Dear Fergus,

International Travel

I am writing to thank you for your recent evidence to the Committee regarding the impact of Covid-19 on the tourism sector on 25 June, and seeking some further information with regard to the issue of international travel. In evidence to the Committee with regard to international travel you stated that—

"I hope that we will take an aligned approach with the UK, in so far as we possibly can, on all these matters. They are being looked at by some of my colleagues, and that includes air bridges and aviation. The airports in Scotland are also essential parts of our local economy that employ a great many people and support a range of other activities beyond aviation, such as services and associated hotels that rely on international travellers.

The sooner that we can safely restore international travel to and from Scotland, the better, but—it is a big “but”—the public health advice needs to be looked at very carefully. My colleagues in the Covid team are working on that with the UK Government, as is appropriate, in order to find safe solutions as quickly as they can be found.”

Since you gave evidence to the Committee, there have been widespread media reports that the UK Government intends to change current international travel restrictions this week with changes expected to apply from Monday 6 July. In addition, there have also been media reports citing Scottish Ministers stating that no decision has been made on whether this change would apply in Scotland and that no discussions had taken place with the UK Government prior to this announcement. It

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is my understanding that a discussion has now taken place and that the Scottish Government intends to make clear its position on international travel later this week.

The Committee recognises that control over international borders is a reserved matter whilst public health issues, arising from international travel, is devolved. However, we would welcome your understanding whether the Scottish Government has the legal right to adopt a different approach in this area from other jurisdictions in the UK or whether the UK Government can unilaterally announce a change in policy in this area that would apply in Scotland.

On the basis that the legal position may be more nuanced than this, the Committee would appreciate your understanding of the balance of legal competences in this area. In other words, what are the powers that the Scottish Government has with regard to public health issues arising from international travel. For example, would these relate to issues such as quarantine restrictions or public health requirements in airport infrastructure as opposed to being able to restrict international air travel itself.

The Committee would also welcome an update on the content of any discussions that have now taken place with the UK Government on this issue. Given the time-critical nature of this issue, I would appreciate a response from you as a matter of urgency.

Yours sincerely,

Joan McAlpine MSP
Convener, Culture, Tourism, Europe and External Affairs Committee