



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

DRAFT

Members' Virtual Question Time

Thursday 30 April 2020

Session 5



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Scottish Parliament

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

Members' Virtual Question Time

Local Government and Communities

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): Welcome to the Scottish Parliament's virtual question time, which today is on the subject of local government and communities. I am joined by ministers and members from their homes in constituencies around the country, in a format with which I hope we are becoming quite familiar and comfortable.

Voluntary Sector (Support)

Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): Across my Cowdenbeath constituency, there has been a tremendous contribution from the voluntary sector, led by Fife Voluntary Action. There has been grass-roots community activity, including individual volunteer efforts, such as the raising of more than £1,000 for Benarty food bank by 11-year-old Maci Fotheringham from Lochore, who used her artistic skills to set up a rainbow-painting production line. Can the Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government provide an update on the support that is being made available to the third sector in Fife, and will she take the opportunity to congratulate 11-year-old Maci Fotheringham on her outstanding efforts?

The Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government (Aileen Campbell): Absolutely. The work that Maci has undertaken to raise that figure to help to tackle the pandemic sounds incredibly inspirational. On behalf of everyone in the Government, I am sure, I congratulate Maci on that effort.

There are so many inspiring groups working hard across the country; we see that especially in our communities. Fife Voluntary Action, along with the 31 other third sector interfaces, is helping us to assess bids for our wellbeing fund, which is part of the £350 million-worth of measures that I outlined last month for the support of communities and people who are vulnerable in the efforts to tackle the pandemic.

We can ensure that more information is given to Annabelle Ewing about the specifics of what is happening in her constituency. Fife Voluntary Action, along with all the other third sector interfaces across the country, has been pivotal in

determining who should get support to help the community.

Local Government Funding

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): On 18 April, Robert Jenrick announced that councils in England were to get an extra £1.6 billion to help with the efforts against Covid-19. Scotland would get £155 million in consequentials from that, but councils here have not yet heard whether they will receive a penny of that money. They are hopping mad about that, to put it mildly. Will the finance secretary commit today to passing on that full amount to Scotland's councils?

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Kate Forbes): We have been clear that we are committed to deploying all consequentials that we receive in a way that is helpful to local government and the wider Covid-19 response. I have been in contact with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, which is doing a cost-gathering exercise across local authorities. It is only right that we understand fully the cost implications on local authorities and work jointly with them on how we deploy those consequentials.

We have already provided additional funding of £175.6 million before the United Kingdom Government has committed a single penny of consequentials to local authorities; that money has gone on hardship funding, welfare top-ups, free school meals, the food fund, and fully funding the council tax reduction scheme. Non-domestic rates reliefs and business grants are fully funded, as well, and local authorities have flexibilities around early learning and childcare funding, for example.

I do not dispute the financial challenges that our public services face just now. I am working closely with COSLA, but it is only right that we understand what the costs are before we come to conclusions on how to use the consequentials to support local authorities.

Graham Simpson: The question was whether councils will get all of the £155 million, because that is what they want. It was a straight question, and I did not hear a straight answer.

Kate Forbes: The straight answer is that we need to understand what the costs are. Local authorities and COSLA have committed to providing me with information on what costs they face just now as a result of coronavirus. We have already committed funding, and I am being clear that, once we have that information—I expected that information on Monday past, but I have not received it yet; I now expect it in the next few days—I will work jointly with COSLA to understand how we can face the challenges.

Local authorities recognise and acknowledge the cost pressures that they face, but it is

important for me, working in consultation and collaboration with COSLA, to understand what the full costs are. It is perfectly reasonable to operate on that basis.

Local Government Funding

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): I want to follow up the previous question. It is critical that our local authorities get certainty from the Scottish Government. The money has already been received from the United Kingdom Government, and the consequentials are vital for our local authorities. Local authorities have already transformed their services to support our communities and staff through the pandemic, their incomes have already been reduced, and they had existing budget pressures. Can we get trust from the Scottish Government? They are working together, and we need to ensure that our local authorities have certainty so that they can plan now for the future that we all need them to deliver for us.

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Kate Forbes): I recognise the challenges that local authorities face, but it is remarkable that we are being pressed just now to provide funding in advance of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities confirming what their cost pressures are. It seems to me to be perfectly reasonable that, as COSLA has committed to a cost-gathering exercise—it is clear that there are cost implications—we should understand what the funding need is before we come to a settled conclusion on the available funding.

What we have committed to is ensuring that all the consequentials that we receive are directly delivered to helping local authorities to meet their coronavirus impacts. In advance of any consequentials being available, we have already provided additional funding of £175.6 million. We have already underwritten £972 million of non-domestic rates income, and we have already front loaded the funding available for grants. That is fully funded.

I do not dispute the cost impact, but I hope that members understand the importance of proceeding in a reasonable way, based on the cost estimates that local authorities indicate to me. I am waiting for that information.

Business Support

Andy Wightman (Lothian) (Green): I have a constituent who, like others, is an occupier of premises that are part of a larger, shared office building. His individual premises are entered on the valuation roll, but he pays the rates via his landlord. He receives small business bonus scheme support, again, through the landlord. He and others have been refused a business grant by

the council concerned. Does the cabinet secretary agree that he should be eligible for business support? Will she clarify the guidance to ensure that councils have a clear steer on that question?

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Kate Forbes): That is a very reasonable question. I agree that we need to provide as much certainty as possible.

In designing the grant scheme, I have had to balance the need to deliver financial support as quickly as possible with ensuring that that is not to the detriment of due diligence to minimise fraud.

Where a property meets the eligibility criteria, the grant is payable only to

“the ratepayer as at 17 March 2020 as per the local authority’s records”.

However, I acknowledge that there are a small number of cases where the tenant of a property might be in receipt of small business bonus scheme support, even though they are not the legal ratepayer. As a consequence, I would be happy to follow up Mr Wightman’s question by asking officials to explore, with COSLA and local authorities, ways that applicants in that situation might be eligible for grant support, even though they are not the legal ratepayer, through contractual evidence that they are liable for rates. I will take that away and get back to Mr Wightman as soon as possible, but I indicate that I would like to make that possible.

Local Government Funding

The Presiding Officer: I missed a supplementary question from Sarah Boyack.

Sarah Boyack: The cabinet secretary is right in saying that money has already gone to local authorities, and I know from talking to councillor colleagues that they very much appreciate it. The issue is that the Scottish Government got its consequentials from the UK Government without question; can we not apply that same principle to councils? There is good joint working, but the pressures that are on our councils mean that they need to plan ahead and to look at their reserves. They have pressures from arm’s-length external organisations, and they have less money coming in from things such as their normal parking charges. Our councillors require certainty.

Kate Forbes: I accept the need for certainty, and I accept that there are cost implications. That is why, initially, we relaxed as much as possible some of the ring-fenced budgets, which have long been a matter of debate and dispute in the Scottish Parliament. For example, the early learning and childcare and education budgets have been de-ring fenced, to enable greater flexibility, which local authorities need.

However, I saw yesterday in the press that my local authority, Highland Council, said that it faces cost pressures of £80 million. When it comes to prudent management of local finances, surely it stands to reason that I look at the analysis of cost pressures that the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities has committed to providing me with, before determining how we support local authorities with their funding.

Local News Media

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): Presiding Officer, before I ask my question, I would like to make you and other members aware that I have a family connection to a local newspaper.

Smaller independent news providers and local newspapers are trusted and essential sources of information for communities, and are especially valued for their coverage of the pandemic. Some local print newspapers have ceased publication because of the loss of advertising revenue.

I ask the Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government for an assurance that the Scottish Government and its agencies are making full use of local media and community radio across Scotland for public health advertising and campaigns.

The Presiding Officer: I believe that the Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Kate Forbes, might wish to address that question. Is that right, cabinet secretary?

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Kate Forbes): Only if Aileen Campbell is comfortable with that, because it is about business support. I will hand over to her if she wants to answer.

The Presiding Officer: I saw you indicating that it was your responsibility. I ask Aileen Campbell for confirmation.

The Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government (Aileen Campbell): The question straddles a number of portfolios, so I am sure that Kate Forbes will be able to add to my reply.

We recognise the need for good, reliable and trusted sources of news to enable our messages, including important public health messages, to be understood across the country, as well as the need to support those businesses as best we can. I am sure that they will have been able to access some of the packages that Kate Forbes has outlined.

As an MSP, I have continued to advertise the presence of my office and its staff to support people in my constituency. All MSPs can make sure that we do that. The Government will continue to engage with Beatrice Wishart and

other members who share her interest in the matter on how we can make sure that those very reliable and trusted sources of news can continue to feel supported.

Those sources should also feel that they can access the support that we have put in place through the package of measures that I announced last month. There may be a need to consider third sector resilience funds or other funding streams and mechanisms that support community endeavours. It is not just the usual news titles that are suffering—I know that community papers are feeling pressured as well.

If there is any more that we can do with regard to the situation in Shetland that Beatrice Wishart has raised, we would be happy to engage with her. I am also willing to ensure that we work collaboratively across Government to make sure that all the efforts that we are making support news titles across the country.

Perhaps Kate Forbes will want to supplement that reply.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you for moving rooms and reconnecting, cabinet secretary.

Aileen Campbell: It was seamless.

The Presiding Officer: Would Kate Forbes like to add to Aileen Campbell's comments?

Kate Forbes: I will briefly confirm that we are working closely with the Scottish Newspaper Society to look at how we can support the industry more widely. In discussions with the society this week, we agreed to advertise in our local papers a series of campaigns from the Scottish Government. All members should see those in their local papers in the coming week and beyond; they are a means of directly supporting local papers with a source of revenue.

Fuel Poverty

Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Will the Minister for Local Government, Housing and Planning comment on what the stay-at-home guidance means for households, particularly those with disabled people in them, who will be using more electricity and heating than normal and who might also be struggling economically? What support is the Scottish Government able to provide to people who are experiencing fuel poverty as a result of the pandemic?

The Minister for Local Government, Housing and Planning (Kevin Stewart): The Scottish Government has already topped up the Scottish welfare fund with an additional £45 million to take cognisance of issues such as [*Temporary loss of sound.*] We ask people to look at boosting income in other ways first, through universal credit or other

means, before resorting to the welfare fund. However, the welfare fund is there for emergency circumstances.

Beyond that, last week I wrote to United Kingdom Government minister Kwasi Kwarteng on what more we can do to help households who, without doubt, are using more energy during the pandemic. This week, I received a positive response about further help from energy utility companies, and we will continue to push for further moves to ensure that folks who are staying at home are doing so comfortably.

Construction Industry

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): My question is for Aileen Campbell. The construction industry in England is starting up again next week. When will the Scottish Government allow construction work to continue in Scotland? As she will be aware, many firms are struggling financially and houses are not being built. What will it take for the Scottish Government to relax the rules in Scotland so that they align with those in the rest of the United Kingdom?

The Presiding Officer: Although your question was addressed to the cabinet secretary, Mr Balfour, I believe that the matter comes under Kevin Stewart's responsibility.

The Minister for Local Government, Housing and Planning (Kevin Stewart): I thank Mr Balfour for the question. I chair the construction leadership forum as well as its restart group, which looks at [*Temporary loss of sound.*] sites again as we move forward. Ministers will make decisions that are based on the evidence that we receive from medical and scientific experts, before we move forward.

I am very grateful to the many companies that have been helping to formulate guidance on how a safe return to work can take place and on the phased return that we may have to deal with. I am also grateful for the help of all those who are taking part in the numerous talks that we are having on what the restart might look like.

However, the key point for the Government in all of this is [*Temporary loss of sound.*] the spread of the virus, on which we will be guided by the evidence presented to us by the medical and scientific experts before we make such decisions.

The Presiding Officer: Mr Balfour would like to ask a brief supplementary.

Jeremy Balfour: Could the minister either publish or let us have today any evidence that he has that is different from that in the rest of the United Kingdom? In saying that the construction industry cannot be open, what scientific evidence

is he relying on that is different from what is available in England?

Kevin Stewart: Not as many sites are operating south of the border as some would think. Beyond that, we should not look just at what is happening south of the border; we must look at what is happening in the rest of the world [*Temporary loss of sound.*] before we look at the rest of the UK. For example, my understanding is that Italy has yet to allow any construction work—apart from the most essential work—to take place.

We have to be guided by the advice that we receive from the medical experts on ensuring that we keep the reproduction number well below 1. When we reach the stage at which such experts think that the time is right, ministers will take those decisions. Today and previously, members will have heard the First Minister speak about getting that balance absolutely right. The Government will continue to look at all the advice. However, I repeat that stopping the spread of the Covid-19 virus is key to everything that we are doing.

Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP): Dumfries Timber Company, which is a builders' merchant business in my constituency, very responsibly closed its doors to all customers except those working on essential infrastructure, as per the Scottish Government's guidelines. However, it has found that the big national chains are not doing that; indeed, they are providing non-essential items such as garden landscaping materials, which is taking business away from that responsible local company. Can any minister advise how the regulations might be enforced in relation to companies that act in such a way? There seems to be a lack of clarity, in that different messages are coming from the Scottish and UK Governments.

Kevin Stewart: [*Temporary loss of sound.*] Ms McAlpine to send me the details of the situation that she describes, and we will look into it.

Essential works to ensure people's safety are going on across the country. Yesterday, along with a number of the trade bodies, including SELECT, I appealed to the general public to treat folks who are going about their business entirely within the rules and are helping others with the respect that they deserve.

If Ms McAlpine wishes to send me the details of the situation in her area, I will certainly have a close look at it and get back to her as soon as I possibly can.

Emergency Free Meals

Maureen Watt (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): The coronavirus pandemic has created considerable financial challenges for many people. We know that in my constituency—

and, indeed, across Scotland—some households are unable to access the basics, including food. How is the Scottish Government ensuring that emergency free meals are provided in a dignified way to those who are in need of them?

The Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government (Aileen Campbell): I thank Maureen Watt for raising that issue. She used the word “dignified”, which is exactly the principle that we are trying to use to guide our actions. We are taking a “cash first” approach to supporting those who cannot afford food during the crisis, by endeavouring to put money into people’s pockets. We want to ensure that people can afford the necessities in life, including food. That is why we have more than doubled the Scottish welfare fund, and have made an additional £45 million available, in addition to the £35.5 million that was committed in the Scottish budget, thereby giving local authorities flexibility in how they deploy the funds for the people who require them most.

As I said in my statement last month, in order to respond directly to people’s need for food, we have committed £350 million to support communities and vulnerable people. In the £70 million that is specifically for food, £30 million has been allocated to the shielded population. We have also provided local authorities with £30 million—£15 million for free school meals and the rest for helping with local efforts. That is in addition to the direct support that we have given to FareShare and other organisations, so that they can make food available.

We did not ever want to see food banks being used in Scotland: we wanted to get rid of food insecurity before the pandemic, but it continues. We want people to be able to comfortably afford food, which is why we are continuing to work with food providers so that we can principally take the “cash first” approach, but also support people who have emergency needs.

We also recognise that there are other groups that we need to support, including older people and people who need culturally appropriate food provision. Through the £350 million support package, we have endeavoured to support a variety of organisations so that the right packages and measures of support get to the people who most need support. I encourage people to apply to the Scottish welfare fund for cash support, if they need it.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you. Pauline McNeill was next, but I am afraid that we cannot hear her. Could you take yourself off mute? We will come back to Ms McNeill.

Travel to Second and Holiday Homes

Gail Ross (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP): In my constituency and in other remote and rural areas, there has, since the beginning of lockdown, been a lot of worry and, indeed, anger about people coming to second and holiday homes to self-isolate. We know that the police have new powers, but is consideration being given to empowering local authorities to take additional action? How will we ensure that tourists and visitors feel welcome to come back to such areas once the restrictions have been lifted?

The Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government (Aileen Campbell): I understand exactly why there is anxiety in areas where people visit, when the advice is to do the contrary: the advice that says that people should avoid travelling unless it is essential has been very clear. The First Minister reiterated that important message in her update today.

We are starting to see that people are possibly feeling a bit frustrated about the restrictions, but it is critical that we continue to abide by the message to avoid unnecessary travel. People must avoid travelling unless it is essential, and must not travel to second homes, but must remain in their primary homes.

The regulations are clear that Police Scotland needs to enforce the regulations on individual movement and gatherings in public spaces. We believe that that is the right approach. At this point, we are not considering additional powers for local authorities but, as ever, we are willing to engage and to consider new additional ideas that would help to reiterate and underline the important health messages.

Although Gail Ross is right to ask about how we will start to welcome people back to those areas when the restrictions are eased, that is a discussion for a point in the future. My colleagues, in particular Fergus Ewing and others, are engaging with rural and Highland communities to work out what might be the best steps to recovery in those areas.

However, that has to be done at the right point in time, when there is no risk to public health. At the moment, the clear message is that people should avoid unnecessary travel, and should continue to stay in their primary residence. We will continue to support communities that feel that that is not being abided by, and we will ensure that Police Scotland is appropriately informed of concerns that residents or communities have.

Business Support

Peter Chapman (North East Scotland) (Con): I have been approached by several hotels in my area that are deeply concerned and feel that they

might not survive because they will not receive the £25,000 grant because their rateable values are above £51,000. They argue that that is too blunt a measure. I, too, believe that that is the case, and that there should be some sort of tapering mechanism in relation to rateable value, so that the cliff edge at £51,000 can be avoided.

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Kate Forbes): I am sympathetic to the plight of hotels that are above the £51,000 rateable value. As Peter Chapman will know, we have moved quickly to support businesses; our support for business now exceeds the Barnett consequentials that were made available to us for that purpose. A few weeks ago, because we were fully aware that some businesses were still falling through the cracks we announced another level of support. That additional £100 million of support went live today at 2 pm. Businesses that have been unable to access support to date can apply for that.

The process will be managed by our enterprise agencies. There is a £20 million creative, tourism and hospitality enterprises hardship fund, and a £45 million pivotal enterprise resilience fund. Those funds are designed to reach the businesses that have not yet had support, and those that have had some support but are so critical to local economies that they need special or bespoke aid, through our enterprise agencies.

We continue to keep those matters under review. If further consequentials become available that would allow us to make our support even more generous, we will do that. However, in the meantime, I recommend that Mr Chapman's constituents consider the additional funding that has been available since 2 pm today.

Peter Chapman: I appreciate and welcome that response from the cabinet secretary. I just hope that she takes on board the fact that the £51,000 rateable value is the problem, and that we need a solution to that. I believe that we need some sort of tapering mechanism; otherwise, businesses will continue to fall through the cracks, which she rightly mentioned.

Kate Forbes: [*Temporary loss of sound.*] applies obviously in England and in Scotland. On the consequentials, I have a responsibility to ensure that the money goes as far as possible in order to support as many businesses as possible. In some cases, we have done things a little differently to ensure that as many businesses as possible benefit. Ultimately, I am constrained by the consequentials having been given for that purpose.

We do not have the fiscal levers that Westminster has to support some businesses. This afternoon, I will have a conversation with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, during which I will

raise that specific point, off the back of Mr Chapman's question.

Business Support

The Presiding Officer: We will try again to hear from Pauline McNeill.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): Can you hear me now, Presiding Officer?

The Presiding Officer: Yes, indeed.

Pauline McNeill: My equipment seems to be working now. I never touched anything—it has a mind of its own.

Many small businesses in Glasgow are struggling to survive, and I am concerned that they might go out of business. The Cabinet Secretary for Finance might be familiar with the impact of the Sauchiehall Street and Glasgow School of Art fire.

I will mention two particular businesses in my constituency. First, NY Slice, which is just in recovery, waited six weeks for an application for assistance to be considered, only to be turned down, which I am pretty certain was an error. There are probably more applications in Glasgow than in all the other cities put together.

I want to raise the same issue that Peter Chapman raised. Another company that survived the Glasgow School of Art fire just missed out on getting assistance because its rateable value is just over £51,000. The company feels that that is unfair because other businesses that have more than one property, but whose value is under £51,000, get assistance. Can the cabinet secretary say a bit more about what she said in answer to Peter Chapman? Will the Government help companies in my constituency that have just missed out? There is a big worry that they will not survive because they have just missed out.

Will the cabinet secretary also say something about monitoring the timescales for assistance? Glasgow City Council has had tons of applications for Government assistance, but it is taking too long over them and businesses are concerned about how long it is taking to get assistance.

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Kate Forbes): We are closely monitoring progress, I say again that I am acutely aware of the enormously challenging circumstances that businesses are facing—in particular, businesses in Pauline McNeill's constituency that are recovering from the Sauchiehall Street fire.

We are publishing weekly figures on how many grants have been issued. At close of 28 April 2020, local authorities reported that more than 74,000 applications had been received, and of those applications, 45,000 grants valuing £526

million had been awarded. That is more than 50 per cent.

I understand that Glasgow City Council initially faced some challenges, as did many councils, with the need for people to work from home as well as managing the non-domestic rates system. However, it has scaled up operations significantly in order to get through applications as quickly as possible—it has more than doubled the number of staff who are processing applications.

I have made it clear that I want to see as many businesses as possible receiving grants, because they will be a lifeline. We will try, as far as we can, to fill the gaps. However, the Scottish Government has limited financial levers, so we can fill only so many gaps with the powers and resources that we have. That is why we need to work closely with the United Kingdom Government, which ultimately has the fiscal levers and the ability to provide more consequential to help even more people.

If Pauline McNeill wants to raise with me anything specific about the businesses that she mentioned and which she believes did not get the grant because of an error, I will happily look at that. As I said, I expect as many businesses as possible that meet the criteria to get support.

Contact Tracing (Councils)

Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP): The English health secretary, Matt Hancock, recently said that, in the future, councils in England and Wales will help to trace the contacts of those people who test positive for Covid-19. Will the Scottish Government ask Scottish councils to do such work? If so, what assessment has been made of councils' capacity to do that work?

The Minister for Local Government, Housing and Planning (Kevin Stewart): Test, trace and isolate will be immensely important as we move into the next phase. This is a matter for Public Health Scotland, which will be looking to build capacity at the local level. Whether that will involve councils is something that I can relay to Ms McAlpine later, but the ball is very firmly in Public Health Scotland's court with regard to how we move forward and build capacity at the local level. That might involve a number of partner organisations.

Fly-tipping and Recycling Centres

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): Yesterday, I had a discussion with the co-leader of Fife Council, David Ross, and raised with him the issue of fly-tipping, which has become problematic in some areas of Fife and across the country. Today's *Daily Record* urges the Government to get councils to open up recycling centres. Councillor Ross believes that, although it would be

a challenge to open the recycling centres, the council could begin to do that, but, to date, the Scottish Government has made it clear that the work of recycling centres counts as non-essential activity. Could the Minister for Local Government, Housing and Planning clarify that? Will he start to work with councils to get those centres open again and working in a safe way?

The Minister for Local Government, Housing and Planning (Kevin Stewart): I thank Mr Rowley for his question. The same question was posed to the First Minister at today's press briefing.

Obviously, fly-tipping is an offence and people should not do it; people should behave responsibly during the public health emergency. As the First Minister said earlier, we continue to review everything that it is possible for us to do. We will take decisions based on the evidence that we receive.

One of the things that I have found useful in attempting to move forward with the construction industry is to ask folks in the know—in other words, folks who work in specific areas—to put together guidance on how they could see their particular sphere operating within all the social distancing rules that are in place. If Fife Council has done something like that in relation to recycling centres, I would be more than happy for Mr Rowley to send us that material so that we can have a look at it.

Beyond that, if we were to move to reopen the recycling centres, we would also have to take cognisance of people's behaviours, and the judgment in that regard is sometimes a bit more difficult to make.

I reiterate—as all the ministers who are taking part in this session have done—that our first and key priority is to stop the spread of the virus. However, we will base any future decisions on knowledge, and if Councillor Ross, Councillor Alexander or any other councillor wants to give us an idea of how they think that the reopening of recycling centres could work, I would be more than willing to look at that.

Alex Rowley: I understand Kevin Stewart's view that people should not dump rubbish, but the fact is that people are dumping rubbish and it is starting to become more and more of a problem. I do not want the issue to become a health problem for people, with rubbish being dumped here, there and everywhere.

I am looking for a commitment from Kevin Stewart, as the local government minister, that he will start to talk to councils and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities about safe ways of opening up the recycling centres before the problem escalates and the Government is forced to take action.

Kevin Stewart: Ministers constantly speak to COSLA and council leaders about various issues, as I am sure that Mr Rowley will understand. If we are to reopen any facility, we must make sure that we do so in a safe manner and that, as in everything that we do, we are guided by the medical and scientific advice that we receive.

I well understand the difficulties that Mr Rowley highlights—I know that fly-tipping is becoming a problem in many places—but we must do what is right by ensuring that we stop the spread of the virus. However, we will continue to talk to local authorities about the recycling issues and many others.

The Presiding Officer: Aileen Campbell would like to come in on this subject.

The Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government (Aileen Campbell): I underline the points that Kevin Stewart has made. The Government is working proactively with COSLA, local authorities, the Scottish Environment Protection Agency, Zero Waste Scotland and the waste sector to assess some of the risks involved. That work is on-going—such engagement is happening.

Kevin Stewart and I have explicit responsibility for local government, but another minister who is involved in driving a lot of the work in this area is Roseanna Cunningham. We will endeavour to keep Mr Rowley informed as that work progresses.

Planning

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

The Scottish Government has recently put through without parliamentary scrutiny regulations that remove the public from the planning process at a time when local authority members are also being cut out of decision making. Does Kevin Stewart agree that there is a risk that some controversial developments will go ahead with the views of local communities being completely sidelined?

The Minister for Local Government, Housing and Planning (Kevin Stewart): I disagree with Mr Mason that the public have been cut out of the planning process. We have not done that at all. We have stopped public events, which would create a great amount of risk given the public health emergency. However, we have put in place other ways for folks to make their views on such matters known while we are in lockdown.

Beyond that, on the democracy of local members, which Mr Mason also mentioned, my understanding is that Aberdeen City Council's

planning department met either yesterday or today.

I would like elected members in local authorities and planning authorities across the country to be open and transparent in the decisions that they make. For example, the Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park Authority held a meeting last week that was videostreamed far and wide so that everybody could see the democratic process at play. That is the best way for all planning authorities to conduct their business. We want to ensure that we have the trust and faith of the general public as we move forward in these difficult times.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, minister.

I thank all my colleagues, particularly for coping with the technical difficulties this afternoon. That concludes our question session.

We will be back tomorrow at 2 pm with the Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, Europe and External Affairs, Michael Russell, and the Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Fair Work and Culture, Fiona Hyslop. Until then, thank you very much.

Meeting closed at 14:47.



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba