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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 21 May 2020

[The Presiding Officer opened the meeting at 12:30]

Covid-19 Lockdown: Next Steps

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): Good afternoon, colleagues. Before we start, I remind you that, if you are moving around the chamber, you should remember to observe social distancing rules.

Our first item of business today is a statement by Nicola Sturgeon, the First Minister, on Covid-19 lockdown: the next steps. The First Minister will take questions at the end of her statement, so I encourage all members who wish to ask a question to press their request-to-speak buttons as soon as possible.

12:30

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): The Scottish Government has just published a route map to take Scotland through and out of the Covid-19 crisis. It provides information about how and when we might ease the lockdown restrictions while continuing to suppress the virus, and it provides us with some indication of what our journey to a new normal might look like. The route map is, for ease of access, high level, but it will be supplemented in the days ahead with detailed advice and information for the public, as well as guidance covering key sectors of our economy, travel and transport.

In publishing the route map, we confront a fundamental issue. The lockdown restrictions have been absolutely necessary to mitigate the massive harm caused by the Covid-19 virus. However, the lockdown is creating harms of its own—loneliness and social isolation, deepening inequalities and serious damage to our economy. None of us wants it to last any longer than it has to. Today, we are setting out the phases in which we will aim to ease lockdown and reduce the impact on us all—individuals, families, communities and businesses.

The steps we will take are, by necessity, gradual and incremental, and they must also be matched with rigorous, on-going monitoring of the virus. There is no completely risk-free way of lifting the lockdown, but we must mitigate the risks as much as we can, and we must not at any stage act rashly or recklessly. For all our progress, the virus has not gone away. It continues to pose a significant threat to health and, if we move too quickly or without proper care, it could run out of control again very quickly. The danger of a second

wave, later in the year, is very real indeed. We must not forget any of that.

At every stage, though, the biggest single factor in controlling the virus will be how well we all continue to observe public health advice. Continued high compliance with the restrictions that are in place at any time, together with hand washing, cough hygiene and physical distancing, will continue to be essential, as will wearing a face covering where that is appropriate. We must also understand and accept what a test, trace and isolate system will require of us all. Each of us will have an on-going responsibility to protect ourselves and each other.

I will do three things in today's statement. First, I will give an update on where we are now in our efforts to control the virus. Secondly, I will set out the initial ways in which lockdown restrictions are likely to be eased from the end of next week. Finally, I will discuss possible future steps and the approach we will take in deciding which ones to take, and when.

I stress, however, that the nature of what we are dealing with means that the proposals cannot be set in stone. We will conduct formal reviews at least every three weeks, to assess whether and to what extent we can move from one phase to the next, but we will be constantly alive to when we can go faster or whether we have gone too far. It might be that we cannot do everything in a particular phase at the same time. A single phase might span more than one review period. Some measures might be lifted earlier than planned and some later.

Of course, our plans will change if the data, evidence or, indeed, our understanding of the virus changes. We also welcome views on the plans, including from other parties. In addition, I encourage members of the public to read the route map at www.gov.scot and let us know their views. This crisis affects us all, and how we emerge from it safely matters deeply to us all.

In setting out where we are now, I will give an update on the daily statistics before putting the data we now have into a broader context. In doing that, I want to thank—as I always do—our health and care workers for the extraordinary work that they are doing in incredibly testing circumstances.

As at 9 o'clock this morning, there have been 14,856 positive cases confirmed, which is an increase of 105 from yesterday. A total of 1,318 patients are in hospital with Covid-19; 909 of them have been confirmed as having the virus and 409 are suspected of having Covid-19. That represents a total decrease of 125 from yesterday, including a decrease of 34 in the number of confirmed cases.

A total of 51 people last night were in intensive care with confirmed or suspected Covid-19. That

is a decrease of two since yesterday. Unfortunately, I also have to report that, in the past 24 hours, 37 deaths have been registered of patients who have been confirmed through a test as having had the virus, which takes the total number of deaths in Scotland under that measurement to 2,221.

Those numbers, together with yesterday's figures from National Records of Scotland, spell out very starkly the human cost of this virus. Those are not simply statistics; they all represent individuals whose loss is a source of grief to many. I send my deepest condolences to everyone who has lost a loved one to this virus.

However, the numbers also make it clear—as I indicated yesterday—that our efforts to curb Covid-19 have had an impact. Our mid-range estimate for the number of infectious people in Scotland is now 25,000; however, we expect that number to decrease further.

We are now seeing significant and sustained reductions in the number of confirmed Covid-19 patients in hospital. The number of Covid-19 patients in intensive care is now less than a quarter of what it was at its peak, and yesterday's National Records of Scotland data showed that the number of Covid-19 deaths has now fallen for three consecutive weeks. Last week's total was just over half the figure that was reported for the last full week of April.

We are also publishing today a paper that sets out the methods that we use for calculating the R number—the rate at which the virus is reproducing. We will now publish our up-to-date estimate of the R number each Thursday. Our latest estimate is that the R number remains between 0.7 and 1. In March, it was probably above 4.

It is worth saying that, although those figures indicate real progress, we cannot and must not be complacent. Progress remains fragile, and it would be too easy for the virus to run out of control again. The total number of Covid-19 deaths—351 last week alone—is still far too high. Although we estimate that the R number is below 1, the range has not changed this week, and there is still uncertainty about just how far below 1 it is. It may also still be slightly above the R number in other parts of the United Kingdom.

However, we now have some confidence that the R number has been below 1 for more than three weeks and that there has been a reduction in the number of new cases and in the impact of the virus. In my judgment, therefore, the time is right to move towards a careful relaxation of lockdown restrictions. However, as I will say in a moment, we must do so on a timescale that aligns with our development of test, trace and isolate.

Today's route map outlines four phases in emerging from the Covid-19 crisis beyond the current lockdown phase, and it covers nine key aspects of our lives: seeing friends and family; travel and getting around; education and childcare; work, business and the economy; shopping and leisure; sport and culture; public gatherings and special occasions; communities and public services; and health and social care.

We are legally required to review the lockdown restrictions every three weeks, and the next review date is 28 May—next Thursday. Provided that we continue to make progress in tackling Covid-19 over the next week and, in particular, that we see no regression from our progress so far, I can confirm that the Government intends to move from lockdown to phase 1, and thereby lift some restrictions, from 28 May. As we enter later phases, as and when the evidence allows, more restrictions will be removed—details of the relevant criteria to be met and the restrictions to be eased in each phase are set out in the document.

I am sure that everyone who is watching will want to know what changes will be made as we move to phase 1, but first I offer a word of caution. Not every phase 1 measure will necessarily be introduced immediately on 28 May. Some might be introduced a few days after that, and, depending on the evidence, it is possible that some might have to be postponed, although I very much hope that that will not be the case. Next week, when we have completed our formal review, we will make clear exactly what changes we are making and when, and we will ensure that detailed information is available for the public.

I will now set out some of the likely changes in phase 1. More outdoor activity will be permitted. People will be able to sit or sunbathe in parks and open areas, and they will be able to meet people from one other household—although initially in small numbers—while they are outside. We hope that that change will benefit everyone, but particularly those without gardens and people who live on their own. It is important to stress, though, that different households should remain 2m apart from each other. That will be critical in ensuring that that change does not provide easy routes of transmission for the virus. Because of the much higher risk of indoor transmission, visiting inside each other's houses will not be permitted in phase 1.

Some non-contact outdoor leisure activities will be allowed to restart, such as golf, tennis, bowls and fishing—subject, of course, to people engaging in appropriate hygiene measures and physical distancing. In addition, people will be able to travel—preferably by walking or cycling—to a location near their local community for recreation,

although we are asking people, where possible, to stay within or close to their local area.

Waste and recycling services will resume, as will many outdoor businesses such as agriculture and forestry. The construction industry will be able to carefully implement steps 1 and 2 of its six-step restart plan, which it has developed with us. However, I make it clear that there must be genuine partnership with trade unions—the resumption of activity can take place only if it is done safely.

In the first phase, other industries that are expected to resume in phase 2 will be permitted to prepare workplaces for the safe return of workers and customers. We will no longer discourage takeaway and drive-through food outlets from reopening, as long as they apply safe physical distancing. Outdoor retail outlets such as garden centres will be allowed to reopen. However, non-essential indoor shops, as well as indoor cafes, restaurants and pubs, must remain closed in the first phase.

Some key community support services will resume. For example, face-to-face children's hearings will restart, using physical distancing, and people who are at risk will have more contact with social work and support services. We are also planning a phased resumption of aspects of the criminal justice system. In addition, we will carefully and gradually resume national health service services that were paused as a result of the crisis. I remind people that, as of now, they should contact their general practitioner or NHS 24, or dial 999, if they need to. That message is really important.

I stress that those phase 1 measures, most of which have an outdoor focus, are not in place yet, and they are dependent on our continuing to suppress the virus. They will also be monitored carefully as they take effect. However, we view them as a proportionate and suitably cautious set of first steps, and I hope that they will bring some improvement to people's wellbeing and quality of life, start to get our economy moving again and start to steer us safely towards a new normality. It is important to stress, though, that while the permitted reasons for people to be out of their house will increase, the default message during phase 1 will continue to be to stay at home as much as possible.

As we move into subsequent phases, more restrictions will be removed. Details of those later phases and the criteria that we will need to meet are set out in the document.

We will make decisions on when, and to what extent, we can move to those phases carefully, and on the basis of evidence, and we will carry out formal reviews at least every three weeks—

although I hope that we can move more quickly than that, if the evidence allows it.

I want to take a moment to talk directly to people who are currently shielding—those whom we have asked to isolate completely for 12 weeks because we know that they are at greatest risk from the virus. We know that the isolation that is imposed by shielding over a long period of time is in itself very difficult and, indeed, harmful, so although we are not changing our advice on shielding yet, I confirm that we will issue new guidance before the initial period of shielding ends on 18 June. I say to those who are shielding that that will aim to increase your quality of life and your ability to make informed choices, while continuing to protect you as much as possible from the risks that the virus poses. I really understand how hard this is for all of you who are shielding, but I want you to know, at this point, that you are central to our thinking, as we move forward—through and out of the crisis.

More generally, the route map sets out what phases 2, 3 and 4 will mean for various areas of activity. It tries to give as definite as possible a sense of when, and on what basis, we might be able to see friends and family on something like a normal basis.

We have set out what the different phases will mean for transport. I confirm that we will publish a much more detailed transport transition plan on Tuesday next week.

We have also outlined the further stages, in which businesses might reopen. I stress that we want to move through the stages as quickly as the evidence allows; getting the economy moving again matters very much to all of us. We have sought to focus first on industries in which people simply cannot work from home. However, safety and the confidence of employers, employees and customers are essential, which is why detailed guidance for key sectors of the economy will follow in the days ahead. I stress that we will continue to require, for the foreseeable future, home working where that is possible. We will also encourage flexible working, including consideration of four-day weeks, for example.

We are indicating the phases in which service industries might reopen—businesses such as restaurants, bars and hairdressers. That last is a priority, I know, for almost every woman in the country—

Members: And men! *[Laughter.]*

The First Minister: —and some men. I will not go any further than that, Presiding Officer. For restaurants and bars, opening of outdoor spaces will come earlier than opening of indoor spaces.

The route map also indicates when places of worship might reopen, and it makes it clear that while our current guidance on funerals—among the most distressing and heartbreaking rules of the current lockdown—unfortunately remains unchanged for now, we hope to relax it as we move from phase 1 into phase 2.

Finally, I know that a key priority for parents, children and young people is education and early-years services. We confirm that we are planning to allow universities and colleges to have a phased return next term, with a combination of remote learning and some limited on-campus learning.

On schools, early learning and childcare, we have published today the report of the education recovery group, which is chaired by the Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, and includes representatives of councils, parent and teacher organisations and trade unions. Through that approach, we have reached an agreed position that will help us to build confidence among pupils, parents and teachers about a safe return to formal schooling. The report can be read in full on the Scottish Government's website. I stress that all its conclusions are subject to health advice, and to appropriate measures on physical distancing, testing and provision of protective equipment, where required, being in place.

I will summarise the key points. Teachers and other school staff will return during June to prepare classrooms for the new term and a different model of learning. During June and over the summer, an increased number of children will have access to critical childcare such as has been provided for the children of key workers during lockdown. We will provide, where possible, transition support for children going into primary 1 or moving from primary 7 to secondary school.

From 11 August, all schools will reopen. However, to allow appropriate physical distancing, children will return to a blended model of part-time in-school and part-time at-home learning.

Childminders can reopen during phase 1 and, over the summer, all early-years childcare providers will reopen, subject to necessary health measures. Capacity will be prioritised for the children of key workers, early learning and childcare entitlement and children who are in need. The Care Inspectorate will provide further guidance, in due course.

The arrangements will not represent a complete return to normality by August, but we judge them to be the most sensible approach that we can plan for at this stage. To reflect the fact that children will still be doing part of their learning at home, we will invest a further £30 million to provide laptops

for disadvantaged children and young people, to enable them to study online.

At this stage, I want to take a moment to say a huge "Thank you" to parents, carers and teachers who are doing so much to ensure that children continue to learn during the lockdown period.

I want also to send a special message to children and young people themselves, on the off-chance that any of you are watching a parliamentary statement. I know how difficult it has been for you not to be at school and with your friends, but you have been magnificent during this lockdown period. From the bottom of my heart, I say "Thank you" to each and every one of you.

As I have briefly summarised—I know that all members will take the time to study the document in full—the route map sketches out, with as much detail as we can provide at this stage, how and in what stages we might move back to some normality, as we continue to live with the virus, which we will have to do for some time to come. The route map does not yet set definite dates for all phases, because it cannot do so. We know that the virus is, and will remain, unpredictable.

Of course, to a great extent, the timing of the changes—of moving from one phase to another—will depend on all of us. It will depend on our continued ability to suppress the virus even as we move out of lockdown. Our emergence from lockdown will be faster or slower, depending on the level of continued success that we have in suppressing the virus.

It is also worth saying that in the weeks ahead, our messages will inevitably have to become more nuanced and complex, as we strike the difficult balance between protecting public health and allowing more personal choice. Straightforward strict rules will gradually be replaced by the need for all of us to exercise judgment and responsibility. However, some key advice—for example, on isolating if you have symptoms of Covid, strict physical distancing, washing of hands, and face coverings—will remain the same throughout.

We must continue to recognise that every decision that we take as individuals has an impact on others and on our collective wellbeing. That sense of collective responsibility has been so much appreciated by me and, I know, by all of us throughout the whole period. Indeed, it is only because people across the country have so overwhelmingly observed the lockdown restrictions that we are now able to plan ahead.

It will be absolutely vital that we all continue to abide by whatever rules are in place at every stage. For the moment—until 28 May—I must stress that our key public health guidance as of now remains unchanged. Please stay at home

except for essential purposes, such as daily exercise, going to essential work that cannot be done at home, or shopping for essential items such as food or medicine.

You can exercise more than once a day, but when you leave the house, stay more than 2m from other people, and, for now, do not meet up with households other than your own. Please wear a face covering if you are in a shop or on public transport, and remember to wash your hands thoroughly and regularly.

Finally, if you or someone else in your household has symptoms of Covid-19, please stay at home completely. Those symptoms are: a high temperature, a persistent cough, and a change in or loss of the sense of smell or taste.

I am very aware that talk of emerging from lockdown, and the nice weather that we have enjoyed in recent days, make the restrictions even harder, but I want to stress that abiding by them is what makes it possible for us to think about relaxing them. By doing the right thing, all of us have helped to slow the spread of the virus and to protect the NHS from being overwhelmed, and we have, despite the grim numbers of people dying, helped to save lives.

As a result of all of that personal sacrifice on the part of everybody, for the common good, we are now able—gradually, cautiously, and in phases—to plan our move back to some normality. I thank everyone for making that prospect possible.

Jackson Carlaw (Eastwood) (Con): It is now two months since we went into lockdown. In that time, we have seen the best of our NHS, our public services and our communities. However, there is no doubt that the lockdown has been hard and heartbreaking. People have not seen friends or families for weeks, our most vulnerable and our elderly are isolated, and Scotland's businesses are still just trying to survive. Of course our priority remains to save lives and not to become complacent, but people are now reaching for a way forward, and Scotland is already on the move. A plan to exit the lockdown is therefore welcome—even one that promotes a sense of déjà vu.

I thank the First Minister for advance sight of her statement. However, it raises many questions about how any plan will work in practice.

As Scotland is gradually released from lockdown, Government communications must evolve from being simple and direct instructions to being a broader and, as the First Minister has said, a more nuanced schedule of advice. In those circumstances, the need for clarity will be more urgent than ever. Can the First Minister confirm that the Scottish Government will publish specific advice for each sector so that there is no

confusion or so that confusion is kept to a minimum as we move through each stage?

The First Minister: Going into lockdown was really difficult for Scotland, as it was for all countries. I have always thought that, in some ways, coming out of it will be even more difficult, because it will involve us giving more nuanced messages and people having to understand what to do and what not to do and continuing to think very carefully about our personal responsibility and the actions that we take, even as we might be getting the impression that the threat of the virus is receding.

Inevitably, when a plan is put forward, some will say that we are going too slowly and others will say that we are going too quickly. Similarly, some people will say that we should have gone into lockdown earlier and some people—not very many, I think—will say that there was no point in doing it at all.

For me, this is not, and never will be, a popularity contest. Every single choice that the Government and I face right now is a hard choice, and we have to get the balance right. As we try to mitigate harm in one area, we open the risk of doing harm in another. There is a very difficult balance to strike, but we must try to continue to do that on an on-going basis.

I gave a commitment at the start, and I will give it each and every day in which we are dealing with the virus. I will try to take the best decisions that I possibly can at every step, based on the best possible information, with the protection of health and human life very much as my guiding principle.

Clarity will be important. In my statement, I said that, in the coming days, we will issue guidance for the public and businesses. Today, we have issued a paper on schools that people are able to read. We will continue to ensure that there is guidance.

I have said previously that we have 14 sectoral workstreams that are looking at guidance for each key sector of our economy. We will publish guidance in all those areas. We have been working with key sectors. I mentioned the work that we have been doing with the construction sector, which Kevin Stewart has been very involved in. We are giving the green light to the first phases of the industry's own restart plan, subject to continued dialogue with the trade unions.

We will seek to give clarity at each and every single step, and I will continue to do everything in my power and to the best of my ability to communicate the clearest possible messages to the public, so that we all know our responsibilities and we can all make a collective decision to continue to do the right things.

The threat has not gone away, and it will not go away in the near future. As we come out of the current phase, the Government has to be very focused on trying to mitigate the dangers that lie ahead. We will continue to do that as far as possible and for as long as required.

Jackson Carlaw: As work resumes, employers need time to prepare, and businesses need to know when they can open, so that they are ready when that time comes. I welcome the conversations that have taken place with the Scottish Trades Union Congress and the many references to those that have been made in statements, and I am encouraged by what the First Minister has just reported in relation to discussions that are taking place with the construction industry. However, many wider employer organisations claim that they have not been consulted or involved in discussions with the Government on future arrangements. Can the First Minister give an assurance, or is she able to report, on those conversations and confirm that they will be an integral part of any return-to-work strategy?

The First Minister: We have weekly discussions with all the key business organisations, and that will continue. If Jackson Carlaw wants to give me the details of organisations that have not had those conversations, I will be very interested to hear them and, of course, I will take steps to rectify that. The key business organisations are, and will continue to be, included in those discussions, as is the STUC, which is a critical partner, as we have to satisfy not just ourselves but workers that workplaces are safe to return to—just as we have to satisfy parents and pupils that it is safe to return to schools. That is an important part of building the confidence that we must build, so I will give an assurance that we will continue to have those discussions on an on-going basis.

I appreciate that members have not had time to absorb fully the detail of the document and route map, but members will see that we are building in time for preparation with each phase. Construction is being asked, and is permitted, to start its phased approach now; that is about preparation. Businesses that will, all being well, reopen in the next phase will be able to start making those preparations now. Dialogue and preparation will continue to be vital.

Jackson Carlaw: Everyone is understandably keen for normal life to resume, but the real risk of a phased lockdown, with its many variations, is that it becomes overly complicated and impossible for people to understand what is appropriate or permissible. What role does the First Minister expect Police Scotland to perform at each stage of the exit from lockdown, or will much of the auditing

of business practice fall on local authorities? If that is the case, what assessment has been made of their capacity and resource to manage that process?

The First Minister: Both Police Scotland and local authorities are central to our planning and discussions. Rightly, both take part in the Scottish Government's regular resilience meetings and both make a valuable contribution. Police Scotland will continue to have a role as we go through the phases of lockdown but, as we do that, we will inevitably move from having rules and regulations to having more of what we are asking the public to do contained in guidance. That balance is already there, but it will change as we go through the coming weeks. Therefore, there may be less of what we are asking people to do that is legally enforceable by the police, but it is important that, while there are regulations that are enforceable, the police continue to have an input in advising us on the enforceability of everything that we do. Police Scotland already does that and it will continue to do so.

It is important that the public understand what they are legally required to do and what we are asking them to exercise judgment about. Local authorities have a key part to play, both with businesses and individuals. To take one example, we have been working with local authorities in the past couple of weeks on the reopening of waste and recycling centres, and there will be many other examples where we will be working with them.

There is no risk-free path ahead of us right now—everything that we do and do not do comes with risks. My job as the leader of the Government, and the job of the whole Government and all of society, is to find the best balance in mitigating those risks so that we can get back to normal but without allowing the virus to run riot again, because that will cost more lives. That is not a risk that I am prepared to take.

Jackson Carlaw: I ask that question because employees will want to know what to do if they feel that their place of employment is not safe and will want to have a clear understanding of what their recourse should be if that is the case.

There is a risk that, without a proper testing and tracing plan, we will not get ahead of the virus, and a return to lockdown will then be the consequence. I do not think that, as things stand, the First Minister has yet secured that plan for testing and tracing. We heard this week that the recruitment of contact tracers to achieve the target of 2,000, which the First Minister confirmed in the chamber a fortnight ago, by 1 June, is lagging behind. We know that, even now, actual testing is running at around half of available capacity.

Does the First Minister accept that, for Parliament and the public to have confidence and for Scotland to feel safe as we come out of lockdown, it is essential that the infrastructure for testing and tracing, or test and protect, is in place?

The First Minister: Before I come on to test and protect, I will finish the point about making sure that workers have confidence that workplaces are safe. Police Scotland has been mentioned, but it is also worth mentioning that we will continue to work with the Health and Safety Executive and regulators, where necessary, to provide that assurance. I have been, and will continue to be, cautious and will not move into phase 1 until the end of next week at the earliest, because I want to align our lifting of lockdown with our ability to implement a substantial, significant test and protect operation. We will be able to do that from the end of next week in every health board area in the country.

The plans for that are not lagging behind. They are moving at pace. The health secretary confirmed at the weekend that health boards have already identified 600 individuals who are ready to do that. We will have a capacity of 2000 in place by the end of this month. We have the testing capacity that we need for that. I appreciate that testing is important in every phase, but it is important not to look at the reasons for, the demand for, and the purpose of testing now and equate that with testing in the test and protect phase. They fulfil the same purpose, but they are different phases.

The plans are in place. They will continue to bed down and to develop and they must be flexible, because the number of tests and of contact tracers that we will need will depend on the prevalence of the virus at any time. We must keep it as suppressed as possible. Also, at times when we may see a resurgence, even in local areas, we must have the ability to adapt that capacity to cope. It is a crucial part of what we are doing, but it must sit as part of an overall approach that involves all of us physically distancing and following all other relevant advice.

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): I thank the First Minister for advance sight of her statement.

I begin by restating that Labour wants the Government to succeed in defeating the virus. We want to support the Government to get that right, so we have supported the lockdown and today we support a gradual easing of the restrictions.

However, that must be done as safely as possible. It must follow the science, and it must be done at the right time. We need a national consensus to build public confidence in the plan.

Any decisions to ease restrictions must respond to the facts on the ground.

To achieve that, we need three guarantees. First, the Government should publish the evidence behind the decisions that it has taken and will take in the future. Secondly, we need to see maximum testing capacity and a fully working test, trace and isolate system that is rolled out universally. Thirdly, the Government's strategy must be flexible and able to adapt quickly to changing circumstances. Can the First Minister give us those guarantees?

The First Minister: I can do that in broad terms. We will be scrutinised on the detail and we will develop that in the weeks to come.

I agree that safety, and an approach that is informed by the best science, are vital. We have tried to prioritise that all along. We have built, and will continue to build, a national consensus. If you look at the work that the Deputy First Minister has led to get us to the position on schools that we have set out today, you see that it has had that consensus approach at its heart, and we do not take that for granted. There is a lot of detail to work through. We now have all of the key stakeholders in broad agreement on the direction of travel and the timing. We want to take that approach to every aspect of the crisis.

I turn to Richard Leonard's three asks. On the evidence, I said earlier that we publish all the data. We publish data on a daily basis. This afternoon, we will publish a paper that goes into more detail about how we calculate the R number and the different considerations relating to that. The advisory group that is one source of our advice publishes its minutes on its website. We will always look at how we can be more transparent about the data, evidence and advice that inform our decisions.

Ultimately, however, decisions must be taken. The advisors advise us and we pay close attention to the science, but I, and the whole Government, must make judgments and decisions based on that. We are ultimately accountable for those decisions.

I will not go over all the detail on test, trace and isolate that I covered in my answer to Jackson Carlaw. One reason why I have not wanted to accelerate our speed out of lockdown, and why I have taken a slower and more gradual pace, is that I want to be able to align the steps with test, trace and isolate. We will continue to do that. The roll-out to 14 health boards will coincide with going into phase 1. We will bed that down, develop it and make sure that we have got all the ways in which it works right, and that will align with further phases. It is really important that we have that relationship and that it is tested.

On Richard Leonard's third point, we have to be flexible. There is no alternative to having a plan that can be flexible and adapt. I cannot stand here and rule out to the people of Scotland that, at some point over the next few months, we will have to go back the way, because the virus is unpredictable. We talk about "defeating" it but, until we have a vaccine or an effective treatment, "defeat" is the wrong word to use; we are trying to contain, live with and suppress the virus, and we are using every tool at our disposal to do that. We must be prepared to be flexible, because we know that the virus is flexible and will take every opportunity to spread further. Flexibility will be at the heart of everything that we do.

Richard Leonard: It is clear to my party that we need a plan for the economy. That starts with a plan for a return to work on a sector-by-sector basis that is strategic, thought through and, above all else, safe, rather than there being an arbitrary "If you can't work from home, go out to work" message. As the STUC has said, such a message would be nothing less than "dangerous".

We broadly welcome the Government's approach, but the route map cannot end there, because the truth is that we are facing a massive rise in unemployment and the potential collapse of our town centres. Our night-time economy is going bust and, because young workers are two and a half times more likely to work in shut-down sectors such as hospitality, hotels and non-food retail, we are facing the return of youth unemployment at levels that have not been witnessed for decades. Therefore, for many, an uneasy feeling persists, with people having looming worries about not just present but future job losses.

Will the First Minister work with us, other parties, trade unions and employers to establish a new industrial strategy, a new plan for the economy and a new plan for jobs, including a job guarantee scheme that targets the under-25s, so that we do not see the return of mass unemployment, especially among young people?

The First Minister: I broadly agree with Richard Leonard's questions and certainly with the sentiments behind them. We have a duty to steer the country safely from where we are now to a position in which the economy is operating again, but none of us is under any illusions—I am certainly not—about the damage that has been done by the lockdown restrictions, essential though they were to the economy, or about the action and efforts that will be needed to repair that damage. As we come through the phases, we will be working hard to look at how we do that.

Richard Leonard is right to talk about the risk of unemployment, particularly for certain groups including young people and women, as we spoke about in the chamber yesterday. I spoke about

that briefly the other day when we announced additional funding to support young people in particular back into work when we come through this. These will all be pressing and difficult challenges, but they are vital challenges. We are already working with the STUC and trade unions, and I give a commitment that we will continue to do so and will seek to work with parties across the chamber.

This is one of the things that will be easier for all of us to say than to do, but it is important that we remind ourselves that, although we want to repair the damage and get things back to normal, we must also take care not to simply slip back into old and bad ways of doing things. There are opportunities for change, and all of us want to try to grasp them.

The announcements that I have just made on schools mean that, for a potentially considerable time, parents will have a very difficult balancing act between the need to work and the need to care for children when they are at home rather than in school. That is one reason, but not the only reason, why we have to look at different working patterns. We should no longer only be talking about things such as a four-day week; we should be encouraging employers to look at embracing them. There is a whole range of things that fall into that category.

The Presiding Officer is about to get justifiably irritated by the length of my answer. In short, Richard Leonard is right about this. We will not agree on everything, but I hope that we find the space to work together and find consensus on as much as possible.

Richard Leonard: Yes. People have seen a glimpse of a different kind of future, and there is demand for change.

Let me turn, finally, to the crisis in our care homes. That crisis, the unnecessary deaths in our care homes and the anxiety and fear of their staff have not gone away. As lockdown measures are eased, there is a real risk that they will increase and intensify.

The Government was too slow to take responsibility for care home residents for the first two months of the crisis. Now, as lockdown is lifted, they must be a priority. That is about the protection of their physical health through testing and personal protective equipment but it is also about their mental and emotional wellbeing, which we know will have been damaged by months of fear, isolation and—not least—separation from their families.

As the rest of the country gradually returns to some kind of normality, how will the Government ensure that the rights, wellbeing and dignity of our care home residents are respected and upheld?

The First Minister: Nothing matters more to me than making sure that we protect the health, dignity and rights of everybody in society, particularly those who are most vulnerable. That undoubtedly includes care home residents, and we will continue, each and every step of the way, to take the actions that we think are right and necessary to provide as much protection as possible.

Every single one of us who has been in a position of taking decisions to deal with this crisis will have made mistakes—I have no doubt about that. That is in the nature of dealing with an unprecedented situation—and doing so without the hindsight that many are now trying to apply. The responsibility of dealing with this will certainly bear heavily on me for probably the rest of my life, and I am sure that many people in my position will feel the same.

What I want to make clear is that, at every stage, based on the best information and knowledge that we have, we try to do the right things. In relation to care homes in particular, there will undoubtedly be very legitimate and hard questions for us all to reflect on—that is how we learn. However, some of what people say now fails to take account of the situation that we were dealing with.

For example, I hear people say now that care home residents should not have been discharged from hospital; however, back then, we were waiting for a potential tsunami of coronavirus cases going into our hospitals. If we had not tried to get people who did not medically require to be in hospital out of there, that would also have exposed people to very significant risks. *[Interruption.]* I hear people saying “testing” from a sedentary position, which is, again, legitimate. However, we must remember that our knowledge of the efficacy of testing in asymptomatic people back then was different from what it is now.

The point that I am making is not that there are not legitimate questions—there are, and I ask myself those questions every single day. The point that I am making is that, at every step of the way, we have acted with care and thought and with the best intentions to provide the best protection for everybody, including the most vulnerable. That is what we will continue to do every step of the way.

Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green): I thank the First Minister for advance sight of her statement. I welcome today’s route map, which provides clarity on how we can suppress the virus and lift restrictions, in contrast to the reckless approach taken by the United Kingdom Government, which has eased restrictions in England without a robust test, trace and isolate strategy in place, contradicting World Health Organization guidelines.

Although I of course fully support continuing to follow the scientific advice and staying in lockdown for another week, does the First Minister agree—particularly given the scenes in Portobello in my city of Edinburgh yesterday—that the lockdown is getting harder to sustain? Does she also agree that, if we had been using testing capacity to its full potential throughout the pandemic, we would be better informed about the virus, better able to protect people, and able to move to the test, trace and isolate strategy at a faster pace?

The First Minister: On the first part of Alison Johnstone’s question, I will continue to do what I have tried to do throughout this, which is to resist all and any provocation to be party political about it. I do not think that it is appropriate in these circumstances.

All of us are trying to do the best we can. We will come to different decisions along the way, and I hope that we come to those different decisions for the right reasons. Every leader of every Government anywhere in the world—well, there may be some exceptions to that—is trying to do the best that they possibly can. That is what I will continue to do, as well as keeping politics—as far as possible—completely out of the equation.

We will be debating the issues around testing—what we did and did not do and what we should and should not have done—perfectly legitimately for a long time, and I accept that.

We set out early on the plans to build testing capacity. I remember talking in Parliament at a very early stage about our priorities for testing in this phase, which were to protect the sickest and most vulnerable, to ensure that we tested key workers and to have surveillance and monitoring. We have also set out our plans for test, trace and isolate and will continue to do so. It is really important that those plans are aligned with the steps that we are taking to ease lockdown and with what we have sought to build into the heart of the route map that we published today.

The public have been truly magnificent in how they have complied with the restrictions, and my final point is an appeal to them to continue to do it for a little bit longer. If we see a regression between now and next week, I will not be able to introduce the changes that I have talked about today, and I do not want to be in that position.

I almost felt like crying when I saw the pictures of Portobello beach yesterday. I know why people felt the need to do that and I completely sympathise. However, every time people get together in ways that provide opportunities for this virus, we risk the progress that we have made together. I appeal to people to stick with the restrictions for a bit longer so that we can work

through these phases much quicker and get back to the normality that all of us so badly crave.

Alison Johnstone: The Scottish Government has previously said that it would consider adopting a different approach for different parts of the country, based on current scientific advice and local circumstances. Should it become apparent that there were different levels of infection in different parts of Scotland, can the First Minister confirm whether she would still consider a differential approach to lifting lockdown and moving through the phases that are set out in today's strategy, in close collaboration with local government?

The First Minister: In short, yes. If memory serves me correctly, that point is explicitly made in the strategy document, both in general terms about the speed at which we move through phases and on some particular issues around public transport, for example, where we might require different approaches in different areas for obvious reasons. The evidence might, of course, lead us in that direction.

I have always said that we do not rule out that approach, although we have to balance it with issues of practicality, deliverability, ease of understanding and ability to communicate clear messages. So much of what we are dealing with just now involves difficult balancing acts. We will continue to strike that balance as best we can, and try not to rule anything out that might be helpful at some stage in what we are trying to achieve.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I appreciate the advance copy of the statement and the work that the officials and ministers have invested in creating the plan. The stage that we now enter is probably the most difficult, and we will do everything that we can to help steer us through this period, as we have always sought to do.

I have some practical questions. Phase 3 on schools starts on 11 August; phase 3 in call centres starts in August too. Will that be the start time for all other areas as well? In August, will we be in phase 3 for getting around, seeing family and friends, and for sport and leisure, for instance? It is stated that in phase 3

"pubs and restaurants can open indoor spaces".

Does that mean that they will reopen in August?

The First Minister: That is a valid and important question, which gives me the opportunity to clarify matters, although some of my clarification will take in the flexibility and continued uncertainty around some of the decision making.

Let me be clear that the specific mention of 11 August applies to schools and does not indicate that all of phase 3 will start on that date, because we have to be guided by the evidence and take

decisions as we go. Willie Rennie might understandably be getting at the point that we want to align such things as parents going back to work and kids going back to school, as much as possible—although it might not always be possible—so that we give as much consideration as we can to people's practical ability to live their lives. Even the date of 11 August for schools is subject to the evidence allowing that to happen.

Apart from when we hope to go into phase 1 next week, we cannot give people definite dates right now, and it would be a mistake to do so. That is why the review period of every three weeks at least will be so important, so that we build in as much clarity as possible as we go, as quickly as we can.

Willie Rennie: Therefore, it could be that we are in phase 4 for some areas and in phase 2 for others, depending on what the evidence indicates.

Clarity will be really important, so we will have to work very hard to make sure that the message gets across. The message this week remains "Stay at home". The First Minister has indicated that, in phase 1, the message will be "Stay at home as much as possible". Will that be the message for phases 2, 3 and 4, or will we have different overarching messages for each of those phases? How will that develop? Will we have an opportunity in Parliament to debate the matter, to make sure that we get it right?

Yesterday, I asked about restarting non-urgent healthcare and operations, because a lot of people out there are suffering. I am pleased to see that the plan includes measures to restart some of that. I would like it to be done faster, but perhaps the First Minister can explain why that is not possible.

The First Minister: Willie Rennie is right to say that it is possible—although it is not certain or inevitable—that we might be in different phases for different things. The document is very explicit about that. In all of this, the need for clear public communication will be even more important than it was last time around, and we are very mindful of that.

It is not for me to decide parliamentary business, but I would welcome a debate in the Parliament on the document and how we best pitch the messages going forward. At the moment, through phase 1, the default message is still to stay at home. We have an expanding list of reasons why people can leave home, but that default message to stay at home as much as possible is still important. As we go through the phases, we will keep that under review because it is important that the messages that we are giving people have a relationship to the way in which we are asking and expecting people to live their lives.

Therefore, the input of the Parliament on such considerations would be very welcome.

On healthcare, I want to move faster through every stage if we possibly can, but probably in no area more than in resuming health procedures that have been postponed. We set out a careful, phased way in the document. We have to make sure that we are doing things safely and that, as we resume things, we do not take our eye off the potential need later this year for significant hospital capacity to deal with coronavirus. I am not trying to scare or depress people, but if I have a fear right now, it is that people are starting to think that this is over. Hopefully, this phase is drawing to a close, but the risk of a second wave of the virus later this year is real, and we cannot take our eye off that. Therefore, we need to get the balance right. "Balance" is a word that I use repeatedly at the moment, but we will try to do as much as we can as early as we can, guided always by the science and the different considerations that we have to bear in mind.

Bruce Crawford (Stirling) (SNP): The First Minister will understand that people in some sectors might be frustrated that we have not gone further in easing the lockdown at this time. However, I believe that the vast majority will support the route map as we attempt to save as many lives as possible while navigating Scotland's way out of the grip of Covid-19.

I might be getting ahead of myself, but I want to look further ahead, because we potentially face previously unseen levels of debt and poverty. In response, there will be a requirement for a truly historic and massive increase in public expenditure to help to boost recovery. What plans does the Scottish Government have to discuss that matter with the UK Government? As we all know, the current fiscal arrangements in the UK leave the devolved Governments with very little room for manoeuvre in that regard.

The First Minister: That is a really important question, which will continue to be important. We have good discussions with the UK Government across all aspects of the handling of the crisis. Despite our political disagreements, I would say that it has been a constructive process. I want that to continue, and I hope that it will.

Many of our discussions have been about the initial responses, including on the economy and helping business, but, increasingly, we are seeking to discuss how we respond in the longer term. That will include discussion about how the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government can be better equipped fiscally to deal with the challenges, which is an area that I am sure that every party will want to be involved in.

We must also make sure that, as we come out of the immediate crisis, we—by which I mean all of us, including the UK Government and the Scottish Government—take a very different approach to the one that was pursued after the financial crisis, whereby we treat the debt that has been accumulated through the crisis separately, almost as in wartime, and do not see an austerity approach as being the way to deal with it. That would be a disastrous thing to do, as it was after the financial crisis.

Instead, we must rebuild carefully and must be prepared to think about doing things differently—I have spoken previously in the chamber about my growing support for the concept of a universal basic income. We must think about how we support people, we must get the economy growing again in a sustainable way and we must get our focus firmly back on the need to move to net zero, as was the case before the current crisis. An austerity approach or anything like it would be devastating for all of that, so we must resist it with everything that we have.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): Willie Rennie's first question was timeous, because yesterday Aberdeen was rocked by the news that the Doubletree by Hilton hotel will close immediately, with the loss of all jobs. Difficult trading conditions were cited, which include the current crisis and punitive business rates.

Scotland's tourism industry will have noted that, in phase 2, pubs and restaurants can open outdoor spaces with distancing and hygiene routines in place, but that will take some time. As the First Minister made clear, it will be some time before tourism businesses in general reopen to full capacity, so there is a real risk that many will not survive between now and reopening. Will the First Minister remind the former Hilton employees what support is available? What support can she offer the sector more generally until the lockdown measures allow full operation?

The First Minister: It is important that the support that is now in place for individuals and businesses, which we have warmly welcomed and translated into programmes here in Scotland, continues for as long as is necessary. That includes the job retention scheme and the different grant routes that can help businesses. Over and above that, we will seek to do as much as we can to support the businesses in the sectors that will be hit hardest for longest. We want to support those businesses to restart as safely as possible.

The importance of the tourism sector to Scotland is definitely measured in pounds, but it is also measured in much more than that. It is fundamental to our perception of who we are as a country and to our international standing. Therefore, it is really important that we support the

tourism sector, and it will be vital that, as we move forward, we have tailored programmes of support to help those businesses that will take longer to come out of the current situation.

For employees, whether of the Hilton in Aberdeen or of any business whose workforce faces redundancy, as well as doing everything that we possibly can to avert those situations, our partnership action for continuing employment—PACE—initiative will always work with affected employees to support them into alternative employment as quickly as possible.

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): Parents and teachers will be pleased to have a confirmed date for when they can expect schools to reopen. However, they need the confidence of seeing and understanding the scientific advice and public health modelling that is behind the decision for such reopening. The education framework that was published today refers to specific modelling and advice and draws conclusions from that, but it does not share it. In the interests of the transparency that the First Minister spoke about earlier, will she publish that advice and modelling now?

The First Minister: We do publish the data. I have referred to an additional document that will be published today, which is on how we do the R number. We are putting as much of that information as possible out there, and we will look at what further advice—for example, from the expert advisory group—we can share. However, ultimately, we have to make judgments based on all that advice, and we have to do that in partnership.

The way in which the work on schools has been done—led by the Deputy First Minister—is a template for how we do such work in future. It has been done in a way that will give parents, pupils and teachers confidence, which is particularly important when we are dealing with children. There is lots of commentary and narrative about whether the virus affects children less than it does other people; we do not know for sure whether that is true. There are also worrying reports about Kawasaki syndrome, which seems to affect some children, although we should not yet be overly alarmed about that. We have to be cautious about all this.

To members who say that we should publish more, I ask—this is a genuine invitation—that they look at all the data that we publish, including the further information that we will publish and what the expert advisory group publishes, and then we can work to see whether there is more that we can helpfully put in the public domain.

We are not trying to hide anything, but as this key debate develops right around the UK, we as

accountable politicians have to make our decisions based on the best advice. I am keen to publish as much as possible—I genuinely mean that—but members must understand that the data will only ever take us so far, as the decisions still have to be made.

Shona Robison (Dundee City East) (SNP): The First Minister outlined how a phased return could be achieved in a way that protects people from Covid-19 while ensuring that key justice agencies can function. Will she take us through how the Scottish Government will seek to balance harms, given that we rightly have to strike a balance between the health harms of coronavirus and the social harm that continued lockdown measures could cause?

The First Minister: That is probably the key question, and the key challenge, at the heart of everything that we are doing. In the paper that we published a few weeks ago, “COVID-19—A Framework for Decision Making”, we set out clearly the framework in which we try to take decisions that balance all the harms. We know the harm of the virus—we have seen it day and daily for the past few months—but, increasingly, we have mounting evidence of the harms of the steps that we are taking to combat the virus.

As I keep saying, every choice that we make right now is a difficult choice: when we try to reduce harm in one area, we at least run the risk of it increasing in another area. There is no perfect answer; unfortunately, there is no magic science to tell us exactly how to do this. For all that we still face a risk from the virus, my judgment is that we face mounting risks from what we are doing to deal with it, which is why we have to take the risk of starting to ease the lockdown in a measured and careful way. That will continue.

We will publish, as I think we did at the previous review date, some of the assessments of the different harms that are feeding into the decision-making process.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): What guidance and support will be available from the Scottish Government to prevent the closure of several of Scotland’s outdoor centres? As the First Minister will know only too well, those centres could be so important in fostering the wellbeing of our young people—especially of many in disadvantaged communities—as they come out of lockdown.

The First Minister: We want to enable as many outdoor activities as possible to restart—not just outdoor activities for individuals, but outdoor leisure activities and outdoor sport. The document goes into some detail on that.

For much of the early phase of the work, there is a focus on outdoor activity for a very important and

obvious reason: although we do not have definitive answers on many aspects of the virus, the evidence suggests that the risk of transmission is lower outdoors than it is indoors. We therefore feel more confident in lifting the restriction on outdoor activity. I hope that that will be positive news for outdoor centres, because it offers a route to restarting activity—albeit on a carefully planned basis—and we will continue to support that as much as we can.

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): During phase 3, a blended model of school education is proposed, and is planned for 11 August. When can parents expect to know what their child's school week will look like, in terms of how many days they will attend school? What consideration has been given to school transport needs? Many high schools in my region rely on buses, and social distancing is not possible. Will local authorities be funded to provide additional capacity?

The First Minister: On the first part of Claire Baker's question, parents will be communicated with directly, over the summer, so that there is an understanding of exactly what the school provision will be for their child or children. Again, that is subject to the health advice. Teachers are keen to get back during June, so that they can do the preparatory work that is needed. We will take care that that is communicated clearly to parents and to young people.

Transport is also a very important issue. I mentioned that Michael Matheson will next week set out a transport transition plan. That will cover the totality of public travel and transport; however, as part of those discussions, how children travel to and from school is important, because there will be restrictions on transport, given physical distancing requirements. We also know that some provision of transport has been under pressure because children have not been at school recently. More detail on that will be provided, and we will be working closely with local authorities. Right now, I give the assurance that it is a key part of our thinking, as we work out how in practice children get to school safely—and when I say "safely", I mean in all its different respects.

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): The First Minister highlighted the work that the education recovery group is undertaking regarding the proposals to expand the school estate and the education workforce in preparation for pupils being phased back to school to allow for social distancing and classroom learning to recommence. Can she confirm that schools will not be opened unless and until it is deemed safe to do so and that, in accordance with local circumstances, councils, as education providers, will be best placed to talk about the

physical infrastructure that they have? Can she confirm that, crucially and unlike what has happened in England, the process will be carried out in consultation with teachers, parents, trade unions and other stakeholders?

The First Minister: Yes, I can give assurances on all those issues. We have got to where we are today by working in consultation with teachers, local authorities and parents organisations, and that partnership approach will continue. Keith Brown is right to talk about the lead role of local authorities, particularly in relation to the physical infrastructure in schools, which will have to be adapted to accommodate the model that will be necessary.

I absolutely give an assurance that we will open schools only when we think that it is safe to do so. If we were to take any other approach—although we would not do so because we should never compromise children's safety—we would not persuade parents to send their children back to school. If we are to get children back to school, the Government and local authorities have to do the work that we have to do, teachers have to make the preparations that they have to make and we have to persuade parents and pupils that it is safe to go back, because otherwise the whole thing will not work.

That is why it is important to take a careful, cautious and deliberative approach. Although we all want children back in school as quickly as possible, if that careful, cautious and deliberative approach means that it takes a little longer to give people confidence, that is worth while, rather than try to rush things in a way that does not command the confidence that is required. We will always try to do it in the most careful way possible.

Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con): My question follows on from that previous answer. Parents will understand why schools cannot open this term, but the idea of blended schooling in the autumn term means that parents are likely to have to balance work, childcare and home schooling for months, perhaps until the end of the year. The education framework that has been published today suggests that there were different views among the advisory group about the need for social distancing in schools. Can the First Minister explain the rationale behind the proposed blending of in-school and in-home learning?

The First Minister: Our knowledge and understanding of the virus, not just in the area of education but in all aspects of handling the virus, will undoubtedly develop. However, all the advice that I have access to is strong on the importance of physical distancing. We should be clear about that. There are different approaches in various countries and debates about whether the distance

is 2m, 1.5m or 1m. No doubt, discussions will continue on that between scientists and decision makers for a time to come. However, certainly in my mind, the importance of physical distancing is not in doubt. That creates a range of challenges for us in the school environment and in almost every other environment that we are all used to being in. We have to work through those issues if we are to get back to some kind of normality without taking unnecessary and unacceptable risks with people's health and wellbeing.

I think that people understand this, but it is important to stress that, although we have made huge progress against the virus, it is still there and it will resurge in no time if it finds the bridges between people to jump over. Therefore, all the physical distancing and other measures will be important. They will make life much more challenging for a significant period of time to come, but we have to work through those challenges as best we can and try to do so in a way that maximises convenience, particularly for parents, who will be juggling childcare, home schooling and work potentially for quite some time to come.

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): We are all affected by the virus, but some people are disproportionately affected by it and the restrictions that are in place. With that in mind, how did the Scottish Government ensure that the views and experience of disabled people, carers and black and minority ethnic communities informed the route map, and what steps will the Scottish Government take in future to ensure that any voices that have been excluded will be heard?

The First Minister: Throughout this period, we have tried to be as open and consultative as possible with the population at large and, as Ruth Maguire rightly says, with particular groups in the population. From the publication of the framework for decision making through to today's publication, we have made it clear that fairness, dignity, equality and human rights are key principles that have to underpin our response at all stages. The harms that are caused by the pandemic are, to a greater or lesser extent, being felt by everybody, but they are not being felt equally, and how we respond has to take account of that inequality.

Christina McKelvie has been leading much of our work engaging regularly with organisations that directly represent the voices of some of the most disadvantaged groups in society, including people who have disabilities. We will continue to ensure that that approach is central to everything that we do.

Adam Tomkins (Glasgow) (Con): The First Minister conceded in her statement that lockdown has caused, and is continuing to cause, a number of serious and potentially long-term health harms,

from cancer to mental ill-health. Will the Scottish Government publish its assessment of the adverse public health impact of lockdown, so that we can balance its effect against the undoubted threat of Covid-19?

The First Minister: Perhaps this is a small point, but I do not think that I "conceded" that; I have said it all along, and I think everybody has said it all along. We all understand those differing harms and the need to balance them as best we can. That will be an on-going challenge, not only for Government but for Parliament and society as a whole.

If my memory serves me correctly—and I think it does—we published a document at the time of the last review date, which was two weeks ago, assessing all the different harms, and we will do that at every review date. If Adam Tomkins has not seen that document, I suggest that he has a look at it. If there are more areas of information that he, or any member, thinks it would be helpful for us to include, we are happy to try and accommodate that in future iterations.

Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): Cancer is Scotland's biggest killer and Scotland's cancer organisations are warning that we are at risk of an unprecedented cancer crisis. Some cancer services were struggling pre-Covid-19, due to major staff shortages. However, one of the issues caused by Covid-19 is the pausing of the screening programme. There are 2,000 fewer people being referred for early diagnosis and the sad reality is that many people will die because they were not diagnosed early enough or are not able to access the treatment that they need now. I welcome the route map to normality, but will the Scottish Government install immediate measures so that we can, as best as possible, restore Scotland's cancer services to normality now and help to save lives?

The First Minister: We are doing so, and we will continue to on an on-going basis. At this stage, the route map sets out an assessment of some of the order in which we will seek to do things. Although we will want to accelerate as much of that as possible. The resumption of screening services is in phase 2 right now, but we will look continuously at whether that can be brought forward.

The suspension of screening services was probably one of the most difficult in a panoply of horrible, difficult decisions that we have had to make over the past few months. The judgment that was arrived at was informed by the clinical advice that it was less harmful to suspend appointments than it was to carry on and have people missing appointments because they might have been ill or worried about going to their appointment because of the risk of catching the

virus. If we had done the latter, people would not have been seen until the next time that they were due to be screened in the three or five-year cycle, whereas, if we pause the process, we can pick up as we resume screenings again and nobody will miss out completely. Neither of those options was good, but that was the decision.

However, I want to get those screening services resumed as quickly as possible, as does the health secretary, and we will seek to do it as quickly as possible. We will also continue to talk to cancer organisations about how we mitigate the harm of that, and about other actions that we can take in the short term, and as quickly as possible, to try to deal with extremely serious issues that absolutely none of us is complacent about in any way.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): I rise not only as an MSP but as a dad to two young children. Like many parents, I am terrified of what schooling might be like for children and what impact social distancing could have on their learning and development. That is why I am fully supportive of the measured, cautious and evidence-led approach of this Government. I thank the First Minister and Deputy First Minister for that.

Given the evidence that outdoors is safer than indoors—as the First Minister said—and that being outside and active is beneficial for kids, what steps is the Government taking to increase outdoor education as one in a suite of measures to allow schools to reopen safely?

The First Minister: Before the crisis, we had already been doing work to increase the provision of outdoor education; Maree Todd has been a champion of that in the early years context. We now have not only an opportunity but a necessity to look at doing that even more, within the constraints of the Scottish winter weather with which we are all familiar. It is an important aspect of what we will need to do.

It will be a difficult conundrum to work through, which is why it is important to do it in partnership. None of us wants children to be unsafe at school, but we all want to see children back at school and in a way that allows them to be children. None of us relishes the prospect of kids—particularly, young kids—having to socially distance or to be as aware of the risks as we will require them to be. For children in particular, it is important to get as much normality as possible in the school environment. We should not underestimate the challenges of that, but it is central to all the careful planning that is under way.

Andy Wightman (Lothian) (Green): In her statement, the First Minister talked about the need for the public to “exercise judgment and

responsibility” in the months ahead. As a species, we are instinctively used to handling risks when we travel to work or decide what to eat, and many people are engaged in dangerous activities that involve calculating risks. However, the virus situation is different—many people who have been stuck at home are fearful and overestimate the risks; some are more complacent. What will the Government do to ensure that the public are as knowledgeable as possible about the risks and, importantly, that people can assess and manage them?

The First Minister: Arguably, that is one of the most important questions at the heart of the next phase and the phases that we will go through. Like so many of the questions, there is no easy answer. I will talk about the shielded group briefly before I come on to the more general point. We need to move from asking people to shield themselves completely, to thinking about how society best protects them and allows them, as far as possible, to go about their normal life and make informed decisions. Through the test and protect strategy, testing will be an important part of that. It will also be important to make sure that we give people information about whether there is a higher transmission in their area or community, so that they can adapt their behaviour accordingly. We are thinking through all those important considerations.

That is also true for the general population. Increasingly, this will be about making sure that people understand and equipping them to make decisions about the balance of risk. Over the next couple of months, my biggest worry is that there will be a perception that the virus has gone away and we will slip back into old ways of doing things. None of us will be immune from that, and it will be important to combat it. It will be important to give people the information and tools that they need to make the best decisions and to remind everybody that, more than ever before in our lifetimes, our individual decisions impact on the collective wellbeing. We will try our best to get that right. Government cannot do it alone; in the weeks and months to come, as elected politicians and representatives, we will all have a big role to play.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): The First Minister rightly highlighted the importance of transparency as the Government takes forward its test, trace and isolate strategy. Therefore, will she agree to make publicly available details of the testing that is taking place at a local health board level? That localised detail is already available in relation to confirmed Covid cases and Covid-related deaths. However, without knowing how much testing is taking place, it is impossible for the public to make sense of the information that is published. In the interests of public confidence, will

she agree to publish data on testing at a local health board level?

The First Minister: Yes, I will be happy to look at how we do that; it will be important to do that. I will not give a straightforward commitment, because I will need to discuss the practicalities but, in principle, yes. What will be most important is making sure that people have an understanding of whether transmission of the virus is higher in their area than it might be elsewhere, so that, to go back to Andy Wightman's question, we can equip people with the ability to know what risks they should and should not take. Transparency around that will be important. Once we have had a chance to consider it in more depth, I will come back to Liam McArthur with more detail about the information that we will provide as part of the test and protect strategy.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Given the demographic fragility of Scotland's island and rural populations, health must remain the primary consideration as the lockdown eases. Many holiday home owners are, understandably, champing at the bit to visit their properties, however many of my island constituents feel that unleashing thousands of holiday home owners and day-trippers from mainly urban areas into their communities will undoubtedly carry the risk of local flare-ups of the virus and even potential animosity. There is little support among island residents for visitor restrictions being lifted soon.

What precautions will be taken to protect rural and island communities as the lockdown eases and tourists and second-home owners from across the UK begin to return?

The First Minister: That is where having locally available information will be important. That point links back to the questions from Andy Wightman and Liam McArthur. Fundamentally, my main message right now is that we are still saying to people that they should not travel to rural parts of Scotland—to visit holiday homes or go to places that have fragile infrastructure and health services—because they risk taking the virus with them.

We hope that phase 1 will kick in a week from today and in that phase we envisage people being able to travel more for recreation and leisure. However, in that phase, travel should continue to be within people's own locality, where possible. The document says, as a guide—it is not a prescriptive rule—that people should stay within 5 miles of the locality. That may mean something different in a rural area from what it would in an urban area—it is a guide.

The general principle of people staying within their community and locality is important because,

over the next phase, we do not want to see tourist spots flooded with people out for day trips. I want to be very clear and specific about that. The virus is always looking for bridges to hop across and the more people there are together in crowded places, the more chance that it has of doing that. It is important that people stick to the advice that we are giving, even as that advice evolves through the different phases.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I want to return to Jackson Carlaw's point on transparency. Given the events of the last few weeks and the information relating to the Government's handling of the Nike outbreak in Edinburgh, my constituents are not filled with confidence.

On the radio this morning, the Deputy First Minister said that the Government had recruited 600 people out of its target of 2,000 people by the end of May. How many of those 600 people in the isolate team have been moved from other coronavirus response departments, such as the shielding contact group?

The First Minister: Health boards will be making judgments about what is appropriate; as we go through the different phases, tasks that were being done may no longer be necessary, so people will move. We have given health boards the responsibility in the first instance to look at recruiting staff from their own resources where those individuals can do the job. Although people will need training and guidance, many people will be experienced in this area. The proper checks and so on need to be in place.

In addition, we will recruit people to those roles. We have a live recruitment advert just now and the closing date is 22 May. There will be recruitment from that pool to augment the team. All of that is in place to ensure that we are using the resources at our disposal in the most sensible way.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): The First Minister said that the proposed test and protect system will be available in every Scottish health board from the end of the month. She knows that many of my constituents cross the border every day for work, education, health and leisure. The numbers will rise in the days and weeks ahead. Can she give us an assurance that any interaction that my constituents have with people who live in the north of England who test positive for Covid-19 will be picked up by the test and protect system? Will interactions with people from England who work in Scotland also be picked up, and will that include the technological solutions, meaning that systems and processes on both sides of the border are compatible?

The First Minister: The answer is yes to both those questions, although work is still on-going on the latter question. Public health experts are used

to dealing with infections across borders, which will be particularly important given the geography that Colin Smyth asked about. When a person tests positive on one side of a border, there will be contact tracing on the other side, although a different organisation might do it. Integration and collaboration are important and are already well established when it comes to dealing with such issues.

On the technology—forgive me, as I am not an expert on all the fine details—as I have explained, the Scottish test and protect system will have its own digital system. That will be for use by contact tracers and, as soon as possible, for people to use as a way into the system. It is important that it is integrated with our standing health systems. Work is on-going to do that.

In addition, we have been in discussions with the UK Government about the proximity app, which we want to be able to use. We do not yet know exactly how it is going to be rolled out, but as well as needing to be confident about how the app works, we need to ensure that it is integrated with systems that we use in Scotland. I think—although I might be wrong—that English health trusts will also want to make sure of such integration.

Discussions are on-going, and I am advised that they are progressing well. I will continue to keep members updated.

Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP): This is Scottish learning disabilities week. In England, data from the national learning disabilities mortality review suggests that there is among people with learning disabilities a higher death rate from Covid-19 than there is among people in care homes. Many learning-disabled people live together in supported or residential accommodation, and many have underlying health conditions and require help with personal care. My sister is in that situation.

As is the case for people in care homes, those individuals have had no visitors since the beginning of lockdown, which can be very distressing. It also means that their main risk of catching Covid-19 comes from asymptomatic care workers.

Does Scotland have comparable figures on deaths among learning-disabled people? When will learning-disabled people's care workers be able to access the routine testing that it has been announced this week care home workers will receive? Finally, what consideration will be given to the needs of people with learning disabilities as we move out of lockdown?

The First Minister: Some very important issues are contained in those questions. If I do not cover all the detail in them, I will ask the Cabinet

Secretary for Health and Sport to write to Joan McAlpine with additional detail.

The data that she asks about is not currently collected on death certificates. We are working with National Records of Scotland and the Scottish Learning Disabilities Observatory to ascertain whether the data from death certificates can be linked with census data to give an indication of how many deaths related to Covid-19 have been of people with learning disabilities or autism.

All social care and social work staff who work with vulnerable people in the social care system—in care homes, care at home and children's services including residential and secure care—and social care personal assistants are in priority group 1 for testing. That testing will continue to be routed primarily through NHS testing at local NHS facilities.

We are working with clinical advisers to develop guidance on minimising the distress of testing for people who might be anxious about being tested. We are also very conscious of the need to ensure that appropriate visiting of people is possible, even within the current restrictions.

As I said earlier, I will ask the health secretary to write to Joan McAlpine with additional detail on the key points that she raised in her questions.

Tom Mason (North East Scotland) (Con): The First Minister mentioned a number of non-contact outdoor activities that people will be allowed to pursue. That will be very welcome across Scotland, because it has been most frustrating in the past few weeks being locked down with the weather having been so good.

The First Minister mentioned golf, bowls and fishing, among other activities. I have two questions. First, are only those specific activities allowed, or are they indicators of other sports that could be pursued, because a number of sports, such as croquet, for example, which I have an interest in—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Mr Mason, we heard “croquet” being mentioned. *[Laughter.]* It caused a bit of a reaction in the chamber, and I did not hear the last part of your question. After “croquet”, what did you say?

Tom Mason: I said that I have an interest in croquet. Secondly, I asked whether the operation of sports and activities will be the subject of negotiated regulation or self-application of regulation.

The First Minister: We expect the non-contact outdoor sports that are allowed to recommence to pay due regard to social distancing, physical distancing and public hygiene. An issue that has been raised with me is that, in bowling, for example, the bowls can be picked up by different

people, so people will have to ensure that hygiene is observed. That is not something that can be regulated in every single circumstance, so we are asking people to make sure that they take the proper steps.

On the sports that are mentioned, the list is illustrative, not exhaustive. I am not sure that I am giving an undertaking specifically to add croquet to the published document, although I am open to lobbying on that. I am not sure—although I suspect that my inbox this afternoon will tell me—how many croquet players there are in Scotland, so I had better not say anything that could mistakenly be construed as being insulting to croquet players.

I thank Tom Mason for the question. If there is more detail that I have missed—I did not hear everything that he said—I will be happy to deal with it in writing afterwards.

I do not know whether that was the last question, Presiding Officer. However, just for public information, I point out that I have been told by the Deputy First Minister that the website has had a massive number of visitors to it—understandably, to access the route map document. There have been more than 100,000 visits while we have been in the chamber. I make a plea that the public bear with it; if the website is a bit slow because of demand, they should not give up, because they will be able to access it later on today.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you very much. I thank all members for their participation. I suspend proceedings until half past two, when we will resume with questions on local government and communities.

14:06

Meeting suspended.

14:32

On resuming—

Members' Question Time

Local Government and Communities

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Lewis Macdonald): The next item of business is a members' question time session on local government and communities. This session follows the format that we have used previously only in virtual sessions. If members wish to ask a supplementary to their own question, they should press their request-to-speak button or the online equivalent. Any additional requests to speak will be taken if time permits at the end of the session. As ever, we would appreciate short and succinct questions and answers.

Local Authorities (Income Shortfall)

Bruce Crawford (Stirling) (SNP): In its discussions with local authorities, has the Scottish Government been able to quantify the shortfall in revenue income that councils have suffered as a result of Covid-19 because of facility closures and reductions in fees, charges and so on? Is the cabinet secretary aware that Convention of Scottish Local Authorities leaders have agreed to work on a joint letter to the Chancellor of the Exchequer about the impact of that loss of income? What actions can the Scottish Government take to support local government leaders in their approach to the United Kingdom Government?

The Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government (Aileen Campbell): Ministers are in regular and open dialogue with COSLA on the range of cost pressures that local authorities are facing as a result of the Covid-19 crisis, including the impact of loss of income. Officials have now received COSLA's analysis of the initial additional expenditure and loss-of-income figures for the period from March until the end of June 2020, in which it has estimated the losses of income to authorities.

We will continue to engage with the United Kingdom Government about the funding implications of Covid-19, including its impact on local government, and my colleague Kate Forbes continues to engage with the UK Government, especially on the financial implications of Covid—not just the implications for the Scottish Government but its impact on local government more generally.

We will continue to keep members updated on how those discussions progress, but no one is under any illusion about the fact that this has been

a challenge not just for us but for local government, too.

Bruce Crawford: Does the cabinet secretary agree that those discussions with the Treasury are very important because of the very limited level of fiscal powers that are available to devolved Governments in situations such as this? Does she agree that in this situation, under the fiscal framework, only the UK Government can borrow to support that type of activity and that the Scottish Government cannot?

Aileen Campbell: Absolutely. Nobody is under any illusion about the unprecedented situation in which we and the UK Government find ourselves. That begs the question whether the current fiscal arrangements are suitable to respond to the unprecedented nature of the pandemic.

We want to continue to engage constructively with the UK Government. The First Minister outlined how that constructive engagement with the UK has been critical in enabling us to try to emerge—we hope—from the current restrictions.

We must have discussions about whether the current fiscal arrangements are appropriate for us to ensure that we can protect jobs and our public services, and ensure that we do not revert to the austerity that happened as a result of the financial crisis of 2007-08.

We will continue to engage robustly but constructively with the UK Government, but the situation highlights the shortcomings of the current fiscal arrangements. We want to support people, our economy and our communities as best we can, and that will mean that we will look for borrowing powers.

Construction Works

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): The answer that Bruce Crawford was looking for was £100 million.

My question relates to the route map that the First Minister has just outlined, and specifically to construction. She said that in phase 1, there would be a three-stage restart—stages 0 to 2—for construction. I have just looked that up. It includes the phrase “soft start to site works”. I do not know what that means. Does it mean that the 6,000 homes in Scotland that are nearly complete can be completed? If it does not mean that, what does it mean?

The Minister for Local Government, Housing and Planning (Kevin Stewart): There is a huge amount of detail about the construction restart, the agreements that we have made on safe operating procedures and the phased approach. I will send all that detail to Mr Simpson, because I will not be able to fit it all into my answer.

The First Minister outlined the phased approach today. Working with the construction industry, we have put together a six-phase approach. The first stages, which the First Minister outlined today, mainly enable getting sites into shape to allow for physical distancing and the hygiene that is necessary. We will move forward incrementally at each stage, and we will work with the industry, trade unions and others to ensure that that phased approach is working safely.

I thank the construction industry, trade unions and others who have worked with us to shape how we move forward. I am sure that we will all work in partnership so that those phases ensure that people are safe in their work.

Graham Simpson: I will appreciate the details that the minister has promised. Can he ensure that when construction restarts, it is in alignment with supply chains. There is no point in workers getting back on site if they cannot get things such as windows and doors.

Kevin Stewart: I am well aware of that issue from my discussions with industry. In recent weeks, we have been looking at safe operating procedures and supply chain delivery into sites, to ensure that that is done appropriately and as safely as possible. We will continue to refine those safe operating procedures and the phased approach with the construction industry and trade unions. As I said, I thank everyone who has been involved in this really good piece of work. Everyone is aware that if we are to return to operation, we need to do it safely, to protect people.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before I take the next question, I should mention that Kate Forbes, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance, is online to answer any questions that are specific to her responsibility.

Local Authority Services

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): How is the Scottish Government supporting local authorities to maintain and increase vital services for communities during the Covid-19 outbreak?

The Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government (Aileen Campbell): I continue to engage regularly with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers to ensure that they let us know whether they face any challenges, and I have on-going dialogue with them in response to the pandemic.

In March, we announced £350 million to support communities, the third sector and local government, so that they can respond and support the communities that are the most impacted by the pandemic.

We have on-going discussions with local authorities. In my answer to Bruce Crawford, I mentioned that COSLA has provided its financial analysis of the pressures that it faces. I will continue to engage with COSLA on that matter, to see how we can support one another to ensure that services continue and that they align with the route map that the First Minister published earlier today.

Sarah Boyack: I understand from the City of Edinburgh Council that funding from the Scottish Government has been slow to arrive, which means that the council is 70 per cent short on its spending until the end of June, at a time of huge loss of income from things such as parking and arm's-length external organisations. When will councils receive the support that they need to keep those vital services going? Will they need to rely on reserves until the Scottish Government gets that urgently needed money to them?

Aileen Campbell: In addition to the funding that we have outlined—the £350 million support package that was announced in March, of which £50 million went to local authorities—and the consequentials that have been discussed, we have agreed flexibility for local government. We have replaced £972 million of lost non-domestic rates income with additional revenue grant of the same amount. Following an agreement with COSLA, we are front loading the normal weekly grant payments by £150 million in May, £100 million in June and £50 million in July to ease local authority cash flow problems. We have agreed to a relaxation of some ring fenced budgets to enable greater flexibility in local authority responses.

In addition to the consequentials that we are passing to local government, we have agreed a package of significant measures and flexibilities to support local authorities and ease their cash flow problems.

Renters (Financial Difficulties)

Andy Wightman (Lothian) (Green): In yesterday's debate, Pauline McNeill highlighted that research across the United Kingdom had revealed that

“six out of 10 renters said that they had suffered financially as a result of the UK-wide lockdown. One in five has been forced to choose between food bills and paying rent.”—[*Official Report*, 20 May 2020; c 56.]

In response, Mr Stewart said:

“I assure Ms McNeill and Parliament here and now that we will, as we begin to gather evidence and data on what is going on out there in real folks' lives, be more than willing to share the data with Parliament.”—[*Official Report*, 20 May 2020; c 57.]

When will that evidence and data gathering start and when will it be reported to Parliament?

The Minister for Local Government, Housing and Planning (Kevin Stewart): First, I apologise unreservedly to Mr Wightman for my intemperate remarks and behaviour yesterday. I went too far in the heat of the moment and I will send him a written apology. I want to ensure that we can work across the Parliament in the future to get those things right.

With regard to my remarks to Ms McNeill yesterday, we are more than willing to share with colleagues across the chamber data on what is going on out there as we gather it, in order to see what the exact impacts of Covid-19 have been. We are still in the early stages, so we are not yet able to understand all the impacts across society and it is vital that we look at any analysis as it comes in. For example, we have some work going on that involves a small amount of data collection and analysis to look at how fuel poverty has been affected by Covid-19. As I said, we are more than willing to share that information as we get it.

Andy Wightman: I thank the minister for his answer. I also thank him for his apology, which is accepted in good faith. I look forward to working with him on these important matters.

My question was specifically about the evidence and data on the financial difficulties that renters are facing. The answer implied that a specific exercise was going to be done on that. That is what I am interested in. From the minister's answer yesterday, I presume that no data is currently collected on the financial difficulties that tenants are facing—I would welcome confirmation on that point.

Kevin Stewart: We will enhance data collection as we move forward, without a doubt, and I am grateful to colleagues in housing associations and in councils in particular who are carrying out their own work to look at the impact on tenants in the social sector.

We have a little bit further to go with data collection in the private rented sector, but we will have to collect that data in order to look at all the impacts right across the board. As we receive robust data, I will share that with Parliament so that everybody is aware of the impacts that Covid-19 has had on some of our most vulnerable folk.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We now have a series of questioners who are not present in the Parliament. I remind those without the benefit of eye contact to press their button if they wish to ask a supplementary and I call Liam McArthur.

Local Authorities (Financial Support)

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): Thank you, Presiding Officer. I belatedly welcome you to your post—I was not present when you first took it up.

Can local authorities expect the full £155 million of consequentials and, if so, when?

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Kate Forbes): The short answer is yes, local authorities can expect the full £155 million on top of the money that we have already provided to local government, which takes the total that we are providing to local government in additional funding to £300 million. We will agree with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities on how that money is to be distributed. I recently received a communication from COSLA about distribution and I will ensure that local government gets that money as quickly as possible.

Tenants (Support)

Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): Can the minister provide an update on what the Scottish Government is doing to support tenants who are in need due to the coronavirus crisis?

The Minister for Local Government, Housing and Planning (Kevin Stewart): As I outlined yesterday, the Government has provided £350 million of funding for those in need to cover all aspects of the difficulties that people may be having in their lives.

The key point for renters is that, if they are in difficulties, they should first contact their landlord to see what help can be provided to them and ensure that they are accessing universal credit or housing benefit, if that is what is required. Beyond that, I know that landlords, particularly in the social sector but also in the private rented sector, are discussing with tenants how to manage rent. In some cases, rents have gone down.

As the member is probably aware, we also announced yesterday an additional £5 million for discretionary housing payments, which those folk who are facing severe financial pressure can access.

We have also asked the United Kingdom Government to continue with the changes that it has made to local housing allowances, which have been put in place as a temporary measure, and we will continue to talk to it about how it should change its current welfare reforms, which of course also have a major impact on renters and those who are most vulnerable.

Annabelle Ewing: I welcome the support that the Scottish Government is making available, including the additional £5 million that was announced yesterday for the discretionary housing payment. My concern is to ensure that all tenants in need are aware of the help that they would be entitled to. Is the minister satisfied that there is sufficient signposting to ensure that that information is widely available?

Kevin Stewart: When we announced the no-eviction policy and introduced that legislation, we launched a campaign, mainly on social media but also in other places, to highlight to tenants what they should do and what their rights are. We have also provided money to Citizens Advice Scotland so that it can help those tenants who are most in need. The first campaign reached hundreds of thousands of people throughout the country. It may well be that we have to run it again or, alternatively, look to those in the social and private rented sectors to make tenants aware of their rights. I will reflect on what Ms Ewing said about a further programme of work to highlight those issues. If folks are in difficulty, the key is to contact their landlord.

Weddings

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): As the Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government will be aware, registrars will issue wedding certificates so that people can get married. However, places of worship and most venues and hotels are still closed. Given the First Minister's announcement, when is it likely that weddings will be able to take place, either in a place of worship or a hotel or venue?

The Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government (Aileen Campbell): In many respects, it is very difficult to give a definitive date for when those things can start to happen, but it is clear that the need to make a balanced judgment on the evidence and the continued efforts to suppress the spread of the virus is what is motivating the sequence of those decisions. That is a very difficult and delicate balance and we have articulated that within the document, "Scotland's route map through and out of the crisis", which was published today. We need to think ahead about when we might be able to get to a position when we can open places of worship and other business premises. How those family gatherings can be safely configured also needs to be considered.

Although that does not necessarily give any comfort and there is no definitive date as to when weddings might be able to take place, we are absolutely aware of the need to give people certainty and an understanding of when they can start to plan some of those events. The need to suppress the spread of the pandemic, however, has to govern those decisions. As the First Minister said, we need to make sure that there are no bridges by which the disease can spread. We will continue to work and engage with our faith groups and churches to make sure that they understand what they might need to do so that their congregations can meet safely, when they start to return to their places of worship.

We have engaged with our faith groups to try to find and support other ways by which people can observe their faith and feel that connection, which is so important, particularly when people are in lockdown. We will continue to keep the member and the population informed, but we have to make sure that we are governed by the evidence and the information, that we make a balanced judgment and continue to work with the groups that have an interest in weddings and other celebrations.

Jeremy Balfour: I am sure that the cabinet secretary is aware that weddings and other forms of public worship vary in size and type of service. Will there be a different standard for smaller weddings compared with larger weddings, and will churches and other places of worship be able to open in different ways, depending on how many people attend the venue?

Aileen Campbell: We are continuing to engage with our faith groups. At the start of the pandemic, I endeavoured to call as many of our faith leaders as possible, because we knew that it would have a real impact on the observance of faith. At this point in time, when people are feeling isolated and removed from their family, they will often look to their faith to find some support, but the ability to do so physically is no longer there. Therefore, we have engaged with our faith groups to make sure that we can move forward safely.

Worship and ceremonies are listed in the document that has been published today, but we have to be careful that we do not put people under any increased risk. That is why we will continue to work with our faith leaders in order that they can put in place some of the measures that are necessary for gatherings to happen safely. At the moment, that will not happen any time soon. This afternoon, the First Minister talked about the very gradual easing of restrictions, and when we can do so more generally, we will continue to work with our faith groups in order to move forward safely. We will keep Jeremy Balfour and others informed as the thinking on the issue progresses.

Licensing Alterations

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): Many local food and drink businesses are diversifying to meet the challenges that are presented by Covid-19. Some such businesses want to expand to outdoor spaces to meet social distancing requirements when it is safe for them to do so, and many continue to offer home deliveries of food and alcohol, for which they require licences. Will any of the relevant licensing requirements be altered? Can the Government provide advice for businesses that are in that situation?

The Minister for Local Government, Housing and Planning (Kevin Stewart): The Government

responded quickly to the coronavirus outbreak by providing new discretion and flexibility in the licensing system through provisions in the Coronavirus (Scotland) Act 2020. The changes were warmly welcomed by those in the licensed trade and other licensing stakeholders.

However, it is very important to acknowledge that a licensing regime for the sale of alcohol exists for a reason. As Emma Harper will be aware, Scotland has a challenging relationship with alcohol, and given the dangers of alcohol misuse, it would not be right to simply sweep away the need to license the sale of alcohol. That said, licensing should never be seen as a barrier to those who wish to sell alcohol. The Government expects all 32 licensing boards to have the interests of their communities, including the economic interests of licence holders, at the heart of what they do by ensuring that the licensing regime is operating as fully as possible to aid the recovery from the coronavirus outbreak.

Emma Harper: I will not pursue a supplementary question at this point, because I need to go back to my constituents to find out some further information from them.

Housing Construction

Tom Mason (North East Scotland) (Con): I remind colleagues that I am a councillor in Aberdeen.

A vital element of moving forward from the current pandemic is getting construction sites back to building houses. I am glad that the First Minister made reference to that earlier this afternoon. There have been successes, such as in Aberdeen, where the current administration, in the face of severe budget cuts, is on target to build 10 times as many houses by 2022 as the previous administration did between 2007 and 2012. Will the minister commend that progress and pledge to work with local authorities to ensure that they have the support that is required post Covid-19 to deliver the housing that the country needs?

The Minister for Local Government, Housing and Planning (Kevin Stewart): We were on track to deliver 50,000 affordable homes, including 35,000 for social rent, before coronavirus came into play. Although we will not reach that target, it is my ambition, and the ambition of the Government, to ensure that we deliver as many homes as possible during the current parliamentary session.

In order for us to meet the challenge that we set ourselves, the Government has been reliant on partners in local authorities, housing associations, the construction sector and many others. Many folk have put their heart and soul into delivering what was an ambitious housing programme, and I

know that, like me, they are sorry that we are in the situation in which we find ourselves.

I say to Mr Mason and to folk across the country that, as we relax the lockdown, the Government will continue to work in partnership with everyone to deliver as many affordable homes as possible, because that is what we need in our country.

Housing Allocations

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I want to raise the issue of councils and social landlords not allocating houses. Recently, I contacted the head of housing in Fife, who wrote back to me to say:

“As you will know, the advice from the Government is that people should not be moving house at this time. That is why the Council has suspended normal housing allocations. We are making efforts to allocate properties to homeless households, but this is at a much reduced level to normal.”

When will we start to see the Government working with local authorities to allocate houses, which is crucial? I remind the minister that we were in a housing crisis before Covid-19 came along, so we need to get the housing sector moving again. Is he working with councils so that that can happen?

The Minister for Local Government, Housing and Planning (Kevin Stewart): I am working very closely with local authorities and housing associations so that we get all that absolutely right.

Mr Rowley mentioned the head of housing in Fife, John Mills, who is also the lead in the Association of Local Authority Chief Housing Officers at this time. He is very much involved in the work of the resilience group that is led by the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations about how we move forward on that front.

Mr Rowley is right to point out that allocations are being made to homeless folk, and I am keen to ensure that we can move into housing folk who have been in unsuitable accommodation or even, in some cases, on the streets. With local authorities and housing associations, we have also put in place allocation plans for people—women in particular—who have faced domestic abuse, in order to get that absolutely right.

Mr Rowley is a knowledgeable man, so he will be aware that there are sometimes difficulties with allocations when the right repairs have not been done. That has caused some grief, and we are working our way through the issue in order to get things right.

As the First Minister laid out today, we will have a phased approach to the return. We are very aware of the issues relating to the allocation of

housing, and we will continue to look at when the right time is for a full return to allocations as was.

Alex Rowley: I honestly do not believe that that is good enough. We have to get the housing sector moving, because there is a housing crisis. There are people who have been told that they have been given a tenancy, and there are people who are living in massively overcrowded accommodation or in other unsuitable housing. We have to get the sector moving, otherwise all that we will be doing is stoking up the housing crisis even more.

Today, the First Minister said that sales and so on will come in phase 2, but I do not believe that we can wait until phase 2 for councils to start allocating houses again. Will the minister make that issue a priority and look at how we can move things fairly quickly?

Kevin Stewart: I understand Mr Rowley's frustration about all this, but he will understand that we are dictated to by the virus.

I will add to what I have said previously about getting this right. For example, there have been discussions about how viewings can take place outwith the normal circumstances of someone going into a house with the keys and showing folk around it. The sector is looking at alternatives to its previous ways of working.

However, we must ensure that we get all this absolutely right. That is why I am swift to give Mr Rowley a timescale at this moment. I recognise the difficulties. As every member in the chamber will do, I have constituents who want to make a move, but we must do things at the right time. We will continue to update Parliament on how we can move forward on that front and on the work that we are doing with partners to get everything right.

Furlough (Local Government Fixed-term Contracts)

Gail Ross (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP): What can be done to support local government employees who are coming to the end of fixed-term contracts and will be ineligible for continued furlough after 1 July?

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Kate Forbes): As Gail Ross knows, she has raised an important issue. Those people's employment terms and conditions are obviously a matter for local government. However, I hope that in such cases a local authority would give serious consideration to what further support it can offer to ensure continuity of employment. Some of the challenges in our communities that are putting local government on the front line in providing support will require on-going staffing support. I would be very happy to raise that with the

Convention of Scottish Local Authorities the next time we have a discussion.

Gail Ross: Does the cabinet secretary agree that, given that many of the posts are in vital sectors including care and learning, local authorities should be encouraging more people into those sectors, at this time?

Kate Forbes: I absolutely agree. With the publication today of the route map out of the pandemic, we have seen that there will be a change in need for staffing support in areas of importance for local authorities. In particular, as children start to return to school, additional staff will be needed to support, for example, social distancing within schools. Again, I say that I would be very happy to raise those matters with COSLA the next time we have a discussion.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Edward Mountain. [*Temporary loss of sound*]. In the absence of Mr Mountain—for the moment, at least—we have a perfect opportunity for a delayed supplementary question from Liam McArthur, for Kate Forbes.

Tourism Businesses (Support)

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): Thank you Presiding Officer. I am happy to step back into the breach.

I would welcome a response from the finance secretary on the issue of the many tourism businesses that are unable to access any support because they do not have a business bank account. I know that she has been considering whether local authorities might be able to manage a fund to target funding at those businesses, so I would welcome an update on those discussions.

Kate Forbes: I am mindful of the issue that Liam McArthur raises. There are a lot of tourism businesses in my constituency, many of which do not have business bank accounts. They form one of a number of different groups that, as yet, have not been able to access support. There are others. Yesterday, the issue was raised of market traders, for example, not being able to get help through the non-domestic rates system.

My approach throughout has been to provide funding and then, when there has been criticism or suggestions have been made for improvements, to go away and see whether we can tweak systems or provide additional funding.

The creative, tourism and hospitality enterprises hardship fund and the pivotal enterprise resilience fund have closed, and additional funding was announced yesterday. I am keen that such groups, one of which Liam McArthur just mentioned with regard to business bank accounts, get help.

I strongly suggest that that is not the end of the story; we will work night and day to get further support in place.

Free School Meals (Summer Holidays)

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): Although schools are closed, local authorities are still delivering free school meals programmes, and are often providing direct payments to families. The current funding allocation does not meet the cost of delivering the programmes, and many authorities are noting an increase in uptake.

I understand that local authorities were awarded support from the food fund, but that money has been stretched thin across a number of projects. As we approach the summer holidays, will local authorities be funded to continue free school meals provision throughout July and August to support families? How much of the £70 million food fund has been allocated?

Aileen Campbell: Of the £70 million food fund, we gave local authorities £15 million to cover free school meals programmes, and a further £15 million for other food insecurity issues that they might want to address. That was a £30 million pot. Another £30 million was earmarked for the shielded group, and £10 million has been and continues to be used to respond to other food insecurity issues, including awards of funding to FareShare, Social Bite and other groups and organisations that support vulnerable and marginalised people.

The funding lasts until June, which means that we will need to start engaging again on how we will support families over the summer holidays. I am being up front in saying that that will be a challenge, because there are now more people on universal credit. We will need to ensure that food insecurity does not drop off our radar, because there are more people on universal credit, there are more families who will require support over the summer months and, in general, there are more people with stretched finances. We will continue to engage with local authorities, and I will continue to have discussions about the matter with my Cabinet colleagues.

There will be more issues if people have to stay at home for longer over the course of the year, due to the test, trace and isolate approach. We are having to think through a wide gamut of food insecurity issues.

Good work is happening in communities, and lots of groups and organisations are providing support. Forby the food fund, there have been awards of support to local organisations through the supporting communities and wellbeing funds, which are supporting food insecurity projects around the country.

It is not just the £70 million fund that is delivering food projects; the whole £350 million fund is supporting hard-pressed families. Additionally, there has been a doubling of the Scottish welfare fund, which is a crucial piece of financial assistance to families. That links back to our cash-first approach, under which families have the autonomy and agency to make their own decisions, which provides dignity.

Claire Baker: A lot of local authorities are delivering free school meals provision as a direct payment—on average, about £10 a week—as part of the cash-first policy.

I hope that the cabinet secretary recognises that some local authorities, including Fife Council, ran their own school meals projects last summer, which were extremely valuable to families. This year, there will be a shorter summer break of about five and a half to six weeks, so perhaps some additional money could be found to provide support to families.

Aileen Campbell: Absolutely—and our engagement with local authorities will continue. I have visited Fife and a number of other council areas during summer and other holiday times when it is challenging for families whose resources are stretched.

That is why we moved swiftly to provide financial support to communities, local authorities and the third sector, and it is why we doubled the Scottish welfare fund and issued guidance to local authorities to make sure that they take the cash-first approach. We continue to think about how, once the restrictions start to ease, we will move into a different phase of providing support in respect of food, and how best, along with local authorities, to use resources in order to protect families that continue to require support.

Church Halls (Small Business Grants)

Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP): I have been approached by a church hall in my constituency, which expected to benefit from the extension to charities of the small business grant. However, the local council has refused the grant to the church hall because the rates relief that it receives is based on a church exemption rather than on charity relief. That has happened despite church halls being included in the list of premises that pass the relief test in Kate Forbes' circular to councils of 30 March. Is the Government aware of that anomaly? If so, how can it be addressed?

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Kate Forbes): I thank Joan McAlpine for that question. What she described sounds like strange decision. I would appreciate further information, and will look into the matter with the local authority.

Our commitment is to provide as much support as possible to charities; that includes churches. That is why we extended the small business grant to include those that were eligible for charitable relief rather than the small business bonus. We backed that up with £30 million. There is also the third sector resilience fund.

However, Joan McAlpine's question is about a church hall having not received funding. I continue to review the support measures that are in place to ensure that we do everything that we can to provide support, and I am keen to look into that anomaly. We have tried to fix as many emerging anomalies as possible.

Joan McAlpine: I thank the cabinet secretary very much for that answer. The council in question is Dumfries and Galloway Council. I will write to her, and would appreciate her taking the matter up with the council.

Delayed Discharge (Care Home Capacity)

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): [*Temporary loss of sound.*]—understand what is happening in relation to delayed discharge. Prior to the Covid-19 crisis, we had record delayed discharge; in March, 1,000 people were discharged into care homes and council services. I am trying to understand where the capacity came from for those people to go to. Was the capacity always there or was the capacity found through additional money?

The Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government (Aileen Campbell): I understand that it is appropriate to raise those issues when members get the chance. If Neil Findlay's questions have not already been answered by the First Minister or the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport, I will make sure that he gets the responses that he requires.

The decisions and rationale were to ensure that the national health service was not overwhelmed by the virus, and they were guided by the best possible advice. Some of that does not sit within my portfolio, but I will make sure that Neil Findlay gets the responses that he wants if he feels that his questions were not answered when he asked them in the past.

Small Business Bank Accounts

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I turn to a point that was raised by Liam McArthur and that I have raised before in the chamber—the issue of business bank accounts and why small businesses do not need them. The Cabinet Secretary for Finance will remember that I raised the matter with her. I also raised it with the First Minister, who agreed that she would ask the cabinet secretary to look at it. After that, the

cabinet secretary wrote to me, saying that there was no way that she would change the criteria. Small businesses are advised by their banks not to have business bank accounts, and Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs does not require them; now, they have been left out in the cold. They need more help than just an assurance that the cabinet secretary will tweak the criteria. Will she give small businesses an assurance today that she will help them?

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Kate Forbes): My assurance to every business is that we will look at how we can help it. Edward Mountain will know from my letter that I am very clear that we must balance the challenges around fraud with ensuring that the hurdles that businesses have to leap over in order to get support are minimal. The creative fund was intended to quantify hardship and understand the need as well as ensure that the money was going to genuine businesses.

I recognise that, with a large group of different businesses, from photographers all the way through to bed and breakfasts, it is very hard to get eligibility criteria that work for everyone. That is why I said to Liam McArthur that I am very aware of the groups that still have not had support, including market traders, B and Bs without business bank accounts and a number of others—it is probable that the constituents who are writing to him are the same ones who are writing to me. The work to get support to those groups has not stopped. I will continue to do that work and ensure that the eligibility criteria are such that they do not exclude people without good reason.

Edward Mountain: In her letter, the cabinet secretary said that the reason for the business bank account requirement was the prevention of fraud, but that is not a requirement that HMRC demands of those businesses in order that they pay tax. HMRC is very happy to accept tax from those businesses, but the cabinet secretary is not happy to give them the grant, because they do not have the right bank account. I urge the cabinet secretary again to do more than simply offer a tweak. Those businesses are feeling really hurt, and I urge her to help them.

Kate Forbes: I recognise that those businesses need support, but I encourage Edward Mountain to recognise that, in providing those forms of support, it is not good enough to just say that there are no eligibility criteria. We must have the right eligibility criteria.

The member talks about HMRC, but that demonstrates my point. Our schemes are not based on the tax system, because HMRC is reserved to the UK Government. If the UK Government were to establish a scheme linked to HMRC, it would probably allow money to go out

faster. However, I am not going to wait for the UK Government to do that. I want to get support to those businesses, and I will ensure that as many businesses as possible get support. We must do that in such a way that we manage our public finances wisely, although I recognise the hardship.

I commend Edward Mountain for raising the issue—it is not the first time that he has raised it. We will try to get the support to those businesses, but we must do that in a sensible way, and we must prudently manage our public funding to ensure that it goes to the businesses that need it.

15:23

Meeting suspended.

15:24

On resuming—

Urgent Question

Untested Patients in Care Homes (Inverclyde)

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to reports that the health secretary authorised the purchase of 50 beds in order to move untested patients into 10 care homes in Inverclyde, which has the highest Covid-19 death rate in Scotland; how many of these homes have experienced a subsequent outbreak of the virus, and how many deaths there have been.

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Jeane Freeman): As part of our planning for Covid-19, we asked all health boards and, jointly with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, all health and social care partnerships, for their mobilisation plans in order to make sure that we were ready for the worst-case scenarios that were being suggested by the scientific advisory group for emergencies and the associated modelling. Our plan was to create a capacity in the health service of 3,000 beds and to double the number of intensive care unit beds at that time.

Inverclyde regularly has the lowest levels of delayed discharges anywhere in the country, but the health and social care partnership anticipated more people coming through the system more quickly, with high levels of care and support needs. As part of its advance planning, Inverclyde secured an additional 50 care home places to be called upon if required. Forty places have been used to date, covering eight care homes. There are 14 care homes in Inverclyde and the total number of deaths in those 14 homes is 35. As part of the Scottish Government's commitment to testing, all the homes will have been fully tested by this coming Monday 25 May. To date, my understanding is that three staff have tested positive.

With regard to the number of those eight homes that have experienced one or more Covid-19 case, I apologise to Neil Bibby that, in the time available, I have not been able to get robust data on that. However, I commit to writing to him very shortly, as soon as I have the data, so that he will have that additional answer to his question.

Neil Bibby: It is vital that the full facts about outcomes of Scottish Government decisions are in the public domain, and I look forward to receiving that further information from the health secretary. It is particularly important given that there has been some confusion about figures in answers that ministers have given in recent days. It has at times appeared that ministers have tried to avoid

giving figures or have been unclear about what the accurate figures are. No one questions that ministers believe that they have acted with the best of intentions, but does the health secretary regret authorising the purchase of beds for hospital patients in unprepared care homes without testing, and does she believe that that and the known problems with personal protective equipment were likely contributory factors to the failure to protect care home residents in Inverclyde and West Scotland?

Jeane Freeman: I will make a number of points in response to that supplementary question. I am grateful to Mr Bibby for his question and for the way in which he asked it. Those were decisions that I made, but they were made on the basis of the plans that local health and social care partnerships had come forward with, because they know their areas best. All those health and social care partnerships anticipated what they believed would be the demand coming in their direction at that time and what they thought they needed to do in order to best meet it. I am not trying to absolve myself of accountability. I signed off on those final plans—absolutely—but they came from those partnerships, which of course involve both health and local government.

With regard to whether those patients should have gone into care homes, or indeed their own homes, in the absence of testing, I think that I have said before that I am sure that, as we look back we will think that there are many decisions that we would perhaps have made differently, if we had known at the time what we know now about the nature of the virus, the way in which it transmits itself and so on.

At that point, as I am sure the member recalls, not least from the four nation plan that was published, we were facing what we anticipated to be a significant surge in demand on our health service. In order to ensure that we minimised the number of deaths there, we took a number of decisions to protect capacity for that health service. As it has turned out, largely on the basis of how the public responded to the restrictions that we asked them to abide by, we have fortunately not reached a position where that full capacity has ever been used.

In our care homes, testing is not the only precautionary measure in terms of controlling the introduction and the spread of the virus. All our care homes should have proper infection prevention and control for previous infectious diseases, such as winter vomiting and flu—the member will know them as well as I do. Infection prevention and control and adequate PPE—including knowing how to use it, with proper training given to support staff—are critical.

As Neil Bibby will recall, when private and public care homes' own PPE supply chains became disrupted, the Government stepped in to ensure that PPE was supplied to care homes in Inverclyde, as elsewhere.

Neil Bibby: I thank the health secretary for that further answer. As I said before, it is vital that we have the full facts about the outcomes of Scottish Government decisions. Almost 1,000 patients across Scotland now appear to have been discharged from hospitals to unprepared care homes without testing—that we know about.

Has the cabinet secretary seen or asked for, and will she publish, any report that details the specific homes across Scotland that received such patients and that went on to experience a Covid-19 outbreak, as well as the number of residents and staff who became ill, tested positive or died in each case? In addition, were new care home units established for that purpose?

Jeane Freeman: I share with Mr Bibby the desire that there is as much transparency as possible and that accurate information is given to members. As I hope he knows, this morning, I wrote to his party leader and others to clarify things to address some of the concerns that have been raised around that matter in recent days.

In relation to the information that he asked whether I will publish, I commit to go away and look at that in detail, to publish as much of the robust data as I believe we can, and to advise him and other members of my response to that particular part of his question.

The only caveat that I add is that I have a little anxiety around the idea of naming specific care homes. I need to take advice on whether naming particular care homes to which there has perhaps been only one admission from hospital means that there is any risk of identifying that individual.

As I said, I will take advice on that and, in as much as I can do so, I will publish the response to Neil Bibby's questions. I will certainly write to him to let him know whether I believe that I can answer all those questions and publish all that information, or whether there are areas where I do not think that I can produce that information, with an explanation of the reasons for that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): I would like to be able to call all the members who have requested to ask a question. I therefore ask for more succinct questions and answers, in which case I may well be able to do so.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): The cabinet secretary highlighted the importance of effective prevention and control measures in care homes and hospitals to ensure

the clampdown on Covid-19 and to protect lives. I would be grateful if the cabinet secretary could set out what steps the Scottish Government has taken to support those integral activities in the 14 care homes in Inverclyde, and across Scotland.

Jeane Freeman: As I hope that Stuart McMillan and colleagues know, we first issued guidance to care homes on 13 March, which was subsequently updated. Part of that guidance states, as we have always said, that the critical steps that need to be taken absolutely include quality infection prevention and control measures alongside the appropriate use of PPE for any particular setting. That guidance also asked care homes to reduce significantly the amount of communal activity—including communal dining—and to reduce visiting, with one or two exceptions around palliative care and support where it is needed for residents with dementia.

Since then, as I hope that Stuart McMillan knows, we have charged our directors of public health, who are working with our board directors of nursing and medical directors, to directly engage and work with every care home in their area to assess the levels, extent and effectiveness of infection prevention and control and to provide additional support if that is required; to ensure that staffing levels are as they need to be and, if they are not, to ensure that we can provide additional NHS staff to those areas if employers have not taken staff from our returners portal; and to make sure that there is direct clinical engagement from local primary care practices and general practitioners.

As I believe the member also knows, the Care Inspectorate has taken the decision to provide direct inspections of care homes, working on the basis of the red, amber or green status that it gave the homes in previous inspection reports.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): It has taken 10 weeks for the cabinet secretary to provide the most basic information on when, from where and to what setting almost 1,000 hospital patients were discharged, and the information that she provided to me on Tuesday was inaccurate. The Scottish Government still has not revealed how many patients were discharged over the whole of April to care homes from a hospital setting. Families want answers. This is a matter of competence, honesty and transparency, and the cabinet secretary has failed on all three. Given all that we now know, does the cabinet secretary not realise that she has lost the confidence of the public?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before we go any further, I say to the chamber that I expect courtesy at all times. There is certain language that I think we all recognise as being very discourteous, and perhaps all members should reflect on that. [*Interruption.*] I ask everyone in the

chamber to please be quiet. I think that I have made the position very clear. I will be listening carefully from now on. I ask everyone to reflect on how they are dealing with certain issues and to do what most people would believe to be the right thing.

Jeane Freeman: With regard to what I said on Tuesday and subsequently, as Mr Briggs knows, I have written to his party leader, Jackson Carlaw, and I believe that a copy of that letter has gone to Mr Briggs. It sets out the factually correct position and apologises for any mistake that I made in the language that I used in the chamber. I have also written to the Presiding Officer with that apology and asked for the record to be corrected.

The April figures will be published once we have gone through the proper process of assuring their accuracy for all the partnership areas and all our hospital settings. As soon as they are published, Mr Briggs will be able to see them.

On whether the public has confidence in the job that I am doing, that is, in my view, for the public to decide. I am focused on doing what I believe to be the right thing: making the right decisions based on the information that I have at the time that I have to make them. That does not mean—and I would never claim—that there might be decisions that have been made that would have been different had I had the information then that I have now. However, I do not think that there can be any doubt about the focus that I am giving to the job that I have to do, or about my intent to get it as right at the time as it is possible to do.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Briggs, you might wish to take the opportunity to accept the apology.

Miles Briggs: In this whole debate, members across the chamber are doing our utmost to—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Briggs, I asked you whether you wish to take the opportunity to accept the apology. If you do not wish to take that opportunity—

Miles Briggs: Yes, I do, Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you very much.

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): The cabinet secretary is more than aware that bed blocking occurs because there is no care home place or home care package available to people who are in hospital. In the past year, we have had record delayed discharges because of that.

However, in March, 1,000 untested people were discharged from hospital to care home places or home care. I am trying to understand and get my head around how we were able to find those additional 1,000 places. Was that capacity always

there, or was extra capacity suddenly built, or were jobs created overnight, with additional funding? If the capacity was always there, were people kept in hospital not because there was no care home place or home care available but simply because local government and integration joint boards have been underfunded?

Jeane Freeman: There were two primary reasons for the improvement in reducing the number of delayed discharges. At least one of those reasons is reflected in our health service, where we have secured improvements, for example in the use of digital technology, in a shorter period than we had been able to manage up to the point when we were charged with dealing with the pandemic.

Regarding one improvement, there has always been a minimum-to-zero level of delayed discharges in some of our partnership areas. In fact, Inverclyde was one of those areas. Those partnership areas had adopted particular aspects of practice that involved planning for discharge at the point of admission and ensuring that any care package that was needed—if one was needed—was available to the individual at the point when they were clinically fit to leave the hospital setting.

That spread of practice was secured much more quickly by all the partnership areas through an absolute focus on that being what we needed them to do. As I know the member is well aware, having people stay longer in the hospital setting than their treatment requires risks causing them harm. For some time, all of us in the Parliament have shared a desire to achieve a reduction in the number of delayed discharges, and the position was achieved partly through that focus of effort, with the spreading and uptake of good practice.

Additional funding was made available to partnership areas to ensure that existing social care packages were not depleted. The member will have heard me speak about my concern regarding some areas where that happened, without, I believe, good reason.

It has also been a matter of meeting additional demand for support at home for short or long periods. Further, in some cases, intermediate step-down beds were created, sometimes in a care home and sometimes elsewhere in more of a community setting, in addition to care homes places.

There were a number of reasons why that position was achieved. As we look back over the journey of dealing with the pandemic and as we consider what improvements we would want to make and what lessons we would want to learn, we will conclude that some of them will be improvements that we want to continue into the future.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western)

(LD): Minutes of the Covid-19 advisory group meeting that was held on 2 April record a number of priorities, but two stand out. One was to understand the problem of virus transmission in hospitals, and the second was to support the mobilisation of patients from those same hospitals into social care. It seems that the group could not understand how the virus was spreading in hospitals, yet it still sent more than 1,000 patients into care homes without a Covid test.

We know that those homes were raising concerns about PPE and access to testing at the time, so what risk assessment was made prior to that mass movement of patients? If one exists, will the cabinet secretary now publish it?

Jeane Freeman: By 2 April we had already set up the additional support to provide PPE to social care, and to the care home sector in particular. That support was active by that date to ensure that there was appropriate PPE, and an appropriate level of PPE, in care homes as elsewhere.

Guidance is clear that individual risk assessments are undertaken for the discharge of elderly patients from hospital—whether or not they were in hospital because of Covid-19—that look at the appropriate support that they need and the appropriate place to which they should be discharged. Those individual risk assessments are part of the work that is undertaken. It is not possible to publish individual risk assessments; however, risk assessments have always been undertaken when discharging from hospital patients who require additional support, be that for a short period or a longer period.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I apologise to Angela Constance, Jamie Halcro Johnston and George Adam for being unable to take their questions.

Decision Time

15:45

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): There are no decisions to be taken, so I close the meeting.

Meeting closed at 15:45.

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