

# Reduced paediatric service at St John's to continue 'indefinitely'

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The partial closure of a vital children's ward is set to continue "indefinitely" – after the SNP admitted its staff recruitment crisis was to blame.

Addressing Holyrood today, health secretary Jeane Freeman said while a plan for improvement was underway, the paediatric unit at St John's Hospital would continue to send patients to Edinburgh at night.

She said that staffing levels were "fragile", meaning it couldn't continue as a 24/7 operation, and conceded she was "anxious" about the continued closure.

However, she stopped short of setting a date for when the full service would resume, instead saying NHS Lothian would give it "the highest level of priority".

The Scottish Conservatives said the latest development was more evidence of a "downgrade" at the Livingston hospital, something campaigners have been highlighting for more than a decade.

In August, the party revealed how around 500 child patients had been transferred to the Edinburgh Sick Kids – 20 miles away – since the move.

They also called for the SNP government to make it an accredited paediatric teaching hospital to help safeguard its future.

**Scottish Conservative shadow health secretary Miles Briggs said:**

"This statement from the new health secretary doesn't suggest the SNP is any further forward in reopening the children's ward at St John's.

"The hospital and the people of West Lothian have been the victim of the SNP's shambolic workforce planning.

"For years the SNP has neglected the fact we have an ageing and increasing population, and ignored the challenge of an NHS retirement boom.

"That's left wards like the children's unit in St John's unable to cope – forcing a partial closure which now looks set to go on indefinitely.

“It’s the ultimate self-fulfilling prophecy, and these warm words change nothing on the ground.

“Still parents across a huge slice of central Scotland do not know when they will be able to count on their local hospital again.”