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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 28 May 2020

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

Portfolio Question Time

Education and Skills

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Lewis Macdonald): Good afternoon, and welcome to this virtual meeting of the Scottish Parliament. The first item of business is portfolio questions on education and skills. In order to get in as many members as possible, I would prefer short and succinct questions, and answers to match. If a member wishes to request a supplementary question other than on their own question, they should indicate that in the chat function by entering the letter R during the relevant question.

Scottish Qualifications Authority (Grading Proposals)

1. **Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the concerns of the Equality and Human Rights Commission that the SQA's proposals for grading this year's qualifications may not be compliant with the Equality Act 2010. (S5O-04340)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): Presiding Officer, I begin by welcoming you to your post. This is the first occasion on which I have had the opportunity to do so.

The chief examiner has set out that fairness is one of the three core principles upon which the Scottish Qualifications Authority is approaching the awarding of qualifications this year, and the Scottish Government would expect that to be the case.

The Scottish Qualifications Authority will meet its public sector duty under the equality legislation on its approach to certification, including publication of the equality impact assessment, as confirmed by the chief examiner in her written response to the Education and Skills Committee of 21 May 2020.

Patrick Harvie: I am pleased that a commitment has been made to taking further action. The cabinet secretary will be aware of the Equality and Human Rights Commission's submission to another parliamentary inquiry, in which it said:

"we remain concerned that SQA have been unable to demonstrate that they have considered any equality issues

in their work in this area, or that they have met their legal duties in this regard."

Is the cabinet secretary telling us that the Equality and Human Rights Commission has given an assurance that its concerns have been fully addressed and that legal compliance has been achieved? If not, does he acknowledge that there is a risk that we will send a signal to young people that their individual abilities will be considered less important than the political objective of creating the appearance of an average set of exam results? What would he say to any young person whose teacher believed that they should pass but who is given a fail by the SQA this August?

John Swinney: First, I must make it clear that I cannot speak on behalf of the Equality and Human Rights Commission; the commission must speak for itself. What I can represent to Parliament is the fact that the SQA has a legal duty to undertake the appropriate equality impact assessment, and that that will be undertaken. The SQA has committed to undertake that work as it develops the model for certification. As I indicated in my previous answer, fairness will be at the heart of that process.

I say to young people that I acknowledge the uncertainty and the difficulty that the current environment poses for them. Those circumstances are not of their making. The SQA will make sure that the quality of certification around the country meets the standards that we would all expect so that there is consistency across the country. I am grateful to members of the teaching profession for the work that they are doing to make sure that the SQA has the information on teachers' judgments that will enable it to arrive at that position.

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): The SQA has said that it will publish its moderation scheme only on the day that the results are published. Does the cabinet secretary think that that is acceptable?

John Swinney: I think that that is the only appropriate time at which the moderation process can be published, because it must be published once the exam diet and the certification process have been completed and the results have been published.

Mr Gray will be aware that an appeals process is available for pupils within the SQA examination process. Schools will be able to make appeals on behalf of young people where they believe that the appropriate certification has not been undertaken, and that service will be free for all pupils who are put forward for an appeal.

Covid-19 Education Recovery Group

2. **Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the work of the Covid-19 education recovery group. (S5O-04341)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): The education recovery group has met regularly in recent weeks to discuss a range of issues regarding continuity of learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. Minutes of those meetings are routinely published online. The group provided advice on the strategic framework that sets out how a phased reopening of schools and early learning and childcare settings will be implemented. That document was published on Thursday 21 May and I provided a statement to Parliament on Tuesday of this week to highlight the work in more detail, including the move towards a blended model of learning.

Beatrice Wishart: I am worried about how we will avoid conflicts between the needs of businesses and the needs of parents. If pupils return to school part time in August but their parents are asked to be back at work full time, how will they be covered for childcare? What will happen if it is impossible for someone to work from home but their child is learning at home for a few days? Will any further provision be available during the period of blended learning? If so, who will pick up the cost?

John Swinney: We are operating in extraordinary circumstances, and the plans for the delivery of a blended learning model take into account the public health requirements, which are inescapable in relation to the necessity for physical distancing in schools. As we have set out in the framework and the route map, across a range of sectors, there must be an adaptation to the new environment in which we are operating. For many parts of the different phases of the route map, that will involve individuals carrying out work from home and employers undertaking the necessary changes to their working practices to enable that to happen.

Education is not the only aspect of our society that will be delivered in a different fashion. The world of work will be different, too. The economy secretary and I—and, through dialogue with the economy secretary, the business community—are involved in regular discussions about how that relationship between education and business can be fostered in a way that adapts to the unprecedented circumstances.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): The Government's top-line message today is that childminding and some nursery services may resume as early as next week, but the feedback that I am getting is that many people are still in the dark about the specifics of that. Yesterday, the Care Inspectorate published a note that says that it is still waiting for Government guidance. Parents simply need to know whether they will be able to go back to work next Wednesday. Could the

guidance for the sector be published as early as tomorrow, rather than next week, in order to give parents and childminders enough time to plan ahead?

John Swinney: The guidance can only be published next week. Work is under way to complete it. We are working to finalise the guidance on access to schooling to enable the development of the models for schooling to be undertaken. I give an assurance that the material will be available next week to enable an early start to the childminding activities that are envisaged in phase 1, as mentioned in the announcements that have been made today.

Schools (Social Distancing)

3. Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government how social distancing might be maintained should schools be reopened. (S5O-04342)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): Through the work of the education recovery group, we will publish detailed guidance this week on how and what physical distancing measures should be implemented for a phased return to schools in August.

Murdo Fraser: The Scottish Government has said that it will be unrealistic to expect the very youngest children to be socially distanced at school, but there must also be a concern for older pupils. They might be able to be socially distanced in the classroom, but can that be maintained in common areas at lunch time, for example, or in corridors, toilets or the playground? In addition, what will happen with school transport? In many rural areas, children are transported to school by bus, minibus or taxi.

John Swinney: Murdo Fraser raises a number of scenarios, and of course the answer in each scenario will be slightly different. Under the public health advice that is available to us, a very different approach is taken when young people are outdoors compared to when they are indoors. The situation will vary from scenario to scenario.

It is essential that schools explore with local authorities the necessary arrangements that must be put in place to safely transport pupils to school. In a blended learning model, not all the pupils who would ordinarily be transported to school will be transported on a daily basis, because not all children will be attending school every day.

Schools and local authorities will put in place detailed arrangements. There is obviously a multiplicity of scenarios around the country, which is why the Government and the education recovery group opted to produce a strategic framework that gives sufficient guidance on the

principles that should be applied and leaves it to schools and local authorities to make and put in place the appropriate local plans to meet the needs of individual learners.

Colleges (Covid-19 Support)

4. Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on how it is helping colleges and their students to deal with the Covid-19 outbreak and to prepare for economic recovery. (S5O-04343)

The Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science (Richard Lochhead): The Scottish Government recognises that this is a very anxious time for students, and we are working closely with colleges and student bodies to support the sector. Our student support action plan, which we launched in April, provides emergency funding of £5 million for students who are in hardship across further and higher education.

The Scottish Funding Council and the Student Awards Agency Scotland have also issued guidance to colleges saying that they can use discretionary funds to cover necessary infrastructure and equipment costs for students who might otherwise be unable to continue their studies remotely.

Joan McAlpine: I recently met senior management from Dumfries and Galloway College, which is in my constituency. I know that the minister visited the college before the pandemic broke out, and he will be aware that it is very well placed to deliver virtual learning. Can he give us an idea of what kind of support the college will have for that? The college's senior management has emphasised that many of the college's students need laptops. They are used to working with phones, but students really need laptops for virtual learning. What support can be given there?

Finally, has thought been given to how colleges can help workplaces to design courses that show how to safely social distance in the workplace?

Richard Lochhead: Given the rural areas that it covers, Dumfries and Galloway College is in the vanguard of Scotland's colleges in terms of introducing remote learning. It has had a lot of really good experience that it can pass on to other colleges.

The Government is paying close attention to digital exclusion and how we can help vulnerable families. We are working with students, the Scottish Funding Council and Colleges Scotland to see what more we can do to ensure that students have access to connectivity and appropriate equipment.

Discretionary funds are being used to provide laptops to students who need them; I know that Moray College issued 50 laptops to students who had no other means of accessing remote learning and teaching.

We are paying very close attention to the issue and we are looking at what further measures we can introduce to ensure that students have the necessary equipment. I am also meeting broadband, data and telecommunications companies to see what they can do to help our students with connectivity and costs.

Further Education (Covid-19 Support)

5. Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what support it will provide to the further education sector to help to develop the skills of people whose employment has been impacted by the Covid-19 outbreak. (S5O-04344)

The Minister for Business, Fair Work and Skills (Jamie Hepburn): The Scottish Government is actively working with the college sector and its agencies to respond to the skills needs of those who are affected by Covid-19. That includes provision of additional hardship funding for existing further education learners; an investment of £5 million for our most vulnerable families to tackle digital access and connectivity issues; the launch of free-to-access online learning materials that are linked to a new helpline that is provided by Skills Development Scotland for those who are furloughed or unemployed; and work to ensure that colleges are best placed to deliver the retraining that many people will need, as part of Scotland's economic recovery.

Alex Rowley: I do not know about Mr Hepburn, but I am very worried about how we will move forward, and about the level of job losses that we will have. Going into next year, we could end up with unemployment levels the likes of which we have not seen for generations.

What planning is being done? Is a skills audit being done? Are industries or areas of the economy that will not get back to work soon, areas that will have high levels of unemployment, and the creation of opportunities for training and reskilling, all being considered? Are we trying to get ahead of the curve? Are all those areas being looked at in consideration of how we will tackle the economic crisis that is fast heading our way?

Jamie Hepburn: I share the concerns that Mr Rowley has laid out. I think that we all recognise that we do not yet know precisely what the scale of the economic downturn will be, but we expect a likely negative impact on unemployment. I think that that impact is likely to be more severe than any we have seen for some time.

Accordingly, we have started a range of planning for how the entirety of our skills system can respond to the challenge. We recognise that we will have to support people to gain the skills that they will require to get back into the labour market as quickly as possible. To that end, the Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills and I have had conversations on the issue with Skills Development Scotland. With Nora Senior of the Enterprise and Skills Strategic Board, in conjunction with the chair of Skills Development Scotland, Frank Mitchell, we are undertaking work on what we need to do further to support economic recovery and retraining, and we have engaged directly with the principals of Scotland's colleges to understand what more might require to be done.

I am confident that we have a strong foundation on which to build. We have a good education and skills system, which will help us to recover, but there is lots of work to be done. Mr Rowley can be assured that that work is under way.

Modern Apprenticeships (Promotion)

6. Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it plans to continue to promote modern apprenticeships, in light of the Covid-19 outbreak. (S5O-04345)

The Minister for Business, Fair Work and Skills (Jamie Hepburn): The Scottish Government has been working with Skills Development Scotland to offer support to apprentices, training providers and employers through the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. We recognise the value of apprenticeships in supporting the training and upskilling of our workforce, which will be needed as we recover from the impacts of Covid-19.

We will continue to promote apprenticeships and apprenticeship opportunities, and we will build on our existing approach by utilising digital channels, social media and traditional media, alongside physically distanced work with partners across the education and skills pipeline, to promote the value of work-based learning.

Annabelle Ewing: I thank the minister for his recognition of the importance of modern apprenticeships.

The minister will be aware of the pivotal role that the developing the young workforce programme has played in Fife. Can he provide an update on what support is being made available to ensure that the pilot project for a Fife DYW co-ordinator in each high school can continue? Surely that innovative and successful approach is needed more than ever, in this very challenging time for our young people.

Jamie Hepburn: I share Ms Ewing's perspective that the Fife developing the young workforce regional group, under the leadership of Bob Garmory—whom Ms Ewing will know well—has adopted a proactive approach to the developing the young workforce agenda. I am aware of the pilot that has been developed, and I am keen that we learn from it. There is an appetite within the regional group to continue that work. The group agreed that work with Fife Council and I understand that there is still dialogue between the group and the council on how they can continue with it. My officials have engaged with Bob Garmory and his team earlier this month, and we will speak again next week.

I will also be engaging with all the employer leads across all the regional developing the young workforce groups to discuss that and related matters.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can squeeze in the last two questions, but only if questions and answers are as brief as possible.

Schools (Reopening)

7. Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government when ministers will decide whether it is safe for schools to reopen on 11 August. (S5O-04346)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): I said in my statement to Parliament on Tuesday that all schools will reopen on 11 August. However, to allow appropriate physical distancing, children will return to a blended model of part-time in-school and part-time at-home learning. That will be subject to scientific advice that it is safe to do so, because the health and wellbeing of staff and pupils are paramount. "Coronavirus (COVID-19): framework for decision making—Scotland's route map through and out of the crisis" gives details of how we will implement a gradual four-phase move out of the current state of lockdown across all parts of society.

Iain Gray: At what point will the cabinet secretary be able to decide that the virus is under control, that safety measures are in place, that testing and personal protective equipment are available and, therefore, that 11 August is the day when schools will reopen? There must be a point at which he will make that decision; he obviously cannot do it on the morning of the 11 August.

John Swinney: The Government is going through a process of three-weekly review of the lockdown regulations. The First Minister made an announcement earlier, which sees us move into phase 1. There will for each three-week period be successive reviews at which we hope to be able to move into phases 2 and 3 of the lockdown

restrictions. It is envisaged that schools will be reopened during phase 3 and that 11 August will fall in that period. We will be able to say more on the progress that has been made towards reopening schools at those three-week intervals. We have confirmed today that staff are able to return to schools as part of phase 1 activities.

Covid-19 (Education Contingency Planning)

8. **James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what stage it has reached in its contingency planning for delivering education in the event of a second wave of Covid-19 later in the year. (S5O-04347)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): The Scottish Government will do its best to avoid a second wave of Covid-19. However, it is possible that if the scientific evidence tells us that we are unable to contain the virus, we might need to reimpose lockdown restrictions for schools and other education settings. Our primary concern is the safety and wellbeing of staff and pupils, so we will ensure that pupils, education staff and families are fully supported in the event of any recurrence of the virus. Regardless of whether there is a second wave, children and young people will continue to be supported in teaching and learning.

James Dornan: What lessons have been learned so far from the on-going emergency, and how can those lessons be adapted for future contingency plans for preparing either for a potential second wave of Covid-19 or for a similar crisis?

John Swinney: Members of the teaching profession have done exceptionally good work, and at speed, to adapt many aspects of our learning and teaching so that it can be delivered in an online environment and remotely to pupils around the country. That adaptation is a significant strength in Scottish education, and the approach will serve us well in our ability to cope with a prolonged period of in-school and at-home blended learning. It will also serve us well in the circumstances that have been mentioned by Mr Dornan—the possibility of a second wave of coronavirus, which the Government is doing everything it can to try to avoid.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I apologise to members who sought to ask supplementaries but were not able to do so. I suspend the meeting until 2:30 pm.

14:25

Meeting suspended.

14:30

On resuming—

Health and Sport

Covid-19 Lockdown (Public Health Evidence)

1. **Michelle Ballantyne (South Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government on what scientific evidence regarding a threat to public health the health secretary and the First Minister have based the decision to continue the lockdown measures, and how this has been balanced against a threat to the economy. (S5O-04348)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Jeane Freeman): To judge whether and when restrictions can be eased, we consider a range of evidence on the progress of the pandemic in Scotland, including what we know about the reproduction rate of the virus and data on the number of infectious cases. The current position is that R is estimated to be between 0.7 and 1 for Covid-19 in Scotland. It has been at that level for the past four weeks.

The epidemiological model estimates the number of infectious people in Scotland on 22 May to have been around 19,000. This is the third week in a row that there has been a decline in the number, and a sustained decline of more than three weeks for all supplementary health measures, including new Covid cases, hospital admissions, intensive care unit admissions, and deaths.

That is the basis on which we go forward. It is set out in our framework for decision making and the route map through and out of the crisis. Today, at 12.30, on the day set for the review of the lockdown measures, the First Minister announced some easing of those measures, including some that affect the economy alongside the continuation of the stay at home message.

Michelle Ballantyne: The economy clearly needs lockdown to end and businesses need to be able to get back to work. The First Minister and the cabinet secretary have now said that the test and trace system will be at the heart of being able to move forward. However, we now know that Covid cases began in Scotland during the Nike conference, and it seems that there was a failure to trace those who had been in contact with participants. Why did the tracing process not work then? What lessons has Health Protection Scotland learned from the failure of tracing in that case? What steps has Public Health Scotland taken to correct the failings in February and March of that pilot tracing exercise? As we go back to work, can we now be assured that there are enough tracers in place to make sure that the

economy does not end up having to close down again?

Jeane Freeman: What the economy needs, as the business community has told us, is for lockdown to end safely and for businesses to be given time to prepare and to know that they can put in place the necessary public health measures, so that they can conduct their business safely for their customers and employees. That is precisely the road that we are on, as we set out in the route map.

It is not accurate to say that transmission in Scotland started at the Nike conference. A case was reported before that conference. It is neither accurate nor fair to our Public Health Scotland and Health Protection Scotland professionals, who have considerably more expertise and experience of these matters than I do—I cannot comment on Ms Ballantyne's experience—and who make the judgments that they make using a system that has been tried and tested in Scotland for many years.

As members will know, testing and contact tracing works only when transmission levels are low. That is why it is critical that the numbers that I just gave indicate a steady decline in transmission levels over a period. Transmission levels are low, which allows us to ease the lockdown measures, but at the same time use test and protect in order to continue to manage and suppress the virus, which, of course, has not gone away.

Covid-19 (Testing Facilities)

2. **Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide testing facilities in the areas with the highest incidence of Covid-19. (S5O-04349)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Jeane Freeman): That is a really important question, if I may say so. As Ms Baillie knows, testing in Scotland is provided through two routes, which will continue. The first route is national health service controlled and is our NHS board laboratories, the academic partners that we have engaged with, and the Scottish National Blood Transfusion Service.

The second route is the United Kingdom Government's four-nation programme, which is made up of the drive-through centres and the mobile units. The tests that are taken in those places go to the Lighthouse lab.

We are looking very carefully at how we can introduce closer-to-home testing for individuals as part of test and protect. I hope to be able to make those decisions clear in the coming days. That includes looking at the use of, for example, our Covid assessment hubs—which we set up to provide a safe primary care route, leaving general practitioner practices Covid free as best we

could—and at testing at home. That is different from the UK Government's home-testing kit, which still has a very slow turnaround. Test and protect rests a lot on the speed at which we can turn around the test results. Testing at home is about looking at how we can use healthcare professionals to test people in their own houses.

Jackie Baillie: I thank the cabinet secretary for that very helpful response. She will, of course, be aware that West Dunbartonshire has the second highest incidence by head of population of deaths from Covid-19. However, health and social care staff and local residents have to travel substantial distances outwith the area in order to get tested. Indeed, one constituent was referred from Dumbarton to Dunoon, which is simply incredible. Will the cabinet secretary ensure that there are local testing facilities, particularly in West Dunbartonshire?

Jeane Freeman: I suspect that the particular instance that Ms Baillie mentioned was of someone who booked a test through the UK Government portal, which refers people to the drive-throughs or to the mobile testing units. Those mobile testing units are now in the control of the Scottish Government, so we can move them in a way that makes more sense. As Ms Baillie will know, they are staffed by the Army, so we need to make sure that we also have clinical teams there in case the individual cannot take the swab sample themselves—it is not always straightforward.

We will go further than that. I am looking at a map of Scotland on which we overlay where all the drive-throughs are and where we can move the mobile units, as well as where our Covid assessment hubs are. We will then look at making sure that we introduce in addition to that—even if it is in a staged way—additional places where people can be tested.

That will focus on those areas where either, as Ms Baillie said, there has been a higher incidence of Covid than in other areas, or where there are particular geographical challenges to individuals driving—I am thinking of remote and rural areas—and we do not want them to use public transport. We are looking at all of that, and I hope to be able to set it out for members in the coming weeks.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I ask for quick supplementaries and answers from Beatrice Wishart and Stuart McMillan.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): As we move to test and protect, the demand for tests will inevitably rise significantly, but the islands face unique hurdles when it comes to accessing testing and local capacity has to be available. Can the cabinet secretary provide an update on how local

capacity will be increased in island communities to meet that demand?

Also, the First Minister said last week that it will be important to publish testing data. Can the cabinet secretary provide an update on that?

Jeane Freeman: On the last part of the member's question, we are currently working through what test and protect data we will publish and with what frequency, and on how that process will operate. The information will include the number of index cases, the speed of test results, the number of contacts that follow and so on.

On the islands question, I know that agreements have been reached and arrangements made in order to use satellite sites in the islands and to ensure that the chemicals and testing kits necessary to undertake testing are available in the islands. If it would be helpful, I will send the details to the member—to all MSPs in island communities. In addition, every board area, including the islands, has its own pool of contact tracers.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): A new mobile Army unit opened in Greenock last Friday and I have been informed that only eight people used it yesterday. Does the cabinet secretary agree that those units should sensibly move around constituencies to help both older households and households without a vehicle?

Jeane Freeman: I expect that the reason for there being so few people at the unit is that, up until this morning, testing was demand-led through the United Kingdom Government portal, which sent people to the mobile units. If people did not fit the definition at that point, they were not able to access testing.

From this morning, test and protect specifically changes the message. We tell people who have any of the symptoms of the coronavirus to not wait to see if they feel a bit better the next day but to please isolate at home and either use the NHS 24 free phone number or book a test straight away on the NHS Inform website.

That means that there will be greater use of the testing capacity, and that the mobile units will be freed up for us to make more effective use of them, perhaps in the way that Mr McMillan described, or by ensuring that we maximise our testing speed in care homes or by covering areas of particular deprivation or incidence of Covid-19. We will work through that logistical exercise as the data emerges around where people are booking tests. We will know that in real time and will be able to respond accordingly.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We have to speed up a wee bit. Can we have single

questions, rather than multiple questions in one slot?

Covid-19 (Care Homes in Grampian)

3. Tom Mason (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what proportion of care homes in the NHS Grampian area have reported cases of Covid-19. (S5O-04350)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Jeane Freeman): Between 14 March and 21 May, 54 per cent of care homes for adults in the NHS Grampian area had notified the Care Inspectorate of at least one suspected case of Covid-19.

Tom Mason: NHS Grampian is one of the many health boards that has been supporting care homes with community response teams. I have a few questions about the procedures. How many of those teams have been deployed to help alleviate pressures on care homes? Have they been given access to routine testing in the same way as care home staff have? Will the Scottish Government commit to national priority testing for care home staff and those response teams and to expanding that provision to all who provide care in our communities?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I expect members to listen to me. I know that it is difficult, cabinet secretary, but could you be quick with your answer?

Jeane Freeman: I clearly do not have the information to hand to answer the detailed parts of Tom Mason's questions, but I will secure it and send it to him.

I think that, by response teams, Tom Mason means national health service staff from NHS Grampian who are assisting care homes, as staff from NHS Highland and other boards are doing. We are currently waiting for clinical and scientific advice that I will receive from the chief medical officer and his scientific advisory group, and from the chief nursing officer, on the use of testing in healthcare settings for healthcare staff in order to prevent the introduction of the virus in those circumstances, and whether that should be blanket testing or focused on particular settings for particular reasons. We should bear it in mind that we will be testing people who do not have symptoms, and negative tests need to be repeated at least every seven days. Once I have that advice and have taken a decision on it, I will make sure that members are made aware of it.

National Health Service (Suspension of Non-emergency Services)

4. Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the long-term health impacts of

suspending non-emergency NHS services and procedures because of the Covid-19 outbreak. (S5O-04351)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Jeane Freeman): That is an important issue that I am very conscious of. We were clear at the outset that we expected and knew that, in order to protect against the largest harm, there would be other harmful impacts, not least in health.

For example, we knew in March that accident and emergency attendances were at 40 per cent of the pre-Covid-19 level. In April, unscheduled care was at 27 per cent, and planned admissions were at 33 per cent. We began the NHS is open campaign on 24 April, and since then, the numbers have gone up—A and E attendances to 59 per cent, emergency admissions to 72 per cent and urgent suspicion of cancer referrals from 28 per cent to 61 per cent. We have therefore seen the emergence of closer to pre-Covid levels in relation to those important healthcare needs.

However, as we look to remobilise our health service, we need to protect our capacity to deal with the virus—the virus has not gone away, and infections may increase, depending on levels of compliance when we ease the lockdown measures. At the same time, we need to take clear clinical guidance on which of the other paused areas we can restart, bearing in mind that there are other dependencies involved, not least transport and the use of laboratories. The framework for how we will make such decisions will be published in the next couple of days and debated in the Parliament on Tuesday. As we make the decisions, members will be advised, and we may well return to the matter in committee or in the chamber at some point.

Mark Griffin: I have a constituent with prostate cancer whose surgery has been indefinitely postponed. Other constituents include a hemochromatosis patient whose venesectioning appointments have been indefinitely postponed and a cataract patient whose surgery has been indefinitely postponed. Another constituent has hearing loss that has been exacerbated by the indefinite postponement of ear, nose and throat appointments.

As the cabinet secretary says, the reason for those postponements is so that the NHS is not overwhelmed by Covid-19. However, what work has been done to assess the danger of the NHS being overwhelmed due to missed routine appointments becoming emergencies, and what measures are in place to support burned-out staff? Will she give my constituents an indication of when they can expect such services to resume?

Jeane Freeman: On the latter question, I regret to say that I cannot at this point give an indication

to Mark Griffin's constituents—or to anybody else's constituents, including my own—of when those procedures might resume.

With the exception of cataract surgery, none of the procedures that Mark Griffin described sounds elective. Therefore, a clinical decision will have been taken by the individual's clinical team, balancing the risk posed by postponement against the risk posed by going ahead while the virus was so prevalent in the community.

We have said that, although we postponed and delayed procedures in other healthcare areas, emergency, urgent care and maternity services in the NHS remained open. The decisions about non-elective work will have been clinical decisions, and it is not for me to take clinical decisions to restart such work. However, we are very mindful of the importance of all those issues—both the harms and the impact of delays, including on elective work—for our population. We will work hard now—indeed, that work is under way—to begin to plan how we will safely restart services in those areas of the health service.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will be able to take only one more question, which is unfortunate for Emma Harper and John Mason. The questions and answers have been very long; there have been multiple questions in one slot, and it is difficult to interrupt people in a virtual meeting. I ask members to think on that before we come back to another virtual session.

Diabetes (Deaths from Covid-19)

5. David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what research it has done regarding the correlation between deaths from Covid-19 and patients with diabetes. (S5O-04352)

The Minister for Public Health, Sport and Wellbeing (Joe FitzPatrick): We know that this is a worrying time for people who live with diabetes. Their safety and the continued provision of care and treatment remain a priority for the Scottish Government and NHS Scotland. Our analytical partners across the Scottish Government—National Records of Scotland, Public Health Scotland and the national health service—are working together to consider how we can better understand the impact of Covid-19 on people in Scotland with diabetes and other health conditions.

We will be guided by the evidence from that work in assessing any continued risk from the virus, but I encourage anyone who has any concerns about their diabetes—or any other condition—and Covid-19 to contact their general practitioner or the diabetes clinical team, who are best placed to provide specific advice and support.

David Stewart: Research by NHS England a few weeks ago concluded that one in four coronavirus deaths in hospitals were of people who had diabetes—[*Temporary loss of sound.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We seem to have a problem.

Joe FitzPatrick: Shall I have a go at answering, Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Yes—we will get your answer on the record.

Joe FitzPatrick: NRS published data on 22 May as an ad hoc step, which I hope folk will find useful. It showed that, in 15 per cent of all deaths resulting from cases of Covid-19 in Scotland, the death certificate mentioned diabetes. We are still learning about the virus, and it is really important that we record all such data. The Scottish Government and NRS will publish the data as it becomes available.

I hope that that information is roughly what the member was looking for.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Let us hope so. Thank you very much.

That concludes portfolio questions on health and sport. As I said, I apologise to Emma Harper and John Mason for being unable to reach their questions. I suspend the meeting until 3 o'clock.

14:53

Meeting suspended.

15:00

On resuming—

Communities and Local Government

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): The final item of business is portfolio questions on communities and local government. I remind members that questions 1 and 5 are grouped together and that questions 2 and 4 are grouped together. Question 8 has been withdrawn. If a member wishes to request a supplementary question other than on their own question, they should indicate that in the chat function by entering the letter R during the relevant question. For the questions that are grouped, I will take supplementaries after I have taken all the questions in the group.

Construction Sites (Reopening)

1. **Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on how construction sites could reopen safely in order to

allow its affordable housing supply programme to resume. (S5O-04356)

The Minister for Local Government, Housing and Planning (Kevin Stewart): Today, we published refreshed guidance for the construction sector as phase 1 of the route map commences. That will permit the sector to progress from the planning stages of restart to preparing sites before moving to a soft start to site works. The move to a soft start will be undertaken only after consultation with Government to ensure that it is safe to do so in line with public health advice. We are keen to restart construction, but only if it is done safely. Good progress has been made to date and work by the industry to develop the necessary new procedures is progressing well.

The Scottish Government remains absolutely committed to seeing more affordable and social homes delivered in communities across the country and we will continue to work with all partners on preparations for restarting construction.

Willie Coffey: When does the minister expect the house-building sector to move beyond the industry's phase 2, and what are the barriers to that phase starting across Scotland and here, in East Ayrshire?

Kevin Stewart: Progress beyond the industry's phase 2 across the country, including in East Ayrshire, will clearly depend on a range of factors—in particular, wider supporting health data as we consider the appropriate point at which to move to phase 2 on the route map. I will, of course, continue to work with the industry and trade unions to support the construction sector as it moves towards building up the scale of operations. I must emphasise that, if any evidence at any stage suggests that construction activity leads to an increase in infection rates, we will have to consider tightening up restrictions again.

Affordable Homes Programme (Targets)

5. **Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what new targets it has set for its affordable homes programme. (S5O-04360)

The Minister for Local Government, Housing and Planning (Kevin Stewart): Prior to the current pause in construction, we were on track to meet the 50,000 affordable homes target and we were working hard with all our delivery partners to ensure that the final approvals and site starts were in place. We remain committed to meeting the target, but the impact of the pandemic means that there has been a necessary pause in all housing delivery.

Once activity can safely resume, and when the impact of the pause and the implementation of the

updated safe operating procedures has been assessed, we will be clearer about the full effect that the crisis will have on the timing of the delivery of the affordable housing programme.

From the beginning of this parliamentary session to December 2019, we have delivered 31,136 affordable homes, which form part of the more than 91,000 affordable homes that have been delivered since 2007. I thank the housing sector for all its hard work in that delivery, and, when it is safe to restart the programme, I look forward to the continuation of its efforts.

Graham Simpson: Thank you. Pausing the programme means that we are even further behind. It is my view that we were not going to hit that 50,000 affordable homes target, but the minister has a different view. Has he done any work on the figures that will be needed to catch up? I go back to Willie Coffey's question about when builders can start back on site; I heard the waffle that the minister gave. He has been speaking to the industry for weeks; he knows that builders can restart, and we know that they can, so when can they do so?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There should be no waffle from anybody.

Kevin Stewart: I will start with the last part of the question. We have been working hard with the industry to put in place a phased approach to a return to construction, along with safe operating procedures. As most people do, Mr Simpson has to understand that our moves forward will be dictated by the virus. It is essential that we get it right and that we do not move to a situation where we put people at risk or there are increases in the spread of the virus. We have taken a precautionary approach, in order to balance out exactly what is required. I believe that that is the right approach. I thank the industry and the trade unions for their efforts in all that we have done.

With regard to the affordable housing programme, we have work on-going on how we can move forward. It is my ambition to ensure that we deliver as many affordable houses as we can during this parliamentary session. Our housing partners share that ambition; however, we have to do all that safely.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We need to speed things up, but I will take brief supplementary questions.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): Thank you, Presiding Officer. Does the minister acknowledge the severe shortage of affordable housing in Edinburgh, which will be exacerbated by the crisis? Is he prepared to increase the level of support to the council, so that it can maximise the number of affordable homes in the local plan that is under development?

Kevin Stewart: We will work with all local authorities on local development plans, but we will also work with them on the delivery of the affordable housing programme. In recent times, Edinburgh has been in a lucky position, because it has benefited from additional resources that other local authorities were unable to spend. We will continue to co-operate with City of Edinburgh Council and other councils across Scotland, as well as other partners, to maximise the delivery of affordable homes throughout the country.

Local Government (Support for Increased Services)

2. **Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government how it is supporting local authorities to maintain any increased services resulting from the Covid-19 outbreak. (S5O-04357)

The Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government (Aileen Campbell): To date, more than £300 million of additional funding has been committed to local authorities by the Scottish Government and, to avoid any potential cash-flow problems, we have also agreed with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to front load our weekly grant payments to local authorities during May, June and July.

We have also increased our 2020-21 general revenue grant by £972 million to offset the reduction in business rates income that will result from our package of support for businesses through rates reliefs, effectively underwriting local authorities' income stream.

Alongside those measures, the Government has relaxed current guidance on specific grants, such as the pupil equity fund, to allow additional resource to be diverted to the Covid-19 response. Ministers are in regular and on-going dialogue with COSLA on the range of cost pressures that local government faces as a result of the crisis and we will continue to engage with the UK Government on the impact of Covid-19 on local government services.

Sarah Boyack: I thank the cabinet secretary for the resources that have been allocated to local government to date—that is crucial for their work. Can she confirm when the second tranche of £155 million of UK consequentials will be transferred, as councils are currently setting emergency budgets? City of Edinburgh Council is now looking at a gap of £60 million, even though it is using reserves of £11 million. Will the cabinet secretary put on record what financial support local government will receive to enable councils to reopen schools, fully fund social care, ensure an adequate supply of personal protective equipment and support the Government's work on test and protect?

Aileen Campbell: I have outlined a range of ways in which we are financially supporting local government, recognising the need to provide resources up front as well as trying to put in workplace flexibility to enable local authorities to deal with cash-flow problems and to use that flexibility to meet the needs that have arisen as a result of the crisis. Allocations of the £155 million were confirmed to councils by Ms Forbes in her letter of 26 May, and those went through the regular distribution funding mechanism, as had been agreed at the COSLA leaders meeting a week or so ago.

We have put in place a range of measures to allow us to support local government financially, recognising the huge pressure that councils are under—the pressure that the Government and the country are under is significant. Kate Forbes, as the Cabinet Secretary for Finance, and I, as the Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government, will continue to engage with local government and work in partnership with local authorities to meet future needs.

Glasgow City Council (Covid-19 Support)

4. Adam Tomkins (Glasgow) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what help it is giving Glasgow City Council to support communities during the Covid-19 outbreak. (S5O-04359)

The Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government (Aileen Campbell): All local authorities, including Glasgow City Council, will benefit from the £350 million funding package to support people and communities. In addition, Glasgow City Council will receive its share of the £155 million of consequentials, the distribution of which was agreed by Convention of Scottish Local Authorities leaders on 15 May. Glasgow businesses will also benefit from the £2.3 billion package of measures announced to limit the impact on the business community. However, we recognise and appreciate the fast pace of change that we all face in a very challenging operating environment. We are committed to continuing to address those issues in partnership with COSLA on behalf of all 32 local authorities.

Adam Tomkins: Under the Government's new test, trace isolate and support scheme, anyone who is contacted by a contact tracer will have to isolate for 14 days, irrespective of whether they are symptomatic. Every such person will require shelter, food and income security. What provision is the Scottish Government putting in place to ensure that local authorities and the third sector can provide shelter, food and income security to people who have to isolate in that way?

Aileen Campbell: Adam Tomkins raises a very important point. The £350 million package of support that I announced in March was a crisis

response that was intended to do what he is asking for now: to keep people fed, safe and sheltered. As we move forward, we are asking the public to do something very different, which means that we need to shift how we support that. We are working across Government and with our partners to work through what that will look like and how it will be supported. If we ask people to go back to work and then they suddenly have to isolate for 14 days, we need to work through what that means and what support we put in place.

That support will undoubtedly build on the infrastructure at community and local authority levels that is already in place and has been supported through the £350 million that we have provided to support that endeavour. However, we must recognise that it is not just a short-term situation and that we will have to think through how we can continue to sustain that support over the long term.

We will furnish Adam Tomkins with the granularity and fine detail on that. However, I reassure him that we are working hard across the Government to put in place the right and adequate support to recognise the additional and different challenges that people are now facing as a result of the change in the way in which we respond to the pandemic and the easing of the restrictions.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): How much extra resource has the cabinet secretary provided to Inverclyde Council to help it to deal with Covid-19? What discussions has she had with the council in response to its asking for additional resource?

Aileen Campbell: To date, Inverclyde Council has been allocated £4.1 million in additional funding for its Covid-19 response, including £700,000 from the hardship fund, a £400,000 top-up from the Scottish welfare fund, £600,000 from the food fund and £2.3 million from the additional £155 million of consequential allocations that Ms Forbes confirmed, on 26 May, that councils would receive.

Subject to need, Inverclyde Council can also benefit from the £50 million of funding that is available for devolved social security payments and council tax reductions, and from the additional £23 million that is available from the Scottish welfare fund.

To ensure that our communities receive the help and support that is required during these difficult times, we have been in regular dialogue with COSLA, and that will continue. If Stuart McMillan wants to raise particular issues relating to Inverclyde, I am happy to engage with him on them.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): COSLA has reached an agreement on how the £155 million

that has been in the Scottish Government's bank account for a number of weeks should be distributed, but it has still not been passed on. Why not? When will it be passed on?

Aileen Campbell: The local authority leaders agreed how the money would be distributed at their meeting on 15 May. On 26 May, my colleague Ms Forbes wrote to councils to confirm the allocations, and the payments will be made as soon as possible.

That money should be seen in the context of all the different funding support that has been put in place, as I outlined to Sarah Boyack. There is the £300 million of additional funding, there is the ability to use flexibility in relation to the pupil equity fund, and we have increased the general revenue grant by £972 million. We have put in place a range of flexibilities, because we understand the cash-flow situation for councils. We understand the financial challenges that all those in public life will face.

In addition to all that support, Kate Forbes has written to councils to let them know their allocations, and we will get the funds to them as soon as we can.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I say to all members, including the cabinet secretary, that I appreciate how important these issues are, but three further questions are to be asked and time is marching on, so I ask members to speed up, please.

Local Government (Covid-19 Support in Deprived Areas)

3. Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what extra support it is giving to councils in less wealthy areas to assist with their response to the Covid-19 outbreak, in light of figures suggesting that people in the most deprived areas are twice as likely to die from the virus. (S5O-04358)

The Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government (Aileen Campbell): The Scottish Government took decisive action to commit an additional £350 million of support, some of which goes directly to local authorities, for people and communities, including £45 million from the Scottish welfare fund, £50 million to allow increased access to the council tax reduction scheme, £70 million from the food fund to address food insecurity, £50 million from the wellbeing fund and £40 million from the supporting communities fund. We have put in place that range of measures not only to support local authorities but to support those who have the least, because we recognise that they are most likely to be impacted by the pandemic.

Colin Beattie: Many of my constituents have contacted me to say that they are struggling to access food deliveries and to express their feelings of loneliness. What is being done to ensure that those who are more isolated and vulnerable have proper access to food and medical supplies and to any emotional support that they might need?

Aileen Campbell: Colin Beattie raises an incredibly important point. We have put in place funding to support local authorities, the third sector and communities, which have undoubtedly stepped up to the mark by continuing to support people who are feeling isolated and lonely, and by helping people to access food.

We have also opened the national phone line—0800 111 4000—which enables people to get in contact with their local authority directly to say what they feel they need, so that that support can be put in place. In addition, www.mygov.scot provides information on staying safe and getting food, as well as on getting mental health and wellbeing support and paying bills. There is a range of services but, given the time pressures, I am happy to get back to the member with details of any of the groups or organisations that we have funded in his constituency.

Taxi Drivers (Covid-19 Safety)

6. Peter Chapman (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what guidance has been issued to local authorities to ensure the safety of taxi drivers operating throughout this crisis. (S5O-04361)

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I would prefer it if you read the question as it is in the *Business Bulletin*, but, in the interest of speed, we will let that pass.

The Minister for Local Government, Housing and Planning (Kevin Stewart): I will respond to the question as per the *Business Bulletin* first.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That is a good idea, minister.

Kevin Stewart: As they are the relevant licensing authorities, local authorities have a role in the safety of taxi drivers. The Scottish Government published guidance on Tuesday 26 May for those who are providing transport services, including taxi and private hire vehicle operators, on how they should assess risks and implement appropriate measures to ensure the safety of themselves, their staff and their passengers during the Covid-19 crisis.

Peter Chapman: Throughout this crisis, taxi drivers have faced immense financial hardship. We are now looking to enter a different phase, in which passenger numbers will start to increase.

What guidance and support do drivers need to keep themselves and their passengers safe?

Kevin Stewart: One of the key things is to realise that physical distancing might be a challenge in some vehicles that are operating. Operators might consider installing a screen or protective barrier as one of a number of mitigation measures.

Decisions on the installation of protective barriers or safety screens are for licensing authorities and the firms or individuals who are operating the vehicles; they have to make their own assessment of risk in that regard. However, before installing safety screens, operators should contact the relevant licensing authority to check that it is permissible to install them and that the screens meet the requirements. I also urge operators to contact their insurance company about the installation of any additional protective measures in their vehicle.

Aberdeen City Council (Scottish Government Meetings)

7. Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what meetings it has had with Aberdeen City Council since the Covid-19 crisis began. (S5O-04362)

The Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government (Aileen Campbell): Ministers have been in regular and on-going dialogue with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and individual local authorities, including Aberdeen City Council, since the Covid-19 crisis began. We appreciate the range of challenges and pressures that face local government at this time, and ministers welcome the opportunity to discuss the critical issues that are affecting individual local authorities and the ways in which we can address those challenges in more detail.

Liam Kerr: The burden on councils will only grow and, in the north-east, Aberdeen City Council faces a £27 million shortfall. Despite the United Kingdom Government giving a windfall that is explicitly for Scotland's councils, Aberdeen is looking at receiving less than £6 million in funding, instead of double that amount. The Scottish National Party has underfunded the north-east for years. Will the cabinet secretary guarantee that Aberdeen will now get the money it deserves to fight this crisis?

Aileen Campbell: Like other local authorities, Aberdeen City Council has been allocated a considerable amount of support to help it cope with the on-going crisis. We will continue to work with COSLA to ensure that we distribute the resources that are available to us and meet the needs of local authorities across the country.

I also point out that the Cabinet Secretary for Finance continues to have to engage with the UK Government to ensure that Scotland gets what it needs to cope. Perhaps it would be useful for us to engage with Mr Kerr on what the Scottish Government requires in order to be able to cope, such as increased borrowing powers.

We understand that local authorities, and indeed bodies across the whole of public life, face challenges in coping with the current situation. As it always does, the Scottish Government will continue to ensure that it treats local government fairly and recognises the hugely important part that local authorities play—in general, but particularly in response to the pandemic. The role of Aberdeen City Council is no different. We value the huge amount of work and effort that is going on there, and we want to support the council in continuing with that.

Meeting closed at 15:25.

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