 150 staff in Larkhall; Migdale Smolt at Bonar Bridge; and Mowi Scotland, with 1,000 people in Rosyth. The aquaculture industry, like other industries, needs sustainable growth.

Salmon Scotland has said that the industry supports marine protection, but only based on evidence and science, and the HPMA proposals are based on neither. The industry wholly opposes the proposals. Salmon Scotland believes that they have been driven by politics, not by rational analysis and evidence, and it fundamentally disagrees with the glib and bald assertion

“that salmon farms are incompatible with marine protection”.

It goes on to state that

“Neither the Bute House Agreement nor the consultation documents”

even attempt to consider the economic impact on all those industries.

The potential of our aquaculture sector is perhaps illustrated by a saying that I believe is current in Norway, which is that fish is the new oil. That is the extent of the opportunity that we have in Scotland. The opposition to HPMA is very strong; I believe that it covers the whole of the Highlands and Islands, and indeed the whole country. My recommendation is to go back to the drawing board and review the existing MPA structure, which Mr Whittle rightly mentioned in his intervention, because that process is—for good reason—regarded with mistrust by fishermen around the country.

I will conclude, in the short time that I have available, by asking what, at the end of the day, Parliament is for. What is the purpose of our being here in this centrally heated, pleasant chamber, with our salaries and our perks? It is to enable us to give voice to the views of the people. I believe that that voice is loud and clear: go back to the drawing board, go and speak to the people, go and speak to the fishermen and listen carefully. As Rhoda Grant said, they know how to manage things best. If we do not do that, does the Scottish Parliament as an institution continue to be worthy

of the name, and are we worthy of the honour of being members here?

17:34

**Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con):** I congratulate Rhoda Grant on bringing to the chamber this members' business debate on a topic that is, and will continue to be, extremely concerning.

As some may possibly remember, I, too, mentioned the song "The Clearances Again" when I spoke in the chamber last week, and I, too, congratulate Donald Francis MacNeil and Skipinnish on their chart success. The verse that I read out went:

"A Mayday call we cry.  
We will stand for the rights of our children.  
We will not let our islands die."

Those are powerful and emotive lyrics—members should be grateful that I chose not to sing them. I am sure that my son, as a big fan, would have volunteered to do so, and I know that we look forward to hearing Skipinnish perform the song live at the Royal Highland Show next month.

We also learned that Donald Francis is a lifelong inshore fisherman who has, for his whole life, fished around Mingulay and the other islands to the south of the island of Barra. Like many others, he fears that if the Scottish Government presses ahead with its controversial proposals to introduce HPMA's in 10 per cent of Scotland's seas, that will spell the end for many coastal communities scattered the length of the country.

If HPMA's are put in place to that extent by 2026—and early indications certainly suggest that the Scottish National Party will allow its extremist Green coalition partners to dictate this issue, regardless of the undoubted damage that it will cause—a significant area of Scotland's coastal and inshore waters will be closed off to all fishing, aquaculture and infrastructure developments, where spatial pressures are already causing issues for our coastal communities.

The fact that so many nationalist MSPs seem so hellbent on pushing through these highly contentious proposals, when such a large number have fishing interests on their own doorsteps, indicates just how dysfunctional this SNP Government and its back benches have become, with the Green tail wagging the yellow dog.

As someone else said, the SNP is in government, but it is certainly not in power. For MSPs who represent coastal areas, voting in favour of the proposals is almost like signing their own P45, because—make no mistake about it—people in the fishing sector and coastal communities have long memories. Only a few

such MSPs have shown the courage of their convictions and are ignoring their party in order to put the interests of their constituents first by voting against this madcap plan. Indeed, perhaps the most dramatic intervention came from Fergus Ewing, who ripped up the consultation paper, describing it as "a notice of execution". It is not only a notice of execution for the fishing industry, but a notice of eviction for those other SNP MSPs at the next election.

Members on all sides of the chamber, and people across the fishing fleet who have, for generations, fished sustainably, recognise the need for targeted, specific conservation measures. Working together, there have been successes, without the need for sledgehammer legislation, and with stakeholders coming together to agree measures to protect stocks and habitats.

How can Mairi Gougeon and Màiri McAllan argue that HPMA's are needed in 10 per cent of our waters, when there is not a shred of scientific evidence to support that blanket approach? These draconian plans have already united the seafood sector, and some non-governmental organisations, in opposing the Government's approach, which has undermined any sense of working together for the common good.

Only last Friday, at the fishing industry's conference in Aberdeen, Elspeth Macdonald of the Scottish Fishermen's Federation warned that the conservation zones are too big a price for fishermen to pay when they are being introduced for political rather than ecological reasons.

It must be remembered that the fishing industry has long been committed to nature conservation that is founded on evidence, properly and carefully developed, with the genuine involvement of stakeholders; and balanced alongside sustainable use. On the contrary, in this instance, there is no evidence for, nor transparency around, the view that the establishment of HPMA's across 10 per cent of Scotland's seas will guarantee the ecosystem regeneration that is being sought. In fact, there is a significant danger that the exact opposite will be achieved, with a potential increase in predator stocks impacting on other species.

Our fishermen are already subject to an ever-tightening spatial squeeze, and further reductions in the areas that are available to them to fish will certainly drive many of them out of business. The Scottish Crofting Federation has warned that the plans will have

"a devastating impact on crofting".

There is still time for the nationalists to do the right thing and ditch their approach to HPMA's, even if it means a messy divorce from the Greens. Surely the nationalists must now listen to the widespread opposition from the fishermen's

associations in Shetland, Orkney, the Clyde and Galloway. I strongly urge the Government to rip up its current commitment and start afresh, with our fishers at the heart of the debate.

17:39

**Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD):** I, too, thank Rhoda Grant for bringing this important debate to the chamber, and I congratulate inshore fisherman Donald Francis MacNeil and Skipinnish for the protest song, “The Clearances Again”. For the song to have made it into the top 10 download charts within just 24 hours of having been released indicates the strength of feeling among people in the Highlands and Islands and across Scotland, who agree with the sentiments that are expressed about the Scottish Government’s HPMAs proposals.

As an islander myself, albeit that I am from northern waters, I understand the threat to the way of life that the song so eloquently and passionately describes. However, we should not make the mistake of thinking that it is about looking through rose-tinted glasses at some romantic notion of how life used to be—a life that is yearned for again. We have strong links to our seas, and we want to ensure that they are healthy and sustainable for future generations.

I also congratulate the SNP Scottish Government, because it has managed to unite coastal and island communities around Scotland in vehement opposition to what it has presented with astonishing insensitivity. It is not that there is opposition to sustainable and responsible management of the marine environment to tackle biodiversity loss and the climate emergency—far from it. It is that the proposals, as they stand, have the potential to decimate communities, businesses and livelihoods, and to make people move away from what are often the most fragile of areas.

The policy—“a blunt instrument”, as Shetland’s only Green councillor described it—appears to have been drawn up on the basis of political demands, without any understanding of the interconnectivity between land and sea. Indeed, Donald MacKinnon, who is the chair of the Scottish Crofting Federation, has pointed out that the impact of the proposals extends beyond the shoreline and goes inland, through the crofting counties. Crofters are often also fishermen.

The no-take zone at Lamlash Bay is frequently highlighted during discussion about HPMAs, despite the lack of clarity about whether there has been a positive impact across all species. Lamlash Bay, which is an area of just 1 square mile, cannot be used as the sole basis for no-take zones around the rest of the coastline. Different areas include different marine habitats and

environments; that should be considered alongside marine spatial planning.

We can also look at the evidence-based work over the past 23 years from the Shetland Shellfish Management Organisation—which, incidentally, won the annual *Fishing News* sustainability award on Friday night in Aberdeen.

When we talk about fishing and aquaculture, what we mean is provision of high-quality nutritious food and high-value exports beyond our shores. It means business investment and jobs—often well-paid skilled jobs—through direct and indirect employment. It includes the catchers of fish, crabs, langoustines and scallops; the growers of salmon and mussels; the processors, hauliers and marine engineers; the net makers and feed suppliers; and many more throughout the supply chain, as Fergus Ewing described.

Communities are viable because of fishing and aquaculture because it keeps working-age families there—people who keep the school roll up and the local shop open. The Government missed the opportunity to bring communities along with it by not engaging with them at the beginning of the process, and it seems to have been surprised by the reaction to this top-down policy. It has lost the trust of island and coastal communities.

We already have marine protected areas covering almost 40 per cent of Scotland’s seas. HPMAs could add 10 per cent to that coverage, and with offshore wind, the impact on fishermen and fish farming is undeniable. As Elspeth Macdonald of the Scottish Fishermen’s Federation pointed out at the Scottish Skipper Expo in Aberdeen last week, the industry

“feels under threat like never before”,

because of both the rapid development of offshore wind farms and HPMAs. She said:

“Let us be in no doubt, while the energy sector rushes to show its green credentials in energy transition, these will be massive industrial developments in our own waters. Very little is known about their long-term effect. The problem with being ambitious to be ‘global leader in offshore wind’ ... means you are also the global guinea pig.”

The offshore wind farms will become vast no-take zones for fishing vessels, which will increase spatial-squeeze pressures on the fleet.

In conclusion, I repeat my call to the Scottish Government to rethink its current HPMAs proposals.

17:44

**Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green):** I congratulate Rhoda Grant on bringing this important debate to the chamber. I would like to address a number of points. First, I believe that it is irresponsible, inflammatory and misleading to

compare HPMA to the Highland clearances. If the member truly believes that the policy is so damaging, why did she and her Labour colleagues stand on a manifesto commitment to introduce HPMA that would cover 20 per cent of Scotland's seas? The truth is that Labour cares more about political point scoring than it does about our coastal communities.

In the face of the ecological and climate crisis delay matters, and acting quickly is vital to restoration of our ocean's productivity and resilience. Fish biomass in a wholly protected marine reserve is, on average, 670 per cent greater than it is in unprotected areas—

**Members rose.**

**Ariane Burgess:** I will not take interventions, as I have very little time and I want to get all my points across.

The policy is about protecting our fish nurseries and it is about allowing key areas of our sea bed to recover, in order to increase the abundance of our seas so that they support more fishers fishing more fish, and to protect the ecosystem for all of us. That is what the policy aims to do, but we need to work with the people on the ground, who know the waters intimately. I urge all low-impact and static-gear fishers to work with the Scottish Government and the Greens to make the policy work for them, for the stocks that they fish and for their communities.

Most of our creelers and divers are, as the Skipinnish song says,

“At one with the ocean and nature”.

It does a great disservice to the responsible members of coastal communities to conflate them with the big businesses that are the trawling and dredging industries. Trawler gear is not at one with nature—it is destroying nature on our sea bed, including vital fish nurseries and other blue-carbon habitats. Most of the dredge fleet is not based in the communities where they fish; bar in Shetland, the majority of the dredge fleet is nomadic. Low-impact fishers are almost always linked to the patch in which they fish—

**Finlay Carson:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Ariane Burgess:** —and they harvest our seas responsibly—

**Finlay Carson:** Will the member give way on that point?

**Ariane Burgess:** I am sorry—*[Interruption.]*

I must keep going.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Ms Burgess, resume your seat for a second.

Mr Carson, the member has made it clear that she is not likely to take an intervention. That is not an invitation for you to shout from a sedentary position. There will be respect shown in the chamber, irrespective of whether members agree with the views that are being expressed.

I can give you back the time, Ms Burgess.

**Ariane Burgess:** That is very much appreciated, Presiding Officer.

Clearances were operated through violence and force: the Scottish Government's HPMA could not be more different. Coastal communities have always been central to the designation process, and plans to bring stakeholders together using maps to draw out sites collectively, in order to mitigate impacts and to consider how to provide a just transition, are crucial parts of the early consultation.

The First Minister has even promised that the HPMA—fish nurseries—will not be introduced where communities are opposed to them. The clearances were driven by profit: they were about moving the majority of people off the land in order to boost profits for a privileged few. HPMA—fish nurseries—are not driven by profit but by science, and by the need to protect our environment and boost fish stocks to supply our communities—especially our coastal communities—and our economy.

There used to be a time when Scottish Labour supported the many, not the few. As we have seen, those days are long gone. I want young people to have ample opportunity to stay in their communities in order to help coastal communities to thrive and to build community wealth.

We must deliver housing that local people can actually afford, invest in the good green jobs that they want to do and enable sustainable fishing. We need to support the local initiatives that are painstakingly restoring coastal habitats after decades of damage, and which are creating jobs, in the process. Protecting a mere 10 per cent of our marine commons from all forms of fishing is not a big ask for biodiversity and our ecosystem services. Let us listen to fishers, especially creelers and divers, but let us also amplify the voices of our coastal communities on the whole, which might want a small slice of their coastal zone to be set aside for nature and biodiversity.

17:48

**Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab):** I begin by saying to the member of the Green Party, who spent most of her speech attacking the Labour Party, that the comparison that is being made between HPMA and the clearances is not from the mouths of people in the Labour Party, but

is directly from the mouths of people in the community. It is in the name of the title of the song that is quoted in the motion for debate tonight. The song is written by an islander, and is being listened to by people across the Highlands and Islands, as members on all sides of the chamber have testified tonight. It is that member, and this Government, who are refusing to listen.

It is right to highlight the role of protest songs at this point in time, because when rights are lost and community is threatened, and when hearts yearn for justice for their communities they call, in song and in poetry, to our common humanity and they ask us to listen to them.

I have heard the words of families—the words of fathers and mothers in those communities, saying that they see no future for their children. If the cabinet secretary wants to listen to them, she would do well to hear them properly and to revisit the proposals.

The work of Donald Francis MacNeil and Skipinnish calls to mind, I think directly, the poetry of the clearances and land agitation of the early 19th century that was first collected by Donald Meek. “Tuath is Tighearna” is the name of his collection—it means “Tenants and Landlords”. In this situation, people know who the tenants are and they know who the landlords are. This is how people feel they are being treated: they feel that the land is not their own and the seas are not their own—that they are being granted permission to be there rather than owning and living in their own communities.

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

**Michael Marra:** No, thank you, sir.

The landlords are as they ever were—the elite of Edinburgh telling those people exactly how to live their lives and what they should do. The current debate over HPMA is, frankly, just the latest example in a litany of policies.

**Jim Fairlie:** Do Michael Marra and the Labour Party not accept that we are only at consultation stage, and that the point is that the cabinet secretary is going to go around the country to speak to those communities?

**Michael Marra:** Jim Fairlie would do well to listen to all those communities right now. The member who is sitting next to him has highlighted very well the unanimous voice of those communities. I am sure that the cabinet secretary will hear that loud and clear in the coming months, as she tours the country.

We know already that having an axe hanging over the necks of every coastal community is a

very poor way to develop policy, and that it is receiving the reaction that we would expect.

When we think about the ferries that do not sail, the breakdown of crofting regulation, delays in extending broadband provision, housing policies that are pushing families out of villages and the tokenistic commitment to the Gaelic language, we see that this Government’s myopic focus on central belt policies has served our island and coastal communities poorly for 16 years: it has betrayed them.

During the statement regarding the ferries from the Government earlier today, the people in those communities who were listening would have been appalled at the temerity of the Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy attempting to make a virtue out of the ferries disaster that has happened. I feel that the tone of that statement speaks to the very problem that we see in the motion that is in front of us now.

We need to maintain and build sustainable communities in the Highlands and Islands, and that can be done only by growing their economies, creating more jobs and giving people reasons to stay there with their families or to move there. Success for this protest song—this cry for justice—will not be measured on iTunes or Spotify; it can be measured only by whether the Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Just Transition, her Minister for Green Skills, Circular Economy and Biodiversity and the Cabinet actually listen to it, hear it and change their own tune.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I call Màiri McAllan to respond to the debate. You have around seven minutes, cabinet secretary.

17:52

**The Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Just Transition (Màiri McAllan):** Presiding Officer, I thank you and all the members who have taken part in today’s debate. The fact that we are discussing this topic again is testament to the importance of the issue.

As others have done, I begin by commending Skipinnish and Donald Francis MacNeil for so evocatively capturing the strength of feeling among some people in relation to the issue. It represents, I think, two great things about our nation: how politically engaged Scotland’s polity is and how we often express our political views through our culture and the arts. That is a beautiful and important way to express ourselves, and it often communicates issues in a way that is more accessible. It also has longevity; when debates are over and consultations are complete—or ripped up, in the case of Fergus Ewing—songs about people and about culture will endure.

With all that, I repeat what I have said before to those who are concerned about the proposals that we have consulted on. First, I care; secondly, I sympathise—I am a rural MSP, who has probably done more days working the land than most people in the chamber, and I understand the connection with the land in the way that coastal and island communities feel connected to the coast and sea—and, lastly, I am listening.

As I said when I launched the initial consultation—

**Finlay Carson:** Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

**Màiri McAllan:** I will very briefly.

**Finlay Carson:** When you say that you are listening—

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Through the chair, please, Mr Carson.

**Finlay Carson:** I beg your pardon. I ask the cabinet secretary why Elspeth Macdonald from the Scottish Fishermen's Federation said:

"I'm sorry to say our recent experience in engaging with the government on HPMAAs has been far from meaningful."

**Màiri McAllan:** If anybody feels that way, I am determined to work to make sure that everybody who engages with my department, me and the Government realises that I appreciate that, and that everybody feels that the engagement is meaningful. If that is how she feels, I am determined to work on that.

Members are telling me to go back to the drawing board, but the truth is that I never left the drawing board. We are at the drawing board and I have, rightly, invited Scotland's communities to the drawing board with me.

**Brian Whittle:** Will the member take an intervention on that point?

**Màiri McAllan:** I will take one more intervention.

**Brian Whittle:** The cabinet secretary mentioned the 4,000 replies to the consultation that she initiated. If she is listening and is going to go through all those 4,000 replies, how can she possibly come to the nominal percentage of 10 per cent prior to reading all the consultation replies?

**Màiri McAllan:** The consultation was on the proposal; we have to put something on the table on which to consult. That is how policy is developed.

Rather than consulting on pre-determined areas at the end of the process—that would have been a top-down model—we have instead consulted early and on principles, including what might constitute HPMAAs, what people thought of the 10 per cent figure and how they felt about the timeline. Those

are exactly the questions that we asked and exactly the questions that I will now consider.

**Rhoda Grant:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Màiri McAllan:** I will take one more.

**Rhoda Grant:** The cabinet secretary says that she is consulting on the 10 per cent level, but that figure is included in the Bute house agreement. Is it up for negotiation or is it set in stone?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Cabinet secretary, I can give you the time back for all the interventions.

**Màiri McAllan:** I will consider the responses to every aspect on which I have asked questions in the consultation. I will work with my Green colleagues on whatever we are told. We have been very clear from the start. We took our proposal to communities, invited them around the drawing board with us and will carefully consider what they have told us.

Having confirmed that I will do that, I want to take the opportunity to address some inaccuracies—some of which have been repeated in the debate—that are causing people concern. Contrary to what the motion says, our proposals would not ban inshore fishing, and certainly not ban all marine activities. Our proposals, which we have consulted on, are that certain activities could be restricted in carefully selected locations throughout Scotland's seas, inshore and offshore.

We suggested that those sites would be selected based on the best available scientific evidence and rigorous socioeconomic assessment. Fergus Ewing cannot have read the consultation if he thinks that there was no socioeconomic assessment built into it. It is like a thread through the consultation. We committed to doing that in close collaboration with stakeholders in order to understand how it would impact businesses, individuals and communities. I reiterate that we are at the very earliest stages of developing HPMAAs and no sites have been selected—they have not even been proposed.

All of that is happening against the backdrop of the strong track record that the Scottish Government, the Scottish fishing industry and coastal communities have on working together to meet shared challenges, deliver mutual benefit and ensure sustainable co-management. Of course, we sometimes hold different views on individual issues, but we have achieved great success when we work in partnership and on a pragmatic basis. My commitment to a partnership approach is absolutely resolute.

In the time that I have left, I remind members that we cannot forget why we have to take action. We are in the midst of a climate and nature

emergency. Our oceans are critical to the sequestering and storing of carbon and to supporting ecosystems and species, the abundance of which is directly tied to how healthy our natural world is. We have to protect our oceans so that they can protect us.

I will say this time and time again to reassure people who I know are worried, because I do not want them to be worried: I am absolutely determined that, as we take the actions that we must take in response to the climate and nature emergency, it will be done via a just transition. It will be done hand in hand with communities, particularly with those who could be affected by proposals.

That task is incumbent on me as a minister. I do not have the ability to politically posture about this. I have to be serious about it, and I give my commitment to communities throughout Scotland that I will take that balanced approach.

*Meeting closed at 18:00.*



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