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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 3 September 2020

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

Portfolio Question Time

Communities and Local Government

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): Welcome to this virtual meeting of the Scottish Parliament. The first item of business is portfolio questions on communities and local government. If members wish to ask a supplementary question, I remind them to enter the letter “R” in the chat function when the question is being asked. Questions 3 and 5 are grouped, and supplementaries to them will be taken after I have taken both questions.

Covid-19 (Supporting Local Authorities)

1. **Gail Ross (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what support it is providing to local authorities in their response to Covid-19. (S5O-04533)

The Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government (Aileen Campbell): To date, the Scottish Government has committed £330 million of additional support for local authorities. Discussions with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities on further financial support and flexibility are on-going. To help with local authorities’ cash-flow difficulties, we agreed with COSLA to front load our weekly grant payments by £455 million during May, June and July.

We have also replaced £972 million of non-domestic rates income—the cost of Covid-19 rates reliefs—with an additional general revenue grant of the same amount, which effectively protects local government funding from the potential loss of non-domestic rates income.

Alongside those measures, the Scottish Government will provide an additional £35 million over the next two years on top of the £100 million funding that it previously announced to help support the return to school, and a total of up to £100 million to support the challenges in the social care sector, which will be provided through integration authorities.

Gail Ross: That extra support is welcome. However, Highland Council currently owes the Public Works Loan Board nearly £715 million. Does the cabinet secretary agree that the United Kingdom Treasury needs to seriously consider writing off local authority debt, or at least consider

a payment break, given the significant pressures under which local authorities find themselves at the moment?

Aileen Campbell: I agree that it would be of enormous benefit in the current circumstances if local authority debt could be written off without that having an impact on the Scottish budget. However, any approach to HM Treasury to write off local authority debt in Scotland is likely to be met with the requirement that the Scottish Government provides an offsetting reduction to its budget. From that perspective, that is simply not affordable. I recognise that it would be enormously beneficial if HM Treasury was agreeable to something being done.

Covid-19 (Vulnerable and Older People)

2. **Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what further support local authorities can provide to communities and community organisations to continue to protect the most vulnerable and older people during the Covid-19 pandemic. (S5O-04534)

The Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government (Aileen Campbell): We have already provided a considerable amount of support to local authorities, including £57.6 million to provide co-ordinated support with food and essentials for people at risk. We have also doubled the Scottish welfare fund.

Our programme for government commits to more investment in people and communities, including £275 million over five years to support community-led regeneration and town centre revitalisation, as well as a £10 million tenant hardship loan fund. We have also announced a further increase of £3 million in discretionary housing payments support, which brings total investment to £80.1 million in 2020-21.

We have also announced plans to refocus part of the communities fund into a £25 million community and third sector recovery programme, which will provide direct support to the third sector to continue to assist people and communities.

Rona Mackay: In my constituency of Strathkelvin and Bearsden, community organisations have been a lifeline for many vulnerable people, with East Dunbartonshire Voluntary Action providing expert co-ordination and support for local groups. Will local authorities be given guidance on how to prioritise the needs of vulnerable people both now and after the scourge of Covid-19 is no longer with us?

Aileen Campbell: I thank Rona Mackay for bringing to our attention the phenomenal work that is clearly happening in her constituency through local groups. That has been replicated across

Scotland, and people have done enormously inspiring work to keep people looked after, safe and well.

Local authorities have a deep understanding of their communities, and community needs will be different across all areas of Scotland. Local authorities will prioritise and support their communities based on local need, and will use a range of tools and data to support their analysis of it.

Rona Mackay is absolutely right to point out the need to learn from what has happened and to use those lessons in looking forward and preparing for the future, especially with the concurrent risks of winter and Brexit that are on the horizon. I know from the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities that that work is being considered, and that is why COSLA is an active participant in our social renewal advisory board, which seeks to work out how we not only recover from this situation, but seek to rebuild and refresh what we do. That will include making sure that we enable our communities to continue to flourish in the ways in which they have flourished.

Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): Today, more than 100 charities in Glasgow got a temporary reprieve from huge proposed cuts to their funding through the Glasgow communities fund, but it is not yet clear what the council will do to fill the financial gap. Organisations—*[Inaudible.]*—have contacted me, and they are scared that they will have to close. Does the cabinet secretary agree that those charities should never have been under that threat in the first place, and that, in the current circumstances, disproportionate underfunding of local authorities has to stop?

Aileen Campbell: I had trouble hearing some of what Annie Wells said—her line was pretty poor—but I think that I got the gist of her question.

The Scottish Government continues to treat local government fairly. In my response to Gail Ross, I outlined a significant range of levers that we have used to support local authorities through this uniquely difficult time.

I understand entirely why there are so many concerns about some of the on-going discussions in Glasgow. I understand that a paper has gone to Glasgow City Council, which will finalise and confirm its decisions today. There has been movement, with Jennifer Layden's announcement of a transition fund to help support some of those local groups from the local authority pot. Continuing dialogue is also important to make sure that the local authority supports community groups as best it can.

I point out to Annie Wells that a lot of those organisations are helping people who are deeply vulnerable and have been impacted by some of

the welfare cuts that her party has brought about. She should also be seeking to make sure that the United Kingdom Government continues to do what it can to alleviate poverty across the country—lifting the benefit cap, for example, would go some way towards supporting people.

We need to pull together, and we need to make sure that we can support our communities. I am confident that the continued dialogue that is happening in Glasgow will enable community groups to feel supported. However, we have to make sure that we work collectively to recognise the valuable work that the third sector does across the country.

Covid-19 (Support for Communities)

3. **Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what steps it is taking to empower local authorities to make decisions that will strengthen their communities as they move on following the Covid-19 pandemic. (S5O-04535)

The Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government (Aileen Campbell): Our communities have responded to Covid-19 in partnership with local authorities, the third and voluntary sectors and others, and we want to build on that as we move forward into recovery and renewal. As part of the joint local governance review with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, we will work with councils, wider public service partners and our communities to develop place-based proposals for alternative governance arrangements that reflect the principle of subsidiarity and our commitment to local democracy.

Sarah Boyack: Restrictions are increasingly being imposed on the basis of local authority areas, but the rate of Covid-19 cases broken down by local authority is not publicly available. Will the Scottish Government commit to publishing that information as soon as possible so that councils can respond to a rise in cases quickly, ministerial decisions can be understood and scrutinised, and funding can be allocated to support local communities that are going back into lockdown?

Aileen Campbell: I will certainly endeavour to see whether any improvements can be made around the information that is available. The Scottish Government has been pretty open about what it has been seeking to do and the balancing act that is involved in reaching decisions to protect people from the continued spread of the virus. In the Aberdeen example, we made resources available to support some of the restrictions that had to be put in place. If more can be done to support those decisions and increase awareness, I am sure that the Government will continue to look at that.

I note that the First Minister answers questions daily about the decisions that she has to make. She is open about how she makes those decisions, which are based on the advice of public health experts, and she makes judgments in order to protect the public.

If there is more that we can do, I am sure that we will look at that. Again, I point to the example of Aberdeen, with resource going to support the city during that difficult time.

Covid-19 (Support for Communities)

5. Shona Robison (Dundee City East) (SNP):

To ask the Scottish Government what additional support it is providing to strengthen communities in light of the challenges that many face as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. (S5O-04537)

The Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government (Aileen Campbell): As we move from the immediate response to recovery, we will refocus part of the communities fund into a £25 million community and third sector recovery programme, which will include business support and investment to help organisations adapt their operations and income generation to increase sustainability. The funding will support our third sector to continue to support people and communities to respond to the on-going impact of the pandemic.

Shona Robison: Will the cabinet secretary set out—both in general and specifically with regard to Dundee—how the initial £350 million community fund has supported and targeted the communities and individuals who are most in need and who do not always have the expertise and resources to make applications for funding?

Aileen Campbell: The initial £350 million funding package has been distributed in a number of ways, with flexibility added to ensure that—exactly as Shona Robison described—support reached communities that perhaps would not have had the capacity or expertise to access it.

The supporting communities fund was delivered using a targeted approach through community anchor organisations—CAOs—enabling the funding to be distributed locally to active groups supporting Covid work. Across Dundee, seven CAOs have been awarded a total of £269,000. In addition, 110 organisations and projects in Dundee have received awards totalling £605,000 through the wellbeing fund, 46 organisations have received £686,000 through the third sector resilience fund, and £2,167,000 has been delivered by the local authority through the food fund.

We published, and will look to refresh, data on the geographical spread of the awards, in order to be open, up front and honest about where the

money is going and how it has been distributed. That information is on the Scottish Government website for MSPs who wish to see how their communities have been supported.

James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP):

Does the cabinet secretary agree that steps taken so far with local government—including the relaxation of some ring-fenced budgets, the front loading of weekly grants and close working with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities—has given authorities additional flexibility, both during the pandemic and as we have begun to move forward?

Aileen Campbell: Absolutely. We took decisive action to allocate an additional £350 million in funding and to relax rules on some of the previously ring-fenced funding in order to provide flexibility, which is so important in enabling local authorities to respond effectively to the pandemic. We also agreed with COSLA to bring forward £455 million of grant payments to alleviate cash-flow problems.

The situation is not static and discussions with COSLA are on-going to examine what further financial support and flexibility could be delivered. It has been essential to put in place that flexibility to help local authorities.

Community Facilities (Funding)

4. Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):

To ask the Scottish Government what its response has been to reports that many community facilities run by charitable trusts are on the verge of collapse due to reduced income caused by the lockdown conditions. (S5O-04536)

The Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government (Aileen Campbell): We are aware of the difficulties that the third sector faces, and the Scottish Government has taken action to support the third sector during the Covid-19 pandemic.

That includes £350 million of community funding, of which £100 million has been committed to the third sector and has been delivered rapidly, ahead of other parts of the United Kingdom and on a much greater scale.

It also includes the £25 million third sector resilience fund, the wellbeing fund and the supporting communities fund, which have played vital roles in supporting the third sector, ensuring that it in turn could support people and communities.

We are working quickly to develop a communities and third sector recovery programme, to support organisations to adapt their operations and income generation. I expect to be able to announce further details of that soon.

Claire Baker: I thank the cabinet secretary. My question was redrafted by the chamber desk; my intention was to ask about arm's-length external organisations and community and leisure trusts, and I was advised to describe them as charitable trusts. I apologise if the cabinet secretary has misunderstood the initial intention of the question. I wanted to ask about the local government income compensation scheme, which I understand will apply in Scotland to sport and leisure trusts; that is very welcome.

Will the cabinet secretary advise as to the timescales for the distribution of funds related to that scheme? Will it follow the timescale that is expected for the funding in England, which would mean that the first payments would be in October?

Aileen Campbell: We have advised the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities that we would consider for Scottish councils a tailored lost income scheme, which would include some allowance for ALEOs. That would have to be contained within the overall funding envelope for local government.

We know that the UK Government introduced a lost income scheme for councils in England, and we are still waiting for some of those details. Although, as I understand it, the UK Government scheme specifically excludes arm's-length organisations, we recognise the point and the issues that Claire Baker raises about ALEOs. I am not sure why the chamber desk redrafted her question; I will be happy to engage further on that with her, if she wishes to pursue it.

Officials are actively engaging with COSLA on the scheme that the member asked about, to enable us to work through what we need to do to support ALEOs as best we can, and to collectively recognise and meet the particular challenges that they face.

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): The £4 million museums recovery and resilience fund will be a lifeline for many museums in our communities, including in Dollar, Dunblane and Alloa, in my area. Will the cabinet secretary provide an update on how museums can access that funding?

Aileen Campbell: I understand how much of a necessity the fund will be for many communities, particularly those in Keith Brown's constituency, which he described.

The fund is being administered by Museums Galleries Scotland. Museums that are seeking support from it should visit the Museums Galleries Scotland website for details on how to apply as it will have fuller information about what organisations need to do, and how they need to do it, in order to engage and access the funding.

I will be happy to forward the link to Keith Brown if he requires it. He should direct his constituents to the Museums Galleries Scotland website for further advice.

Covid-19 (Local Government Services)

6. **Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the impact of the cost of the Covid-19 response and recovery measures for local government on the delivery of other council services. (S5O-04538)

The Minister for Local Government, Housing and Planning (Kevin Stewart): The Scottish Government recognises the significant financial impact and the challenging operating environment that we all face, and we will continue to consider every option to ensure that local authorities have the financial support and flexibility to support communities across Scotland with the services that they expect and deserve at this time.

The Government took decisive action to allocate an additional £330 million of funding, and, in recognition of local authorities' additional cost pressures and lost income, the Government has also brought forward £455 million of grant payments to help alleviate local authorities' potential cash-flow problems. Discussions are ongoing with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities on further financial support and flexibility.

Working in partnership with COSLA, the Scottish Government will continue to press the United Kingdom Government for additional financial support and fiscal flexibilities, for both the Scottish Government and local authorities, and would welcome any support that the Parliament can provide in that respect.

Colin Smyth: We know that councils face a shortfall between what they have had to spend on their efforts to support communities in the fight against Covid-19 and the extra resources that they have received from Government. A report by Dumfries and Galloway Council last month showed that even excluding the cost of the return to schools, the local shortfall was £2.5 million and rising. Does the minister accept that unless additional resources are allocated to councils, there will be cuts to existing services over and above the cuts that we already know will be required to balance the books?

Kevin Stewart: I will not go over all of what the cabinet secretary covered in previous answers about additional money. Dumfries and Galloway Council has been allocated an additional £7.6 million to deal with the challenges of Covid-19 and beyond that, it will receive a fair share of the further £75 million that is currently undistributed

but will—[*Inaudible.*—] agreement on the distribution methodology with COSLA. As the cabinet secretary pointed out, we are continuing to look at all the other flexibilities that come into play and I am more than happy to continue dialogue with Mr Smyth.

Planning Conditions (Negotiations)

7. Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government what it considers an acceptable length of time for negotiations on planning conditions to conclude. (S5O-04539)

The Minister for Local Government, Housing and Planning (Kevin Stewart): There are statutory timescales for determining planning applications. If those are not met, an applicant can appeal or seek local review on the grounds of non-determination.

Mark Ruskell: Three years on from the minister's notice of intent to approve the controversial Park of Keir development and more than a dozen extensions to planning negotiations later, there is still no agreement on the proposal. Does the minister agree that any three-year planning negotiation that was initially meant to last only three months risks becoming meaningless, because the context is likely to have changed dramatically since the original decision?

Kevin Stewart: We are aware that planning obligations can be a source of sometimes significant delay in the planning process. The Government encourages negotiations to be conducted as timeously as possible. Negotiations between Stirling Council and the developer over the planning obligations in that case are on-going. Under the current circumstances, a further extension to September 2020 has been allowed for the obligations to be concluded between the parties.

Homelessness

8. Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to prevent an increase in homelessness as the Covid-19 pandemic continues. (S5O-04540)

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, did you catch all that? You should have the question in writing.

The Minister for Local Government, Housing and Planning (Kevin Stewart): I have that in writing, so I can answer that. The Scottish Government wants to ensure that everyone has a warm and safe home that meets their needs. Our focus has not changed during the pandemic, but our ambition has increased. We do not want to see anyone return to unsuitable accommodation or rough sleeping as we emerge from the crisis.

That is why I reconvened the homelessness and rough sleeping action group, which has produced a comprehensive set of recommendations, including wide-ranging proposals to prevent homelessness, which we are using to update our ending homelessness together action plan and guide our recovery. Among its recommendations was that we prevent a wave of new eviction cases and, subject to parliamentary approval, we will do so by extending the emergency measures to prevent evictions that were originally in place until September for a further six months to 31 March 2021, except those relating to antisocial behaviour or criminality.

By ensuring that the emergency legislation remains in place, we are providing extra time and protection to tenants who are struggling, enabling them to secure the financial support that is available to them so that they can keep paying their rent and can remain in their homes over this unprecedented period.

Liz Smith: I am grateful to the minister for the detail in that answer, but I want to ask specifically about the concern over more jobs becoming risky as the pandemic continues. What support can the Government hope to give to the third sector, which is so important in helping people who have struggled with homelessness?

Kevin Stewart: We will continue to work with all partners over the forthcoming period. Third sector partners have been vital in helping us to deal with situations over the course of the emergency period. It was £1.5 million of funding to third sector partners that allowed us to get rough sleepers off the streets and into hotel accommodation. [*Inaudible.*—] a number of organisations, such as the Simon Community and Streetwork, for the work that they have done on that. We have also given additional funding to bodies such as Citizens Advice Scotland to ensure that people are getting the right advice.

As Ms Smith may well be aware, I have written to every tenant in Scotland, most recently to all those in the private rented sector, signposting them to the support that is available. We will continue to monitor how much that support is taken up.

14:27

Meeting suspended.

14:40

On resuming—

Social Security and Older People

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): Good afternoon. The next item of business today is portfolio question time on social security and older people. Our first question is from Keith Brown.

Race Equality Framework

1. **Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the race equality framework. (S5O-04541)

The Minister for Older People and Equalities (Christina McKelvie): Our race equality action plan 2017-20 outlines the activity that we have undertaken over the course of this Parliamentary session to secure better outcomes for minority ethnic communities in Scotland. Those steps are a vital part of the action that we have taken towards achieving the vision that was set out in the race equality framework.

On 20 March 2020, we published “Race Equality Action Plan: year two progress update”, and a final year report will be published in 2021. That report will include a full update on progress towards achieving our ambitions in the framework. We will, of course, need to pay particular attention to the issues that have been highlighted by the Covid-19 pandemic, and to the recommendations from our expert reference group on Covid-19 and ethnicity.

The programme for government also highlights a range of actions that we are taking to support minority ethnic people and communities. That includes the “no one left behind” policy, a new recruitment toolkit, a housing evidence review and a partnership with the John Smith Institute to develop a leadership development academy.

Keith Brown: I thank the minister for that very comprehensive answer. Can she also outline how the work of the academy will reach out to people from all walks of life, in all parts of our community, so that it reflects the society that we live in—not least given the huge impetus that has been given to such work by recent events?

Christina McKelvie: That is an important question to kick off with. The programme with the John Smith Institute will be open to people from all minority ethnic backgrounds and all walks of life. It will provide opportunities for up to 50 participants to take up living-wage placements. The placements will allow participants to develop the personal and professional skills that they need in order to succeed. We strongly encourage applicants from across all of Scottish society. We will lean heavily on all of our organisations to

ensure that young people know that that is available.

The programme will also focus on helping people to break down the barriers to accessing and contributing to public service and public life, and support will be available to take account of different needs, application and placement stage.

Please, everyone—let young people know that that opportunity is coming up, and that they should take advantage of it.

Child Social Security Support (Cowdenbeath)

2. **Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how children in low-income households in the Cowdenbeath constituency are being supported by the social security system. (S5O-04542)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Security and Older People (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Since their launch, best start grant and best start foods have provided over £2.2 million in vital support to eligible Fife households with children.

The Scottish child payment will open for applications from low-income families with children under the age of 6 in November this year, and that significant new benefit will start to provide payments of £10 per week for each eligible child from the end of February 2021.

The new job start payment, which helps young people to take up offers of work, provides a higher level of support—£400—to those who have children.

Annabelle Ewing: I thank the cabinet secretary for her answer and am particularly pleased to note that, notwithstanding the challenges of the pandemic, the Scottish Government will be in a position to commence payments of the Scottish child payment early next year.

What does the Scottish Government plan to do to encourage people to apply—in particular, for the Scottish child payment, which is a new game-changing benefit that will do so much to tackle child poverty in my Cowdenbeath constituency and throughout Scotland?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Annabelle Ewing is right to point out the importance not only of establishing the Scottish child payment, but of ensuring that take-up of that benefit is as high as possible. That is why, as with all the benefits that we have launched, we are developing a comprehensive communications and marketing campaign that will support the launch of the application process. There will be further work on that during the application window, and when payments begin to be made at the end of February.

Our approach will build on the lessons that we have learned from the best start foods and best start grant payments, and from our wider activity on benefit take-up. We will keep that under review to ensure that we are doing everything that we can to make families across Scotland aware of the benefit. That includes families in Fife and in Ms Ewing's constituency.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): Article 27 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child sets out that every child has the right to a standard of living that is good enough to meet their physical and social needs and to support their development. It also says that Governments must help families who cannot afford to provide that.

For months, anti-poverty and children's organisations and many others have been calling on the Scottish Government to implement a payment that would be equivalent to the Scottish child payment, and which would tide families over until that benefit is available in February. Will the Scottish Government now turn its rhetoric into reality and make that payment to the families that need it?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: We will be making the Scottish child payment only two months later than was originally planned. That two-months change is due to the difficulty of having a benefit go live during the Covid pandemic.

That does not mean that we are not serious about our responsibility to ensure that we support low-income families. For example, £110 million has been spent to tackle food insecurity during the pandemic, and we have more than doubled the resource for the Scottish welfare fund. There is £80 million available for discretionary housing payments, a £10 million tenant hardship loan fund and the coronavirus carers allowance supplement. I could go on, but I hope that that gives a flavour of the real action that the Government has taken.

I hope that Ms Grant will join us in seeking more powers for the Scottish Parliament, to ensure that we have the responsibility for low-income benefits here in whole, rather than their being reserved to Westminster. We would then no longer be wanting changes that the Westminster Government refuses to make, such as the changes that are required to get rid of the benefit cap, which has seen many more families being plunged into poverty during the coronavirus pandemic.

Carers Allowance (Delivery Date)

3. **Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what the revised delivery date for carers allowance is and when the transfer of cases will take place. (S5O-04543)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Security and Older People (Shirley-Anne Somerville):

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a major impact on the Scottish Government, on Social Security Scotland and on the Department for Work and Pensions, whose support we need in order to transfer social security powers. As was set out in my statement to Parliament on 1 April, we are having to rework our timetable to deliver the remaining devolved benefits and to complete case transfer.

That is a complex on-going exercise. We must consider the impact of the pandemic not only on our own services, but on the availability of health and social care professionals to bring their expertise to co-design of disability and carer benefits, at a time when many of them are still needed on the front line. We must also account for the extraordinary pressures that have been placed on the DWP following the unprecedented demand for universal credit, which is impacting on the resources that it has available for the devolution programme.

I will update Parliament on revised delivery dates for Scottish carers assistance and dates for completion of case transfer of Scottish clients who are in receipt of carers allowance, once the re-planning work is complete.

Claudia Beamish: I thank the cabinet secretary for her answer, and note that she will inform us of those dates.

As the cabinet secretary knows, unpaid carers across Scotland have been putting in the toughest shifts during the pandemic, often without breaks. The 78,000 of them who got the additional supplement are, as many of us will have heard across Scotland, deeply grateful for that support, but many have also lost loved ones to the virus.

The cabinet secretary might be aware of the policy proposals from Marie Curie, Sue Ryder and Reform Scotland for a bereavement support bill, a fund for training and education for carers returning to work, a post-caring support payment and, importantly, a full six months of carers allowance after a carer is bereaved. Has the Government responded to those organisations, and will it be able to support at least some of those development proposals and take them forward?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I am very much aware and appreciative of that work by Marie Curie, Reform Scotland and Sue Ryder. We will hold a consultation on how carers allowance could be changed as it is devolved to Scotland, so that we can ensure that it works better for the people of Scotland. Certainly, as we move forward with that, the aspects of the work by those organisations that relates to social security will be taken into consideration.

I recognise the role that carers play in our society and the challenges that they face following the loss of a cared-for person. That already difficult time is made even more difficult if financial challenges follow from it. The Government is very aware of that, so I reassure Ms Beamish that we will continue to encourage those organisations to work with us on that, as we look at what changes can be made to carers allowance when it is fully devolved to the Scottish Parliament.

Shona Robison (Dundee City East) (SNP): How many people have benefited from the one-off payment to carers during the Covid-19 pandemic?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Around 80,000 of Scotland's lowest-income carers have received an extra £230.10, which is the one-off payment of the coronavirus carers allowance. That means that carers in Scotland this year are receiving £690.30 more than carers elsewhere in the UK.

Welfare Policies (Dundee City Council)

4. **Bill Bowman (North East Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what engagement it has had with Dundee City Council regarding how its welfare policies address the reported widening of the Scottish index of multiple deprivation gap between the least and most deprived parts of the city. (S5O-04544)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Security and Older People (Shirley-Anne Somerville): The Scottish Government has discussed support for food and other essentials with Dundee City Council. The council is working closely with the third sector, through its food insecurity network, to provide food aid support to people who experience financial barriers to accessing food, and has engaged with Dundee Bairns to provide additional food to low-income families. Going forward, the council is aiming to integrate advice provision with food-aid providers to ensure that people are getting the support that they need to maximise their incomes.

Bill Bowman: According to the latest deprivation index figures for Dundee, last year the city had 1,000 more people in the most-deprived bracket than it had in 2016. Dundee City Council now faces a reported £19.6 million Covid funding shortfall. Does the cabinet secretary agree that the Scottish National Party Government should fund that in full, so that the most vulnerable Dundee residents are not pushed further into deprivation?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The Scottish Government takes seriously its responsibility to ensure that low-income families are supported. For example, last year £1.96 billion was invested to support low-income households across Scotland. As was mentioned in a previous answer, we are delivering on the Scottish child payment as

well, which will support families throughout Dundee.

Additional funding has been made available to all local authorities during the coronavirus pandemic. I point to the £5 million from the community funding package, as an example. That is just one of the funding packages that has been available to Dundee City Council, and which has gone to organisations in its area.

Again, I hope that Mr Bowman will recognise the importance of supporting low-income families at all times—not just during the pandemic. I also hope that he will join me in ensuring that low-income benefits, which remain reserved to the Westminster Government, are set at an adequate level, and that he will support the real living wage—which will get people out of poverty—and the fair work agenda.

Of course, the biggest change that could be made to the Westminster Government's mind at this point would be to get it to continue the furlough scheme, which would, of course, support more families and allow people to stay in jobs, so that they do not fall into unemployment and poverty.

Job Start Payment (Glasgow Cathcart)

5. **James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how it is supporting young people in the Glasgow Cathcart constituency with the costs of starting a new job. (S5O-04545)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Security and Older People (Shirley-Anne Somerville): The new job start payment, which we introduced on 17 August 2020, will support all eligible young people who apply to Social Security Scotland for assistance, including those in Cathcart.

Job start payment is a cash payment of £250, or £400 for a young person with children. It will help about 5,000 young people across Scotland every year to meet expenses before they receive their first salary. The money can be used for any purpose and young people have told us that they are most likely to spend it on travel, clothing and food.

James Dornan: The job prospects of young people in my constituency have been hit hard by the pandemic, so the announcement of extra support to help them into work could not come at a better time. What other support is available for young people who might be experiencing unemployment?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As Mr Dornan is aware, the Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Fair Work and Culture detailed many of the measures in yesterday's debate on the programme for

government, which I am aware that he took part in. Those measures include the young person's guarantee, which is aimed at supporting all young people aged 16 to 24.

This financial year, we have committed to investing £60 million in our youth guarantee as part of the £100 million investment for employment and skills that was announced last month. The guarantee is one of the first actions from the advisory group on economic recovery's report that will be progressed. There is also, of course, the additional £10 million that has been put in place to support and retain apprentices.

Older People (Human Rights)

6. Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what role ministers have played in ensuring that the human rights of older people are being protected during the Covid-19 pandemic. (S5O-04546)

The Minister for Older People and Equalities (Christina McKelvie): Ministers have been active in ensuring a human rights-based approach to the development of our policy response, the legislative approach and the range of guidance in relation to this unprecedented threat to public health.

I have held round-table meetings with the older people's strategic action forum to ensure that our response has been directly informed by lived experience, while ensuring that the standards and the principles of human rights are integrated into all our policymaking.

Our immediate priorities fund has ensured that members of our older people's strategic action forum have received more than £1.1 million additional funding to provide direct support for older people during the pandemic.

Anas Sarwar: The sad reality for older people living in care homes is that their human rights seem to have been an afterthought. Almost half of Covid deaths have happened in care homes.

We knew that those who lived in care homes were the most vulnerable to the virus, yet 47 Covid-positive patients were transferred into care homes. We were slow to set up testing, and we still have gaps in testing. Instead, we have sometimes demonised healthcare workers.

What role will the minister now play to make sure that we can, as best as possible, put a protective shield around our care homes and protect as many older people's lives as we can?

Christina McKelvie: Of course, the Scottish Government has always placed the upholding of human rights at the heart of its approach. Since the start of the pandemic, our priority has been to save people's lives, wherever they live.

A framework of legislation protects the rights of individuals receiving care, and throughout the pandemic we have worked closely with our colleagues in the national health service and local government, and with a variety of voluntary and independent sectors, to ensure that the needs and rights of residents in care homes are able to be met.

The Covid-19 framework for decision making and Scotland's route map through and out of the crisis provide an indication of the order in which we will carefully and gradually seek to change those restrictions. The route map includes overarching commitments to human rights, equality and social justice and sets out ways in which those principles have been applied in the decision-making process.

All our decisions on the Covid-19 response have been guided by the scientific advice that was available at the time. We continue to tailor our response as more is learned. I will also continue to work with all our stakeholders, through our older people's strategic action forum, to ensure that their lived experience informs our decision making in future.

The Presiding Officer: We have a supplementary question from Maurice Corry.

Maurice Corry (West Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government how it is protecting our older armed forces veterans during the current pandemic, in line with their human rights, bearing in mind that some such veterans have to cope with complex health issues.

Christina McKelvie: A huge part of our work alongside local communities and organisations aims to support older people and to ensure that a tailored approach is taken to all intersections in such groups, whether they involve older veterans, older minority ethnic people or older lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people.

The Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans is very much involved in that work, and I would be happy to pass on Maurice Corry's comments to him so that he can feed back to him. However, I reassure Mr Corry that we have absolutely factored in all the types of older people who might need such support or for whom tailored support might be appropriate. I also point out that our older people's strategic action forum includes a number of organisations, such as Poppyscotland, which have informed our process. I will take up Mr Corry's specific points to ensure that he receives a fuller answer from my colleague Graeme Dey, who is the minister concerned.

Older People (Welfare Policy)

7. Elaine Smith (Central Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government how its welfare

policies address poverty and malnutrition in older people. (S5O-04547)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Security and Older People (Shirley-Anne Somerville): The Minister for Older People and Equalities has held regular meetings with the older people's strategic action forum to ensure that our approach is directly informed by lived experience.

Our immediate priorities fund has ensured that members of the forum received more than £1.16 million to provide direct support for older people, with more than £170,000 going to support older minority ethnic people's access to hot, nutritious food.

Age Scotland also received more than £870,000 from the fund to enable it substantially to increase the capacity of its existing helpline and to create the infrastructure to maintain that vital service during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Scottish Government has invested more than £110 million in tackling food insecurity caused by the pandemic, including awarding more than £240,000 to Food Train, which has provided meals and check-in phone calls to more than 3,000 older people.

Elaine Smith: Is the cabinet secretary aware that, before the lockdown, the Eat Well Age Well project estimated that more than 100,000 older people in Scotland were at risk of or were suffering from malnutrition? That situation has undoubtedly been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, during which vulnerable older people have experienced difficulty in accessing food, the continued closure of day centres that usually provide lunches, and the isolation and loneliness that have an impact on their ability to eat well.

Does the minister agree with the many organisations that believe that enshrining a right to food in Scots law would ensure that emergency food planning is prioritised and could help to stop malnutrition among the older generation?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The right to food, and indeed all human rights, are being considered by the national task force for human rights leadership. It is developing detailed proposals for a new statutory human rights framework for Scotland, including the right to food as an essential part of the overall right to an adequate standard of living.

The task force is considering the approach that it will take to specific rights, including civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, and it is keen to investigate how we might protect people from poverty.

Alongside my colleague Aileen Campbell, I chair the social renewal advisory board, whose policy circle is looking at aspects around food. I am sure

that it will issue recommendations that will feed into the advisory board's discussions.

I hope that that reassures the member that the Government is not only looking seriously at human rights overall, but is very much investigating how we can ensure that a right to an adequate standard of living—including the right to food—is looked at.

Older People (Self-isolation)

8. Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions the minister for older people has had with the health secretary regarding allowing more visitors and increasing social interaction for older people who are self-isolating. (S5O-04548)

The Minister for Older People and Equalities (Christina McKelvie): I have been kept fully apprised with regard to the restrictions on visiting self-isolating older people and I have taken the opportunity on many occasions to feed in the views of older people from regular engagement with our older people's strategic action forum.

Restrictions are guided by the science controlling the transmission of the coronavirus and older people have been taken into account as restrictions have eased. We definitely appreciate the sacrifices that older people have made while isolating and I hope that many now find themselves able to reconnect with their friends and family.

Alexander Burnett: Several constituents have been in touch to say that, because of lockdown restrictions and a severe lack of social interaction, family members have found their quality of life so diminished that they are losing the will to live. Many conditions affecting older people, such as dementia, advance exponentially without human contact. Is the minister even aware of that and, if so, what action is being taken to ensure that the impact of lockdown restrictions is being considered in relation to the elderly and those who need social interaction to, quite literally, save their lives?

Christina McKelvie: We are well aware of the impact of lockdown on older people, particularly in our care homes. We recognise the sacrifices that older people in care homes have made while isolating. We published a plan and guidance on 25 June to support a staged approach to a return to care home visiting, because we realise the value of such visits. Care homes are now facilitating controlled outdoor and indoor visits where it is safe to do so.

Other visiting options will be opened up that I hope will help to connect many more people with their loved ones. Alexander Burnett makes an excellent point about the importance of that

connection. Further easing of restrictions on communal activities inside care homes and a return of visiting services to care homes were announced today by the cabinet secretary and certain communal activities and services will resume from 7 September. A lot of the routine face-to-face care from health and social care professionals, including podiatrists, physiotherapists, optometrists and dentists, as well as other communal activities for residents, will resume from 7 September. I hope that Alexander Burnett is pleased to hear that and will articulate those changes to the constituents who have contacted him.

If he has any further specific issues that he wishes to raise, I am more than happy to ensure that we look into them and I will work closely with the health secretary to respond.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes questions on social security and older people. We will resume at 3.20 pm with questions on finance.

15:08

Meeting suspended.

15:20

On resuming—

Finance

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): I remind members that questions 2, 5 and 6 are grouped together. If a member wishes to ask a supplementary question, they should indicate that by typing “R” in the chat box while the question is being asked. That is except for those questions that are grouped, in which case they should put “R” in the chat box after the group.

City of Edinburgh Council (Underfunding)

1. **Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what discussions ministers have had regarding reported concerns relating to the underfunding of the City of Edinburgh Council. (S5O-04549)

The Minister for Public Finance and Migration (Ben Macpherson): Ministers have been in regular and on-going dialogue with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and individual local authorities since the Covid-19 crisis began. My colleagues and I appreciate the range of challenges and pressures that are facing all local authorities at this time, including the City of Edinburgh Council.

Working in partnership with COSLA, the Scottish Government will continue to press the United Kingdom Government for additional financial support and fiscal flexibilities for both the Scottish Government and local authorities to use in this crisis. We would welcome any support that this Parliament can provide in that respect.

Miles Briggs: As a fellow Edinburgh MSP, the minister will be aware that the chief executive of Edinburgh Leisure has warned that the impact of Covid on its finances will be up to £8 million and that the sector is in crisis. Given the on-going underfunding of the City of Edinburgh Council via the Scottish Government, will the minister commit to a bail-out fund for arm's-length external organisations such as Edinburgh Leisure and agree to urgent cross-party talks on the crisis that is facing leisure sectors across Scotland?

Ben Macpherson: First, on the general position with regard to the City of Edinburgh Council, Mr Briggs will be aware that it receives £878 million to fund local services and that, taken together with the decision to increase council tax by 4.79 per cent, it will have an extra £66.1 million to support day-to-day services in 2020-21. That equates to an additional 8.8 per cent. To date, the council has been allocated an additional £19.3 million to deal with the challenges of Covid-19, and it will receive its fair share of a further £75 million, which is

currently undistributed but will be allocated following an agreement on the distribution methodology with COSLA.

We are in dialogue with COSLA on the lost income scheme and the pressures that are facing ALEOs. Once we have completed a cost collection exercise, we will look to undertake distribution of that resource and the consequentials received. In that regard, we are in regular contact with the City of Edinburgh Council through COSLA, as we are with local authorities across the country. We are working together to meet the pressures that they are facing.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will take a supplementary question from Rona Mackay. I note that, although the question started out being about Edinburgh, it has broadened out to be about local authorities and ALEOs. Ms Mackay, I have no idea what your supplementary question is, but it does not necessarily have to be linked to Edinburgh.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): Thank you, Presiding Officer. Can the minister advise me of the total additional funding that has been provided to local authorities this year in response to Covid-19?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will allow that question because the answers have broadened the initial question out.

Ben Macpherson: We have committed £330 million of additional support for local authorities. To help with cash-flow difficulties, we front-loaded our grant payments by £455 million between May and July. We also increased our general revenue grant by £972 million to reflect the potential loss of that amount of business rates income resulting from our support for businesses. The Scottish Government is also providing an additional £135 million to support the return to school, and up to £100 million through integration authorities to support the social care sector.

“Government Expenditure and Revenue Scotland 2019-20”

2. Maurice Golden (West Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the latest “Government Expenditure and Revenue Scotland” figures. (S5O-04550)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Kate Forbes): As the member will know, GERS provides estimates of revenue raised in Scotland and spending for Scotland under the current constitutional arrangements. It does not report on the finances of the Scottish Government. With 40 per cent of the spending in GERS reserved to the United Kingdom Government, along with more than 70 per cent of revenue, what GERS shows is the unsustainable nature of the UK and the need for Scotland to make its own choices.

Maurice Golden: Does the cabinet secretary recognise that, if she had her way, Scotland’s fiscal deficit would be higher than the Greek budget deficit was at the height of the financial crisis in 2008?

Kate Forbes: Having my way now, I am obliged by law to balance the Scottish Government’s budget, which we have done every year. Just a few months ago, Maurice Golden and his colleagues were complaining about the underspend in our budget, which is the by-product of having a Government that, by law, cannot overspend. Now he is saying that there is a deficit. Which is it? Do we have an underspend or a deficit?

With the levers and resources that this Government has, we balance our budget. Like every other country around the world, if we were independent, we would use all the levers at our disposal to manage our public finances far more sustainably than they are currently being managed by the UK Government.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Unfortunately, question 5 is from Rachael Hamilton, who cannot get connected. If she gets connected later, I will take her question then. I will move straight to question 6, from Liam Kerr.

“Government Expenditure and Revenue Scotland 2019-20”

6. Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it remains committed to publishing an alternative to the annual “Government Expenditure and Revenue Scotland” report. (S5O-04554)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Kate Forbes): Thankfully, over the past few months, my single focus has been on balancing the budget to pay for personal protective equipment, ensure that businesses get grants and fund public services. As it is, I believe that GERS offers one of the most persuasive arguments as to why the current constitutional arrangements are unsustainable, and the United Kingdom Government’s policy choices that are allocated to the Scottish budget are the source of the challenge.

Liam Kerr: I am not sure that that was an answer to my question. In any event, many members of the Government are on record as suggesting that fiscal transfers from the UK to Scotland are a sign of failure and should be stopped. Given that there have been significant fiscal transfers from Aberdeen in the north-east to the central belt for years, with appalling funding settlements for NHS Grampian and our local authorities, does the cabinet secretary intend to cease such transfers and ensure that the north-east gets its fair share?

Kate Forbes: We continue to ensure that every part of Scotland gets the investment that it needs to progress its agenda. This year's programme for government ensures that that is the case once again.

On fiscal transfers, the member does not need to take my word for it. He can listen to his own Prime Minister, who talks about the need to "level up". He says that precisely because, right now, the way in which public finances are managed across the UK is unfair and unsustainable. Apparently, the winning argument from the unionists is that they celebrate mediocrity, short-term thinking and unsustainability. That is probably why more and more people in Scotland know that our society and our economy would be fairer and more prosperous under independence.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can now take question 5, from Rachael Hamilton.

"Government Expenditure and Revenue Scotland 2019-20"

5. Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the level of deficit recorded by the latest "Government Expenditure and Revenue Scotland" figures. (S5O-04553)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Kate Forbes): As I have already said, 40 per cent of spend, 70 per cent of revenue and all the major fiscal levers are reserved, so if Rachael Hamilton has any concerns about the GERS figures, I suggest that she takes them up with her counterparts in the United Kingdom Government.

Rachael Hamilton: The cabinet secretary's argument for European Union membership is deeply flawed and her party misleads the public. To achieve an acceptable fiscal deficit of 3 per cent or below, the Scottish Government will have to raise taxes or cut public spending. How many years of financial hardship is the Scottish National Party willing to inflict on the poorest people in Scotland in order to achieve independence and take us straight back into the hands of Brussels?

Kate Forbes: The irony in that question is that Rachael Hamilton is part of a party that has inflicted 10 years of cuts to public spending under the UK Government. The choice that we face now is whether Scotland is able to make its own choices and decisions, and use all the levers that any normal country has, to invest in economic recovery and to chart a course out of this pandemic.

Had we been an independent member of the EU, not only would we have been able to borrow—as every normal country has done—in order to invest in the pandemic response, we would have

had access to the EU's £750 billion recovery fund, to which we did not get access because the UK Government is currently taking Scotland out of the EU against its will.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): The cabinet secretary is aware that the SNP growth commission said that the deficit should be reduced to 3 per cent. Given that she was a member of that commission, I take it that she still agrees with that figure, which means cuts in expenditure of more than £1,800 per person. What public services will the cabinet secretary therefore have to cut?

Kate Forbes: As Jackie Baillie was obviously an avid reader of the growth commission's report, she also knows that it charted a course on how to increase our public spending while managing our public finance more sustainably.

I understand that politicians across the unionist parties will consider GERS and make certain arguments. However, those arguments celebrate mediocrity and short-term thinking, because we can manage our public finances in different ways. Every country around the world is developing a deficit as a result of the unusual circumstances of this pandemic and not one of them is rethinking its independence. Instead, those countries use the levers at their disposal to manage it, as Scotland would have to do in the event of its independence.

Universities and Colleges (Financial Sustainability)

3. Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what analysis the finance secretary has made of the financial sustainability of Scotland's universities and colleges. (S5O-04551)

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before the cabinet secretary answers, is Mr Halcro Johnston really outside? I love the background, it is quite glorious.

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Kate Forbes): Although we know that both sectors that the member identifies have been hit hard by the crisis, the financial impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on our college and university sectors is still to be fully realised. We continue to work with the Scottish Funding Council, which analyses the institutions' financial forecasts.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: The cabinet secretary is aware that Audit Scotland, among others, repeatedly raised the precarious financial situation that Scotland's higher and further education sector faced this past year. It is clear that those institutions will be essential to Scotland's recovery from the coronavirus outbreak, and the use of that sector to deliver training and school programmes is welcome. Can the cabinet secretary guarantee that no further cuts will be made to the core

budgets of Scotland's colleges and that they will be adequately resourced, not only to provide additional responsibilities but to address the underlying problems in the sector?

Kate Forbes: I agree that our colleges and universities will be vital to our recovery. Our universities are renowned the world over and our colleges will be essential to reskill people and help them to go back into work. The member might have seen our report, "Supporting Scotland's Colleges and Universities: Coronavirus (COVID-19) Further and Higher Education Sustainability Plan", which was published on 9 July and highlighted the steps that we have taken to support further and higher education as a result of the pandemic—namely the £75 million to protect research and £10 million for the estates, in order to try to help universities and colleges with some of the challenging costs that they face.

That form of engagement will continue and we will continue to invest where we can. We have a finite and limited budget. As I said in my first answer, we cannot overspend and that is a challenge, but we will continue to work with those institutions to try and help them through this particular storm.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Does the cabinet secretary agree that it is equally important that students are able to sustain themselves? What would be the impact on Scottish students if they had to pay tuition fees of £9,250 a year, as they would under the Tories in England, or £9,000 a year, as they would under Labour in Wales?

Kate Forbes: Yes, I agree that that is important.

As Kenneth Gibson will be aware, the Scottish Government is still committed to free tuition. We believe that access to education should be based on the ability to learn, not on the ability to pay. That commitment ensures that Scottish students who are studying in Scotland do not incur the additional loan debt of up to £27,000 that is incurred by students elsewhere. As a result, they continue to have the lowest average loan balance in the United Kingdom. This year, we will ensure that we continue to support students who are going on to university.

Tax-raising Powers

4. **Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how it will use its tax-raising powers to generate additional income in the coming year. (S5O-04552)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Kate Forbes): We have a strong track record of using devolved tax powers to deliver a fairer and more progressive system, protect lower and middle-

income taxpayers, support first-time buyers and raise additional revenue to support Scotland's vital public services.

We acted quickly through the pandemic. As part of the Covid response, we provided businesses with a support package, introduced non-domestic rates reliefs and increased the land and buildings transaction tax threshold to support the housing market.

As Bob Doris knows, any change to tax policy is usually announced at the budget, other than in exceptional circumstances.

Bob Doris: Between 2012 and 2015, it was reported that the Scottish Government generated £95 million from a public health supplement, which was essentially a tax on the largest supermarkets to sell both alcohol and tobacco. In relative terms, it is clear that the largest supermarkets have done very well compared with other parts of the economy during Covid-19. Will the Scottish Government consider bringing back such a tax, and using the money that is generated to support youth and other services across our communities with activities that have clear health benefits, at a time when both council and Scottish Government budgets are particularly overstretched?

Kate Forbes: As I mentioned, any change to tax policy is usually announced at the budget. That said, I am keen to hear from others about how we can support our public services and Scotland's recovery from the pandemic. I am trying to take an open and consultative approach to the development of our tax policy. Today—at 10 am, I believe—I launched a consultation on the role of devolved taxes and the fiscal framework in supporting Scotland's economic recovery. I suggest that Bob Doris and others feed into that consultation.

On Bob Doris's specific request, a number of those businesses will currently pay the large business supplement, but I will keep the non-domestic rates system, including all the supplements and reliefs, under regular review to ensure that it supports businesses and communities across Scotland, particularly as we come out of the pandemic.

Families in Poverty (Government Support)

7. **Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what financial support it has allocated to help protect and lift families out of food poverty and extreme poverty. (S5O-04555)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Kate Forbes): Last year, we spent around £1.4 billion supporting low-income households, including more than £100 million to mitigate the impact of United Kingdom Government welfare cuts. In response to

the pandemic, we have gone well beyond our original £70 million food fund commitment, which was introduced in March, by investing more than £110 million on tackling food insecurity, supporting people during this hugely difficult time and ensuring that free school meals were maintained for more than 175,000 pupils over the Easter and summer breaks. We have more than doubled the Scottish welfare fund, and applications will soon open for the new Scottish child payment, which shows our commitment to tackling child poverty head on.

Bill Kidd: The tragic death of Mercy Baguma last week evidences that much more must be done to protect the most vulnerable in our society. As the economic ramifications of Covid-19 affect families across Scotland, will the Scottish Government continue to push for practical financial support and ensure provision of food and basic securities, especially for people in extreme poverty and those in very vulnerable circumstances, such as asylum seekers, who have fewer rights and community safety nets?

Kate Forbes: Bill Kidd asks a hugely important question. Mercy Baguma's death was tragic.

Before and during the pandemic, we have raised our grave concerns with the Home Office about the support that is available to asylum seekers and people with no recourse to public funds. The Home Office must stand by commitments made by the Home Secretary to the Home Affairs Select Committee that it will provide the right kind of support to asylum seekers in terms of accommodation and financial provision at this time.

New sources of Scottish Government funding—including the food fund, supporting communities fund and hardship fund—can be used by local authorities and other partners to support people with no recourse to public funds.

Elaine Smith (Central Scotland) (Lab): The cabinet secretary mentioned the Scottish welfare fund. This week, the Poverty and Inequality Commission highlighted local authority spending as a key issue in the Scottish welfare fund's underspend. It also noted that many people using food banks were not aware of the Scottish welfare fund. Does the cabinet secretary agree that that highlights the impact of underfunded authorities and the lack of joined-up planning for emergency food provision? Does she agree that the Government should properly fund local authorities and enshrine into law the right to food?

Kate Forbes: Having just listed a number of initiatives and schemes that we delivered through the pandemic in partnership with local authorities, I agree that the partnership approach that Elaine Smith identifies is important.

We try to ensure that every penny that we have at our disposal goes to those who need it most, either through local authorities and the Scottish welfare fund or in other ways.

Elaine Smith has a point about the need to raise awareness of sources of support. However, through the pandemic, we have certainly invested more in local authorities from the consequential that we have received, recognising the important role that they play on the front line.

Public Spending (North East Scotland)

8. Peter Chapman (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government how it plans to protect public spending in the north-east. (S5O-04556)

The Minister for Public Finance and Migration (Ben Macpherson): The Scottish Government will continue to focus on delivering outcomes for all areas of Scotland through its spending plans, including for the north-east. For example, local councils in the north-east will receive more than £1.6 billion from the Scottish budget in 2020-21.

The Scottish Government is working closely with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to support local authorities in responding to the challenges of Covid-19, as I mentioned earlier, and we have committed an additional £330 million of direct support this year.

We have responded swiftly to support businesses, including the provision of £137 million through the Covid business support fund grant for businesses in the north-east.

Peter Chapman: Those measures will look like a slap in the face to the hundreds, if not thousands, of people in Aberdeen who could lose their jobs because the Scottish National Party Government failed to offer the right support for jobs and businesses during the local lockdown.

The Scottish Conservatives published a plan to protect the local economy in the north-east through the crisis. If there has to be another lockdown, what has the Government learned from us?

Ben Macpherson: We are all learning at the moment about how best to tackle the challenges of Covid-19 and in how we respond as public servants.

On the localised lockdown in Aberdeen, businesses in the city have already received £32 million of grant support from the Scottish Government, and an additional fund of £1 million for business support was announced on 19 August. That fund was and is being delivered by Aberdeen City Council to provide grants of up to

£1,500 to hospitality businesses that were affected.

Importantly, we have called on the United Kingdom Government to extend the schemes that it funds—such as the job retention and eat out to help out schemes—where there are localised restrictions, as there were in Aberdeen.

I call on Peter Chapman to join us in urging the UK Government to do the sensible and appropriate thing and continue the job retention scheme around the country, and certainly to create the facility for it to be utilised in instances of lockdown, such as in Aberdeen.

Maureen Watt (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): I am still waiting for a reply on that point from Rishi Sunak, the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

What funding is provided to support innovation in, and attract investment into, the north-east?

Ben Macpherson: Supporting innovation and attracting investment is vital at all times, and particularly at the moment. The Scottish Government supports innovation and investment across all of Scotland.

Particular measures in the north-east include our funding of £125 million for the Aberdeen city region deal; supporting Aberdeen's position as a global oil and gas hub; and our creation of a new £62 million energy transition fund, to accelerate our progress in moving Scotland towards being a net zero carbon society. In addition, over the past three years, Scottish Development International has helped to secure 39 inward investment projects for Aberdeen city and Aberdeenshire, creating or safeguarding more than 2,600 jobs.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you very much.

That concludes questions on the finance portfolio. I close the meeting.

Meeting closed at 15:46.

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