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Around 500 sick youngsters have been diverted to a hospital 20 miles away since the controversial closure of a children's ward, health bosses have admitted.

NHS Lothian shut the paediatric facility at St John's Hospital in Livingston to out of hours and in-patients last summer, with no firm plans to reopen it.

Since then, the health board has stated, 500 children have been taken to the Sick Kids Hospital in the centre of Edinburgh.

Shadow health secretary Miles Briggs said the revelation proved the negative impact of the gradual downgrading of hospital services in West Lothian by the SNP government.

And he warned that patients in areas like Perth and Kinross and Renfrewshire would face similar issues with services being removed from those communities.

Papers presented to this month's NHS Lothian board meeting stated: "In the year since the temporary closure of the paediatric inpatient unit at St John's Hospital there had been approximately 500 admissions from there to the Royal Hospital for Sick Children, averaging at 1.6 admissions per day."

Previous research by the Scottish Conservatives suggested the number of ambulance journeys from St John's to the Sick Kids trebled in the wake of the closure.

Earlier this year, the party called on the SNP to consider making St John's a paediatric teaching hospital in the hope of safeguarding its future and improving care across central Scotland.

Scottish Conservative shadow health secretary Miles Briggs said:

"The situation facing sick children and their parents in West Lothian is completely unacceptable.

"This proves the decision to close the ward to 24/7 admissions, and downgrade the hospital more generally, has had a genuinely negative impact.

"The last thing worried parents should have to face in these situations is a

20-mile trip into the centre of Scotland's capital city when the care was previously provided on their doorstep.

"The SNP needs to wake up to the importance of local services.

"It's not just patients in West Lothian being affected. We could see similar trends occurring in Perth and Kinross and the west of Scotland too with planned reductions there.

"This is yet more evidence that the SNP government simply isn't up to the job of running Scotland's NHS."