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Tuesday 28 April 2020

Session 5



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Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 28 April 2020

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): Good afternoon, colleagues. Before we start, I remind members of the social distancing rules that are in place in the chamber and throughout the campus. Although I am sure that you are all aware of them by now, please be careful to keep your 2m distance, particularly when you are leaving and entering the chamber.

The first item of business is, as it always is on a Tuesday, time for reflection. Our time for reflection leader today is Mr Iain Stewart, executive director of the Edinburgh Interfaith Association. Mr Stewart is joining us via a live audio link.

Mr Iain Stewart (Edinburgh Interfaith Association): I happily join you today during these turbulent times, which are also, for our Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Sikh, Baha'i, Pagan and Hindu friends, a happy holy season, which brings hope of positive change to come.

People are asking when things will return to normal. I do not want us to return to the way that things were before. Being in lockdown has brought us closer together as a society and as communities. The pandemic has shown just how fragile human life is, and how much we need one another. It has broken down preconceived barriers and brought together people of all different backgrounds and beliefs in solidarity.

It has made us stop and pause in our busy lives and reflect on what really matters. That is not material things but our relationships with our neighbours, friends and loved ones. As we clapped our appreciation for our national health service staff, we also exchanged greetings and support with our neighbours. "Sunshine on Leith" was also heard recently ringing from the open windows, uniting communities in Leith. I was heartened to see many Edinburgh interfaith community members join friends across Europe at our Covid-19 prayer vigil, which brought many much-needed comfort and support.

Faith communities have been doing their part alongside others in the battle against Covid-19—from local Muslim-owned shops in Falkirk and Edinburgh giving out free Covid-19 survival kits to the elderly, to churches, mosques, temples, gurdwaras, and synagogues doing their part by distributing vital food supplies. We are seeing an

ocean of support and kindness spreading throughout the world, exemplified by 99-year-old war veteran Tom Moore raising more than £27 million for the NHS by completing 100 laps in his garden. Even in the townships of South Africa, gangs have called a truce and are now bringing food to struggling households in lockdown. In Jerusalem, we hear the story of the Muslim and Jewish paramedics who paused to pray together just after attending an emergency call-out.

The Pope, in his Easter address, said:

"Let us silence the cries of death, no more wars! Since we need bread, not guns."

My prayer is that coronavirus teaches us that we are one human race, and that caring for one another, for the most vulnerable, the poor, the elderly, the sick, and our fragile world, from this holy season onwards, becomes the number 1 priority and part of the positive change.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you very much, Mr Stewart, for joining us remotely this afternoon.

Business Motion

14:03

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S5M-21593, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on referral of Scottish statutory instruments.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the following SSIs be considered by the Parliament—

Fuel Poverty (Targets, Definition and Strategy) (Scotland) Act 2019 (Scottish Fuel Poverty Advisory Panel and Consequential Amendments) Regulations 2020;

Public Services Reform (Scotland) Act 2010 (Part 2 Further Extension) Order 2020;

Town and Country Planning (Changing Places Toilet Facilities) (Scotland) Regulations 2020.—[*Graeme Dey*]

Motion agreed to.

Covid-19 Legislation

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The next item is a statement by the Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, Europe and External Affairs, Michael Russell, on coronavirus legislation update. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end.

14:04

The Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, Europe and External Affairs (Michael Russell): I am pleased to be able to update the chamber on coronavirus legislation and related matters.

Last Friday, I gave evidence at the first meeting of the new COVID-19 Committee. The committee will play a key role in ensuring that the legislative powers that have been granted to the Government in response to Covid-19 and the unprecedented circumstances in which we find ourselves, are properly scrutinised. The Scottish Government welcomes that scrutiny and my ministerial colleagues and I are committed to engaging with the committee.

I would like to update the chamber on four main strands of legislative and related activity: first, on the management of the overall legislative programme; secondly, on the development and management of further potential Covid-19 bills; thirdly, on the oversight of the public health regulations—the so-called “lockdown” regulations; and finally, on the co-ordination of reporting on the implementation of Covid-19 legislation and regulations.

The statement to Parliament by the Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans on 1 April set out the Scottish Government’s approach to the management of the legislative programme during this difficult period. As I indicated to the committee on Friday, that approach not only supersedes any plans that have been previously published but confirms Mr Dey’s intention to keep the programme under constant review.

The priority is to ensure the passage of essential legislation—Covid-19 and non-Covid-19. However, we should note that the resources that are necessary to do that are likely to be under considerable pressure, given the demands of the current situation. Those resources would be further stretched—perilously so—should the United Kingdom Government not seek an extension to the Brexit timetable.

With those caveats in mind, I turn to the need for further Covid-19 primary legislation. Such legislation—here, at Westminster and in the other devolved Parliaments—addresses the disruption

to national life, public services and the public sector that dealing with the virus is causing.

Of course, the priority is to save lives. All of us will be more than aware of the individual and collective tragedies that have been, and are being, played out every day, as well as of the individual and collective heroism that our front-line services are displaying.

The legislative measures that we are able to take to support our fellow citizens are temporary; they are about getting us through the current situation to a time when we can undertake the renewal of our country and ourselves. How we collectively choose to do that was the subject of the framework that the First Minister published last Thursday—I will say more about that later. For now, we need to continue to temporarily alter our laws and regulations in order to operate as effectively, efficiently and supportively as we can during this period.

The UK Coronavirus Act 2020 and the first Coronavirus (Scotland) Act 2020 were immediate reactions. I now intend to introduce the second Scottish coronavirus bill, which will cover similar issues, as well as items that are required to overcome some problems with statutory deadlines—which cannot now be met—and items that reflect the fact that the disruption that the pandemic has caused will be with us for some time yet. I have asked the Opposition parties for details of what they might want to see in the bill, and I hope to give them more granular details of content later this week.

I will indicate some of the issues that I already know will be covered: registered social landlords will be given more time to lodge their accounts with the Scottish Housing Regulator; and the timetable for holding the citizens assembly on climate change will be relaxed, although I assure the Parliament—especially the Green Party, which was responsible for the relevant amendment to the Climate Change (Emissions Reduction Targets) (Scotland) Act 2019—that that will not diminish our commitment to the project.

In order to reflect the realities of our housing market, for those who had paid the land and buildings transaction tax's additional dwelling supplement prior to a particular date, the bill will extend the time period during which a previous main residence must be sold in order for them to claim a repayment from Revenue Scotland. The bill will remove requirements to serve or intimate documents on the walls of court. It will also amend the UEFA European Championship (Scotland) Act 2020 to reflect the postponement of the Euro 2020 championships to 2021.

In addition to the Scottish bills and the UK bill, an increasing number of Scottish statutory

instruments that are part of the legislative response to the coronavirus outbreak, are being prepared by Scottish ministers. Those SSIs are in train and will be subject to scrutiny by the committees as appropriate. All those matters are technical, but they are also a necessary part of our national response; we will try our best to ensure that they are consensual. I commit to continuing my cross-party work in that regard.

I turn to the lockdown regulations. As members will be aware, the First Minister announced the outcome of the first review of the regulations on 16 April and the Scottish Government made amending regulations on 21 April. The next three-week review period for those regulations ends on 7 May. Last week, the First Minister published a paper that set out the criteria, the factors and the framework on which future decisions might be based, which is clearly a key focus for the Government now.

The document was intended to start, and has started, a conversation not just about the current issues but about what we will have learnt about ourselves during this time and how we will apply those lessons to the future of our communities, our society and our nation, as good neighbours on these islands, as upholders of the values that we share with our European friends, and as global citizens.

The Bible reminds us that there is a time for everything:

“a time to cast away stones and a time to gather stones together, a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing”.

It is not yet the time for renewal, but it is the time to think about renewal. Although it is the time to start to talk about how we might move on from lockdown, it is absolutely not yet the time to relax for a second our vigilance and our vital obligation to stay at home, protect the national health service and, by so doing, save lives. I emphasise that last point particularly.

There is still a very high level of observance of the lockdown regulations. Yesterday, I took part in a conference call with the other Governments of the UK that touched on that subject, and it is clear that there remains very strong public support for what is being done.

The police are working with diligence, but also with discretion, underlining the four Es: engage, explain, encourage, and only thereafter, enforce. Of course, there is a temptation to blur the edges of the rules, particularly in better weather. For example, on Saturday, there were 766 compliant dispersals, whereby people were asked—and they agreed—to move on and change what they were doing, compared with an overall total of just over 6,000 between 28 March and 26 April.

As political leaders, we need to follow the four Es, too. We need to engage with our constituents on these issues and explain why it is essential for the measures to stay in force. The reason is simple: we must save lives. We need to encourage continued observance, support the police when enforcement becomes necessary, and we need to go on doing so until we are all confident, and have incontrovertible evidence, that the virus has been permanently suppressed.

I will talk about the issue of reporting. The Coronavirus (Scotland) Act 2020 places a duty on ministers to report on implementation to the Scottish Parliament every two months, with the first report being due when the first reporting period under the legislation ends on 31 May. As members will recall, I have also given a commitment to report in the same way to Parliament on actions that are taken under the UK act, and it is my intention to combine both those reports into a single report.

As I noted in my opening remarks to the COVID-19 Committee on Friday, the content of the report and our approach require careful consideration. When we combine the provisions in the legislative consent memorandum and those in the Coronavirus (Scotland) Act 2020, more than 40 separate items will require some measure of reporting, and that is before we add in the items that will require to be reported under the next Scottish bill.

Of course, our aim is to be as transparent and as helpful as we can to the Parliament and the people of Scotland. Where powers are being used, we must be able to demonstrate that they are being used properly and proportionally to implement measures that we consider to be essential, that such powers are not being used if they are no longer needed, and, if they are being used, the reasons why.

Reporting must reflect not only the need to avoid placing undue pressures on those who are at the heart of our response, but the fact that the measures in the legislation are of varying degrees of significance in terms of their impacts and the level of interest in their operation. Some measures are of particular and significant interest to members, for example, because of their potential impact on vulnerable groups or their implications for particular rights or protected characteristics. Other measures may emerge as such over time, and our approach must be sufficiently flexible to respond to that.

We are therefore considering a matrix approach by which we would prioritise measures that are of most significance and in whose reporting there is the greatest interest, and give most detail on the operation of powers for such measures. The criteria by which we judge significance and impact

are very important. The issue of whether there are particular areas on which we may wish to direct our focus in the reporting process is germane, and I am happy to hear views on that and other issues this afternoon.

I am aware that there are areas of interest in respect of which members will wish to seek information on specific decisions or matters relating to the implementation or operationalising of measures that are contained in the legislation. In such cases, if the information is requested in advance of the formal report, I will be happy to follow it up with my ministerial colleagues who have portfolio responsibility for the relevant area and are therefore best placed to respond.

I hope that this update has been helpful to members, and I underline again the Scottish Government's on-going commitment to engaging with Parliament and colleagues across the chamber as we take forward our collective legislative response to Covid-19 over the next month. I am happy to take any questions.

The Presiding Officer: I encourage members who wish to ask a question to press their request-to-speak buttons, if they have not already done so.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I thank the cabinet secretary for the open and consensual way in which he has approached the proposed legislation. We Conservative members have tried to reciprocate by working in a positive fashion, and I intend that that approach will continue.

I would echo the comments that the cabinet secretary made about the lockdown. There is a lot of media chatter about how and when the lockdown might be eased, which builds public expectation. There were pictures on the lunch-time television news of beaches in Australia that have been reopened. That has an impact on people here, which is significant, because the lockdown is largely self-policing. It is important that any relaxation is not only driven by the science but is clearly communicated to the public and the business community, whom we have to bring along with us.

I welcome the proposed legislation that will give registered social landlords more time to lodge their accounts—an issue that my colleague Graham Simpson has raised—and will provide an extension to time limits for the additional dwelling supplement, which is a matter that has been raised with me.

We have also raised other issues that might be considered in the bill—for example, changes to tenancy law to incentivise landlords of properties that are currently available for short-term lets to bring them into use for longer-term tenancies, and a relaxation of the licensing laws to allow purchase

of alcohol by vulnerable groups and NHS staff before 10 o'clock in the morning. Will those changes be considered for the forthcoming bill?

Michael Russell: I thank Murdo Fraser for the positive way in which he has approached the matter as party spokesperson and, latterly, as convener of the COVID-19 Committee. I am grateful for that and I hope that we will continue to make progress.

As I explained in my statement, and as I said to Murdo Fraser earlier, the process of selecting and deciding on the final elements of the bill is ongoing. I hope to be able, by the end of the week, to speak to the relevant party spokespeople about the final contents of the bill, but I do not want to commit myself to particular items, at this stage.

Some issues that have been raised by Opposition parties and others can be dealt with by regulations or secondary legislation. The bill is designed to be for items that cannot be dealt with in that way, which is what we will bring to Parliament.

I hope that we can find agreement on most of the issues. With a couple of exceptions, we managed that for the first bill. I would like us to get exceptions out of the way, which will require a collaborative approach not just from me but from others. If we can do that, we will have in the bill a range of items that are agreed on.

However, bills can always be improved. I often say in the chamber that my attitude to bills is that a bill is not fully finished when it comes to the chamber and can be improved by amendment and discussion. If that is possible for the forthcoming bill, we will certainly do it.

I note the point that Murdo Fraser made about licensing, which he has raised with me on a number of occasions. I am still in discussion with colleagues about that, but I know that it is a suggestion that would have support from a range of people.

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I acknowledge the cabinet secretary's engagement with the other political parties, which has been, and will continue to be, important. When the cabinet secretary introduces and makes the case for emergency legislation to deal with the Covid-19 crisis, Labour will support it. We will work with the Government through this difficult period.

I return to the framework document that the cabinet secretary talked about. Does not he agree that there needs to be further discussion and debate in Parliament about the document? There are contradictions. If we are to move forward and get out of the current situation in a safe way, as the First Minister has outlined, we need to do testing. The World Health Organization has said,

"Test, test, test". Indeed, in interviews over the weekend, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport talked repeatedly about the test, trace and isolate approach. Where are we with testing? If we are to take the public with us, clarity is needed.

There also needs to be clarity around workers. Last weekend, a number of workers contacted me to say that their employers want them to start back at work. What rights do those workers have, including rights to protection? We are certainly protected in the Scottish Parliament, but what are the rights of workers who are being told that they have to go back to work?

Does the cabinet secretary agree that there needs to be proper discussion and debate in Parliament about the framework document, so that we can all understand better how to proceed and move ourselves out of the current situation? Will the Government timetable a parliamentary debate on Covid-19 over a couple of days, so that we can have such discussions?

Michael Russell: I repeat what I said to Murdo Fraser: I am grateful to Alex Rowley for his cooperation and for the discussions that we have had, and will continue to have, about the bill.

Alex Rowley has made important points. I can tell him—this is hot off the press—that there will be exactly the debates that he is seeking on the framework document and how we move forward on suppression of the virus. Suppression of the virus, and the action that we take to do so, is the issue. That debate will take place two weeks from today, I think; I hope that the Labour Party representative on the Parliamentary Bureau will support the suggestion, because that will make it easier to have the debate.

In that debate, we will be able to look at the strategies that the Government is pursuing—as, I am sure, we will do this afternoon. We will look at the test, trace and isolate strategy. We will also consider the need for a wider debate in Scotland about how we move forward together. Some of the issues that have been raised in the press, which Mr Fraser mentioned, are not things that any of us would treat seriously in the context of what will happen next.

I expect that all our constituents are interested in these matters—indeed, it is impressive how interested they are. I note that, as at 12 o'clock today, 397,000 people had viewed the paper on the Scottish Government's website. That is not the usual reaction to a Government document. That shows the type of discussion that we need to have, inside and outside Parliament, so that we can find a common strategy. Let us see whether we can agree a strategy together, rather than taking a confrontational approach.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): I am grateful to the cabinet secretary for advance sight of his statement.

The Greens acknowledge the need to adjust the timetable for the citizens assembly on climate change. However, the need for the assembly is greater than we could ever have imagined it would be. The pandemic will cause the greatest global economic collapse of our lifetimes. After it, we will be tasked not with rebuilding the global economy but with building one anew. It is therefore essential that economic recovery from the health crisis does not double down on the systems and approaches that have caused the continuing climate crisis.

Will the Scottish Government confirm that it will use the citizens assembly on climate change to help to shape the economic recovery that will be required over the coming months and years, and to provide an essential counterweight to the economic elites who are already lobbying, from their private islands, for bail-outs?

Michael Russell: I am glad that Mr Greer has accepted the reasoning behind the postponement of the citizens assembly. I assure him that it is a postponement, and not a refusal to go ahead with the assembly.

Roseanna Cunningham was listening to what Mr Greer said: I am sure that she will have been influenced by it. [*Laughter.*] In my experience, Roseanna Cunningham is a generous and open-minded person, and she will undoubtedly have been influenced by what he said. She will be leading on the matter and will want to take forward in Scotland a green recovery of exactly the type that, I hope, Ross Greer is talking about. That will require compromise and debate across Parliament. Who better to lead the debate and to secure consensus than Roseanna Cunningham? I think that that will be a positive step forward.

I am sure that not every member reads my column in the Sunday *National*, although it would be edifying for them if they did. That is members' loss, not mine. [*Interruption.*] If Mr Rumbles had read my column this week, he would know that I started with an observation about a television clip that I saw last week about a jellyfish swimming in a Venetian canal, and how the environment, in its small way—[*Interruption.*] I do not know why Mr Simpson finds the idea of a jellyfish and Venice together so funny; there is clearly a joke there that I do not get. The reality is that the environment—slowly and not consistently—is beginning to heal. Our recovery must ensure that we accelerate that healing and keep it at the forefront of our minds.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): The cabinet secretary said in his statement that the Government's aim is to be transparent. However, tomorrow's meeting of the Scottish Police

Authority, which will include a report on use of the police powers that have just been agreed, will take place behind closed doors. Parliaments and councils across the country have managed to conduct virtual meetings. Does the cabinet secretary wonder why the Scottish Police Authority cannot do so?

I see no reference in the statement to potential use of the contact tracing app for smartphones. There are issues about the information that the app gathers, how that information is shared and what access the Government would have to the information. Under what legislative powers would the phone app be used?

Michael Russell: On the question about the Scottish Police Authority, that is not a matter for me, but for the Scottish Police Authority, which will, I am sure, have heard what Willie Rennie said.

I am familiar with the debate that is taking place about how data from the smartphone app should be handled, and whether it should be localised or centralised. Both approaches have been approved as legitimate by the European Commission, but both present issues in terms of regulation. The Scottish Parliament is not directly responsible for that regulation, but Willie Rennie is right to raise it as an issue that needs to be discussed. I will take the matter away to see whether there are implications for our legislation that we should consider.

However, the issue is, I believe, a reserved matter. Although I am always encouraged when Mr Rennie wants us to move into reserved matters—it is, at least, a small start—I am just not in a position to give him an assurance on that, now.

Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): It will remain important to ensure that, despite the short timescales that are available to us, we do all that we can to get emergency legislation right. What steps will the Scottish Government take to ensure that the forthcoming coronavirus bill is subjected to due scrutiny by Parliament?

Michael Russell: That is a very good question, which I discussed with the COVID-19 Committee on Friday. I am happy to repeat what I said then, and perhaps I can add a bit of detail to it.

The intention is to treat the bill as an expedited bill—a very expedited bill, I have to say—rather than as an emergency bill, but not to do so in a single day. At present, we hope to introduce the bill in such a way that a committee—I presume, the COVID-19 Committee, although it is up to the Parliamentary Bureau to allocate the bill—could consider it at stage 1 in a single sitting and make a recommendation to Parliament for a stage 1 debate, which is provisionally set for three weeks

today, in the afternoon. The committee would consider the bill at stage 2 the next morning—that would be the Wednesday morning, three weeks tomorrow—and stage 3 would take place that afternoon. That is subject to the Parliamentary Bureau's decision, of course, and to final timetabling, but it would mean that the bill would get longer and more varied scrutiny than the first Coronavirus (Scotland) Bill.

The provisions for the new bill are items that we require to have on the statute book quickly. We would also wish to see expedited royal assent in the programme, so that the bill would be on the statute book before the end of the month. However, that suggested legislation programme provides a better opportunity for debate and discussion than we had with the first Coronavirus (Scotland) Bill.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): The cabinet secretary has talked about the importance of transparency in reporting, and has spoken of the number of dispersals by police on a single day and over one month. I think that people will be interested to know how that, and other enforcement, breaks down in terms of matters such as geographical location, numbers of cases that are taken forward to prosecution, and repeat presentations. Will detail such as that form part of the reporting to Parliament?

Michael Russell: I made it clear in my statement that we want proportionate reporting. The matrix that I talked about is about taking the key issues that are dealt with and ensuring that they are reported on as fully as possible, then across the spectrum to reporting of issues that will not have such a great deal of detail attached.

There is very legitimate interest in how regulations are being enforced. I cannot speak entirely for my colleague the Cabinet Secretary for Justice, but it seems to me that this is an area that we would want to report on in more detail than we would for some other areas. If Liam Kerr will accept that assurance, I hope that the Cabinet Secretary for Justice will flesh that out, as we move forward.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): It is important that essential legislation is prioritised, particularly in relation to the coronavirus. Does the cabinet secretary agree that the UK Government should seek an extension to the Brexit timetable as a priority, to reduce pressures on the legislative process both here in Scotland and across the UK?

Michael Russell: I can only say yes. There is not the bandwidth to deal with Brexit at present. Two factors could be added to the present problems. First, if additional legislation, including primary and secondary legislation, arose out of the

Brexit process, which is a real possibility, it would be the straw that broke the camel's back for the work of this Parliament.

The second issue is economic damage. We know that there will be economic damage from the Brexit process—that is even admitted by those who support Brexit—but if that is added to the economic damage that the Covid-19 pandemic will cause, which is projected to be immensely severe, and at the same time we ask companies to change their methods of operation and activities, that is a recipe for even further disaster.

There is no question—virtually everybody I speak to says that there should be a delay. The assertion that has been made by the UK Government's chief Brexit negotiator, David Frost, that businesses are telling him that they want an end to uncertainty is simply not what businesses are telling me, his colleagues, their trade associations or even the world at large. That is not what is being said. Businesses want a delay or pause to look at this, as it cannot happen in the way that Mr Frost appears to think it should happen.

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): The cabinet secretary made a welcome commitment in his statement to publish information in advance of the formal report, should MSPs request specific details on implementation or operational matters that are in the emergency legislation. He knows that I raised the issue of social work needs assessments at the COVID-19 Committee last week. Since that meeting, there has been growing concern that people are not receiving care packages and that assessments are not being carried out. Does the cabinet secretary agree that reports of the number of care assessments that are being carried out should be published weekly so that we get maximum transparency and to ensure that the needs and rights of older and disabled people are being fully met?

Michael Russell: I will be clear about what I actually said. When information is requested in advance of the formal report, it is not another process of reporting. I said that if the information is requested in advance of the formal report, I will be happy to follow it up with my ministerial colleagues.

There is not a case for putting yet another reporting cycle into the tough reporting cycle that we have, but if there are concerns—the member expressed concerns at the COVID-19 Committee last Friday—it is open to any member to seek information. That is of course what our primary job is, and if those questions are asked, they need to be answered.

The member was right to say at the committee that it is important that there is an understanding

of how the powers that were enacted on 5 April are being used. If there is concern about how they are being used, it is important that that concern is discussed and rectified, but I stress that I do not think that we should be tying ourselves into schedules of reporting over and above what we have. I accept that, when there are concerns, they need to be examined. Monica Lennon has raised a concern and, if she asks questions in the right way—there is no doubt that she knows how to ask questions in the right way—they will have to be answered. If you ask a question, you get an answer—that is the normal situation.

We have set up a whole range of ways in which information can be found. Those exist and I am happy to support the member trying to secure an answer on the issue that she raises if the information is available, because she has raised it twice. Information cannot be conjured out of nowhere and if the information is not available, there is an issue of proportionality when it comes to how much time would be spent to get it. I accept the member's concern; I have heard it and I will endeavour to take it forward.

The Presiding Officer: There are nine more questioners, but we will not get through anything like that in a couple of minutes, I am afraid.

Shona Robison (Dundee City East) (SNP): The Scottish Government has been actively working to engage the public about the complex decisions that lie ahead of us as we look beyond the lockdown. The cabinet secretary mentioned the significant number of people who are accessing the guidance and the framework. What more can the Scottish Government do to encourage the public to feed into that conversation to keep them engaged and help us to ensure that decisions taken have their support and consent?

Michael Russell: That is a very important question. When the First Minister published the paper last week, she indicated that it is an iterative process. It is not the final word by any manner of means; it is the start of the conversation. I expect that conversation to grow and develop on both sides, as this is not a static situation.

Murdo Fraser again referenced the press interest in the issue. There is a great deal of discussion about what should happen next, and that is feeding into the process. As a constituency MSP, I have received quite a number of suggestions about what we can do and how that information can flow both ways. That will influence the iterations of this paper and the policy as it develops. However, we must be aware that what we do must be guided by science and by the absolute necessity to suppress this virus now and for the future—that is the objective. Of course, what is happening must be supported by the

public, who must be persuaded of the need to do what must be done.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The cabinet secretary knows only too well that there are many health risks that are directly affected by the lockdown, not least the risks to mental health. Can he give an assurance that those mental health risks are being fully taken into account as the Scottish Government considers when to ease lockdown?

Michael Russell: Yes, I can. In every discussion that I have been involved in in recent days, the issue of mental health has been mentioned and, on every occasion, there has been an acceptance that it must be prominent in our discussions.

We all know, having lived through this event together, that we have all felt pressures in the present situation. I am sure that we will all want to say that in different ways. We also know that some people have reacted adversely to those pressures and that some people are in considerable distress and are suffering illness as a result of those pressures. Everything is being done at a national and a local level to help and support them. I am extremely impressed by the way in which local resilience groups and other local groups are working to ensure that they are supporting people who are isolated and on their own and who sometimes feel very vulnerable indeed.

Liz Smith makes an excellent point. The issue is at the heart of our thinking. We should all recognise that there is absolutely nothing wrong in our saying to our friends, neighbours, colleagues or workmates that we are finding the situation difficult, too, because sharing that information is part of the way forward.

The Presiding Officer: I am afraid that we have not made much progress through the questions today, but that is all—

James Kelly (Glasgow) (Lab): Presiding Officer, I seek to raise a point of order in relation to the conduct of this afternoon's business.

I have serious concerns that the Parliament is being sidelined and that we are not being given ample opportunity to discuss important issues such as the exit from lockdown, testing and the provision of personal protective equipment. What is the point in members coming through to Edinburgh for these sessions if we are not able to raise the concerns that people are raising with us in our constituencies and regions? I ask that you and the Parliamentary Bureau examine the programme of business seriously to ensure that we have ample time to debate the issues and to represent our constituents fully.

The Presiding Officer: I thank Mr Kelly for that point of order. I recognise the frustration that he refers to. On a couple of recent occasions, I have not been able to allow Mr Kelly to ask a question, and today is another example that.

I am afraid that the Parliamentary Bureau agreed the allocated time. We have a couple of other statements to deal with today, as well as First Minister's question time, and we have allocated a certain amount of time for each of those items. Sometimes, the questions and answers take longer than anticipated.

I suggest that it is up to the member, through his business manager, to propose new business to the Parliamentary Bureau, which will consider any suggestions. I also encourage any members who did not get in just now—namely, Joan McAlpine, Rona Mackay, Graham Simpson, James Kelly, Neil Findlay and Andy Wightman—to press their request-to-speak buttons after a later statement today or during First Minister's question time, and it will be noted that they did not get in with an earlier question.

Health (Covid-19)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Lewis Macdonald): The next item of business is a statement from Jeane Freeman on health and Covid-19. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of her statement.

14:39

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Jeane Freeman): Thank you for the opportunity to update Parliament on several key areas around our response to Covid-19 and to say something about our future planning.

Today is international workers memorial day and, across Scotland, many people observed a minute's silence to honour the health and social care staff who have tragically died during this pandemic. A number of our colleagues in Scotland have lost their lives to Covid-19. My thoughts and those of members across the chamber are with their families and loved ones.

In the past 24 hours, 70 deaths have been registered of patients who were confirmed as having Covid-19, taking the total number of deaths in Scotland under that measurement to 1,332. As always, it is important to remember that behind each of those numbers is the loss of people who were loved and are now much missed. I offer my sincere condolences to their families and friends.

Notwithstanding all of that, we are starting to see promising signs that the efforts and sacrifices that the overwhelming majority of people across Scotland have made are having an impact. In recent days, the number of patients in hospital with confirmed or suspected Covid-19 has been broadly stable, and there has been a decline in the number of people with Covid-19 in intensive care units. We should not read too much into all that yet—these are early days—but those trends are welcome and we are cautiously hopeful about them.

As of today, 50 per cent of adult care homes have reported an outbreak of suspected Covid-19. Last week, I set out a series of additional steps to support those who live and work in our care homes. Those steps increase the clinical support that is focused on preventing Covid-19 infection and transmission in care homes. Our national health service directors of public health are providing enhanced clinical leadership and have contacted every care home in Scotland. They are assessing how each home is managing infection control, staffing, training, physical distancing and testing.

We have provided a direct delivery of personal protective equipment to care homes and have

worked with local partners to significantly improve the operation of local PPE hubs. Although in the private and public sectors the supply of PPE is primarily the responsibility of care home providers, we will continue to provide top-up and emergency provision to ensure that staff have what they need and that they and the residents have that protection.

Work is also under way to ensure that all Covid-19 patients who are being discharged from hospital provide two negative tests before discharge and that all new admissions to care homes and all residents who are symptomatic should be tested. Those new admissions should be isolated for 14 days. Social care and care home staff continue to be priority key workers for testing. I have written to all care homes to remind them of that and to ask them to make sure that, as employers, they follow through where that testing is required.

As members know, we also have more than 21,000 returning health and social care staff alongside student nurses, student midwives, allied health professionals and newly graduated doctors, who are all willing to apply their skills and experience to the collective effort. Many of them are able to work in the care and primary care settings. As of today, 185 applicants have been matched into roles in care homes and care-at-home services, and a further 218 are ready and available. In the coming weeks, I expect the number of matches to increase rapidly.

As well as those who work in care homes to protect our most vulnerable people, many carers—paid and unpaid—support people to stay in their own homes, and they, too, must be protected. Therefore, we have extended the provision of PPE to personal assistants and unpaid carers.

From the start of this week, the local PPE hubs for the registered social care sector are receiving enhanced supplies and support, so that they can distribute to the whole of the social care sector where normal supply routes have failed. We have published advice for unpaid carers on the appropriate use of PPE and how to access it, and we will shortly publish equivalent guidance for personal assistants. I have asked the national carer organisations and local carers centres to discuss with carers their needs, and, when they need PPE, to help us direct them to their local hub.

We will ensure that hub locations are clearly signposted on the Scottish Government's website and that health and social care partnerships are working with local carers centres to make it clear how individuals can get the necessary personal protective equipment.

Throughout this difficult time, it is critical that social care support is maintained, to ensure the safety, dignity and human rights of people who already receive that support. I reached agreement some weeks ago with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities that, in addition to providing the funding that is directed towards social care in the 2020-21 budget, we will meet additional costs that are incurred because of the impact of the pandemic. That agreement was reached specifically to ensure that existing and new demand and need could be met. Alongside that, the additional returning staff whom I mentioned a moment ago are also available for deployment to those services, to ensure staffing resilience.

So, it is not acceptable to me that care packages are being cut—in some instances, by 100 per cent. I expect people to follow the steps that I have already taken. If more needs to be done to ensure that existing packages are not cut and that new demand is met, I hope that colleagues in the sector know that my door is always open and that I expect them to come to me with those additional requirements.

I now turn to testing. By 22 April, 17,800 health and social care staff and symptomatic members of their households had been tested. Twenty-one per cent of those tested were social care staff. By the end of April, all 14 health boards should have local testing capacity. We are on track for testing capacity to reach at least 3,500 tests available per day by the end of this month, having made steady progress from the start of the pandemic, at which point capacity was 350 tests per day from two laboratories.

We also continue to work with the United Kingdom Government on its testing programme, which is expanding both capacity and access in Scotland. Four UK Government drive-through testing facilities are already operational, with a fifth due to open in Perth this Thursday. Five mobile testing units, manned by Army personnel, are going live in Scotland this week, and it is anticipated that a further eight units will be live in Scotland within the next week or two.

The increased capacity in our own NHS laboratories and through our participation in the four-nation testing exercise has ensured that we are able to expand the areas and the groups that are being tested. Thus we have increased availability to key workers beyond the health and social care sector, using the categories that we outlined before, and we have today also extended testing to all people aged 70 years and above who are admitted to a hospital setting. Access to the UK four-nation exercise is controlled through the queueing system and digital portal managed by the UK Government.

Before I conclude, I will touch on research and on-going changes to healthcare delivery. The pandemic has required fundamental change to how healthcare and care are accessed and delivered. That has involved a significant reorientation of resources and the incredible support and efforts of local leaders, planners and clinicians—in fact, of the entire workforce. The work has included preparing to quadruple the number of ICU beds and ensuring that there is sufficient hospital bed capacity; significant increases in digital access to health services, with around 60 per cent of general practices now using NHS near me, and the number of weekly digital consultations increasing from around 300 to over 9,000; the reshaping of primary care to support Covid-19 hubs with 24/7 access; shielding almost 150,000 clinically vulnerable people and focusing multidisciplinary teams to work on anticipatory care planning with them; and expanding mental health support by moving towards a 24/7 NHS 24 mental health hub and digital therapies.

It is clear that, in line with our framework for decision making, which was published last week, we need to achieve a careful balance in managing our healthcare capacity, including our commitment to continue to treat emergency, urgent and maternity cases. Therefore, we will continue to work closely with health boards and our partners to ensure that there are robust plans in place to safeguard local resilience and responsiveness while considering how and when we can increase the business-as-usual work of our NHS.

The incredible level of compliance with social restrictions that we have seen shows a clear willingness on the part of the people of Scotland to think beyond individual health to population health. As we introduce the test, trace and isolate measures that are required, we will need that focus on population health to continue.

In concluding, I will update members on the research proposals for Covid-19 that we launched on 25 March. One hundred and thirty-nine proposals were received from across Scotland's universities and research institutes, and, following an independent expert review process, 55 projects have been selected for funding. That has resulted in a pan-Scotland portfolio of research, with 15 different institutions leading on projects. In summary, the outcome of the call is a programme of projects that meet the aim of establishing a broad Scottish programme of high-quality research on Covid-19 that will be delivered rapidly and that will inform policy and clinical practice in responding to the pandemic.

I continue to be grateful for the tremendous resilience of our health and social care staff, our key workers and, most important, people all across Scotland. Together, we are making

progress, we are suppressing the virus, we are saving lives and we are showing that we can continue to rise to the challenges of this pandemic.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The cabinet secretary will now take questions on the issues raised in her statement. I intend to allow about 20 minutes for questions, after which we will move on to the next item of business.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of her statement.

I would like to raise two specific issues. More than 900 dentists have written to the Scottish Government to express concern about the future sustainability of the sector. Many dental practices that have a mixed NHS and private patient list are expressing concern that they are on the brink of collapse. What support and plans do ministers have to support dentists to get through the outbreak?

Many charities across Scotland are reporting that they have lost 20 to 25 per cent of their income during this period. The UK Government has announced that £30 million in additional funding will come to the Scottish Government to help to support Scotland's charitable and hospice sector, which is very welcome. When will ministers consult hospice associations across Scotland on how the funding will be distributed?

Jeane Freeman: We have provided additional emergency funding to the NHS general dental services budget, which will provide additional support to dental practices for the temporary loss of patient contributions. Following today's session, I am happy to advise Mr Briggs of the exact amount of that funding, but it has already been issued and is in place.

It is for my colleague Ms Campbell to respond to matters relating to charities in the wider sense, but I can confirm that we will pass on all the consequential funding for hospices that we receive from the UK Government. We are in discussions with the hospice network on how best that funding can be apportioned.

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): Last night, the BBC's "Disclosure" programme, which featured journalist Sam Poling, covered the issues relating to PPE in great depth. She described the fear among some NHS staff, but when she put that to the Scottish Government's national clinical director, Jason Leitch, he said that that is not what he hears when he walks the halls and speaks to front-line staff.

Today is international workers memorial day, and we remember that some health and care workers across the UK have died in the line of duty. Does the cabinet secretary recognise that

people are scared, that they are right to raise issues about PPE and that lack of access to PPE and testing is a widespread and collective issue for front-line workers? What is her advice to workers who remain concerned? Can she give an up-to-date figure on how many social care staff have now been tested?

Jeane Freeman: I recognise that fear. This is entirely anecdotal, but I think that the fear is diminishing, as a result of the many additional steps that we have put in place to ensure that we have a continuous through-flow of PPE and, more important, that it is distributed quickly to areas that require it and the guidance is clear. However, I would never underestimate that fear and I completely understand it. Thinking back to my own time, many years ago, I would have wanted to have the right PPE for the clinical or care situation that I was working in. Therefore, I understand.

Notwithstanding everything that we have done—and everything more that we need to do, when issues are raised with us—I genuinely do not think that, throughout this pandemic, I will ever be able to stand here and say that the situation around PPE is resolved once and for all. It will be a constant exercise to ensure that people receive the PPE that they need when they need it, and that they have the confidence and training to know how to use it. It is not only about knowing how to put on PPE; it is about the momentarily risky position that a person is in when they take it off.

Staff are very right to raise concerns and issues, and they should continue to do so. They should raise those issues with the member and other colleagues in the chamber, who should then raise them with me directly. Members should expect us to act as quickly as we can, in order to assure that those issues are resolved. That is entirely right and proper.

Health and social care workers have always been a priority for testing. I gave the latest overall figure that I have about the number of health and social care workers who are being tested, and I said that 21 per cent of that number work in social care. Those numbers are about a week out of date and will be updated later this week. There is a clear route for key workers to be tested, and for members of their households to be tested too, if that is the reason why a key worker is staying at home. As we expand capacity, we will continue to ensure that we are testing those key workers and that we are widening testing to include key workers across the public and private sectors. However, the testing capacity and the exercise of ensuring that demand is flowing through for that testing is a piece of work that—like the situation with PPE—continues all the time.

As the First Minister said at today's lunch time briefing, later this week and into next week we will

say more about testing: on our capacity, how it is used and, importantly, all the work that we have under way to enable us to scale up and deliver the test, trace and isolate operation that is so critical to the next steps.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to open questions. I ask members for succinct questions and answers, to allow as many members to ask questions as possible.

Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green): The cabinet secretary said that she has written to all care homes to ensure that, as employers, they follow through when testing is required. We know that people can be infectious when they are pre-symptomatic or asymptomatic; that has been shown by an increasing body of evidence. Therefore, will the cabinet secretary ensure that all health and care staff will be tested as a priority, and can she confirm that the 3,500 test capacity will be fully utilised by the end of this month?

Jeane Freeman: As Ms Johnstone said, there is growing evidence that pre-symptomatic and asymptomatic individuals shed degrees of the virus that make them infectious to a greater or lesser extent. That is new, emerging evidence that was not there at the start of all this. It continues to emerge and, with our chief medical officer and other clinical advisers—including the Scottish Government Covid-19 advisory group, which is led by Professor Andrew Morris—we are continuing to consider expanding testing to all health and care staff, and whether that is the right thing to do.

Having expanded testing to all patients over the age of 70 who are admitted to hospital, for whatever reason, we must recognise that testing will happen every four days, for as long as they are in-patients. That would also apply in the case of health and care staff. It is an iterative process. The test tells us only whether the person has Covid-19 on the day of the test, so testing has to keep being repeated.

On making use of the 3,500 capacity that we have set, we will meet that by the end of this month. We are working hard to ensure that demand is flowing through in order to use that capacity, and we intend to be at least as close to 3,500 as we can get in the next few days.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I am concerned about the ability of key workers in rural and remote areas to access a test. That includes large areas of the Highlands and Islands and the north-east, as well as the south of Scotland. What is the maximum amount of time for which someone might have to travel to get a test in those areas? How long will it take for key workers in remote and rural areas to have access to a local and speedy test?

Jeane Freeman: Willie Rennie is right. That area has exercised us for some time. That will be assisted in part by the mobile units, of which there will be five this week; that number will scale up until we have 13. The units, which are being deployed in more remote areas—not only in the Highlands but in the south of Scotland, in some parts of Perthshire and so on—will enable us to take testing closer to the individuals who require it.

If those individuals are health and social care workers, their health boards will ensure that testing is available close to them. If Willie Rennie is referring to the drive-through centres, he is right about the distances that people have to travel.

As part of the four-nation exercise, we are also trialling home-testing kits. That initiative has been proven to be clinically robust, and it too will be rolled out, which will make ease of access to testing much simpler.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): What advice can the cabinet secretary give to my constituents who may have to access their GPs during the May public holidays? What support is being made available to them?

Jeane Freeman: George Adam will recall that we provided additional investment to ensure that GP surgeries and community pharmacies were open over the Easter holiday period. We have done that again to ensure that GPs and community pharmacies are open over the May public holidays. We have made a total of £8.2 million available to NHS 24, community pharmacies and GP practices so that they can stay open over the May holiday weekends.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): We are all acutely aware that our front-line NHS staff and social care workers are delivering the highest-quality care in the most demanding circumstances. They worry every day about the danger that they are putting themselves in and about potentially taking that home to their families. They worry about levels of patient deaths, about having to inform families about a loss, and about working long hours and extra shifts. The situation has been described as similar to one that can lead to post traumatic stress disorder.

What is the Scottish Government doing, or considering doing, to support our front-line staff in these unprecedented times, to allow them the time to decompress and look after their own health and wellbeing?

Jeane Freeman: I am grateful to Mr Whittle for that important question. A number of our health boards have taken specific action to create wellbeing spaces near the working environment where people can have a breather, make a cup of tea and so on. They have also made use of digital

technology to provide mental health support to their staff.

However, what Mr Whittle is referring to is about more than that: it is about trauma. That can particularly affect social care staff who become very close to the people they work with in the person's own home or in care homes. It is very hard for many staff in health and social care when individuals die of Covid-19.

We are working with Marie Curie, Scottish Care and clinical colleagues and others. In the next week to 10 days, we will be able to announce a package of additional support for health and social care staff, including access to counselling. We will provide details of that to members nearer the time.

Alex Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Can the cabinet secretary tell us how much the consequentials are for Scotland from the UK hospice fund? In light of the financial challenges facing hospices in Scotland, including St Andrew's Hospice in Ayrshire, which is in my constituency, and its sister hospice, St Margaret of Scotland Hospice in Clydebank, which Gil Paterson supports, once the cabinet secretary has agreed the distribution formula with the hospices, will she consider sending the funding direct from the Scottish Government to the hospices, rather than sending it through third parties such as the integration joint boards, which would slow it down and possibly put it at risk of top slicing?

Jeane Freeman: It is not yet confirmed, but our expectation is that there will be consequentials of £19 million for hospice work from UK Government funding. As I have said, all the consequential funding—whatever the final level—will be passed directly to the hospices through the hospice network. We are discussing with hospices how that will be apportioned.

I am very happy to take away the question of direct funding and to consider further whether that is something that we could sensibly do.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): I do not need to tell the cabinet secretary how many lives cancer screening services have saved. Breast cancer screening in Scotland is a gold-standard service, and it has saved many women's lives. It is the speed with which tumours are identified and acted on, and surgery is carried out, that characterises our wonderful service. Have there been any discussions about how and when safe screening services can return? Has there been any discussion about or assessment of how many men and women have missed out on screening during the short period in which we have been in lockdown and what the consequences of that might be?

Jeane Freeman: I am grateful for that important question: the unintended consequences of

pausing some of the business-as-usual programmes in our NHS and the health harms that may be caused are of significant concern to me. Mr Russell spoke about a range of harms that are being caused as a consequence of dealing with the pandemic.

One difficulty with the breast screening programme is the inability of those involved to maintain any level of social distancing, as Ms McNeill and all the women in the chamber will know.

As I said in my statement, if the number of cases, the number of patients in ICU and, indeed, the number of deaths continue to decline, we will create headroom in our NHS. That headroom is fragile and needs to be protected. We need to maintain a level of protection as we go through the next stages, lest we see the number of cases increase.

If we ease any of the restriction measures, we will need to consider, across Government and with colleagues, what that may do to case numbers and to that headroom, and therefore whether there is any room to restart any of the paused NHS business-as-usual programmes.

Our screening programmes are a very important preventative health measure, particularly in relation to cancer. They will be factored into our consideration. If it is at all possible, we will prioritise restarting those screening programmes. Ms McNeill has my assurance that we will do that as soon as we can. If it cannot be done soon, we will certainly set out to members why we do not believe that it can be done soon.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): In Denmark and Germany, Covid-19 deaths per capita are about a third of the rate in Scotland and a quarter of the rate in the UK; in Greece and Cyprus, the rates are a twentieth. In the Faroe Islands, 187 people are known to have caught the virus, of whom 181 have recovered, and not one person has died. Portugal's deaths per capita is a sixth of the rate in neighbouring Spain. What is being learned from nations outwith the UK that might help Scotland through the crisis, particularly as thoughts turn to how we can lift the lockdown safely?

Jeane Freeman: As I am sure that Mr Gibson knows, our clinical teams and senior leaders on health matters are in constant dialogue with their counterparts not only in the four nations of the UK but especially in Europe and, in some instances, more widely elsewhere in the world. Attention is paid to all the learning from that process, including the tracking of data and what is being said in those countries, and the experiences there. That is all fed into both the scientific advisory group for emergencies operation at the UK level and the

scientific advisory group that we now have in Scotland, which, as I said, is led by Professor Andrew Morris. All those countries' approaches and the ways in which they have faced the challenge that are either comparable to or different from what others have done have been brought into that process. That learning will continue, with particular reference to our consideration of how we might phase out or ease the current restrictions.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I ask for even shorter questions and answers, please.

Bill Bowman (North East Scotland) (Con): I turn to the subject of primary care. As recently as today, I have been contacted by constituents who are very concerned about the looming closure, in July, of the Abbey general practice in Arbroath, which has about 6,500 patients. I understand that resources are being focused on tackling the coronavirus, but can the cabinet secretary offer my constituents any comfort that they will still have a viable general practice service after July?

Jeane Freeman: The right thing for me to do is to ask Mr Bowman to write to me with details of that practice. We will then investigate its situation and reply to him fully.

Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): I was pleased to hear that, at her briefing today, the First Minister announced guidance on the wearing of face coverings. The cabinet secretary will know that I have been calling for the issuing of advice on that matter. Will she outline the Government's current thinking on making the wearing of face coverings mandatory when people are outside, as other countries have done, and especially as we begin to consider any easing of the lockdown measures?

Jeane Freeman: As members who have seen the First Minister's lunchtime briefing will know, the Government's position is not to make the use of face coverings mandatory. That is partly because the science on the benefits of doing so is not unequivocal, although it is sufficiently strong to lead us to consider that it is right to provide the advice that the First Minister has set out and which is now widely available.

It is important to say that the guidance refers to face coverings and not to face masks—especially not the surgical masks that we need for health and social care. The guidance states that people should use such coverings in situations in which social distancing is not possible or is more difficult. However, the really important point that I must make is that the use of such coverings should not in any sense be a substitute for following all the measures that are currently in place—especially those on social distancing, hand hygiene and staying at home with the exception of periods in

which the limited activities that have been outlined may be carried out.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Every Thursday evening we rightly applaud the work of health and social care staff. However, they need more than our applause. I hope that, in the fullness of time, their contribution and service will be recognised through their salaries, because they represent a predominantly low-paid, female workforce. I invite the cabinet secretary to take an immediate step towards offering such recognition by paying the registration fees of nurses and social care staff this year, which the GMB campaigned for prior to the pandemic.

Jeane Freeman: I am sure that Ms Baillie knows that I completely share the sentiments behind her question. I will be happy to look at her request, consider how we might respond to it and let her know the response in early course.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes questions on the cabinet secretary's statement. My apologies to Stuart McMillan, Anas Sarwar and Jamie Halcro Johnston that we are unable to accommodate their questions, but we must move on to the next item of business.

Transport (Covid-19)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): The next item of business is a statement by Michael Matheson on transport in a Covid-19 world. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of his statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

15:14

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity (Michael Matheson): I would like to provide Parliament with an update on the measures that we are taking in relation to Scotland's transport system as we continue to respond proactively to the challenges that are presented by the Covid-19 threat.

First, I thank the people of Scotland, who have heeded the Government's clear advice not to travel unless it is essential. We all need to continue with that co-operation as we begin to look at any easing of restrictions. As the First Minister noted on the publication last week of our paper "COVID-19—A Framework for Decision Making", if we all keep doing the right thing, there will be a way through, and we will find it together.

In keeping our transport network running while we have been tackling the virus, our transport workers on the front line have shown dedication, professionalism and resolve. I offer my sincere thanks to all of them. I am extremely grateful for the way in which our transport community, across all modes and types of travel, has assisted with the national effort, with companies and individuals going beyond business as usual to make sure that our transport system operates to keep key workers moving, essential goods flowing and essential journeys supported.

In the transport sector, we have received offers of assistance including offers of vans, cars, boats, aeroplanes and helicopters. That is genuinely remarkable and I thank everyone for those kind offers. We are liaising across the Scottish Government, local authorities and local resilience partners to establish where those offers of assistance can be most effectively deployed.

Since this crisis began, we have seen a consistent pattern in travel trends. The latest weekly trends summary was compiled by Transport Scotland last Tuesday, and officials will publish updated indicators this week. The most recent data shows that travel is estimated to be around one trip per person per day, which is approximately one third of normal levels, and travel has almost wholly reduced to essential trips.

Although travel by motor vehicles has continued to remain steady at 75 per cent less than normal

levels, travel by active modes has continued to rise. Walking activity has increased across Scotland since the low of the first week of lockdown and the level of cycling activity last week was 35 per cent higher than the weekly average in February. Only a few people are still using public transport, with demand across all modes typically 90 to 95 per cent less than normal.

In that context, the Government's first priority has been to ensure the stability and functionality of our transport system. On bus and rail travel, my priority has been to ensure that, for essential travel and those key workers who rely on public transport, adequate transport links are in place to allow them to continue to lead the fight against Covid-19.

We are ensuring that essential services continue to run, and we are protecting vital transport industries for the future by providing operators with significant financial support at a time when revenues are considerably reduced.

On bus travel, we are maintaining concessionary travel reimbursement and bus service operators grant payments at the levels forecast prior to the impact of Covid-19, in which we would typically spend more than £260 million every year in supporting bus services. That arrangement will be kept under review in order to best support our bus industry.

The Scottish Government has put in place temporary variations to the ScotRail and Caledonian Sleeper franchises to minimise disruption to passengers and rail employees. That will ensure that passenger services can continue to operate during this period, albeit on a reduced timetable and in accordance with physical distancing measures. Both franchisees have agreed to those temporary variations, which will be in place for a minimum of six months.

The First Minister has made clear the need to avoid all but essential travel to Scotland's remote and island communities. In order to protect the safety and security of our islands and remote communities while supporting our ferry and aviation stakeholders to be able to continue to provide their lifeline services, we moved early to put in place restrictions on who can travel on our ferries. To ensure that essential connectivity is maintained between the islands and the mainland, we have agreed that CalMac Ferries can retain a level of service for those who live and work on our islands. To maintain air connectivity, the Scottish Government has contracted Loganair to provide services between the mainland and key island destinations until the end of April.

Those services are available to passengers with an essential need to travel to and from the islands, including national health service patients, essential

workers and people returning home. Importantly, the services are also being used to move essential supplies such as blood samples and cancer treatments, as well as mail items. Feedback from islands authorities is that the services have been operating well during April, so I can announce today that I have asked Loganair to continue the flights until the end of May, which will be in addition to ferry operators continuing to maintain their essential services.

I will now touch on our support for patients and key workers in the health sector. Working across Government, Transport Scotland has helped to produce a guidance document on the transportation of Covid-19 symptomatic patients, and my officials continue to work collaboratively with NHS Scotland to co-ordinate and distribute vehicles to meet emerging demands. We have received many offers of support, but I would specifically like to mention the support from Arnold Clark, which has directly supported patient transport by providing NHS boards with access to 120 nine-seater minibuses and more than 500 hire vehicles free of charge.

Service providers have adapted their timetables to accommodate the needs of key workers. The bus and rail sectors are working with the NHS and other key stakeholders to ensure that key routes, such as those that serve medical centres and hospitals, are being prioritised, with timetables that recognise NHS shift patterns. Operators advise that they are altering routes where possible in the light of feedback from key workers.

The First Minister has today advised of guidance being published on the Scottish Government website regarding the wearing of face coverings in certain limited circumstances, such as on public transport or when shopping. The guidance is a recommendation for consideration rather than a mandatory requirement for the public. I stress that physical distancing, hand washing and respiratory hygiene are the most important and effective measures that we can all adopt to prevent the spread of coronavirus. Therefore, the wearing of facial coverings must not be used as an alternative to any of those other precautions. By "facial covering", we do not mean a surgical or other medical grade mask; we mean a covering of the mouth and nose that is made of cloth or other textiles.

More broadly, my officials at Transport Scotland are currently considering how travel behaviours may change as and when Scotland moves out of the current lockdown. That work recognises that a requirement for physical distancing is likely to remain for some time to come and will have implications for how our transport system is able to operate safely and support people and businesses in Scotland.

As the First Minister set out in “COVID-19—A Framework for Decision Making”, we need to consider the new normal for transport and have a grown-up conversation about the choices that need to be made. People and businesses have a part to play in helping us to make this work.

We must be open and transparent about how transport capacity will be limited because of continued physical distancing. Initial thinking suggests that capacity on our public transport system could be reduced to between 10 and 25 per cent of previous levels, so we will need to ensure a system-wide approach to our transport network’s operation within those constraints. We need many of the measures that have helped to reduce demand, such as working from home, to continue.

An area of our transition thinking that I would like to highlight is active travel. As I mentioned, it is heartening to see an increase in the number of people who have been cycling and walking over the past few weeks, and we want those behavioural changes to endure during this public health emergency and beyond.

My officials are working with Sustrans and local authorities to help to ensure that people are able to walk, cycle and wheel safely during lockdown, including key workers who travel to work and people visiting shops for essential items or taking daily exercise. Doing that is important to support people’s health and wellbeing, and we need to provide more space for people to keep physically distancing in a safe way. Therefore, I am today writing to Scotland’s local authorities to detail a package of support to implement temporary measures so that people can be active while physically distancing, safe from traffic.

The package consists of 100 per cent funding for local authorities to put in place temporary measures, such as pop-up cycle lanes and wider walkways, through a new spaces for people fund of £10 million that will be administered by Sustrans; guidance to support local authorities on the use of existing legislation that gives them powers to quickly implement temporary road reallocation measures; and access to a range of advice and support from Transport Scotland and the Scottish Government on topics including construction, public health, equalities and communications.

I very much hope that local authorities will come forward with bold, ambitious plans to implement temporary active travel measures, following the example of cities, towns and places around the world.

Transport has a crucial role to play in the recovery of the economy and we need to be clear about what we are thinking of doing differently in

the future to aid that recovery. We must be bold in our actions to reset the system to meet our climate change ambitions, reduce inequalities, improve our health and wellbeing and deliver sustainable economic growth. We are working with partners to identify issues and to understand how to support organisations through the current crisis, maintain capacity, skills and expertise, and recover swiftly.

Our key aim across all modes of transport—as demonstrated by the support package for our sectors that I have mentioned—is that our operators will be in a good position to recover when we start to open up again. We are already planning a range of actions for future recovery—supporting the resurgence of a healthy bus industry, for example, will be a vital early step. We are working now to ensure that the right conditions will be in place for Scotland’s cities and regions to recover quickly towards a cleaner and greener future, and I want the bus manufacturing sector and supply chain to lead on that approach. We must also start planning now to ensure that the low-carbon vehicle supply chain can continue to have a strong presence in supporting the global shift to low-emission transport systems.

A new rail recovery task force involving Network Rail, ScotRail, Caledonian Sleeper and Transport Scotland has been formed. In consultation with staff representatives, the group is developing a pragmatic approach to rail recovery that will take account of physical distancing and the safety of passengers and staff during a phased increase in rail service levels.

We must start planning now for the recovery of the construction industry. Transport Scotland is undertaking an exercise to explore ways in which our major transport projects could restart in the event of construction sector guidance being relaxed. Work is also under way to identify potential capital initiatives and infrastructure projects that could be progressed as part of any wider economic recovery plan, should funding become available.

I would like to conclude by looking to the future. The impact of Covid-19 will have changed our economy, our society and our use of technology. We all recognise that this new normal may have to be in place for some time. The necessary changes that lie ahead will require us to adapt how we plan, deliver and manage our transport system. Addressing the uncertainties of the future will require a concerted effort from all parts of Scottish society—national, regional and local—and we will use the available evidence, as it emerges, to inform our policy decision making.

We now have an opportunity to consider how we can sustain some of our behavioural changes, including greater home working and increased use of digital technology, both of which have

been adopted rapidly during the pandemic and are impacting positively on improving air quality and reducing accidents and emissions.

We can now begin to shape the transport system that we want and need for the future by working together on shared principles, being guided by evidence and taking focused action so that we ensure that the people of Scotland can prosper in the future.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The cabinet secretary will now take questions on the issues that were raised in his statement. We are already running late. That is partly due to statements being overly lengthy, but it is also due to members making statements before they ask their questions. If we are to be fair and get through everyone who wants to ask a question about the transport statement, members will have to be a bit more concise. I will allow 30 minutes for questions.

Gordon Lindhurst (Lothian) (Con): I thank the transport secretary for providing early sight of his statement.

As the transport secretary will be aware, although flight and passenger numbers to Scottish airports including Edinburgh airport have dropped drastically, planes are still arriving, including planes from international airports and planes carrying passengers from outwith the United Kingdom on connecting flights. Unlike some other countries in Europe and elsewhere, we have so far not adopted restrictions, mass screening or quarantine measures for people entering the country.

Has the transport secretary had discussions with the UK Government on that issue? What steps has the Scottish Government taken to protect the Scottish public from inward transmission of the virus to Scotland from people returning to or entering the country? What funding has been set aside for future measures at airports to guard against health risks?

Michael Matheson: The member raises a very important issue that relates to the on-going debate about air connectivity and checks at airports. I assure him that we have had direct engagement with the UK Government on the issue. A key part of that engagement concerns the fact that any change to the existing health guidance for the checks that are implemented at our airports must be consistent across the UK, otherwise it would compromise any alternative arrangements that we might put in place here in Scotland.

Our view is that, as we start to make the transition, there is a need to review the existing guidance. Work has already been undertaken in Scotland with partners in other parts of the UK to consider whether further checks need to be implemented at our airports. I assure the member

that dialogue is taking place on such checks, and that we continue to engage with the UK Government on what shape those checks should take in the future.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank the cabinet secretary for providing advance sight of his statement.

Today is international workers memorial day. I express my thanks to our critical transport workers, who have stepped up to the mark and have kept Scotland moving by doing everything from delivering essential goods to our supermarkets to ensuring that their fellow key workers, such as our NHS staff, are able to get to work to care for our loved ones.

Given the substantial and welcome support that was previously announced for the bus and rail sectors, does the cabinet secretary agree that the Scottish Government has missed an opportunity to follow Northern Ireland and Wales by ensuring that that support also delivered free public transport for our key workers, including NHS staff and carers?

I welcome the setting up of the new rail recovery task force to develop a pragmatic approach to rail recovery, but does the cabinet secretary agree that we need a similar process for the bus sector—not least because there are more providers and passengers in that sector—in order to ensure that we also deliver a phased increase in bus services that is safe for passengers and workers?

Michael Matheson: I echo Colin Smyth's points about the tremendous efforts that have been made by workers right across our transport sector. As I outlined in my statement, our priority has been to make sure that we maintain, support and supplement, where necessary, travel services for those who are accessing our healthcare facilities, medical facilities and other key establishments to which public transport is critical. I am aware that a number of bus operators in Scotland have already chosen to implement free travel for NHS employees, although not for social care staff.

The rail recovery task force has been created specifically to deal with the complexities that exist around rail services. For example, the challenges with capacity in our rail services and the safety restrictions that apply to them create an additional layer of complexity for any recovery plan that needs to be put in place, which is not reflected in the same way in the bus industry. That said, we are in regular dialogue with the sector on recovery plans that could be put in place, and on what we can do to provide assistance as and when it is necessary.

The task force has been set up for rail recovery because of the specific regulatory challenges that the rail network will face in trying to address the

challenges of physical distancing while increasing levels of transport. For example, the way in which we manage passengers on and off trains will be greatly complicated by social distancing, so the capacity of rail services will be greatly reduced as a result. Detailed consideration is being given to plans for how we can manage that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to open questions.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): It is clear that the new normal will have to mean safer streets where we live, with slower traffic speeds and enough room for everyone to get around on foot or by bike without fear of injury or infection, so I warmly welcome the new spaces for people support package that has just been announced. How will the cabinet secretary ensure that every council seizes the opportunity and puts appropriate measures in place as quickly as possible, including temporary measures that could become permanent features of our towns and cities in the future?

Michael Matheson: I am grateful to Mark Ruskell for his question. I am writing to all 32 local authorities today, setting out the package of measures that we are putting in place, and enclosing guidance. That will provide them with the advice and information that they require in order to take plans through the regulatory process at local level, which they have control over, and it will encourage them to be bold in imagining how they will take the measures forward at local level. Many of the measures will have very low costs and it will be possible to implement them quickly, should local authorities choose to do so.

I know from my engagement with a number of our major cities' local authorities that they already have in place detailed plans that they would like to take forward. I am keen for them to make progress on that as quickly as possible.

I have no doubt that some local authorities will be more ambitious than others. I encourage all members who are in the chamber today to encourage their local authorities to participate in the programme so that we can capitalise on the benefits that can come from making greater use of the existing road space.

Mike Rumbles (North East Scotland) (LD): The Liberal Democrats are very pleased to see the fund for local authorities for temporary measures including new cycle lanes and widening of walkways. The cabinet secretary and I spoke about the subject on Thursday, so he knows that we fully support those measures.

However, is the cabinet secretary certain that local authorities have the legal powers to implement the initiatives quickly? How quickly does he envisage new cycle lanes and wider

walkways being implemented? He said that some things will be done more quickly than others, but what is his view on how quickly they can be done?

Michael Matheson: Mike Rumbles is correct: we discussed the matter last Thursday as an issue that I was considering. The guidance that we are issuing to local authorities sets out the provisions in existing legislation that local authorities have to hand, whereby they can implement temporary measures very quickly. When I say that, I mean in a matter of a couple of weeks. If local authorities have plans that they are looking to implement, they can accelerate the process in order to have plans implemented very quickly, and the guidance gives them clear advice on that.

Alongside that, we are supplementing the guidance with access to expert advice from Transport Scotland, and our partners in the Scottish Government, to provide local authorities with any additional support and information that they might require in order to implement such measures, which can be taken forward in a matter of weeks, if councils are determined to do so.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): Will the cabinet secretary join me in encouraging local authorities to engage with third sector organisations and with groups that represent visually impaired and disabled people that have been considering innovative ways to improve active travel infrastructure? Will Transport Scotland's advice include links that would facilitate local authorities partnering with such organisations?

Michael Matheson: I certainly encourage local authorities to engage with organisations in the third sector and those that represent the needs of people who have a visual impairment or physical disability that impairs their overall mobility. That is why wheeling must be part of the mix in any additional infrastructure that is put in place.

I expect local authorities to ensure, as part of their engagement on the plans that they are looking to take forward, that they do not compromise the ability of people who have impaired mobility to cross roads and to use pedestrian crossing facilities. I encourage local authorities to undertake that engagement. The guidance that we provide them with will point them in the right direction to get advice and information.

Michelle Ballantyne (South Scotland) (Con): Scotland's coach industry is on the verge of collapse, with coach operators and related businesses of all sizes now going out of business every day. Our coach industry is the workhorse of the Scottish tourism industry. It supports 1.8 million tourist journeys, which equates to £850 million of value to the Scottish economy, as well

as providing school transport and crisis cover when other modes of travel—train or air—fail.

Coaches are also often called on to help in high-risk situations such as extreme weather. With the cancellation of hundreds of thousands of pounds' worth of business over the coming summer, the industry now needs our support. As the cabinet secretary did not mention the coach industry in his statement, will he commit to working with the industry to ensure that it survives until 2021, when its tourist market will—I hope—recover?

Michael Matheson: The coach industry is able to access the provisions in the business support package that my colleague the Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Kate Forbes, set out. The package exists to assist businesses across the country in a wide range of sectors. The coach industry is no different from other businesses in that respect.

Alongside that, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities has issued guidance to advise local authorities that they should continue to pay for existing school coach contracts until the end of the summer term.

However, I say to Michelle Ballantyne that the reason why I did not directly mention the industry is that it is led on by my colleague the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism, Fergus Ewing, because it falls within the tourism sector. I know that Mr Ewing and his officials have been very engaged with the coach industry on the matter, and I have no doubt that they will wish to keep Parliament updated on progress around the challenges that the coach sector is facing.

Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): The cabinet mentioned that very few journeys are being made on our road and rail networks at this time. In that light, on potential easing of the lockdown, will consideration be given—subject to appropriate risk assessments—to allowing vital road and rail repairs and maintenance to proceed, which would be timely and would provide much-needed work?

Michael Matheson: I am grateful to Annabelle Ewing for her question. I assure her that the existing guidance allows for essential works to be undertaken, whether they are on the trunk road network, or on the local road network and are therefore for local authorities to undertake.

Equally, where work is identified that is safety critical and essential for maintaining and sustaining services on the rail network, there is scope for that work to be undertaken.

The risk assessment processes that trunk road maintenance contractors and Network Rail have in place are about assessing such issues to ensure that only work that is viewed as essential to maintaining access to the road and rail networks is

undertaken. I give Annabelle Ewing that assurance.

We will, of course, give consideration to whether there should be any change to construction guidance that would allow other construction works to be undertaken, including on major transport projects. I currently have officials reviewing all our major transport projects in order to identify changes in the guidance on construction that would allow some of them to become active again. We are monitoring the situation almost daily, and we will continue to review it as guidance on the issues moves forward.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): I welcome the cabinet secretary's announcement on speeding up the process of increasing space for walking and cycling in order to enable safe social distancing in the weeks and months to come. Will the investment be able to address the specific issues of poor surfaces on our pavements and potholes on our roads, which make walking unsafe—in particular for people with disabilities—and roads unsafe for cyclists? I welcome the fact that the process will be speedy, but will the cabinet secretary monitor the speed at which the £10 million is invested?

Michael Matheson: Local authorities already have funding to deal with potholes on our existing road network. I encourage every local authority to undertake that work if it is appropriate and essential, which is for them to decide. The fund that I have announced is not for that purpose, but is specifically for creation of temporary cycleways and walkways for members of the public, including cyclists, in order to support physical distancing in a safe way.

Many of the measures that local authorities need to implement are low-cost measures. The funding is to ensure that they have the opportunity to implement them as quickly as possible. I certainly want to see local authorities take a bold opportunity to implement plans that can make a real difference to people on their daily exercise journey or their commute, so that they can use active travel in a safe and viable way.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I welcome the additional £49.7 million that the cabinet secretary is providing to support Scotland's ferry services, which reemphasises the Scottish Government's commitment to our island communities. However, last week, the MV Caledonian Isles had to go to Aberdeen for repairs having again broken down, as it already has several times this year. The vessel was operating only a reduced service due to the pandemic. Had we been in a normal year, there would have been major difficulties in getting people, goods and vehicles to and from the Isle of Arran. How can the cabinet secretary reassure islanders that CalMac

will be able to provide a reliable service, given those recent events?

Michael Matheson: The member will be aware that the timetable that is in place for CalMac services is significantly reduced. Passenger numbers for CalMac services have dropped by around 96 per cent of what they would be at this point in any other year. There is a significant level of additional capacity in the system because of the reduced timetable and the reduced passenger numbers.

I assure the member that we consistently matters to do with reliability with CalMac to ensure that it puts the necessary measures in place and addresses any technical issues that might arise as quickly as possible in order to help improve resilience on the network. I assure him that his concerns, which he raises regularly with ministers, are well recognised and we will continue to impress them on CalMac in our engagement with them.

Maurice Corry (West Scotland) (Con): To help the operators in the sector better understand what financial support is available, will the cabinet secretary agree to publish details of the level of support that is being made available to the transport sector, broken down according to rail, bus, aviation and other modes of transport?

Michael Matheson: The member will be aware that we have taken swift measures to support and assist the transport sector in its different modes as it faces financial challenges. Those measures change depending on the nature of the services that we are expecting of the different modes of transport. I assure the member that we will keep him updated on the costs that are associated with those interventions when we are in a position to do so.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): How has the rail system been performing during lockdown and, in particular, has rail freight been making a positive contribution?

Michael Matheson: The member will recognise that the level of service and passenger load on our rail network is much lower than it would normally be. However, performance has been exceptionally good, well exceeding, at 98 per cent, the original franchise commitment of 92.5 per cent. I recognise that it is difficult to measure that figure against that of the normal franchise agreement, given the lower passenger load and the reduced services that are provided.

We have seen an overall reduction in freight as a result of a reduction in demand for construction goods and car vehicle transportation. The increase in the overall freight picture has been in foodstuffs transported to supermarkets by freight. We are seeing an increase in freight in the areas in which

there is an increase in demand for services, such as the supply of foodstuffs. However, in areas in which we have seen an economic decline, such as construction, as work on many sites has come to a stop, and car sales, which have effectively stopped, we are seeing a reduction in freight. Therefore, overall, there has been a reduction in rail freight, but we are seeing increases in some of the key areas in which we would like to see further growth.

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): If we reduce capacity in our peak train services by 10 to 25 per cent, we will not provide every passenger with a seat, never mind provide social distancing space. What is the thinking on how we will provide the service capacity to get people to work with safe spaces for staff and passengers? In a city such as Edinburgh, is the danger not that we will transfer people back on to the roads, and gridlock will just get worse?

Michael Matheson: The reality is that we cannot just switch the transport system back on. While we apply social distancing, it is not possible to meet the demands that people normally expect to be able to make on our transport system. For example, while physical distancing has to be implemented, a train carriage might be able to carry only a fifth of the passengers that it would normally be expected to carry. If a train leaves Waverley station and heads to Glasgow, how do we manage the passengers who are getting on the train and the flow of passengers at different stations in between to make sure that we maintain social distancing? There are real challenges in managing the demands that may be made on our rail network, as well as the demands on our bus network. While social distancing has to be applied, buses will very often only have a quarter of the capacity that they would normally be expected to have.

We all have a part to play. The transport system simply cannot pick up all that demand while also meeting social and physical distancing requirements. While social distancing is required, businesses that can have staff work from home need to continue to do so. We have to continue to explore and consider the means by which we can reduce the need for people to travel. Greater use of active travel might be appropriate for some people, but for someone coming from West Lothian into Edinburgh, it may not be. If people simply jump into their cars, we will have gridlock because the cities will not be able to cope.

We are undertaking a significant amount of work to understand any changes that might be made to the existing restrictions that are in place, however small they may be, by assessing what impact they would have on our transport system and whether the transport system would be able to cope with

demand, given the need to maintain social distancing. My officials and I are involved in a very complex piece of work on those issues, along with colleagues in health and other parts of Government. I do not for one minute want to give the impression that it will be an easy thing to resolve—it will be very challenging. We will be required to have a new normal and change our ways of working in order to meet the on-going challenges that are associated with maintaining physical distancing and its impact on the transport system.

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): Will the cabinet secretary outline what engagement he has had with the UK Government regarding the systems that will be required at airports and other transport hubs as consideration is given to relaxing the lockdown?

Michael Matheson: We have regular discussions with the UK Government, including at a ministerial level, which I have been directly involved in. They cover a range of issues, including matters that are relevant to our aviation sector.

As I mentioned in response to Gordon Lindhurst's question, the position is that further assessment work has been undertaken by Health Protection Scotland, which is engaging with its counterparts in other parts of the UK, to consider what further guidance might be required for any health checks that may have to be implemented at our airports. Any changes to the guidance for the current lockdown arrangements will be reviewed with regard to what extra measures might need to be put in place. I assure David Torrance that it is an area that we are considering and on which we are working with UK counterparts, because there needs to be consistency in how we take matters forward for our airports across the UK.

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): In the cabinet secretary's statement, he referred to CalMac and Loganair but did not refer to NorthLink Ferries and Pentland Ferries, which continue to deliver vital lifeline links to the northern isles and to ensure that freight is shipped to and from the islands. With passenger revenue almost non-existent, there is clearly a serious cost to those operators. What financial concerns have been raised with the cabinet secretary by the operators on those routes? How does the Scottish Government plan to respond to those concerns?

Michael Matheson: We have had engagement with Serco and Pentland Ferries to discuss the financial implications for them. We are providing them with support, given the financial challenges that they face.

Angela Constance (Almond Valley) (SNP): Companies such as Edinburgh Coach Lines, AAA Coaches and Prentice Westwood in my constituency are unsung heroes, given that they step into difficult situations at short notice when other transport modes fail or will not do. What further consideration will the cabinet secretary give to specific support for the coach industry to ensure that such companies not only survive the pandemic but help our communities thrive and develop resilience, given their access to vehicles and highly skilled drivers? Those companies want to help and we should do more to help them to help us.

Michael Matheson: I recognise the challenges that the coach sector is experiencing—that point was raised earlier by Michelle Ballantyne. I assure Angela Constance that my colleague Fergus Ewing and his tourism officials are engaged with the sector in looking at some of the specific challenges that it faces as a result of the marked downturn in tourism, particularly for companies that previously supported the cruise sector from which, obviously, there has been a significant drop-off in demand for support from coach services. I have no doubt that Fergus Ewing will keep the Parliament updated on any progress that is made on those matters.

As I mentioned, we have had more than 160 offers of assistance from the transport sector, ranging from helicopters and planes to boats, vans, cars and buses. If the businesses that Angela Constance made reference to wish to offer specific support to the Scottish Government in meeting some of the challenges that we face, she can pass on the information to me and I will ensure that that is followed up and that we contact the companies directly to explore those matters.

Andy Wightman (Lothian) (Green): In the cabinet secretary's statement, he talked about working with Sustrans to ensure that people are able to travel during the lockdown. He also talked about writing to Scotland's local authorities detailing a package of support for temporary measures. Is that support just for the lockdown or will it continue into what we all anticipate will be a transition period during which life is largely back to normal but social distancing is still required?

Michael Matheson: They are temporary measures for the period while we still have social and physical distancing. As we know, that could be for an extended period of time and possibly many months. The intention is that the funding over the course of the next couple of months supports local authorities in implementing packages that support people to choose to make use of active travel modes while maintaining social distancing.

As we eventually move out of social distancing, some local authorities might consider the temporary infrastructure arrangements that they have put in place and choose to continue with them permanently, but that will very much be a matter for local authorities.

There is a funding regime in place with which we support active travel infrastructure and which local authorities access for that purpose. On a temporary basis, we are changing part of that fund to get funding quickly to local authorities to allow them to put infrastructure arrangements in place. That means that they could be in place for the extended period during which physical social distancing has to be maintained, which could be for many months, as I said.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): I want to emphasise the point that Andy Wightman made. If we are going to spend £10 million on measures to make it easier for people to cycle and walk, we should maintain that progress. If more people are cycling—and the figures are impressive—we do not want to spend £10 million on measures that are then taken away so that things slip back. Perhaps the issue is the word “temporary”; when the cabinet secretary contacts councils, perhaps he ought to emphasise that the measures do not have to be temporary and could be permanent.

Michael Matheson: I very much welcome that position from the Conservative Party. I hope that it will continue to be the party’s position when it comes to permanent arrangements for removing road space in towns and cities across the country, because the Conservatives have not always taken such a position on the matter. I welcome what appears to be a change in tone and approach in light of recent experience.

I would like the behaviour changes that we are seeing to be maintained. However, the funding that we are making available is to assist local authorities to take action, where possible, in very short order, to support people. Should local authorities wish to consider putting in permanent infrastructure, they will have to go through a more detailed process, because of the implications of such an approach. A legal process must be gone through to put in permanent physical infrastructure of that nature.

No doubt, people will express views on that and local authorities might choose to implement measures on a permanent basis. People who have taken up cycling much more regularly might choose to continue to cycle, which would be a positive thing for us all. I am cycling much more than I have done for many years, as a result of the quieter roads and the ability to get around more readily. The increase in cycling is a positive

element over the past couple of weeks, in what has been a challenging period.

The funding that I announced is to try to help local authorities to support people to walk and cycle safely while maintaining physical distance.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes questions on the statement on transport. Before we move on, I take the opportunity to remind measures—I will start again; it is just as well that I am not making a 15-minute statement. I remind members that social distancing measures are in place and ask them to observe them, including when they are entering and exiting the chamber.

Topical Question Time

16:02

Ban on Public Gatherings (Impact on Sport)

1. Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what it considers will be the impact on sport of an extended ban on public gatherings. (S5T-02111)

The Minister for Public Health, Sport and Wellbeing (Joe FitzPatrick): The Scottish Government recognises that the restrictions on gatherings have had an impact on people across Scotland and that sport has been similarly affected. I thank the sporting sector for its understanding and co-operation.

Sportscotland is working with the Scottish sporting governing bodies to understand the impact of social distancing measures and the possible need for an extended ban on public gatherings. It will look at the short, medium and long-term impacts that the restrictions will have and at how it, along with the Scottish Government, can help the sector through this period.

We appreciate the impact on community sport. Sportscotland is undertaking a survey of sports clubs and groups to understand how impacts are being felt across all sports, at all levels.

The measures that are in place are tough but they are absolutely necessary if we are to slow the spread of the virus, protect the national health service and save lives.

Kenneth Gibson: Thousands of people work in sport, in places from sportscotland's national training centres, two of which are in my constituency, to local golf, football and rugby clubs and so on. If the United Kingdom Government ends furlough payments and the ban on large gatherings remains in place, how will people who are employed in sport retain their livelihoods?

Joe FitzPatrick: We recognise the enormous reach of sport and its impact on communities and individuals. Sport delivers a wide range of social, health and economic benefits, and we want clubs and organisations, across all sports, to survive this terrible pandemic.

The Scottish Government and the UK Government are providing a range of financial and business support. The Scottish Government and sportscotland are working with the sector to understand what support it will need to restart activities as soon as it is safe to do so. It is important that we get the balance correct and that issues such as Mr Gibson raised are part of on-going discussions with the UK Government.

Kenneth Gibson: Football alone has 470,000 registered male and female players in Scotland, and hundreds of clubs at every level. In 2019, it directly contributed £215 million to the economy, with social benefits worth £320 million and active participation leading to £690 million in healthcare savings. Does the minister accept that, unless football and other sports are able to restart playing soon after lockdown ends—albeit safely—some clubs could fold, and many of the economic, social and health benefits to individuals and society would be lost?

Joe FitzPatrick: It is important that we continue to work with all the sporting sectors. Obviously, football, our national game, has a particularly powerful reach across Scotland. It goes much wider than the economic benefits; the social benefits and the impact on people's mental health as a result of both spectating at and participating in football and other sports, must not be underestimated. However, it is important that, as we take the next steps, we do so carefully in order to protect life. That is why I and my officials are working with sportscotland to understand what we can do to continue to support football and other sports and ensure that as much of our sporting collateral as possible survives the pandemic.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): Given the minister's answer, I think that he agrees with me that sport, leisure and recreation activities will become ever more important as we tackle our physical, mental and emotional health. On the back of that, what considerations has the Scottish Government given to supporting sports governing bodies, arm's-length external organisations, sports clubs and third sector organisations such as the guides and the scouts to ensure that they are still there to support our communities when the time comes?

Joe FitzPatrick: I agree with the member's points. There is a range of support. I mentioned the business support from the Scottish Government and the UK Government. Additionally, we are working with sportscotland, which has communicated to all Scottish sports bodies and local partners that they will be receiving six months' payment up front for this year—a £16.4 million payment—to help them through the pandemic, and that it will be relaxing the usual targets to help to ensure that organisations survive the pandemic.

Across sport, there are amazing examples of sports clubs and hubs reaching out to their membership and doing fantastic things at all levels, from community sports clubs upwards. A really good example—not the only one in football, because there are many—is the decision of Hibernian FC to put "Thank You NHS" on its strips for next year to raise funds for Edinburgh &

Lothians Health Foundation. The power of that commitment from the team, and the financial commitment that will go along with it, should not be underestimated. We need to support the huge amount of good work that is going on, which is what the Government and sportscotland will continue to do.

James Kelly (Glasgow) (Lab): I have been approached by a number of constituents who are golfers who have pointed out the benefits to physical and mental wellbeing of being able to play golf. Obviously, they are not able to do that due to the lockdown. What consideration have the minister and his officials given to whether golf can take place once the lockdown is lifted, bearing in mind that social distancing can take place on a golf course?

Joe FitzPatrick: Scottish Golf is one of the organisations that I intend to meet in the near future in order to discuss its particular needs. Right now, though, it is important that we get the message out—it is a message not just from the Scottish Government but from Scottish Golf—that golf should not be taking place anywhere in Scotland.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): I remind the chamber that I chair the cross-party group on the future of football in Scotland.

Even the most committed football fan would agree that the entertainment side of the sport needs to take a back seat during these times. However, some of our clubs are much more than the football played on a Saturday. They are local businesses, employing many people, and they are centres for community networks and a lifeline for many. My local club, Albion Rovers, has been part of the Coatbridge community for nearly 140 years. It has been in touch to say that its existence is threatened. The club relies on gate receipts, and while plans to play games behind closed doors may be a solution for clubs in higher leagues, they will not be a solution for Albion Rovers. Is there a continued commitment to our clubs, particularly smaller ones such as the Rovers, to support them for as long as necessary, as we have supported other businesses, and to help them through this crisis?

Joe FitzPatrick: As I said, a range of support is already in place for football teams and other clubs. The member makes an important distinction between football in Scotland and football elsewhere. There have been suggestions of changes and decisions elsewhere in the UK that have been driven largely by media requirements rather than sporting requirements. We have to make sure that any steps that we take in Scotland, while doing our best to support sport, limit the

spread of the virus, continue to protect the national health service and save lives.

Fraud (Vulnerable People)

2. Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what it is doing to tackle fraudsters who are targeting vulnerable people during the Covid-19 outbreak. (S5T-02112)

The Minister for Community Safety (Ash Denham): Criminals are seeking to capitalise on the Covid-19 pandemic and vulnerable people are especially at risk at this time. Doorstep crime, and scams and fraud, both online and off, are growing in number and it is becoming increasingly important to ensure that people and communities across Scotland are kept safe and resilient. The Scottish Government is working closely with Police Scotland and other partners to encourage the public to be more vigilant against fraud, and especially about sharing financial data and personal information.

We continue to support our partners to help them reprioritise work quickly and put in place resources that will help to inform and reassure the public. There are a number of national initiatives under way—for example, Crimestoppers has launched its shut out scammers campaign to raise awareness of doorstep crime, scams and frauds, with a focus on providing advice to those who are most vulnerable.

Neighbourhood Watch Scotland plays an important role in offering reassurance to local communities, and it has been sharing messages on potential criminal activities in its areas, offering advice on keeping safe and encouraging communities to look out for one another, especially the elderly and the vulnerable. The national cyber security centre is working with Police Scotland and the Scottish Government to raise awareness of the growing number of internet scams relating to Covid-19. It is important that the public think twice before they click on links.

Many organisations, at local and national levels, are working on protecting the most vulnerable. The Scottish Government recognises more than ever the importance of supporting our community safety partners through stepping up activity to provide advice and information during this time. We encourage anyone who has been the victim of a scam to report it to Police Scotland by calling 101. There is support available to victims of cybercrime via Victim Support Scotland.

Alexander Stewart: Despite some forms of crime being down significantly, there has been a 10 per cent spike in fraud cases across Scotland. That has included doorstep presentations of individuals saying that they work for the national

health service and are collecting funds, or offering shopping for money. Clearly, those are callous acts that exploit vulnerable people. What assurances can the Government give to allay people's fears?

Ash Denham: I am grateful to the member for raising the issue. Clearly, we do not want to get in the way of genuine volunteers who are doing amazing work in their communities to support the vulnerable. There are clear strategies that people can employ to make sure that they are not being taken advantage of. For instance, if someone who is not expected comes to the door, the householder needs to check that person's ID and call the organisation that issued the identity card, because sometimes identity cards can be faked. People should feel free to take some time to say, "Thank you," or, "No, thank you," and to shut the door and have a think before they progress. Crimestoppers is reprioritising its work in relation to Covid-19 issues. It has launched a central landing page on its website that directs people to some of the key issues that come up at the moment. There is an on-going campaign to raise awareness of Covid-19 issues such as those that the member has mentioned, including doorstep crime and other scams and fraud; it will also provide people with targeted advice.

Alexander Stewart: Even more worryingly, there has been a reported increase in fraudulent texts, some purporting to be from Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs indicating that tax refunds can be found and others saying that the recipient must pay a fine for breaking lockdown, while other people have received phone calls offering a vaccine trial with financial gain. Those are all devious ways of extorting funds from vulnerable people. What further action can the Government take to put a stop to that worrying behaviour?

Ash Denham: We have seen a rise in a number of scams such as those that the member mentioned, including websites offering fake treatments, fake testing kits and so on. Scams have also been set up to try to raise money for fake victims of Covid-19. The public need to be aware of the types of scams that are carrying on.

Ensuring that people in communities across Scotland are safe and resilient is vital, and it will play a key role in getting us through these difficult and unprecedented times. We are working closely with our partners during this crucial period to monitor the impact of those types of crimes on our communities' safety and to prevent and deal swiftly with any emerging issues.

The Government recognises the importance of supporting our national and local community safety partners and of them continuing to function and, where possible, step up their activity in order

to provide information, advice and reassurance during the on-going Covid-19 pandemic.

Home Care

3. **Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to reports that thousands of people in Scotland have lost their home care support during the Covid-19 crisis. (S5T-02122)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Jeane Freeman): It is important to be clear at the outset that the majority of people who receive home care support have not been reported as losing their home care packages. However, a significant number have, and I take that matter seriously. It is a matter of considerable concern, given our commitment to people's right to live as independently as they wish to, no matter what age they are.

We have taken a number of steps to assist in that regard. In addition to our direct investment of £800 million in social care, we have been clear that we will support additional costs that are incurred as a consequence of additional demand arising from Covid-19. As members know, we have also agreed with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities a number of actions to support social care, including the uplift of 3.3 per cent to all adult social care contracts to enable front-line social care workers to be paid at least a Scottish living wage. Further, in terms of workforce resilience, a significant number of former social care staff, alongside returning national health service employees, are ready to assist.

We have been clear with local authorities that they are still expected to do as much as they can to meet people's needs, with appropriate safeguarding measures in place. To ensure that we can resolve any issues as quickly as possible, my officials are in daily contact with chief officers of health and social care partnerships to hear directly from them about any concerns that they have about delivering that.

Ross Greer: I thank the cabinet secretary for that answer and for the remarks that she made in her earlier statement. The figures that have been published by the BBC reveal considerable regional variation across the country, with Inverclyde health and social care partnership, in my region, reducing its client and home care visits by more than 4,500, while Angus health and social care partnership has increased its by 80. Indeed, Glasgow—one of the worst-affected areas—says that it is running at a reduced capacity of almost 40 per cent in its care staff due to illness and self-isolation. What extra support is the Scottish Government providing to those partnerships that are clearly struggling more than others to meet demand?

Jeane Freeman: I repeat that it is unacceptable to cut the social care packages, in particular because we have made it clear, jointly with COSLA, in a letter that was written by me and Councillor Stuart Currie, that we would meet the additional costs that arise as a result of the demands of Covid-19 on social care packages in order to allow existing social care packages to continue to be provided as well as to meet additional demand. As I have said, we have returners ready to be deployed into the social care workforce precisely to help with the resilience questions that Mr Greer raises.

We are in direct contact with those local authorities that have made cuts to those packages and we are asking them to tell us what they need in terms of either resources or staffing. I regret to say that not all of them have done that, but we will continue to press very hard the point that they should reinstate those social care packages, bearing in mind their statutory obligations in that regard and our offers of significant support and help.

Ross Greer: Organisations such as Glasgow Disability Alliance have expressed concerns about the impact of those changes, which include individuals having their support packages dramatically reduced and others losing support entirely; some have been forced to rely on family members for personal care, meals and medication. The potential impact on the mental wellbeing of disabled people, particularly in relation to social isolation, which often disproportionately affects people with disabilities, is worrying. Are additional resources being put in place, particularly online or remotely, to provide specific mental health support to those who are affected?

Jeane Freeman: As Mr Greer knows, from my former responsibilities, the GDA and other disability organisations are well known to me. I take seriously the importance of enabling people to live as independently as they wish. They have the right to do that and those social care packages are critical to allowing them to do so. We will continue to press our local authority colleagues to take up the considerable support that we are offering them and to reinstate those packages as quickly as possible.

I appreciate the impact on individuals' mental health and wellbeing, whether or not they are disabled. A number of initiatives have been put in place to support the mental health and wellbeing of the population as a whole, some of which might be particularly appropriate to those who are affected in that area. However, if the GDA or others think that we can and should do more, I would be happy to hear from them and to consider what additional action we can take.

Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP): The providers of home care support packages, including personal care, currently follow United Kingdom-wide personal protective equipment guidance, which allows them to self-assess risk in relation to whether they wear a mask. However, confusingly, the same guidance says that masks need be worn only if the person who is receiving the care is symptomatic or shielded. Given the criticism of UK PPE guidance on last night's "Panorama", the fact that the First Minister has now advised members of the public to wear masks and the vulnerability of those who receive home care, will the Government publish Scottish guidance that instructs carers always to wear masks?

Jeane Freeman: The First Minister's advice was about face coverings and not masks. I am not being pedantic; it is an important point. If home care providers are following UK-wide PPE guidance, I do not understand, because the royal colleges and the chief medical and nursing officers clearly issued Scottish guidance. As a consequence of the discussion between COSLA, the relevant unions and me, additional clarity was provided. That guidance is clear: unless their professional judgment tells them that it is not necessary, home care providers and home care staff should wear masks. Rightly, we rely on the professional judgment of the home carers to make that decision. We are working with local authorities and others to ensure that the PPE that is supplied meets the right standard and that, where an emergency top-up is needed, we provide that from our national health service stockpile.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): On 7 April, I wrote to the cabinet secretary to raise the concerns of housing associations and sheltered housing properties regarding access to PPE; I have not yet received a response. Given the pressures regarding the procurement of PPE across the world and the number of vulnerable people who live in their properties, what help is being given to housing associations?

Jeane Freeman: The guidance to which I have just referred applies to areas, such as sheltered housing, where social care is provided. If those organisations, which will be private providers or local authorities, find it difficult to access the level and kind of PPE that they require, they are welcome to approach us; we will ensure that, where we can and according to the guidance, we will provide them with that top-up supply. There is no reason why we would not do so.

There is global demand for PPE but, as Mr Briggs will recall from the briefing that I held yesterday with the party spokespeople, we are doing everything that we can to ensure not only an adequate supply but, thanks to the good efforts of

my colleague, Mr McKee, to begin to increase the supply chain in Scotland for the provision of PPE.

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): Worryingly, many care packages have been withdrawn, and almost eight in 10 of Scotland's unpaid carers are providing more care since the Covid-19 outbreak.

Carers Scotland yesterday published a report: "Caring Behind Closed Doors". Does the Government accept the findings of that report, which surveyed almost 900 carers in Scotland, and does it accept its recommendations, which include a particular request for a carer wellbeing fund to be established that would enable Scotland's carer centres and young carer services to better support the needs of our unpaid carers?

Jeane Freeman: I am aware of that report and I know that the organisation has welcomed the inclusion of unpaid carers in the supply of personal protective equipment that I have announced. We will consider the recommendations very carefully and, with my colleagues Aileen Campbell and Shirley-Anne Somerville, will look at that specific request and see how best we may respond to it.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes topical questions.

First Minister's Question Time

16:25

Covid-19 (Care Homes)

1. **Jackson Carlaw (Eastwood) (Con):** This morning, the Health and Sport Committee heard from Professor Hugh Pennington. He suggested that, in care homes, for every one person with the virus, 10 to 14 other people can become infected, compared to between 0.6 and one additional person becoming infected outside care homes. Professor Pennington called for routine testing of care home workers.

Earlier today, the First Minister said, more or less, that the Scottish Government is looking at that, and that the matter is always under review. Care homes and families would appreciate a greater sense of urgency. What are the Scottish Government's specific plans for testing of all care home staff, and for testing of care home staff to become routine?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I have not had the opportunity to look in detail at Professor Pennington's evidence to the Health and Sport Committee this morning. I will, of course, do so when I am able.

I do not know what Professor Pennington based his assessment on. It was put to me earlier, at the daily update, that he had said that the R number—the reproduction rate—in care homes is, in his view, R10. I said last week that we think, based on the best estimate that we have at this stage, that in the community it is between R0.6 and R1. It is undoubtedly higher than that in care homes right now, but I do not know where the R10 figure comes from. It is certainly not based on any evidence or advice that I have been given.

We take the situation in care homes very seriously, and we treat all its different aspects as matters of urgency. Very clear guidance for care homes has been in place from early in the epidemic, and care home providers have a responsibility to ensure that it is implemented in full. We have enhanced the clinical leadership for care homes, and we have given particular responsibility to public health directors. The Care Inspectorate, working with local health protection teams, also has a key role.

We have been expanding our testing, in line with what we consider to be the best clinical approach. The situation now is that symptomatic residents in care homes should be tested, all those who are admitted to care homes should be tested, and care home workers who are off work or who are self-isolating also have access to testing. More than 20,000 health and care

workers—and, where appropriate, their families—have been tested; about 30 per cent of those are care home workers or their families. We will continue to take measured decisions about extending testing further.

One issue for which evidence about the virus is currently developing is in respect of asymptomatic people and the likelihood of their being able to transmit the virus at an early stage. The balance of judgement has been that that was not likely. However, that judgment is changing and we are taking account of that in our decisions on testing. This morning, we announced that all patients aged over 70 who are admitted to hospital will now be tested on admission, and thereafter every four days during their stay.

We continue to keep those matters under daily review. We will be guided in our decisions by the best possible evidence and will make sure that, as we expand testing, we are doing so for soundly based reasons.

Jackson Carlaw: As it becomes appreciated widely among the public that there is a higher rate of infection and death in care homes, it is difficult to overstate the level of concern for residents and their families. Care homes face additional issues.

National Records of Scotland publishes weekly figures, and is due to do so tomorrow. There are reports that care home residents who have died of Covid-19 have not appeared, as yet, in those official figures, because NRS includes only deaths for which Covid-19 has been specifically identified on the death certificate. The Care Inspectorate, on the other hand, records that data.

It is a sensitive subject, and good information is vital. Will the First Minister clarify whether the Care Inspectorate gives the Scottish Government those wider figures and, if so, will she publish them?

The First Minister: I think that there is a fear that there is underreporting of deaths, but the explanation that I will give in a second should give some reassurance. I hope that people will understand that the correct and robust bases for reporting deaths associated with Covid-19 are a test and/or an entry on a death certificate. It would not be sound to base reporting on anything beyond that, in terms of the connection between a person's death and the virus.

The figures that are now published weekly—they will be published in their latest form tomorrow—are by date of death registration, although some information is published in the reports about figures by date of death. They are the most up-to-date figures in that respect of any country in the United Kingdom: I understand that they are a week more up to date than the equivalent Office for National Statistics figures that

were published for England and Wales this morning.

I want to give some reassurance by making this point. The figures, which I am sure all members look at very closely, give the total number of deaths for the week in question, and that figure is compared with the average number of deaths in the same week in the previous five years. In the past couple of weeks, the number of deaths has been above the average for the past five years, and the figures set out how many of those deaths have been attributable to the virus. If there is a remaining number of deaths that are not attributable to the virus, that is the number of excess deaths. NRS is providing further explanation of that; its publication gives the total number of deaths and as much of a breakdown as NRS is able to provide.

The fear that an unreported number of deaths is lurking somewhere does not have a basis in fact. In its reporting, NRS has made it clear that excess deaths that are not attributable to Covid-19 through death-certificate reporting merit much further exploration. We are seeing that phenomenon in countries across the world, right now. In last week's report, NRS was able to give more context for that; I do not know whether it will be able to do more of that tomorrow. I hope that the report, given its comprehensive nature, allays any sense that there is a hidden number of deaths that are associated with the virus.

Jackson Carlaw: I think that the First Minister will appreciate, as she does, from her answer, that this is a very complicated subject. We will study that answer with care. I hope that it gives the reassurance that she suggests.

One of the absolute priorities in tackling Covid-19 has to be clarity, so I turn to the Scottish Government's new guidance on face coverings. The new guidance is clear about the limits on where they might be effective and where they are not, but we have not been told exactly what evidence the First Minister has been using to inform today's change in advice.

For the sake of absolute clarity, can the First Minister confirm whether the new advice came from the scientific advisory group for emergencies, from the chief medical officer for Scotland, from both or from elsewhere? Can she be absolutely clear about the circumstances in which she is recommending that face coverings be used, given that it is already being reported that it is a requirement that all Scots wear face coverings when they leave home, which I know is not what she was intending to convey earlier today?

The First Minister: SAGE has given advice. I have looked at the evidence that has come through the SAGE process, and I understand that

ministers in other Governments are doing likewise. I have also discussed the matter with the chief medical officer, as—I am sure—members would expect me to do.

One of the reasons why I thought it important to give guidance was so that I could say to people that I have now seen evidence—it is not overwhelming—that there could be some benefit from face masks being worn by people who have the virus but are asymptomatic and might be shedding the virus. Those people do not know that they have the virus because they do not have symptoms, so face coverings might give some additional protection against their transmitting the virus to others. There is an indication of some benefit, so it is important that people know that.

Anecdotally—I see this, as, I am sure, all of us do—we know that many people are choosing to use face coverings anyway. However, I am concerned that people think that doing so gives more protection than it does—that covering their face will give them some kind of invincibility against being infected with the virus. The rationale in the guidance sets out what the limited benefit might be, but it also says that face coverings are not a substitute for the other things that people should be doing. If anything, face coverings are an added protection that should be used as a precaution. However, the most important things to keep doing are staying at home, isolating in certain circumstances, not mixing outside one's own household and following all the hand hygiene and other hygiene rules.

We are not making face coverings mandatory right now. We are giving advice and a recommendation. Essentially, the advice is that people who are leaving their own home to go into enclosed spaces where they will be with other people, from whom it will be difficult to keep apart by the recommended social distance of 2m, should wear a face covering. I stress that “covering” does not mean a medical mask.

The circumstances in which people should be doing that right now should be very limited, if they are following the guidance to stay at home. Today, we have given examples of such situations, which include being at essential work, travel using public transport, and going for food shopping to a supermarket or smaller food shop in which social distancing is difficult. We will keep that under review.

Let me stress that we are not there yet, but as and when we ease any of the restrictions, and people are interacting with others more often, there might be a need to widen or extend the advice to more circumstances.

However, people should wear face coverings when they are in an enclosed space in which they

will come into contact with others, and are worried about not being able to keep to social distancing. I stress that a face covering means a scarf, bandana, piece of cloth or other textile—not a medical mask. We are not advising the general public that they need to wear medical masks.

Jackson Carlaw: I have, since the announcement at lunch time, had e-mails about the distinction between smaller convenience stores and larger supermarkets. One e-mail rather charmingly pointed out that in a large supermarket the person would be no nearer to anybody else than I am to the First Minister now. The sender asked whether I would be wearing a face mask this afternoon, as a consequence of the chamber being an enclosed space. It is a difficult distinction for some people to understand, so it would be helpful to have clarity about the First Minister's thinking on it.

Is it possible that we might soon be moving into the next phase in our response to coronavirus? We cannot be complacent, as we still have a long way to go.

This morning, there was a reminder that even as we continue to confront the health emergency, the economic challenges will be huge, particularly for Scotland. The *Press and Journal* reported that 30,000 jobs could be lost in the oil and gas industry. In recent years, the UK Government has delivered billions of pounds' worth of support for the north-east, including through transferable taxes, slashing the supplementary charge, and investing in carbon capture and decommissioning.

Last week, the First Minister said that she would consider support for the north-east. Ministers have had the opportunity to consider what could be done. Can she confirm to people in the vital oil and gas sector who are worried about their jobs, families and the wider industry—with redundancies regrettably being confirmed as we speak—what action the Scottish Government might now take?

The First Minister: We will continue to consider that matter and to discuss it with the sector; we have not come to a final decision. I point out that most of the levers around oil and gas—certainly in the fiscal regime—lie with the UK Government. Therefore, perhaps we need to have most discussion with the UK Government, which has been very forthcoming in its support for businesses, so I hope that that will be a productive discussion. However, we will continue to take whatever decisions we can to give maximum support to the economy and the sectors within it.

I am acutely aware of the economic impact. A negative economic impact of this magnitude also feeds social and health impacts. We are dealing with a number of different but interrelated harms,

and we have to manage them in a way that reduces the overall harm that is done to the population.

It is important that we take decisions at the right time, rather than prematurely, when we are entering a new phase. From a health perspective, the worst thing that we could do would be to lift restrictions prematurely and allow the virus to run out of control again. That would be really damaging to the economy and businesses. It is not a trade-off—it is about trying to balance all those things.

The next review date for the current lockdown measures is 7 May. At this stage, there is no guarantee whatsoever that come 7 May we will be in a position to lift any of the measures. Although—as I set out last week—we are assessing options and taking advice on what their impacts would be.

We must continue to suppress the virus. The margins that we are operating within are very narrow, and the difference between reproduction numbers of R0.6 to R0.7 and R0.8 to R0.9 is quite dramatic in terms of what would be seen in spread of the virus. We have to be very careful: there will be no flick of the switch moment. Some of the social distancing restrictions that we are living with now are likely to be with us for a considerable time to come, until we have a vaccine or treatment.

We will take such decisions cautiously, carefully and in the way that best balances the various factors that we must take into account. We will, of course, advise and update Parliament as we go.

The Presiding Officer: A sizeable number of members wish to ask questions, so I ask for concise questions and answers.

Covid-19 (Health and Care Worker Deaths)

2. Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests.

Today is international workers memorial day. Each year on this day, we gather to mourn those who have died at work, to remember the dead and to fight for the living. With so many key workers in Scotland fighting the pandemic, doing so has never been more important than it is today.

Will the First Minister mark international workers memorial day and agree with GMB Scotland that there should be a fatal accident inquiry for every health and social care worker who dies from Covid-19? Will she also mark it by extending to Scotland's care workers the death-in-service payment that has been announced for national health service workers?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): As I am sure we all did, I marked international workers memorial day at 11 am this morning by taking part

in a minute's silence. I will also mark it, not just today but every day, by doing everything that I possibly can to ensure that key workers—not exclusively but particularly those working in our health and social care sectors—have the protections that they need and in whatever form they need them.

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport has already written to the Health and Sport Committee to say that we will set out the details of the death-in-service arrangements by 1 May—therefore, by the end of this week. We are taking a bit of time with those arrangements because we are talking to trade unions to make sure that there is agreement about them. We have always made it clear that we will put such arrangements in place—it is right that we do so.

I know that Richard Leonard understands that the question of whether to instruct fatal accident inquiries in Scotland is one not for ministers but for law officers, acting independently of ministers. The Lord Advocate issued a statement at the end of last week that made his responsibilities in that area clear.

We all want to make sure that we do the right thing by any front-line worker who dies protecting the rest of us from the virus, however that happens. It is important that we understand the processes, so that these things happen in the right and proper way. I am sure we will discuss those issues in the future; my focus now is to make sure that those on the front line of dealing with the pandemic have the protections that they need.

Richard Leonard: All too often throughout the pandemic, there has been a gap—a time lag—between what the Scottish Government announces and what is actually delivered on the ground.

I return to the subject of residential care homes. Families across the country are deeply concerned about the situation in our care homes. I speak from personal experience: last Friday, I lost my uncle, who was living in a care home, to Covid-19.

The Scottish Government's framework document, which was published last week, said that the Government listened to the advice of bodies such as the World Health Organization, but the WHO says "test, test, test", and there has been little testing of care workers. The Government also said in that document that it listened to bodies such as the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, but it has said that

"Staff in long-term care facilities should ... be tested on a regular basis ... twice weekly",

and we know that that is simply not happening.

The First Minister talks about expanding testing, but can she tell us how many care home residents and workers in Scotland have actually been tested? Is she confident that the Government has done everything that it could to prevent the devastating losses that we are seeing in Scotland's care homes?

The First Minister: I convey my condolences to Richard Leonard for his personal loss. One of the difficult things for all of us in dealing with this situation is that the impact of the virus means that there are now probably very few of us who—through our own families, our friends or our wider networks—do not know somebody who has been affected. We all understand that impact.

On whether I am satisfied about what we have done, the health secretary, other ministers and I spend each and every day trying to make sure that we are doing everything that we can, on an ongoing basis, to protect those on the front line and residents in care homes.

What I am about to say should not be seen as my underplaying the situation in care homes—I would not want to do that in any way. The overall number of deaths from the virus in care homes in Scotland is broadly in line with some of the international evidence. That evidence tells us that older people—and not just older people in care homes—are particularly vulnerable to becoming ill and dying from the virus. The vast majority of deaths have been in the over-65 age group, and people in that group will be in various locations. However, the virus spreads more quickly in care homes and institutional settings generally, hence our taking the steps that I have outlined already.

I have outlined to Jackson Carlaw our approach to testing. I have said that we are keeping all matters under review and that we are expanding testing as we go—not only as our capacity increases but on the basis of our having sound clinical reasons for doing that.

On the numbers, at the end of this week, which, of course, is also the end of the month, we will set out where we are with testing capacity and the numbers of tests that we are doing daily. That information will not just come from the numbers that we report every day. Shortly, we will add the numbers being tested in the drive-through centres that operate in several locations across the country. That will give us more detail about the total numbers.

As I have indicated, the total number of health and care staff—or their families, where appropriate, because that aspect is important—who have now been tested is 20,700 or thereabouts. Care staff or their families make up just under 30 per cent of that figure. That number continues to increase: it has increased by a higher

number in each of the past few weeks and it will continue to do so.

Richard Leonard: That is still considerably fewer than one in five of all the care home staff who are employed in Scotland.

Last Thursday, the First Minister announced that the Scottish Government would be adopting a test, trace and isolate strategy. We welcome that. In its framework for decision making, the Government sets out that there should be

“Early and rapid testing ... Early and effective tracing”

and

“Early and sustained isolation of contacts.”

Professor Devi Sridhar, who is a member of the Scottish Government's Covid-19 advisory group, has suggested that such a strategy could require between 15,000 and 20,000 tests a day, yet we are still not meeting the Government's target of 3,500 tests a day. In fact, although the health secretary announced six weeks ago that there would be an increase in community testing, the interim chief medical officer has since made it clear that that would start only this week, which is neither early nor rapid. Does the First Minister recognise that the number of daily tests that Professor Sridhar suggests should take place is the right number? When, realistically, will her Government be in a position to implement a test, trace and isolate strategy?

The First Minister: I think that it is important that we do not mix up different things. I will therefore not talk about the testing that we are doing right now for today's purposes; instead, I will look ahead to the test, trace and isolate work, which is under way already.

I broadly recognise the number that Richard Leonard mentioned. We need to make assessments of the number of tests and the number of contact tracers required. That work is under way.

All of that depends on how low we get the prevalence of the virus. One of the reasons why we need to get prevalence as low as possible is that that determines the number of people who are likely to be symptomatic and in need of testing. The assessment of the number of contact tracers depends, to some extent, on the social distancing measures that are in place, because that obviously determines the number of contacts that each of us has daily. Yesterday, the health secretary and I took part in another in-depth session about that in order to look at where that work has got to.

I want to—I intend to—publish a more detailed paper, probably early next week, on the test, trace and isolate strategy, because I think that it is

important that people really understand where that strategy fits into the overall approach in the next phase, the work that we are doing and the capacity that we need to build to. It is also important that the public develop an understanding of their role in making a test, trace and isolate system work, because whether it works will depend on the public recognising symptoms, doing what they need to do and being prepared for periods of isolation. They may need to have multiple periods of isolation, depending on whom they have been in contact with.

That work is under way. As I said, early next week we will publish more detailed information that will explain both how such an approach works and what we are doing to get to the capacity to deliver it. We are working towards having such capacity in place within weeks, in order to dovetail with how we might start to ease restrictions. However, the capacity that we need will develop over time, of course, depending on the degree of social distancing that is still in place. All of us now have many fewer contacts than we would have if we were living our lives normally. Therefore, there will be many stages between those two places that will determine the capacity that we will need to have.

The work is complicated, but I assure members that it is well under way in the Scottish Government and that, as I said, we will provide further details soon.

Covid-19 (Testing of Health and Care Workers)

3. Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green): On international workers memorial day, Scottish Greens pay tribute to essential workers who, sadly, have lost their lives while fighting Covid-19, which is the heaviest price to pay. The safety of their peers is paramount at this time.

On Friday, I published a proposal for routine testing of health and care workers regardless of whether they have symptoms, which has been welcomed by experts and organisations including the Royal College of Emergency Medicine. Routine testing of hospital workers and carers regardless of whether they are showing symptoms will help to detect cases early, reduce the spread of the virus and give those dedicated workers the extra protection that they deserve. Will the First Minister commit to the carrying out of such routine testing not only for those with symptoms?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): My earlier comments on the basis on which we are taking decisions about the expansion of testing also apply to Ms Johnstone's question.

I will make two other points. They are not designed to diminish the importance of testing, but it is really important that we always place that in its

context. First, although the evidence around people transmitting the virus while they are asymptomatic is developing, we are still not confident that the current test is 100 per cent reliable before people have symptoms. It is really important to make that contextual point so that we do not have overreliance on testing, but instead see it in its proper context.

My second point flows from that—and it applies regardless of whether we test particular groups. For example, to go back to the earlier point about care homes, the most important steps in relation to those—which will also be true for hospitals—are the infection prevention and control policies and procedures that are in place. In such institutional settings the most important thing is to ensure that we prevent the virus from entering them and then spreading. It is true that testing has a part to play in that process—and as we increase our capacity we will continue to expand the categories of people whom we test—but we must always bear in mind that we are still not in a position where we can be sure that the test is 100 per cent reliable in the cases of people who do not display symptoms of the virus.

Alison Johnstone: I spoke to a notable Scottish expert about the effectiveness of the current test. Their response to me was that we must not let the perfect be the enemy of the good.

To protect the people of Scotland properly, we need a comprehensive test, trace and isolate strategy. Routine testing of carers and hospital workers has to be part of that. One major hospital in London is already carrying out routine testing of asymptomatic workers. Adding to the growing body of evidence in support of such action is a study that has just been published by Imperial College London, which advises that, regardless of whether symptoms are present, regular testing could prevent about a third of transmissions from those who are tested.

Commenting on the Scottish Greens' proposal, respiratory consultant and expert Professor James Chalmers said:

"the data ... are coming fast ... asymptomatic or mildly symptomatic HCW are likely to be transmitting to other staff and vulnerable patients ... We will regret the lost time if we do not move to address this now."

The urgency is clear if we are to prevent deaths and protect our workers. Every day on which asymptomatic workers go untested increases the risk. We can act to avoid that. Will the First Minister confirm that she will act now?

The First Minister: We will continue to increase our testing capacity and to expand the categories of people whom we test, based on the best evidence. I read a lot of expert evidence on that every day, and I also take a lot of advice from

experts. As is the case with politicians, some experts disagree on the detail of this issue, but we must continue to inform our views through the best advice and expertise that we have available.

It is not the case at any stage that we are allowing the perfect to become the enemy of the good—we have already announced today an extension of testing into a group of people regardless of whether they have symptoms. Equally, we have to guard against the testing of asymptomatic people becoming a false assurance. If somebody who is asymptomatic tests negative, it does not necessarily mean that they do not have the virus; we have to balance a lot of things. Also, although there is clearly a relationship and a bridge between the two, I would caution against mixing up what we are doing now and the purposes for which we are using our expanding testing capacity with what we will move to as we go further into the test, trace and isolate approach.

Health and Social Care Staff (Support)

4. Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): Last week, I asked the First Minister to support a positive proposal to pay £29 per day extra to health and social care workers. Can the First Minister update us on whether she has made any progress on that proposal?

This pandemic has exposed the vulnerability of the social care sector. Staff are on low wages and precarious contracts, even though they are caring for the most vulnerable in society, and morale at this time is particularly low, so will the First Minister also agree to review pay and conditions for all social care staff, whether they provide care at home or in care homes, so that we can give this sector the status and the support that it desperately needs?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): We have not yet come to a final view on last week's proposal from Willie Rennie. I am sure that he will appreciate that we are working through a lot of issues and demands. That is not to say that any of them are less important than others, but we need to make sure that we prioritise urgent and pressing issues. The staffing issue that the health secretary has been prioritising and seeking to resolve is the death in service issue, which has already been raised. All those issues are important, but we require to work through them properly so that we can take a considered view and come to the right conclusions.

We will be looking for quite some time to come at how to properly recognise and reward those on the front line of our health and care services. We will also be thinking much more fundamentally about those services. A lot of what we have been talking about in relation to the care sector right

now raises real questions in my mind about how we will deliver social care in the future.

There are well-established arrangements in place, through staff-side discussions, for pay and conditions and we will continue to discuss those issues in the normal way. Some of the issues that Willie Rennie raises have short-term, immediate aspects to them, but some raise much more fundamental questions. I think that it would be right for all of us, not just the Government but the Parliament, to think through those questions properly and carefully, learning from the experience that we have had in the past few weeks along the way.

Willie Rennie: I understand the point about the Government's capacity to take on new issues and new plans. However, it is important to consider them, as the First Minister says. Morale is particularly low in the social care sector, so if we can give an early indication that it would be possible to address those issues at some point, that would help immensely.

There are also gaps in the financial support that is available from the Scottish and United Kingdom Governments, which is leaving some people and companies in great difficulties. Those gaps will continue if we use only the existing tax and spending architecture. Would it not make sense, at least for the length of this pandemic, to use some form of universal basic income to deal with this problem?

The Spanish Government is bringing in a universal basic income. Will the First Minister raise that option with the Prime Minister this week so that we can implement it at the next stage of the economic response to the pandemic?

The First Minister: I am on record as being very interested in a universal basic income and I think that the experience of this pandemic and the impacts from dealing with it make the case for a universal basic income stronger than ever. I certainly want to see it seriously considered as an option.

I do not want to stray into political or constitutional territory, but I wish that we had the totality of powers in this Parliament so that we could move ahead with something like that right now. However, with welfare still largely reserved, we would need to do that in co-operation and collaboration with the UK Government. I will continue to raise it with the UK Government.

We continually look at where there are gaps in support and we try to plug them as much as possible within the financial constraints that we have. We have on-going discussions with the UK Government about how some of those gaps can be filled through it working in partnership with us. Those conversations will certainly continue.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you. We now move to some supplementary questions.

Migration Policy

Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): The vital importance of the care sector has never been more evident. Therefore, what discussions has the Scottish Government had with the United Kingdom Government on migration policy, in light of the increasing demand on the care sector in Scotland?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): That is an important point. The current crisis has clearly demonstrated our reliance on individuals in our health and care sectors and on key workers across our communities. Many of them were not born in this country but have chosen to make their homes here. We have therefore called on the UK Government to grant all migrants leave to remain during this time and, in the longer term, to revisit its approach to immigration policy.

Across society, we should all stop using the inaccurate and somewhat demeaning terminology “lower-skilled” to describe the contributions of key workers. Those are vital roles that are filled by dedicated people with very valuable skills. We will continue to seek opportunities to discuss those issues with the UK Government and to seek to persuade it to take a better approach to immigration as we come out of the crisis than perhaps was the case when we went into it.

Supermarket Food Deliveries (Priority Scheme)

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): There seems to be some confusion about who should have priority for food deliveries from supermarkets. For example, a constituent of mine who is in her 70s and who is self-isolating with her spouse as per Government guidelines called the helpline and was called back by five different people. They all tried to be helpful, but three said that the couple were eligible for the priority scheme, and two said that they were not. Can the First Minister clarify Scottish Government policy on who should be eligible for the scheme? I am sure that the First Minister will agree that consistent messaging is crucial.

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I will set out the Scottish Government’s policy and approach, although some of the issues that Brian Whittle raises will be down to the capacity of supermarkets to deliver shopping. That is not a criticism of the supermarkets, as the demand on them for delivery slots is greater than ever.

I will explain the arrangements that are in place for what we call the shielded group. Right now, everybody in the shielded group can register through our text message service and, so far,

81,000 people have done so. Those people can request a food package to be delivered, not by a supermarket but free of charge through the arrangements that we have in place. So far, more than 103,000 of those free food packages have been delivered to people in the shielded group.

We also give people in that group the opportunity to ask us to pass on their details to supermarkets so that they can be prioritised for delivery slots. So far, more than 34,000 people have asked us to do that, and their data has been passed on to participating supermarkets. I believe that, currently, we are unique in the United Kingdom in that people in that group who were not existing customers of supermarkets have been matched with supermarkets. That is only now being done in the rest of the UK.

Over and above that, we have put in place a helpline for other vulnerable people who are not in the shielded group. We cannot guarantee supermarket delivery slots for them, because that is down to the capacity of supermarkets, but we wanted to put in place a helpline so that, if somebody is in need of food, medicines or any other vital support, local resilience partnerships can consider how to deliver that through local arrangements. I take this opportunity to tell people that the national helpline number is 0800 111 4000. Anybody who is vulnerable—we have suggested that that may be people who get the flu jab annually—and who needs support can phone that number and will be put on to arrangements in their local council area.

Polish Presidential Election

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): The First Minister will be aware that the Polish presidential election is still due to take place on 10 May. I would not ask the First Minister to comment on Poland’s politics or the election, but can she provide assurances to Polish nationals who are resident in Scotland and who have a right to participate in that election, if they wish to, that protecting them from the risk of coronavirus will be a priority and that the Scottish Government will ensure that there is close contact with the Polish consulate on advice for that electorate?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): We will certainly do so. I am happy to arrange for a written response to be provided to Claire Baker on exactly that point, and Graeme Dey has given me an indication that the work is already under way. As Claire Baker indicated, of my many responsibilities, the Polish presidential election is not one. Nevertheless, ensuring that Polish residents here have the opportunity to participate in an election is an important matter. I will arrange for a written response to be sent, setting out what we are doing to ensure that that is the case.

Social Distancing (Health and Safety Executive)

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP):

Sometimes, workplace management think that there is sufficient social distancing in place but unions and workers feel that there is not. Has the Health and Safety Executive a role in that issue, and what can it do to mitigate or to ensure that there is an agreement in the end?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):

Alongside local authorities and the police, where there is an issue of enforcement, the Health and Safety Executive has a role to play in making sure that employers comply with the law and with the guidance that is in place. We try to have close engagement with employers, business sectors of the economy and, of course, the business organisations, to provide as much advice and support as possible. In my experience, the vast majority of businesses and employers are trying to do the right thing by their workers—and they should be. Where there are concerns, we do what we can to help to resolve them, and the Health and Safety Executive has a role to play in that, where required.

Curriculum for Excellence Review (OECD)

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): Could the postponed release of the much-needed and crucially important Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development review of curriculum for excellence be published, if feasible, before May 2021, rather than after?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): The Deputy First Minister has given some information on the review, and, if that were possible and there was a way to do it, we would want, as a standing principle, for that to be the case.

I hope that members will understand that, across a whole range of our responsibilities, the focus of the Scottish Government right now has to be on dealing with the immediate crisis here, and then with the impacts and the recovery, which unavoidably has an impact on other business. As we go through this, we will try to minimise that impact as much as possible and ensure that, when things can happen even earlier than we might expect, we will keep them under review.

Live Video Teaching (Access)

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): Teachers have worked miracles to move learning into the home. Can the First Minister explain why pupils in some parts of Scotland are offered access to live video teaching whereas others are not? Will she ensure that Education Scotland provides national leadership, to ensure some consistency, at least, in home schooling across the country?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I will certainly take that point about Education Scotland back.

There has been a suggestion that Education Scotland has instructed councils not to use videoconferencing, but that is not the case: local authorities are responsible for decisions about data protection and online safety. We know that some are considering how and whether to use alternative videoconferencing services outwith glow. I understand that Highland Council and Aberdeen City Council are using Google in some schools and that Western Isles Council is using Vscene to communicate with pupils. Those local authorities must be content that any platform that they use provides the level of protection that they require, and we would expect any local authority to follow the national cyber security centre's guidelines. Last week, glow had more than 3 million logins, and many teachers and local authorities are making use of those facilities.

I will take away the question about whether Education Scotland can provide any more national guidance, and I will end on a note of consensus. Teachers are doing a fantastic job to support young people in this very difficult period for them. I place on record my thanks to them.

Construction Industry

Bruce Crawford (Stirling) (SNP): At the commencement of the lockdown in Scotland, we rightly took a different approach from that of the rest of the United Kingdom in respect of the construction industry. Major employers in my constituency, such as the Robertson Construction Group and other construction firms, therefore ceased operations. I know that the Scottish Government is thinking very carefully about how best to ease the lockdown restrictions. As part of that consideration, what is the Scottish Government's current thinking with regard to the construction industry?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): We are considering all such matters carefully and will continue to do so, but the current position is unchanged. That position is that, in our view, all but essential construction sites should remain closed to help to save lives and protect the health service. I reiterate our thanks to the construction workers who are continuing to work on essential projects and to all businesses that continue to act responsibly.

That said, we are very aware that the longer the lockdown continues in its present, very severe form, the greater the impact on industry will be. That is why we are providing unprecedented levels of support. Ministers certainly share the ambition to get businesses back to work as soon as possible, but that must be done with public health

and safety as the first priority. To support that, the Minister for Local Government, Housing and Planning is chairing meetings of the construction leadership forum, whose work includes the development of safe site operating procedures. As we go through the next process of looking at whether, when and how certain of the restrictions can be eased, the role of construction will form part of those considerations.

Fly-tipping

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Over the past few weeks, members who represent rural areas will have had reports of an increase in fly-tipping in the countryside. Such behaviour is always inexcusable, but the present increase seems to be linked to the closure of local authority recycling and waste centres. Today, the United Kingdom Government has said that recycling centres can reopen with appropriate social distancing in place. Is that something that the Scottish Government should also consider?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Of course, we will consider all of that. A public campaign on fly-tipping was started yesterday, I think—I am looking at the Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform to check whether I am right. Fly-tipping is unacceptable at any time, but we understand some of the factors that are contributing to the present increase and we will continue to consider further action that we can take to address what is an understandable concern for people.

Business Support Grants

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): Although I acknowledge that many people have received business support grants, I continue to be contacted by constituents with businesses who have yet to receive such a grant. What proportion of applications have proceeded through to payment? What measures of take-up by all eligible businesses does the Scottish Government have? What communication has the Scottish Government had with local authorities to identify and eliminate backlogs?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): The Cabinet Secretary for Finance continues to have on-going engagement with local authorities to get that money flowing as quickly as possible. The figure is one that I struggled to locate in my briefing at last week's First Minister's question time, so I made sure that I underlined it today. As of 21 April, 33,176 business grants had been awarded—that figure will have been updated by now—which amounted to more than £388 million.

We continue to encourage local authorities to get those payments made as quickly as possible. We want all the support that is being provided to

be with businesses and in their bank accounts without delay. We must, of course, make sure that the right processes are in place to ensure that it goes to people who are eligible to receive it, but we continue to discuss with local authorities how they can get that money flowing as quickly as possible.

Council Tax (Support)

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): During the current Covid-19 crisis, debt, including council tax arrears, will become an increasing issue for households and local authorities. I welcome Glasgow City Council's decision to allow households that are struggling with council tax to defer monthly payments for two months, as well as its decision to temporarily suspend action to recover council tax.

Will the First Minister work in partnership with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to ensure that councils are given the support that they need to support households that are struggling with council tax debt, that best practice is adopted across all local authorities and that, ideally, such best practice includes the provision of full welfare advice and support to struggling households before any recovery proceedings are considered by any authority?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I very much agree with the sentiment behind all aspects of that question.

The council tax reduction scheme is in place to ensure that anybody who loses the ability to pay their council tax because, for example, they have lost their job gets the help that they need. More than 450,000 households already receive some level of such support. Anyone whose earnings are impacted by the pandemic and who might now struggle to meet their next council tax payment should discuss that with their council as soon as possible.

The Scottish Government has made additional resources available to local authorities to increase the capacity of the council tax reduction scheme, given the greater demand that is likely to fall on it. We have also joined with the Citizens Advice Scotland network to fund a new campaign to raise awareness of the financial support that is available to people. It provides information and advice on council tax, rent and mortgage payments, and energy and utility bills, as well as on financial support. People can access that advice online, by phone or by contacting their local citizens advice bureau.

We remain very aware of the need to ensure that support is provided not just to businesses but to individuals who are struggling with the impacts

of the measures that are in place, and we will continue to consider what more we can do.

Charity Funds (Carrier Bag Charge)

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): Many charities rely on funds from the plastic bag charge, which brought in £15 million in Scotland last year. As a Parliament, we recently agreed unanimously that the charge should be temporarily suspended due to health restrictions around food deliveries, but that means, of course, that millions of pounds of income is lost to charities. Does the First Minister agree that supermarkets, which are seeing record levels of profit at the moment, should be honouring charitable donations even though the carrier bag charge is currently not being collected?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Yes. I think that that is something that supermarkets should consider—and, no doubt, they will want to do so. We can certainly raise that issue with supermarkets.

It is also important to say that we are providing, through Scottish Government resources, additional support to the third sector and to charities through the third sector resilience fund, for example, and the wellbeing fund. That money provides support to third sector organisations including charities and social enterprises, helping them to work with the most at-risk people who are affected. We will continue to do what we can to support them, but I am certainly happy to take that suggestion forward.

Business Motions

17:15

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S5M-21600, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, which sets out a business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees the following programme of business—

Tuesday 5 May 2020

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by Ministerial Statement: Economy (COVID-19)

followed by Stage 1 Debate: Agriculture (Retained EU Law and Data) (Scotland) Bill

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

Wednesday 6 May 2020

2.45 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.45 pm First Minister's Questions

followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: Consumer Scotland Bill

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Approval of SSIs (if required)

5.30 pm Decision Time

Tuesday 12 May 2020

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Suppressing COVID: Next Phase

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

Wednesday 13 May 2020

2.45 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.45 pm First Minister's Questions

followed by Stage 1 Debate: Civil Partnership (Scotland) Bill

followed by Business Motions
 followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 followed by Approval of SSIs (if required)
 5.15 pm Decision Time—[Graeme Dey]

The Presiding Officer: I believe that Rhoda Grant wishes to speak against the motion.

17:16

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I want to speak against the business motion, which proposes that we hold stage 1 and stage 3 debates in the chamber next week. We are clear that, when the Parliament meets in person, it should do so only to discuss the response to the Covid-19 pandemic. We cannot return to business as usual in the chamber when we are asking others to undertake only work that is crucial to the Covid-19 response. As I said last week, the Parliament must lead by example.

The proposed business is consideration of legislation, and members must be present in the chamber in order to vote on that legislation. That disenfranchises members who must self-isolate. We proposed that, next week, we debate the Government's response to the pandemic and the way forward. The debate on that could have been a debate without motion, meaning that there would be no vote. That would have allowed time for a remote plenary session to be tested and a remote voting system to be in place in order to allow legislation to be passed virtually. When that is in place, we will be able to continue the day-to-day work of the Parliament, because all members will be able to take part safely from home.

When the First Minister addresses people in her press conference, she reminds them of the importance of changing their way of life in order to save lives and protect the national health service, but that will have a hollow ring if she will not change her programme for government in order to do the same thing. We cannot deal with normal business until we can do so remotely and in a way that makes it safe for all members to participate.

The Parliament needs to lead by example. If we are asking others to prioritise only work regarding the pandemic, we should do that, too. Until all members are able to take part safely, we should not consider legislation. When we are forced to travel to meet physically in the Parliament, we should be involved only in work that deals with the pandemic.

To be frank, the “do as I say, not as I do” approach is wearing thin. If we do not get our act together, we will undermine the progress that is being made during the lockdown. If that happened, I do not believe that the Scottish people would forgive us. I made those points last week but,

sadly, the other parties in the Parliament apparently do not share our concerns. We must therefore move against the business motion tonight.

The Presiding Officer: I call Graeme Dey, the Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans, to respond.

17:18

The Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans (Graeme Dey): As you know all too well, Presiding Officer, the unprecedented times that we are in have, among other things, posed a series of challenges for this Parliament on how it meets and how it finds ways to effectively scrutinise the Government. I hope—and I believe—that the majority of Opposition parties in this institution would acknowledge that the Scottish Government has been a willing participant in facilitating that scrutiny, be it in plenary sessions, virtual sessions, sittings of established committees or the establishment of the special COVID-19 Committee.

However, the Parliament is also this nation's legislature and, like other Parliaments, it has to find a balance between continuing to facilitate appropriate levels of coronavirus consideration and progressing legislation that is already on the agenda of its committees or is anticipated to be so.

I note that the United Kingdom Parliament is this week considering the Domestic Abuse Bill and the Fire Safety Bill, and I read that Labour is tabling amendments to the former. We, here in this place, are not alone in seeking to demonstrate that, as well as addressing the very urgent Covid-19 matters that are occupying our thoughts, we are progressing other issues, while practising social distancing, utilising remote means of scrutiny, and having Parliament staff actively seeking online voting solutions.

Given Labour's active participation in the Domestic Abuse Bill that is going through Westminster today, and Alex Rowley's call earlier this afternoon for the very Covid-related debate that this business programme schedules, I am sure that many in the chamber are somewhat baffled by Labour's opposition to the motion.

The programme that the bureau approved today—by clear majority—strikes the balance that I noted earlier, as well as seeking to bring a degree of routine back into the sitting patterns of this Parliament. Under the proposals that were approved by the bureau, a fortnight today we will spend the afternoon in a debate titled “Suppressing COVID-19: The Next Phase”, which will afford members from all sides the opportunity to offer their thoughts on that important subject.

As minister for parliamentary business, I can further advise the chamber that the Government will shortly seek bureau approval to dedicate two afternoons the following week to conducting stage 1 and stage 3 of the second coronavirus bill. Between those debates and bill stages, not to mention First Minister's question times, topical question times, statements, and virtual question times, members will have ample opportunity over the coming weeks to focus attention on the pandemic. However, it is right that this Parliament also demonstrates to the country that, having adapted its approaches to conducting business, and with the collective will, it can take forward some of the normal business of a Parliament.

On that basis, and on behalf of the bureau, I invite members to support the business programme that is set out in the motion.

The Presiding Officer: The question is, that motion S5M-21600 be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Ballantyne, Michelle (South Scotland) (Con)
 Bowman, Bill (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Corry, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Davidson, Ruth (Edinburgh Central) (Con)
 Denham, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Freeman, Jeane (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)

McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Rumbles, Mike (North East Scotland) (LD)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wightman, Andy (Lothian) (Green)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Macdonald, Lewis (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 54, Against 15, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees the following programme of business—

Tuesday 5 May 2020

2.00 pm	Time for Reflection
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Topical Questions (if selected)
<i>followed by</i>	Ministerial Statement: Economy (COVID-19)
<i>followed by</i>	Stage 1 Debate: Agriculture (Retained EU Law and Data) (Scotland) Bill
<i>followed by</i>	Committee Announcements
<i>followed by</i>	Business Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.00 pm	Decision Time

Wednesday 6 May 2020

2.45 pm	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
2.45 pm	First Minister's Questions
<i>followed by</i>	Stage 3 Proceedings: Consumer Scotland Bill
<i>followed by</i>	Committee Announcements
<i>followed by</i>	Business Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Approval of SSIs (if required)
5.30 pm	Decision Time

Tuesday 12 May 2020

2.00 pm Time for Reflection
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by Topical Questions (if selected)
followed by Scottish Government Debate:
 Suppressing COVID: Next Phase
followed by Committee Announcements
followed by Business Motions
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.00 pm Decision Time

Wednesday 13 May 2020

2.45 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 2.45 pm First Minister's Questions
followed by Stage 1 Debate: Civil Partnership
 (Scotland) Bill
followed by Business Motions
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by Approval of SSIs (if required)
 5.15 pm Decision Time

The Presiding Officer: The next item of business is consideration of business motions S5M-21595 and S5M-21596, on the extension of a stage 1 timetable for two bills.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that consideration of the Civil Partnership (Scotland) Bill at stage 1 be extended to 29 May 2020.

That the Parliament agrees that consideration of the Children (Scotland) Bill at stage 1 be extended to 5 June 2020—[*Graeme Dey*]

Motions agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

17:23

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The next item of business is consideration of three Scottish statutory instruments. I call Graeme Dey to move motions S5M-21584, S5M-21585 and S5M-21586.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Town and Country Planning (Changing Places Toilet Facilities) (Scotland) Regulations 2020 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Public Services Reform (Scotland) Act 2010 (Part 2 Further Extension) Order 2020 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Fuel Poverty (Targets, Definition and Strategy) (Scotland) Act 2019 (Scottish Fuel Poverty Advisory Panel and Consequential Amendments) Regulations 2020 [draft] be approved.—[*Graeme Dey*]

Decision Time

17:23

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): Unless any member objects, I intend to put a single question on motions S5M-21584, S5M-21585 and S5M-21586.

Motions agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Town and Country Planning (Changing Places Toilet Facilities) (Scotland) Regulations 2020 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Public Services Reform (Scotland) Act 2010 (Part 2 Further Extension) Order 2020 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Fuel Poverty (Targets, Definition and Strategy) (Scotland) Act 2019 (Scottish Fuel Poverty Advisory Panel and Consequential Amendments) Regulations 2020 [draft] be approved.

Point of Order

17:23

Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I do not intend to expand on the conversation about the business motion, which is between the business managers. Instead, I seek some guidance from you.

The sense that I get from ministers when we are questioning them in the chamber is that they are more than happy to answer questions, and to come to the Parliament to answer the important questions that people have. I also get the sense from members that they travel through to the Parliament with an inbox that is crammed with people raising concerns, whether they are employee concerns; employer concerns; front-line medical staff concerns about personal protective equipment; or concerns from members of the general public who want to know what will happen in the future.

I do not think that it is an unrealistic expectation to ask the Parliament to consider how we conduct business with regard to the strict timetabling of each individual statement and the expansion of where we get to at decision time. If a member chooses to leave their home—that is, to break the natural rules that we are setting for the general public—in order to come to this Parliament one day a week to ask a question that is relevant to the response to Covid-19, every effort should be made to enable that member to ask that question, and for ministers to get the opportunity to answer it.

What can be done with regard to the timetabling of individual statements and ministerial questions in order for members to have the opportunity to raise issues? Could the debate be expanded without notice for 30 minutes if there are individual questions, for example, so that we do not have a sense of frustration when members come to the Parliament to ask a serious question and do not get the opportunity to have that question answered? I am sure that the ministers themselves would be frustrated if they were not able to answer questions in Parliament.

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): I thank Mr Sarwar for that point. I utterly recognise what he is saying. I consulted the chief executive earlier today about writing to all members to address that very issue, which was raised by Mr Kelly earlier today as well as last week.

I recognise that members make a big effort to come along and that if they are not even able to ask a 15-second question, that is a source of enormous frustration. The bureau—the political parties, voted by all members—is responsible for the allocation of time. However, we are working on

a reduced timetable and the bureau—every member here—has agreed that we would meet in person on only one day a week. That severely restricts the number of opportunities for members to ask questions.

Within that constraint, there are some steps that we can take. For example, today and last week we delayed decision time by 15 minutes; extending business without notifying members or the public is not something that we do lightly, because it is inconvenient for many people, not least broadcasters. However, we are looking at further steps. The subject of coronavirus is serious—a more sombre subject than usual—and questions and answers tend to be slightly longer. Perhaps we should adjust our speaking times in statements to account for that fact.

More use could perhaps be made of virtual remote questioning. The time that we are allocating is reduced and there is therefore a lot of frustration. Mr Sarwar and Mr Kelly are not the only ones to have raised the issue—Mr Tomkins and other members have done so today, too, and I recognise the frustration that is being expressed. We are trying to address it.

Bruce Crawford (Stirling) (SNP): I very much appreciate Mr Sarwar's comments as well as yours, Presiding Officer. There is also a job that party managers need to do. Some members were able to ask three questions today, while others in the same party were not able to ask any at all. The issue is not just how the parliamentary authorities go about it, but how the party managers arrange for the questions to be asked.

The Presiding Officer: That point was not wasted on me either—I also noted that today.

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): Members are raising legitimate concerns. No one doubts the pressure that the Government—or any other public agency—is working under at this time. It is the understandable length of time that it takes to get answers back on a whole range of issues from a whole range of organisations, combined with the limited opportunities to ask questions in Parliament, that exacerbates the frustration.

Every member has people in their constituencies who say to them that they have not received an answer to a question that they asked them four weeks ago. Could the Presiding Officer, with the business managers and the Government, look at all those issues and try to address some of them? All of those points build up the frustration.

The Presiding Officer: That point is widely recognised, not just by Opposition parties but by the Government, which has put in place a number of procedures. The Parliament's chamber desk recently established a service—it is available on the website—that puts together every Covid-19-

related question. It might not help the member to know this, but a lot of submitted questions have already been submitted by other members and have been answered. The issue is being able to find those answers in all the information. The Parliament is providing a service in addition to that, which is already available through questions and answers.

The underlying frustration is an issue that is shared among all members. There is a limited amount of time: all members want to get their points on the record on behalf of their constituents and there are not enough opportunities for members to contribute every week. However, we are trying.

I will take on board all those points and work with the parliamentary authorities, particularly with business managers, in order to address those issues and see whether that circle can be squared.

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I hope that this is helpful; it is certainly intended in that spirit.

In relation to a comment that was made earlier, parliamentary business is not for the Government to decide, and it is certainly not for me as the First Minister to decide. However, given the uniqueness of the circumstances that we are in, and if it is helpful, I am more than happy for First Minister's question time sessions to continue until such time as everybody who wants to ask a question has asked their question. Obviously, that has to be timetabled in a way that fits in with other parliamentary business, but I have no objection to that approach, and if it is something that the bureau wants to consider, it would be absolutely acceptable to me. [*Applause.*]

The Presiding Officer: Thank you. From the reaction, we can judge that that suggestion was well received and will be acted on.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): Business in the chamber starts at 2 pm. Bearing in mind that we are already here, if we could start business earlier, rather than have people stay later, that might assist.

The Presiding Officer: All the points and the general frustration have been noted. We have been aware of the issue for some time and we have been trying to address it. I note that we have one virtual session this week, on local government, and there will be two days on which to meet next week.

Meeting closed at 17:31.

This is the final edition of the *Official Report* for this meeting. It is part of the Scottish Parliament *Official Report* archive and has been sent for legal deposit.

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