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Members' Virtual Question Time

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Scottish Parliament

Friday 24 April 2020

[The Presiding Officer opened the meeting at 15:00]

Members' Virtual Question Time

Environment and Rural Affairs

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): Hello, and welcome to a Scottish Parliament virtual question time on the twin portfolios of rural affairs and the environment. Today, we are joined by 14 MSP colleagues from their homes in constituencies around the country, and by three Government ministers: the Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform, Roseanna Cunningham; the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism, Fergus Ewing; and the Minister for Rural Affairs and the Natural Environment, Mairi Gougeon. We will go straight to questions.

Outdoor Access (Guidance)

Maureen Watt (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): Under the current guidance, it is permissible for someone to leave their home only for specific reasons, including to take exercise alone or with other members of their household no more than once a day. However, the lovely weather has meant that a minority of people are taking non-essential drives into the countryside for their exercise. Will the cabinet secretary provide an update on how the Scottish Government is ensuring that people are well informed of the guidelines and their responsibilities during this terrible pandemic?

The Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform (Roseanna Cunningham): That is a good point. The Government issued guidance on 9 April regarding access to the countryside. That was partly triggered by the fact that some people were driving to locations to go for walks, which we really do not want anyone to do. We certainly want people to exercise, but to do so as locally as possible, ideally starting their exercise as they step off their front doorstep.

We will try to communicate with a wider audience than the usual audience for access issues to ensure that people understand that they should not be getting in cars and travelling to other places, thereby unnecessarily creating other problems.

Garden Centres

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): The mental health and wellbeing benefits of gardening and tending allotments and window boxes are well known. Garden centres have faced the perfect storm of seasonality and perishability, with many growers having to destroy stock.

With their outdoor spaces, garden centres should be well able to adapt to social distancing policies, just as supermarkets and do-it-yourself stores have done. The Horticultural Trades Association devised a robust set of protocols for the industry to sign up to prior to any reopening. I note that France, Austria and Germany have allowed a partial reopening of garden centres, as they consider them essential.

What discussions has the cabinet secretary had with the horticultural industry? Has he considered the measures that the industry has come up with to pave the way for the public to safely and responsibly use garden centres once again?

The Presiding Officer: I call Fergus Ewing.

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism (Fergus Ewing): Although Rachael Hamilton raises extremely important points with which I have a great deal of sympathy, the matter lies in the portfolio of my colleague Roseanna Cunningham. Indeed, I believe that the matter is being dealt with by Mairi Gougeon in practice. Presiding Officer, perhaps it would be appropriate to pass to Ms Gougeon to deal with that question.

The Presiding Officer: I am happy to do that.

The Minister for Rural Affairs and the Natural Environment (Mairi Gougeon): I am happy to take that question. We have regular engagement with the Horticultural Trades Association and the fruit and vegetable sector—in fact, we have a weekly call with them—so we are continuing to engage with industry about this issue.

I completely understand that people have concerns. That is why we wanted to engage with the sector to ensure that we understand all the concerns, and we are working productively with the sector to see what potential solutions to the issue there might be.

I sent a letter to garden centres outlining the measures that set out what they are currently allowed to do. I actively encourage people to have goods delivered by garden centres through mail order, and we are encouraging garden centres to consider that option. Right now, the measures that are in place are about public safety and keeping safe the people who work in the sector, as well as members of the general public. That is why we are actively encouraging those other methods by which garden centres can continue to trade.

We realise that, at this time of year—especially with the current good weather—people want to be out in their gardens and that workers want to keep on working. That is what we why we are encouraging the kind of activity that can still take place within the regulations.

Rural Sector (Support)

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): Covid-19 is, first and foremost, a public health crisis but it is also an economic crisis, with rural communities being disproportionately affected because of the importance to them of sectors such as tourism and hospitality.

The financial support that has been provided so far has been welcome, but can the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism say whether there will be further financial support for the rural sectors that are still struggling, and particularly for those that have missed out on current schemes? Further, given that the Scottish Government's budgets for Highlands and Islands Enterprise and South of Scotland Enterprise were lower this year than was anticipated, will he consider providing extra funding to those agencies in order to help support Scotland's front-line rural economy?

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism (Fergus Ewing): The member is correct that the economic impacts of Covid-19 have perhaps been most severe in the area of tourism, which, as Mr Smyth says, has essentially ceased for the time being—and rightly so—in the interests of public safety. Because of that, the United Kingdom Government and the Scottish Government responded fairly quickly with a comprehensive series of measures of rates relief for the hospitality, leisure and retail sectors, coupled with various pieces of grant support.

In addition to the original package, we have responded to the concerns of industry with an additional £220 million across Scotland, which is in part intended to relieve hardship. It is not meant to defray or compensate for all losses—that, plainly, is not something that Government could do. Rather, it is meant to give a sufficient lifeline to tourism businesses—a bridge, as it were—to help them navigate through this crisis and emerge on the other side.

I have engaged extensively with the tourism community in Scotland through discussions with the Scottish Tourism Alliance, led by Mark Crothall; bodies such as the caravan sector's representative body and the Association of Scottish Visitor Attractions; people who are involved in self-employed work; and people who work in ecotourism. Further, I have discussed matters with people in specific areas of the country, and I have had conference calls with 10

chambers of commerce. I am acutely aware of the issues, and I am determined to do everything within our power, working with the UK Government, to fill the gaps that have resulted in some businesses losing out—which they are understandably frustrated about.

I can tell members that, as of 21 April, 33,000 grant awards totalling £388 million have been administered. However, there is a lot more to do, and I will not be happy until the job is done. I believe that, with the support of members of all parties, we will make significant headway in the weeks to come in addressing the immediate requirement for aid to help businesses weather the storm that Covid-19 has engendered.

Low-emission Zones

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): Clearly, our lung health has never been more important than it is now. Poor air quality makes us vulnerable to Covid-19. Those who have been scarred by the disease will need the cleanest of air to recover. There is a danger that, when lockdown is lifted, there will be a surge in air pollution from traffic. Are all the first four low-emission zones for Scotland on track for delivery by the end of this year, so that we can build back with cleaner and healthier towns and cities?

The Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform (Roseanna Cunningham): The low-emission zone process was on track. Of course, we now need to have serious conversations about how it might look in future. I have already had some discussion with my colleague the Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity about how we emerge from the current set of circumstances holding on to and learning from some of the lessons about air quality and the massive reduction of motor transport on our roads. We are going to discuss the issue, because we think that there is perhaps a way to look at LEZs rather differently from the way in which we have been doing it until now.

Island Communities (Supply of Essential Goods)

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): I start by saying how grateful I am to the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism for convening a recent conference call with MSP and MP colleagues to discuss supply chain issues affecting island communities. I understand from wholesalers in Orkney that, unfortunately, they still face serious challenges. Supplies of flour, pasta, rice, tinned goods and hygiene products all fall far short of what is needed, which is having a serious impact not just on small shops, which are going above and beyond in trying to meet islanders'

needs, but potentially on care homes and the local hospital, which are supplied by the same wholesalers. I therefore urge the cabinet secretary to ensure that, in this time of crisis, the supply chains for food and other essential goods are working in the interests of the whole population, including islanders, and that suppliers are treating wholesalers with fairness.

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism (Fergus Ewing): I thank Mr McArthur for providing prior notice of his line of questioning. I totally agree with him that it is essential that we ensure an equity of supply of goods and provisions, including food and drugs that are required, to our island communities and remote rural population. I have sought and obtained assurances from every major retailer that they are committed to that, and I accept those assurances.

Mr McArthur alluded to a meeting that was convened a couple of weeks ago by me and my colleague Paul Wheelhouse, as the minister with responsibility for the islands. That was extremely useful, and we are happy to do it again and to continue to have such meetings. We are totally committed to ensuring that, in all the islands of Scotland, whether it be in Orkney, Bute or Lewis and Harris, and in remote rural populations, not only the supermarkets but the smaller shops have that equity of supply to their customers. Sometimes, the Co-op is the only shop on an island, so that is absolutely essential. I know that the Co-op has set up a service to ensure that lifeline shops have their stocks checked daily. However, problems sometimes arise and, where they do, Mr McArthur and colleagues from other parties are rightly quick to raise the issues with us. We have set up a method of trying to deal with such issues quickly, as must be the case.

The wholesalers associations are vital in this regard. It is not just the big retailers that we are talking about. We have engaged regularly with wholesalers, who face particular pressures at the moment. Some major food companies—I will not name any names—have refused to send consignments of goods in an appropriate volume to places such as Orkney and Shetland, instead demanding to send a pallet of, in effect, five years' worth of particular products. That is no use. I recently wrote to 60 food manufacturing companies, asking them to observe the equity of supply principle.

I apologise for the length of the answer, Presiding Officer, but I know that the issue is of concern to many representatives of island communities—MPs as well as MSPs—where there are particular access issues because of ferry issues. We all want to work as a team and to set politics aside to ensure that all our constituents,

wherever they live, have sufficient food and other products to see them through this crisis.

Pubs, Hotels and Restaurants (Financial Support)

Bruce Crawford (Stirling) (SNP): Does the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism share my concerns about the effects that the Covid-19 emergency is having on small to medium-sized hotels, public houses and restaurants, which are a vital part of the tourism economy in my constituency? Even if current restrictions are eased, many of those establishments, because of their size, will find it challenging, thanks to safe social distancing, and will continue to require financial support. What discussions have been held with the United Kingdom Government in that regard?

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism (Fergus Ewing): Mr Crawford is correct. For many businesses in the tourism sector, there is a sense that, when it comes, the recovery will not be rapid; it will be slow and not total but partial. Therefore, as Mr Crawford has clearly articulated, there is a strong sense that many businesses will face considerable pressure for a considerable time to come, especially if, as Mr Crawford says, it proves to be necessary to lift the restrictions partially and with the requirement to continue to observe social distancing. That will place obvious pressures on restaurants, hotels and bars. Therefore, I have engaged extensively with UK colleagues, including Nigel Huddleston, the UK minister, and we have had constructive talks. When I have argued that the furlough scheme might require to be extended beyond June, there has been some sympathy from him that that scenario is faced particularly by the tourism industry. Therefore, on a non-partisan basis, we have argued—and we will continue to argue—the case for tourism, because, even if the Covid-19 crisis is successfully overcome and restrictions are lifted, the tourism sector in Scotland and the rest of the UK will need more support for a long time to come.

Deposit Return Scheme

Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): My question is for the Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform. In the immediate future, it will be tough to get the business community to pay attention to the deposit return scheme, as small shops are not sure that they will survive until 2021. We supported the delay to July 2022, but does the cabinet secretary think that there is a case to be made for temporarily pausing the legislative process until lockdown ends and shops are trading normally again?

The Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform (Roseanna Cunningham): I thank Annie Wells for that question. We had to think about that carefully, as we have had to for a number of different pieces of legislation, both primary and secondary. Because the DRS regulations were so close to conclusion, we decided simply to move on with them, because the principal issue, for those who have an interest in it, was the extension of the timetable to July 2022. In my view, proceeding with the regulations provides industry with clarity and certainty over the policy design. Of course, given the current circumstances, we are committed to continuing to monitor the pressures on industry and their likely impact on the new implementation date of July 2022.

Hotels (Grants)

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): My question is for the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism. At least two hotels in my constituency—the Cringletie house hotel and the Tontine hotel, both in Peebles—are excluded from the £25,000 grant for that sector because of the £51,000 rateable value ceiling. Although they can defer that liability on other debts and perhaps secure loans under the United Kingdom business interruption loan scheme, those are all deferred debts. Given that those businesses are crucial to tourism, the local rural economy and local employment, will the Scottish Government reconsider the criteria for accessing that grant?

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism (Fergus Ewing): Yes. Christine Grahame makes the good point—which I am acutely aware of—that businesses above the rateable value threshold, both in Scotland and south of the border, are not entitled to the £25,000 grant. They are, of course, entitled to a year's rates relief, which is welcomed, and they are entitled to access the UK loan and furlough schemes. However, many businesses—for example, family-run hotel businesses that have been built up over decades—with rateable values in excess of the threshold frankly do not want to take out a loan and work for the bank for another 20 years, into their own advancing years. There is a very strong case for the UK Government reconsidering the configuration of support and extending the grant support above £51,000, in Scotland, to enable businesses like those medium-sized hotels and, in many cases, family-run businesses to access that fund.

Also, the announcement that Kate Forbes made about an additional package of £220 million in Scotland will allow applications to be considered by local authorities, with the inclusion of enterprise agencies. The South of Scotland Enterprise

Agency, which is chaired by Professor Russel Griggs OBE, is well aware that access to those funds is available in Scotland. However, that should be dealt with at a UK level. I have made that point expressly to Nigel Huddleston MP, who is not unsympathetic to it.

There is a real need to deal with the issue fairly quickly, because the pressure that is on some of those businesses—I have spoken to many of their owners—is immense. We need to get a solution right now, and in Scotland we are looking to provide one. However, it would be preferable if there were a reconfiguration on a UK-wide basis. Perhaps if some of the money from the loan scheme could be diverted into a grant scheme instead, that might be a better way of helping those businesses to navigate this crisis.

Environmental Lessons of Lockdown

Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab): My question is for the Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform, Roseanna Cunningham. What lessons can be learned from the improved air quality, lower greenhouse gas emissions and return of nature that we have seen during the lockdown? Does she agree that there could be benefits that we could all build on for our own mental and physical wellbeing—not least for the health of our lungs—and for the future of nature and the planet? That is particularly important in the context that the 50th year of earth day took place this week. How can we take those things forward together?

The Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform (Roseanna Cunningham): As Claudia Beamish is probably well aware, we are monitoring those issues very closely. I see people's recognition that nature makes a comeback incredibly quickly when humans vacate spaces to allow it to.

Many lessons will be learned about the air quality issue, and the on-going concerns about climate change and the need to reduce emissions take on a rather different mantle in the context of what we are going through. It is my job—and the job of all of us—to think about the new reality that will emerge after this process. I hope that we get ourselves into a position in which we have learned some lessons and that the new reality that we build after this is therefore not simply a return to all the worst examples that we might be able to point to of what was in place before. The conversation will be oriented toward the future, and I will welcome Claudia Beamish's involvement in it; I know that she will want to be involved.

Fly-tipping

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): Given that there has reportedly been an increase in fly-

tipping since Covid-19 restrictions were put in place, what action has the Government taken to work with local authorities, including Dumfries and Galloway Council, to tackle that illegal activity, and what support can people obtain if they need to dispose of additional waste?

The Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform (Roseanna Cunningham): Members should know that there is currently in place a weekly waste forum that involves partners in local government, the Scottish Environment Protection Agency, Zero Waste Scotland and the waste sector to try to support the resilience of local waste collection and disposal arrangements, which is something that we have been keeping a very close eye on.

Fly-tipping is, of course, illegal. It is dangerous and unnecessary and, regardless of the current circumstances, it absolutely should not be happening. The waste forum is part of the process of attempting to monitor the impact of the disruption on illegal activities such as fly-tipping.

Local authorities remain responsible for managing local waste services, which of course includes responsibility for fly-tipping, but that partnership working is absolutely active and ongoing. Again, it is about communication about how to best manage and dispose of waste at this time. I am sure that we are all aware of situations where we can see that there has been recourse to informal waste dumping, and we will continue to have that serious conversation across all parts of the sector.

Mortality Rates in Remote and Rural Areas

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): A University of St Andrews study has highlighted that, because of their older populations, remote small towns and rural communities—in which I include my constituency of Galloway and West Dumfries—are projected to have death rates that are 50 to 80 per cent higher than those in the main cities. What contingency planning has the Scottish Government done for the provision of vital resources to local businesses and the supply chain if such a situation arises, in order for them to be able to protect remote and rural communities from the worst effects of Covid-19?

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism (Fergus Ewing): Even before Covid-19, rural Scotland and the Highlands and Islands faced quite considerable demographic pressures. One fears that, as Mr Carson implies, those difficulties could sadly, for reasons that we now know only too well, become much more acute.

At present, we are making all the financial provision that we can to help navigate people through this situation. In addition to the financial package, the Deputy First Minister is developing food support programmes for those who are most vulnerable and are shielding, and a lot of progress is being made on that. My colleagues in other portfolios are considering the social consequences and working with local government partners to address some of the challenges.

It is a very big question and a very big challenge, but that is what we face. Working together in a non-partisan fashion, as we have been doing, using common sense and using our money to best protect—that is how we can best solve these problems. I believe that that is what those who voted us here expect of us.

Fishing Support

Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): What support is available for the over-12m white-fish fleet? I note that 9,000 boxes were landed at Peterhead over Monday and Tuesday, and only around 1,300 were landed today. How does the support available to our vital fishing industry in Scotland compare to that available elsewhere?

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism (Fergus Ewing): Mr Stevenson has represented a fishing constituency for rather a long time now.

It is essential to Scotland that we support our fishing communities through this crisis. We have delivered three packages of financial support, totalling £22.5 million. The one that was announced most recently was of £3.5 million for vessels of over 12m. That package of support was developed after detailed dialogue with fishing representatives from, for example, the Clyde, the Western Isles and, of course, the Scottish Fishermen's Federation. It was devised with their support and co-operation and will, I think, provide significant support to vessels.

Vessels have fixed costs, and harbour dues, rental costs for equipment and a whole series of on-costs have to be paid for, at a time when little or no revenue is coming in, as Mr Stevenson pointed out—revenue is certainly much lower.

I cannot speak for what happens down south; that is for my colleagues in the United Kingdom Government to do. However, I am pleased that we have been able to devise packages for vessels of under and over 12m and for hard-pressed processors, particularly in the shellfish and brown trout sectors, which face financial armageddon.

Packages are being administered now by an excellent team in Marine Scotland; I am proud of the work that they and colleagues across the

public services in Scotland are doing. We are determined to get that money out as quickly as possible and, with the co-operation of members who represent fishing communities, I think that we can succeed in that task, to help the sector to weather the Covid storm.

Self-catering Businesses (Support)

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism will be aware that only 4 per cent of the self-catering accommodation businesses that applied for the grants that are available through local authorities have been awarded grants. There is confusion about the eligibility criteria that the Scottish Government set and about how local authorities are interpreting the criteria. Businesses describe the system as “cumbersome and bureaucratic”.

Will the Scottish Government issue further guidance to local authorities, to ensure that valuable support reaches self-catering businesses as soon as possible?

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism (Fergus Ewing): Claire Baker is right to raise a matter that is a priority for me and my colleagues—I discussed it earlier today with Kate Forbes, the finance secretary.

I have mentioned that local authorities have administered 33,000 payments, totalling £388 million. However, I am aware of reports that the response in some parts of Scotland has not been as good as it has been in others. We want to sort that, working with our local government colleagues, and Kate Forbes is doing exactly that right now.

On the level of financial support for self-catering properties that are someone's main livelihood—rather than an Airbnb-type activity or hobby—it is absolutely right that such businesses receive a package of financial support to help them weather the storm. That is why, after listening carefully to the response of the tourism and self-catering sector to the initial package of support, my colleague Kate Forbes announced an additional package of £220 million. As Claire Baker and, I suspect, other members are well aware, that means that, as well as the initial grant, there will be further grants per property—not just one per business—at a rate of 75 per cent. I think that that is a fair outcome.

We will work hard to administer the process over the coming weeks, because those businesses are entitled to financial support and need it very quickly indeed. It is the number 1 priority for me and I assure members that it occupies hours and hours of every single day. We are determined to do that and we are making

some progress, but we recognise that, for businesses that have not yet got the money, the process is not quick enough or good enough. We shall fix it, and fixing it as quickly as possible is our number 1 priority.

Spring Barley (Whisky Production)

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests.

Farmers across Scotland have just finished planting hundreds of thousands of acres of spring barley, specifically for whisky production. If that barley is not required due to distillery closures, the agriculture industry will face devastation. What advice and reassurance can the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism give distillers and farmers across Scotland?

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism (Fergus Ewing): Mr Mountain raises a very apposite point. I am keen to assure him that I am totally apprised of that very issue—indeed, yesterday, I spent a considerable time discussing it with NFU Scotland's arable chair, Willie Thomson from East Lothian.

Whisky distilleries require to be in use in order to consume barley, so the concern is that if they have to remain mothballed for too long, there will effectively be a slump in the price when the barley crop is harvested. There are also difficulties with storage. As Mr Mountain will know well, when barley is taken from the farm it is immediately put into storage at places such as Highland Grain, where, in many cases, it must be stored at precise temperatures and its quality demonstrated prior to the completion of transactions.

I am therefore wholly apprised and aware of the problem that Mr Mountain raises. Of course, NFU Scotland accepts that, at the moment, we must put safety first and, as is right and proper, we have measures in place for the protection of the public. However, we also need to plan ahead to ensure that, if it is possible, as I sincerely hope that it will be, whisky distilling can resume once it is safe to do so—I emphasise that point—and that that will alleviate the pressure on the barley crop.

There are also other pressures. For example, the fall in oil prices in the USA might lead to maize flooding the European market. That would impact the price of wheat, which is controlled internationally.

This is therefore a complex matter. The Scottish Government is absolutely apprised of its being a major problem, which we shall be giving a lot of attention to as we work with partners such as NFU Scotland.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes business. I was wondering whether members wanted to ask supplementary questions, but I do not think that that is the case.

I thank members and ministers for their participation today. Parliament will resume with a one-day sitting—observing social distancing, of course—at Holyrood next week, on Tuesday 28 April at 2 pm. Until then, I thank everyone for joining us.

Meeting closed at 15:37.



The Scottish Parliament
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