



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Meeting of the Parliament (Hybrid)

Tuesday 10 November 2020

Session 5



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

© Parliamentary copyright. Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body

Information on the Scottish Parliament's copyright policy can be found on the website - www.parliament.scot or by contacting Public Information on 0131 348 5000

Tuesday 10 November 2020

CONTENTS

	Col.
TIME FOR REFLECTION	1
TOPICAL QUESTION TIME	3
Tackling Climate Change (Support for Farmers).....	3
Mental Health Support (Police Officers and Police Staff).....	6
COVID-19	10
<i>Statement—[First Minister].</i>	
The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon).....	10
REMEMBRANCE COMMEMORATIONS	35
<i>Motion moved—[Graeme Dey].</i>	
The Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans (Graeme Dey)	35
Maurice Corry (West Scotland) (Con)	40
David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab).....	43
Mike Rumbles (North East Scotland) (LD)	45
Maureen Watt (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP).....	46
Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)	48
Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP)	49
Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab)	51
Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP).....	53
Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)	54
Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con).....	56
Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)	57
Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)	58
Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab).....	59
Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con).....	61
Graeme Dey	63
BUSINESS MOTION	67
<i>Motion moved—[Graeme Dey]—and agreed to.</i>	
DECISION TIME	68
WORLD STROKE DAY AND STROKE CARE (COVID-19)	69
<i>Motion debated—[Alexander Stewart].</i>	
Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con).....	69
James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)	71
Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con)	73
David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab).....	75
Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD)	76
Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP)	78
The Minister for Public Health, Sport and Wellbeing (Joe FitzPatrick).....	79

Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 10 November 2020

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): Good afternoon, colleagues. We begin business today with time for reflection. Our time for reflection leader is Imām Hāshim Matīn, Imām and Principal of Livingston Islamic Centre & Mosque.

Imam Hashim Matin (Imam and Principal of Livingston Islamic Centre & Mosque): Bismillah hir'rahmaan nir'raheem. In the name of Allah, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy.

Presiding Officer and members of the Scottish Parliament, thank you for the opportunity to address you this afternoon. This week is Scottish interfaith week, and the theme is “connecting”. A civilisation can progress only once it is connected and united. If there is any discord among us, we cannot advance. The greatest factor that causes disbandment is oppression. We need to unite against oppression and injustice in any form, whether it is physical, financial or psychological. As a Muslim, my faith prohibits me from any type of oppression. Allah tells us:

“I have forbidden injustice for Myself and I have made it forbidden among you, so do not wrong one another”.

The Prophet Muhammad—peace be upon him—gave a sermon at his final pilgrimage. It is a significant event for Muslims. Even today, we are reminded of its lessons. The meanings that are found in it are astounding and they highlight some of the most important human rights. I will present some quotations from the sermon. After praising and thanking Allah, the Prophet Muhammad—peace be upon him—said:

“Listen to what I am saying to you very carefully and take these words to those who could not be present here today.

O People regard the life and property of every person as a sacred trust.

Return the goods entrusted to you, to their rightful owners.

Hurt no one so that no one may hurt you.

Remember that you will indeed meet your Lord, and that He will indeed reckon your deeds.

Allah has forbidden you to deal in interest.

O People, you have certain rights regarding your women, and they also have rights over you.

Treat your women well and be kind to them.

All of mankind is from Adam and Eve, an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab has any

superiority over an Arab; also, a white has no superiority over black nor does a black have any superiority over a white except by piety and good action.”

Those are words from my leader, guide and prophet, a mercy to mankind. They were spoken over 1,400 years ago, yet they continue to give us inspiration, guidance and light. I conclude by hoping that those words are a means of us uniting against oppression and injustice. Thank you.

Topical Question Time

Tackling Climate Change (Support for Farmers)

1. Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP):

To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to support farmers to help meet Scotland's climate ambitions. (S5T-02518)

The Minister for Rural Affairs and the Natural Environment (Mairi Gougeon): We are working with partners from across industry to take a holistic approach to agriculture, land use and food production while protecting our environment and enhancing biodiversity.

The recent suckler beef climate group report delivered a set of practical actions that will lower our carbon footprint, enhance the environment and boost business. It is important that that report, alongside others such as the farming for 1.5 degrees inquiry's report, is fully considered in the development of policy.

We continue to support farmers, crofters and land managers to meet Scotland's climate and environment ambitions. A third of our current common agricultural policy schemes provide environmental funding, and we have received more than 3,000 applications for our pilot sustainable agriculture capital grant scheme.

Gillian Martin: The minister mentioned the independent farming for 1.5 degrees inquiry, which recognises farming's unique opportunity. Farmers have to improve their own performance as well as contribute to wider emissions reduction targets.

Can the minister provide an update on how many farmers can access LEADER funding to help them diversify, and on the potential implications of the loss of that funding as we leave the European Union, with no detail so far on the proposed United Kingdom prosperity fund?

Mairi Gougeon: The LEADER fund has supported more than 100 new farm diversification projects, which has been worth nearly £6 million. There could well be other diversification projects that are being supported and which are part of wider co-operative projects.

One of the strengths of the LEADER programme is its impact on our rural communities and the sheer diversity of the projects that it funds. It has funded everything from tea farms to local community cinemas and community builds. It is a vitally important fund for our rural community.

A couple of weeks ago, I took part in an event with the Angus LEADER programme to launch its legacy report, which went into the detail of the programme there—what worked, what did not

work and how any future scheme should work—and which highlighted the importance of LEADER.

The Scottish Government absolutely believes that our rural communities should continue to be supported to deliver that locally led development, because it is inclusive growth at its best. That is why we have been absolutely clear and consistent in insisting that we expect full replacement of EU funds from the end of this year, to ensure that there is no detriment to Scotland's public finances as a result of Brexit. We expect the UK Government to fully respect the devolution settlement in any future arrangements, but unfortunately we do not have any clarity on that, yet.

Gillian Martin: The minister mentioned the suckler beef climate group report. Aberdeenshire suckler herds form the backbone of quality beef production in Scotland. Can the minister provide an update on the support that has been made available to that sector? To what extent does the report provide a blueprint for emissions reductions in food and farming production in Scotland and a sustainable future for one of Scotland's most important industries?

Mairi Gougeon: I would echo what Gillian Martin said: it is one of Scotland's most important industries. Jim Walker, who is the chair of the suckler beef climate group, said:

"The Scottish suckler beef herd is the engine room that drives economic activity and environmental management across"

huge

" swathes of rural Scotland".

As far as funding is concerned, £40 million is allocated annually to suckler beef producers through the Scottish suckler beef support scheme. That sits alongside other investment and support under pillar 1 of the CAP and the Scottish rural development programme.

The Government obviously very much welcomes the recent report by the suckler beef climate group, because it recognises the need for the beef sector to significantly reduce its emissions while increasing efficiency, productivity and overall profitability for beef producers in Scotland. The proposed scheme sets out the practical ways that beef producers in the supply chain can reduce emissions and capitalise on the resulting green credentials that would flow from that. We are confident that the scheme lays the foundation for sustainable farming in Scotland. We are currently considering all the details that have been published in the report and hope to set our next steps very soon.

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): Does the minister recognise that maintaining food

production on Scottish farms at current levels is vital to delivering on our wider climate change obligations? Does she agree that policies that simply incentivise our farmers to farm less and outsource production to other countries—many of which have lower environmental standards—will do nothing to help our planet?

Mairi Gougeon: We certainly would not want to see outsourcing anywhere, especially if things are produced to lower standards than our own, given that we have some of the highest and best environmental standards anywhere in the world.

I have highlighted the suckler beef climate group report and farming for 1.5 degrees group's report. There is also the work of the farming and food production future policy group. All that work is vital. Farming for 1.5 degrees and the suckler beef climate group in particular have developed measures from farmers and people who work in the industry. A lot of the recommendations that farming for 1.5 degrees has proposed have come from people involved in farming, people with research and scientific backgrounds, and environmentalists, which is important, because we need to have buy-in to any measures that are produced. With the different inquiries and reports, we are gearing up to have a sustainable future for Scottish farming in a way that drives down emissions in a sustainable way.

I look forward to laying out our next steps once we have considered all those reports.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): The farming for 1.5 degrees group's report is another useful contribution to the debate on the future of agricultural support. However, organisations are once again being left to fill the vacuum left by the lack of policy from the Government. When will the farming and food production future policy group's report be published? More significantly, when exactly will the Government set out in detail its own vision for agricultural support beyond 2024?

Mairi Gougeon: I know that Colin Smyth will remember our debate back in January 2019, when we established the farming and food production future policy group. That was to help us to create and establish the policy, taking into account all the wider considerations.

We absolutely recognise the urgency of the situation. We are in a climate emergency, and there is a lot of work to be done. All the reports from the various groups are vital, especially the farming for 1.5 degrees report, which Colin Smyth mentioned. It highlights actions that can be taken in the short, medium and longer terms, including vital practical actions that can be taken.

We have to consider all that information in the round to inform and develop our policies, and we

hope to be in a position to lay out the next steps in relation to those reports very soon.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): The farming for 1.5 degrees report clearly states that our subsidy system needs urgent reform if we are to achieve our climate goals, but the only scheme that is currently available to farmers specifically to tackle climate change is the agri-environment climate scheme, which is closed indefinitely to new entrants. Can the minister confirm what the future is for that scheme and when farmers will be able to access the financial support that they need to transition to low-carbon farming with the urgency that is needed, particularly given that we are trying to help the economy to recover after Covid?

Mairi Gougeon: I appreciate Mark Ruskell's point, and we absolutely recognise the urgency.

The main issue with the agri-environment climate scheme, which Mark Ruskell mentioned, has been that we do not yet have certainty about the replacement of EU funding, despite repeated requests to the UK Government. Once we have clarity and certainty on how wider rural support and, in particular, current pillar 2 activity will be funded, we will be able to decide how we will proceed with that scheme. We are still to determine whether to open the scheme for applications to be funded in 2022, but we will absolutely ensure that, whatever we decide, there is appropriate funding and support for farmers and crofters to play their part and do more to farm sustainably, enhance our environment and help to cut carbon emissions.

As part of that, we recently had the pilot sustainable agriculture capital grant scheme, which closed to applications in October. There were more than 3,000 applications to that scheme. That was a £10 million fund to help fund agricultural equipment deliver reductions in direct and indirect greenhouse gas emissions. Also, £1.5 million has been provided for forestry grant schemes.

There are, therefore, other things that we are looking at. We absolutely recognise that there is urgency. We are in a climate emergency, and we want to do all that we can to tackle that as best we can.

Mental Health Support (Police Officers and Police Staff)

2. **Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it will take to improve the mental health support available to police officers and staff, in light of the service reporting increasing numbers of absences. (S5T-02521)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Humza Yousaf): First, we are all incredibly grateful for the hard work of all our police officers and staff. Throughout the pandemic, they have shown incredible professionalism.

The wellbeing of police officers and staff is of great interest to me and to the chief constable. He and I speak about the issue on a regular basis. Police Scotland has been clear that maintaining and supporting the health and wellbeing of its workforce is a key priority.

Police officers and staff can access a wide range of services to care for their physical and mental health through the your wellbeing matters programme. Police Scotland provides a range of support mechanisms to colleagues, including counselling services, post-incident trauma support and proactive screening. There are also 200 wellbeing champions across the organisation who offer peer support. Officers and staff can download the Backup Buddy app to their mobile devices. The app has been specially developed in recognition of the need to support the mental health of those in policing.

Police Scotland and the Government recognise the impact of Covid-19 on the wellbeing of officers and staff and quickly set up a wellbeing hub to coordinate information on support services that the workforce can access. Although a number of officers and staff are absent due to Covid-19, Police Scotland reports that the current level of absence is causing no significant issues operationally for the force.

Liam McArthur: We of course owe a debt of gratitude to our police officers and staff and no doubt Covid has made matters considerably more difficult. However, those figures were on the rise well before the pandemic hit.

A year ago, in response to figures that the Scottish Liberal Democrats compiled on working days that were lost to mental health issues, the Cabinet Secretary for Justice said that he was “very satisfied” with the support that was being offered to police officers and staff. Days later, independent research that was commissioned by the Scottish Police Federation showed that half of officers were stressed because they lacked resources and that one in 10 was using drugs or alcohol to cope. Freedom of information requests now show that more days than ever are being lost to mental ill health. What is going on?

Humza Yousaf: Nobody argues that the job of police officers is not incredibly stressful. Officers deal with trauma day in and day out, and Police Scotland recognises that it has to have a unique approach to mental health and wellbeing.

In my first answer, I rifled off a range of the initiatives that Police Scotland has to support

individual police officers and staff with their mental health and wellbeing. In addition, the Scottish Government provided an extra £138,000 in financial year 2019-20 to extend the Lifelines Scotland wellbeing programme that is available for blue-light responders, which includes Police Scotland.

I am more than happy to sit down with the Scottish Police Federation to discuss its research in more detail. I had a teleconference with the federation a couple of weeks ago, but I would be happy to touch base with it again to get more details on that research.

Liam McArthur: The research was carried out almost a year ago, so that meeting should have taken place well before now.

The cabinet secretary did not refer to a staff survey. A full police staff survey is needed to properly understand whether staff needs are being met. Last time round, only 8 per cent of staff thought that the national force cared about their wellbeing. I have been calling on the justice secretary and police chiefs to conduct a survey for years. One was due in 2017, but it is still somewhere on the to-do list. How many more ministerial commitments and police meetings is that going to take?

Humza Yousaf: I am sure that Liam McArthur is aware that it is not for me to direct the chief constable on when to carry out the wellbeing and engagement survey. That is an operational matter. It is a source of frustration—although it undoubtedly comes from a good place—that Liam McArthur continually asks me to direct the chief constable to do a survey that is very much in his operational responsibility.

That said, the chief constable and Police Scotland senior management have told me that they intend to hold the survey in February 2021. Of course, they might have wanted to do it earlier, but we all know the pressures that the force has been under in the past seven to eight months.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): Recent figures show that there has been a cut of more than 650 divisional police officers since the creation of Police Scotland. Could there be a relationship between such a concerning rise in mental health absence and there being so many fewer officers? If so, will the cabinet secretary take steps to reverse the fall in numbers?

Humza Yousaf: First and foremost, there are more than 1,000 more officers than there were when we took office. That is in stark contrast to the cuts to police officer numbers after Liam Kerr’s party came into office, as part of the United Kingdom Government. I am proud to stand on our record.

With regard to resource, the Scottish Conservatives pushed us to increase police funding in the current budget by £50 million. We increased it by £60 million, so we are very much putting our money where our mouth is.

When it comes to divisional versus national resource, that is, again, an operational matter for the chief constable. However, groups such as Rape Crisis Scotland have noted that, with the creation of the national force, the national approach to tackling issues such as sex offending has been much better. Therefore, I think that investing in national capabilities for a consistent approach across the country has been a welcome step. Ultimately, however, those are operational matters for the chief constable.

Covid-19

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The next item of business is a statement from the First Minister on Covid-19. The First Minister will take questions at the end of statement. I encourage all members who wish to ask a question to press their request-to-speak button.

14:21

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Two weeks ago, the Scottish Government published the new strategic approach to tackling Covid, and shortly afterwards we confirmed the level of restrictions that would apply initially to each local authority area.

I indicated then that the allocation of levels would be reviewed on a weekly basis. Our intention is, unless we consider more urgent action to be necessary, to set out any changes on a Tuesday and for those changes to take effect the following Friday. Today is the first of those reviews, and I will shortly confirm the levels that will apply to each local authority area from Friday. However, I can confirm at the outset that the majority of local authorities will see no immediate change this week.

I will set out the rationale behind our decisions, and this afternoon we will publish on the Scottish Government website detailed data for each local authority. Of course, it is important to be clear that those decisions always involve careful judgments as well as hard data.

First, though, I will report on today's statistics. The total number of positive cases that were reported yesterday was 832. That represents 9.5 per cent of people who have been newly tested, and it takes the total number of cases to 75,187. Of the new cases, 293 were in Greater Glasgow and Clyde, 171 were in Lanarkshire, 114 were in Lothian and 90 were in Ayrshire and Arran. The remaining cases were spread across the other seven mainland health boards. The number of people in hospital is 1,239, which is an increase of 12 from yesterday, and 102 people are in intensive care, which is three fewer than yesterday.

I deeply regret to say that, in the past 24 hours, a further 39 deaths have been registered of patients who first tested positive over the previous 28 days. That means that the total number of deaths under that measure is now 3,079. Two weeks ago, that number was 2,726. Tomorrow's update from National Records of Scotland will give us a fuller picture of the number of deaths, based on its wider definition.

However, even using today's figures, the fact that we have seen more than 300 people dying in

the past two weeks is a sharp reminder of the heartbreak that the virus causes and of why we must do all that we can to tackle it. Once again, my deepest condolences go to all those who have lost a loved one.

It is obvious that those who have lost someone or who are living with the long-term effects of Covid carry the greatest burden of the virus, but I know that everyone is finding the experience and the restrictions that we are living under increasingly difficult. I know that the figures that I report each day contribute to a sense that there is no light at the end of this tunnel. Throughout the pandemic, I have tried not to give false assurance; instead, I have done my best to be straight about the challenge that we face. I am going to stick with that approach, not least because, as will be obvious from my statement today, we still face tough times ahead.

However—and this is important—there are also grounds for optimism now. We are not at the end of the tunnel yet, but a glimmer of light has appeared. Yes, there will still be dips in the road and the light might be obscured at times, but it is there and we are heading towards it. Yesterday's news from the Pfizer vaccine trial was extremely encouraging—that is probably an understatement—and it is not the only vaccine undergoing trials just now. Of course, there are questions still to be answered and hurdles yet to be overcome, and it will take time practically and logistically to get large numbers of people vaccinated. However, it was the most positive indication yet that science will get us out of this and it will, I hope, do so in the not too distant future. That is really good news.

Of course, even the not-too-distant future is still the future, which means that, for now, it is down to all of us to keep the virus under control and save lives by sticking to the rules and guidance.

However, there also is some cause for cautious optimism here. The sacrifices that everyone is making are hard and they feel never-ending, but they are helping. They have made a difference and they are saving lives. I have no doubt about that; no one should be in doubt about that.

To illustrate the point, let me give some detail on one of the measures we look at each week—the average number of new cases per day over a continuous seven-day period, based on the day when each test sample was given. In just the three weeks between Friday 25 September and 16 October, Scotland's average daily figure for new cases increased by more than 150 per cent, from 482 to 1,217. If that scale of increase had continued, we would now have around 3,000 new cases a day. Instead, in the following three-week period, the number of new cases stayed at more

or less the same level. By last Friday, the average daily figure was 1,174.

There have also been some signs of a fall in hospital admissions. In the seven days to 30 October, 725 people were admitted to hospital with Covid. In the seven days to 6 November, 545 people were admitted.

There is therefore no doubt that the restrictions that we have put in place and which people are abiding by have dramatically slowed the spread of the virus, but that figure of more than 500 hospital admissions in a week is still too high. The number of new cases that we are seeing—more than 1,000 a day on average—is also still too high. It is crucial that, although we have seen a levelling-off, we are not yet seeing a sustained fall in the number of cases. In fact, although there was a very slight fall in some recent weeks, last week we saw a slight increase. Clearly, that requires continued caution.

As I have set out before, a rising or even plateauing rate of infection is not a stable position. We want to see a decline in cases. We will be monitoring the situation carefully in the days ahead and cannot rule out the need to take action beyond what I will set out today.

Also, in light of the situation that I have just outlined, it would clearly not be prudent to ease restrictions today, with one exception for our three island authorities that I will set out shortly. I can confirm that no local authority will move down a level this week. In light of particularly sharp increases in the number of cases, three local authorities will, unfortunately, move up from level 2 to level 3. Although, I am pleased to say that no local authority will move to level 4 this week, a number are giving us some cause for concern and we will be monitoring them particularly closely over the next few days.

Before I come on to the detail of all that, let me set out again the indicators and wider factors that we consider in reaching these decisions. We look at data for each local authority based on case numbers per 100,000 of the population, trends in case numbers, test positivity, and hospital and intensive care capacity. We are publishing the data that has informed our decisions for each local authority today and people can look at it on the Scottish Government website.

We also consider the extent to which different local authority areas are contributing to the situation across the country as a whole, and the links and interdependencies between them. We seek to balance the wider health, economic and social harms that are caused by the restrictions that are in place. We consider the advice of public health directors through the national incident management team and we consult local

authorities. Then the Cabinet, with advice from the chief medical officer, the national clinical director and others, balances all those factors and takes decisions.

I turn to the detail of the decisions that the Cabinet reached this morning. First, I confirm that Highland, Moray, Orkney, Shetland and the Western Isles will remain at level 1. However, there must be no complacency in those areas. Restrictions that are still in place must be adhered to and all necessary precautions taken in workplaces, hospitality, schools and colleges and healthcare settings.

There is one restriction that we intend to ease for people living in Shetland, Orkney and the Western Isles. From Friday, residents of those three island authorities will be able to meet one other household inside their homes, up to a strict maximum of six people. We are able to make that change because case numbers in those island authorities are very low and sporadic and we recognise that the social isolation that is caused by such a restriction is often exacerbated in island communities where there are not as many public places to meet. However, and this is an important caveat, importation of the virus is a real risk to the islands. For that reason, we will be issuing clear guidance advising anyone who goes to, or returns to, the islands from the mainland to avoid in-house mixing for a period after their return.

Unfortunately, we do not yet consider it prudent to lift that restriction for people living in Highland and Moray, which are the other level 1 areas. Although cases in those areas remain relatively low, we have seen some volatility in recent days, so we continue to ask people living across the Highlands and in Moray, like people in the rest of the country, not to visit each other's homes except for essential purposes, such as childcare, looking after a vulnerable person or being part of an extended household. I know that that is tough, but it remains the single most effective way of preventing transmission of the virus from one household to another.

Let me now turn to the areas that are currently in level 2. I can confirm that Aberdeenshire, Aberdeen City, the Borders, Dumfries and Galloway, and Argyll and Bute will all remain at level 2. Those are all areas that will be hopeful—as I am—of a move to level 1 soon. However, although there are some signs of stability and even improvement in most of them, there is not yet sufficient evidence of a sustained decline in the number of cases. Indeed, in the Borders and—although to a lesser extent—in Dumfries and Galloway, we have seen an increase in cases in the most recent data that we have available. For those reasons, we consider it sensible for those areas to remain in level 2 for now, but we remain

hopeful that some or all of them will be able to move to level 1 soon.

The other areas that are currently in level 2 are Fife, Perth and Kinross and Angus. I can confirm that we have taken the very difficult, but in our view necessary and precautionary, decision to move Fife, Perth and Kinross and Angus to level 3 from Friday. Although on the raw indicators alone Angus and Perth and Kinross are not yet meeting the level 3 thresholds, and Fife is meeting only one of them, all three areas are on a sharply rising trajectory. The most recent data shows that, in the space of a week, the seven-day number of cases per 100,000 of the population has increased in Perth and Kinross by 32 per cent, in Fife by 40 per cent and in Angus by 47 per cent.

The advice of the chief medical officer and the national clinical director is that level 2 restrictions may not be sufficient to slow down and reverse increases of that magnitude and, as a result, an early move to level 3 was strongly recommended. I know how disappointing that will be to residents and businesses in those areas. However, the important point is that by acting now we hope to prevent an even more serious deterioration in the situation in future. I ask people living in those areas to check the Scottish Government website to understand the restrictions that are in place at level 3. Businesses will also find details there of the financial support that is available from the Scottish Government, which is, of course, in addition to the United Kingdom Government's furlough scheme.

A factor that is relevant to both Angus and Perth and Kinross is proximity to and interaction with the city of Dundee. Dundee entered level 3 on 2 November and I can confirm that it will remain at level 3 for now. However, I hope that the three authorities going into level 3 this week will take some encouragement from it. The most recent data shows cases and test positivity declining in Dundee and, while it is too soon to be sure that that will be sustained, I want to stress that the trend is very much positive at this stage.

I can also confirm that the other 18 local authorities that are currently at level 3 will remain there for now. However, it is important to note that there is a varied picture across the level 3 areas and a move to level 4 for some in the near future cannot be ruled out, for reasons that I will outline. However, first, on the positive side, some of the current level 3 areas are, like Dundee, showing encouraging signs. There is some volatility in the most recent data for some of those areas, but I mention with varying degrees of confidence East Lothian, City of Edinburgh, Clackmannanshire, East Dunbartonshire, Falkirk, Midlothian, North Ayrshire and East Ayrshire.

We will monitor all those areas carefully, but we hope that, if people continue to abide by all the restrictions, we will continue to see improvement, and some of those areas may be able to move out of level 3 relatively soon.

However, there are two categories of level 3 areas that we will consider particularly carefully over the next week. First, there are areas where current restrictions have worked very effectively to halt sharp increases in cases and stabilise the situation. They include, in particular, the city of Glasgow, North Lanarkshire and South Lanarkshire, as well as West Lothian and West Dunbartonshire. That stabilisation is positive news—we should not lose sight of that—and, without the sacrifices that everyone has been making, the situation would be much more severe.

However, although cases in those areas have stabilised, they have done so at a stubbornly high level. I have set out previously the risks of going further into winter with a high level of cases, even if the numbers have plateaued. The difficult question that we must consider in the next days is whether more time in level 3 will start to reduce cases in those areas or whether more action will be required.

Finally, there are some areas in level 3 where we have, in recent days, seen a sharp rise in cases. Right now, we are particularly concerned about Inverclyde, Stirling and, to a lesser extent, South Ayrshire, Renfrewshire and East Renfrewshire.

The advice of the chief medical officer and the national clinical director is that, as those areas are already under the tougher level 3 restrictions, and given the need to understand the situations in those areas in more detail, an immediate move to level 4 would not be merited. However, their advice is that we should monitor the data for those areas closely and on a daily basis.

Given the severity of the level 4 restrictions, we will not take lightly a decision to move any part of the country to that level, and we want to give the current levels more of a chance to work. However, we will not shy away from making that decision if we think it necessary to limit the damage that the virus can do, or if we think that a short period in level 4 may be less harmful overall for an area than a prolonged period in level 3.

These are really difficult decisions. I stress that the week ahead is a particularly crucial juncture, and I will, of course, keep Parliament fully updated. However, I stress this point: the best chance that we all have of avoiding a move to level 4, or of moving our own area down a level, is to stick with it and abide by all the current restrictions. I know that fatigue and frustration are setting in, but I appeal to everyone across the

country, particularly if you might have been letting your guard drop recently, to please redouble your efforts in the days ahead. In particular, please do not visit other people's houses, as that is the biggest risk for passing the virus from one household to another.

We know—and we can show, as I have done to some extent today—that all these hard sacrifices are making a difference, but they will make a big enough difference only if we all do all the right things all the time. That is tough, but it is the reality that we face.

Finally, I stress the travel restrictions, which remain essential to a targeted approach to tackling the virus. Those will remain in guidance over the next week, but we continue to prepare the regulations—and to resolve the practical issues—that would be required to put them into law, and we will not hesitate to do that if we think that it is necessary.

However, I appeal to people across the country to please abide by the travel restrictions now, so that that does not become necessary. If you live in a level 3 council area, do not travel outside your own local authority area unless it is for essential purposes such as work that cannot be done at home, healthcare or caring responsibilities. You can find the full list of essential purposes on the Scottish Government website. If you live elsewhere, do not travel into a level 3 area except for the same essential purposes. In addition, please do not travel outside Scotland right now, to other parts of the UK or overseas, unless it is for those essential purposes.

Abiding by these restrictions is hard, and it is not a position that any of us wants to be in, but I cannot stress enough that it is essential if we are to avoid spreading the virus from high-prevalence areas to lower-prevalence areas. If we do spread the virus, those lower-prevalence areas will end up being under tougher restrictions than would otherwise have been necessary.

Many people across our country—too many people—are grieving the loss of a loved one right now. Many more have lost jobs or are worried about losing their jobs. Some people are living with the long-term health effects of Covid. For those who are carrying the heaviest burden of the virus, words are little comfort, of course, but for all of that, and for all the fatigue, frustration and apprehension that we all feel, let us not forget that there is a glimmer of hope. The numbers that I report—for new cases, people in hospital and people who are dying—remind us that the virus continues to exact a terrible toll, and, looking around the world just now, it is easy to see that, if we are not very careful, things could get worse. Against that, however, we can see that the sacrifices that we make are having an impact, and

yesterday's announcement about a vaccine is the best news that we have heard since the start of the pandemic. One of the points that I have tried to stress in the past few months is that, at some point, this will all be over. At some point, we will be looking back on it rather than living through it.

Today, although tough times still lie ahead, that seems a bit more real and a bit more graspable for all of us. Of course, the news does not remove the need for caution. It will be over one day—hopefully soon—but it is not over yet. This is not the time to let down our guard; now is the time to do everything that we can to look after and look out for each other. The more we can keep each other safe in the weeks and months ahead, the more we can look forward to brighter days in the spring.

Please, now more than ever, stick to the rules in your area, check the website to see what they are, and please remember FACTS: wear face coverings, avoid places with crowds of people, clean your hands and hard surfaces regularly, keep a 2m distance from people in other households, and self-isolate and get tested if you have any of the symptoms of Covid. If we all continue to do all of that all of the time, we will protect ourselves, our loved ones and our national health service, and we will undoubtedly save lives.

My thanks once again to everyone for sticking with it and sticking with each other.

Ruth Davidson (Edinburgh Central) (Con): Yesterday's announcement on the efficacy of a Covid vaccine, of which the UK has pre-secured 40 million doses, should give us all grounds for cautious optimism. However, the promise of an effective vaccine at the turn of the year does not override the ability of each of us to play our part now. The on-going restrictions that we are all living under continue to be difficult for the individual and, in many cases, they are crippling for shops, bars, restaurants, businesses and jobs.

The way out of this for everyone is not just to have an effective vaccine; it is to be able to deliver it to the population in an effective and timely manner. We already know from the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport that we will not be delivering the Covid vaccines under the same model that has been used for this year's seasonal flu programme because, as she rightly said, lessons need to be learned.

The simple question that people will want answered is: how exactly will the vaccine be delivered? Reports over the weekend discuss the use of large-scale venues such as medical hubs and conference centres. I am sure that people would find it helpful if the First Minister could give us confirmation today of whether she can identify those venues at this stage and whether they have been secured for that purpose.

Returning to this year's seasonal flu vaccine, many of the problems that we have seen arose from removing administration from general practitioners and handing it to health boards. Some health boards coped admirably, while there were significant and chronic problems in others. Is the First Minister satisfied that, under a national roll-out of Covid vaccinations, all Scotland's 14 health boards will start at the same level of readiness, so that this potential game changer can be administered fairly and equitably across the country, no matter where people live?

The First Minister: I thank Ruth Davidson for those questions. I reiterate that, until we are at the point of vaccinating large numbers of people, it is incumbent on all of us to keep the virus under control by abiding by all the restrictions, however tough that is.

Over the next period, the health secretary will set out much more detail on how exactly we will deploy the vaccine and on the programme that will be in place to ensure that it is delivered to priority groups across the whole country.

In short, yes, we are confident that health boards will be at a level of readiness to deliver that. There will be a nationally co-ordinated approach to that, although delivery will be health board led. There will be a number of places and premises, including local premises such as pharmacies, that will be part of that programme across the country. We will set out more detail on that once that detail is finalised, or is finalising, over the next weeks.

We are following, and will continue to follow, the recommendations of the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation on prioritisation for the vaccine. Interim recommendations have been made and were published by the UK Government yesterday, although they may be subject to change once the final properties of the vaccine, and any other vaccines, become more known.

It will be one of the biggest vaccination programmes that we have ever undertaken—it will certainly be on a par with the flu vaccination programme. On the basis of the Pfizer vaccine, we expect that people will need two doses three weeks apart, so the logistics will be even more complicated. The health secretary is overseeing that, on a daily basis, I am pretty sure, as am I. We will make sure that the details are set out to Parliament as they develop and are finalised over the next few weeks.

However, let us not lose sight of the fact that the development of the vaccine is good news. I do not want to underplay the questions that are still to be answered about the efficacy of the vaccine, its prioritisation and how much immunity it might confer, which the scientists are working hard on,

but for the first time in seven months, we have a very distinctive light at the end of the tunnel. Hope has been in short supply over the past few months, so we should all enjoy it while we can.

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): I thank the First Minister for providing advance sight of her statement.

We all appreciate the balancing act that is needed between the harms of the virus and the wider damage that is inflicted by the restrictions themselves, including damage to business and jobs, and the rising isolation, anxiety and loneliness of many across Scotland. Huge sacrifices are being made.

In setting out the new framework only 12 days ago, the First Minister said:

“Our aim is that the restrictions ... should be in place for as short a time as possible.”—[*Official Report*, 29 October 2020; c 3.]

Today, not one local authority area has been moved to a lower tier, and Fife, Perth and Kinross, and Angus are all being moved up to level 3 from Friday. All the evidence must be shared, and it must be persuasive.

The purpose of the new strategic framework was to provide clarity and transparency on the Government’s decisions. However, today’s announcement raises more questions, not least about what it will take for communities to be moved down a tier. What will it take, and why, after eight months, is the First Minister now contemplating the serious measure of applying the force of law to travel restrictions?

The First Minister: On the last point, over the past seven months, we have never ruled that out, but across all the measures, we have always encouraged voluntary compliance. I believe—and I think that our behavioural science advisers would back this up—that it is better to encourage and support people to do the right thing than it is to use the force of law when they do the wrong thing. However, we will not rule that out—in fact, we have moved to a legal position on things such as face coverings. That is the responsible approach for any Government to take.

On the question of the different harms, the virus harms directly, and the way in which we tackle the virus harms as well, but it is important that we all recognise that, if we do not tackle the harm of the virus, we exacerbate, and do not minimise, the other harms. Understandably, because everybody is frustrated, and people are worried about jobs and businesses, there is a sense that if we ease up on the restrictions to tackle the virus, the economic harm will not happen. That is a fallacy. If we allow the virus to run out of control, the harm to the economy will be worse. Of course, we need to

ensure that support is available while we do that, and we have put support packages in place.

On the question of evidence, for every local authority, we will publish—it has probably already been published—a page of the most up-to-date data that shows the direction of travel and the number of cases per 100,000. There is a wealth of data there that people can go and look at. However, some pieces of data really cannot be denied. If we look at Fife, Angus, and Perth and Kinross, no responsible Government could ignore the figures that I have just given of increases of 40 per cent, or thereabouts, in cases in the space of a week, and acting early will hopefully stop a greater deterioration.

I would love to be in a position to move local authorities down a level today. I do not mean this pejoratively—and we cannot rule anything out for Scotland—but, unlike other parts of the UK right now, we are not in a full national lockdown. We are making some progress, but there is an accelerating global pandemic, and it is important that we are all frank about the challenges that we still face, and the hard actions that we have to take to make sure that we keep it under control. That is what the levels are intended to do, and what the weekly reviews and being prepared to change course when necessary are intended to do as well.

On when areas move up or down, the broad indicators are as they were set out last week, and can be looked at on the website. However, of course, we apply judgments around that. For Fife, Angus, and Perth and Kinross, we have applied the judgment that, if we had waited until next week, when they might have met the raw indicators, the situation would have run more out of control. By acting this week, we hope that we can get it under control more quickly. In reaching such conclusions, judgment must combine with the hard data.

Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green): According to articles published by *The Guardian* and other papers, a proposed move to cut the self-isolation period from 14 days to 10 is the result of a disagreement between the Prime Minister’s chief adviser, Dominic Cummings, and Professor Chris Whitty. Apparently, the specified 10-day period is a compromise between the chief medical officer and Mr Cummings, who pushed for an even shorter isolation period.

I am sure that the First Minister will agree with me that Dominic Cummings is the last person to whom we should listen when it comes to self-isolation, but he is a reminder that compliance with that crucial measure is still an issue. Will the First Minister confirm that Scotland will not support that move; tell us what proportion of those who are asked to self-isolate comply; and say what further actions her Government can take to enable,

support and increase self-isolation, when that is required?

The First Minister: I have had no advice to reduce the periods of self-isolation to below what they are right now. I will always listen to clinical and scientific advice. I cannot say that I will never get advice of that nature, and I will consider it carefully if I do. However, it will certainly not be from Dominic Cummings. I hope that that reassures Alison Johnstone. We will always consider such advice carefully, but, as of now, let me be clear: we are not planning, and have no plans, to reduce the current periods of self-isolation, because they are based on the most up-to-date advice.

We are doing work to understand more the levels of compliance with self-isolation. As Alison Johnstone and others will be aware, a proactive service is starting for people on low incomes, whereby local authorities reach out to people who are self-isolating. That will be one way of assessing compliance, but we are looking at other ways in which we can monitor that. I will keep the Parliament updated on that.

On the self-isolation payment, I do not have figures in front of me, but we will publish up-to-date figures on its uptake as soon as we are able to. Currently, we are actively looking at what else we can do over and above the payment, through additional financial support or other practical measures, to support people to self-isolate, because, as Alison Johnstone is right to say, it remains, albeit not the only thing, one of the most important things that anybody can do.

If you have symptoms, you should self-isolate immediately and get tested; and if you are a close contact of somebody who tests positive, it is absolutely vital that you self-isolate. The more we can do to support people with that, the more we will encourage higher compliance. All those matters are under active consideration, and we will keep Parliament updated.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): Fife will want to know what we have got wrong, and what we need to do to get back to level 2. Over the past few months, and for other areas of Scotland, the First Minister has been able to say, for example, that the issue has been with pubs or indoor social gatherings. What data is available from testing and tracing about the spread and its cause in Fife, Angus and Perth and Kinross?

The First Minister knows that I am frustrated by the slow pace of the Scottish Government's progress on testing. If in England all students are being tested for Christmas, what is stopping the First Minister from doing the same for students in Scotland?

The First Minister: The only thing that is stopping me right now is the need first to advise Parliament, as I am sure the Presiding Officer would insist on. The Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science will make a statement to Parliament tomorrow, setting out plans on that, and I am sure that Willie Rennie will be heartened and encouraged by what he hears in that statement.

We have a supply of lateral flow testing devices and are currently looking at the logistics of exactly how to use those and with what clinical prioritisation. Without pre-empting the statement that will be made tomorrow, I say that students will clearly be a priority for that. I hope that Willie Rennie will be happy when he hears Richard Lochhead's statement tomorrow.

I say to Willie Rennie that we have to be really careful—I mean this genuinely—about using language such as, "What has Fife done wrong?" This is an infectious virus, in a global pandemic and, with the best will in the world, sometimes people get it, sometimes people transmit it and sometimes it can run out of control for a period. We have to be careful about language that suggests that people are to blame for that.

However, it is important that we make very clear that all of us, through our individual actions, can help to minimise transmission. We cannot guarantee that we will not get the virus and we cannot guarantee that we will not pass it on but, by following the FACTS advice and abiding by all the restrictions, we can minimise the chances of that.

On the situation in Fife right now, rates have accelerated quite quickly. The figure that I gave earlier is that, over the past week—the figures go up to 6 November—there has been a 40 per cent increase in cases per 100,000 of population and the positivity test rate has gone up by 1.5 per cent. We have a rising projection for hospital and intensive care unit admissions, although at the moment we are not seeing levels in Fife being breached.

There is not yet an absolutely clear understanding of exactly what the drivers of that are, although the information from test and protect on the contacts that people had in the seven days before they tested positive will be looked at to try to inform the local response. That information is provided through test and protect, and Public Health Scotland reports, but some of the information that I set out in the past few minutes has been published today and all members can look at it.

The hope is that, with Fife, Perth and Kinross and Angus, acting quickly will bring the situation under control—as we have reason to believe might be happening in Dundee—and will lead to

those areas being in tougher restrictions for a shorter period than might be the case if we waited and the virus ran further out of control.

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): It is positive to note that measures that are in place in Scotland are starting to have the intended effect. I appreciate that the vast majority of the public understand the need for caution, particularly in the light of increasing cases across the world.

A number of constituents who have caring responsibilities have contacted me about the advice not to travel outside their local authority area except for essential purposes. Will the First Minister take the opportunity to reassure them that taking care of loved ones is considered essential and will she outline the other exceptions to the travel guidance?

The First Minister: I understand people's anxieties over the issue. I reiterate that the travel restrictions are necessary to avoid taking the virus from high-prevalence areas to low-prevalence areas, which is vital if we are to maintain a differentiated approach to restrictions.

There are exemptions for essential purposes. They are set out in the guidance, which is available on the Scottish Government website. They include travel to care for a vulnerable person, for example if someone has to deliver food or care to someone who is old or vulnerable; travel for childcare reasons; and situations in which, because of where people live, they have to travel a reasonable distance—perhaps a few miles—outside their local authority for exercise or essential shopping, if they cannot do that in the area in which they live. Those are the kinds of exemption that exist. However, we are asking people, where possible and unless travel is absolutely essential, to abide by the restrictions, because that will help us to stem the increase in cases.

Information that is available shows that Ruth Maguire's constituency area, North Ayrshire, is one of the areas where we are seeing signs that give cause for cautious optimism. I mentioned the 40 per cent increase in Fife in the most recent seven days; in North Ayrshire, there was a 12 per cent decline. We have to wait to see whether that is sustainable, but it is one of the positive signs that we are seeing right now, and it is down to the sacrifices that people across North Ayrshire are making, as people are doing elsewhere in Scotland.

Maurice Golden (West Scotland) (Con): The Scottish Tourism Alliance has warned that the sector faces a "third winter". Funding is available to the Scottish National Party to offer help, should it choose to do so. Some £500 million is unspent in its autumn budget revision and, in addition, the

UK Government has provided Scotland with a £1.7 billion boost. How much of that will be spent protecting jobs and supporting Scottish businesses?

The First Minister: First, let me make an important point. I understand how difficult this is for businesses but, as has been recognised by the UK Government in the action that it has taken through the lockdown that is currently in place in England, if we do not control the virus, we do more damage to the economy in the medium to long term. I know that that is difficult for businesses that are struggling right now, but that is the reality. That is why the steps that we are taking to control the virus are right for health and lives but also, ultimately, right for the economy.

We will invest every penny that we can in supporting businesses. In addition to the UK furlough scheme, we already have a package of business grant support. Businesses can find details about that support, which is administered through local authorities, on the Scottish Government website. Over and above that, we are considering what additional support we can provide for particular sectors, and we will set out details of that as quickly as possible.

Not a penny that is available to us for this purpose will be left unspent, because it is vital, when we are asking businesses to do unprecedented things, that Governments across the UK give businesses, as far as possible, unprecedented support.

Bruce Crawford (Stirling) (SNP): I know that the First Minister is aware that the current restrictions are having a huge impact on the hospitality sector in my constituency of Stirling. Unlike the Tories, I recognise that the Scottish Government is on a fixed budget and how difficult it is to find additional financial support for the sector. That said, I ask the First Minister what more can be done to support small to medium-sized hotels and guest houses, particularly those with restaurants. If that requires further support from the UK Treasury, it should provide that support. I know from experience on the ground that such businesses are desperate. Some of those that have been required to close because restrictions mean that trading conditions are simply impossible will never reopen. As the son of a hotelier, the sector is close to my heart, and I feel deeply for it. What can the Scottish Government do to help?

The First Minister: I very much share the member's concerns, and the concerns of the member who previously asked about the hotel sector as well as tourism and hospitality more widely. As Bruce Crawford will be aware, we have already provided £14 million through our hotel recovery fund and a further £4 million for bed and

breakfasts and self-catering accommodation. That is within a wider package of support that now totals more than £2.3 billion.

However, we know that more needs to be done to protect jobs and businesses into the future. The recommendations of the independent tourism recovery task force have been published, and those will be considered by the Scottish Government and the UK Government. They include the recommendation to provide proportionate and fair financial compensation arrangements if further lockdowns are required. The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism will keep Parliament updated.

Given that Bruce Crawford has asked a question, and because he represents Stirling, let me take the opportunity to underline a point that I made in my statement. Stirling is one of the areas currently in level 3 where we have significant concern about a sharply rising number of cases. To try to get that under control and avoid any potential move into the higher level of restrictions, it will be really important that people across Stirling redouble their efforts to stick to all of the restrictions. I know that Bruce Crawford will be instrumental in encouraging his constituents to do so.

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): On the glimmer of hope that is the Covid vaccine, what reassurance can the First Minister give that the public roll-out of the vaccine will get under way as soon as it becomes available in Scotland? To that end, because people have been raising questions about cold storage and the supply chain around that, can the First Minister advise whether we currently have any freezers that are capable of ultra-cold temperatures? The Pfizer vaccine requires -80°C. Have freezers of that nature been procured and, if not, is work under way to do so?

The First Minister: Yes, we have purchased fridges—if I can use what is probably a completely untechnical term. I apologise if I get the figure wrong, because I have got so many figures going around in my head on a daily basis but, from memory, I think that we have purchased around 20 very large fridges that are capable of storing the vaccine at those very low temperatures. They will be situated in strategic locations across the country. There are then logistical issues in getting the vaccines from the cold storage to where they need to be. Different temperatures apply for short periods in the journey to the person being vaccinated. However, all those issues are under close and active consideration and deployment right now, including, I am pleased to say, the procurement of big fridges.

Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): It will not come as a huge surprise to many of my constituents or, indeed, to people across Fife that

Fife is being placed in level 3, given the significant increases in the numbers of Covid cases and admissions to ICU. Will the First Minister provide a bit more detail on the decision-making process that was undertaken as far as Fife specifically is concerned, and can she provide assurances that the worrying increase in ICU admissions is being monitored closely?

The First Minister: Yes, I can. However, before I come on to the issue of ICU, in particular, I will briefly go through some of the process. We have been identifying a rise in cases in Fife for a number of days, and the national incident management team has paid particular attention to the situation in Fife during the weekly review process. One of the reasons for that, as well as the rise in cases, was that ICU capacity has been a cause for concern. The figures for incidence and test positivity have deteriorated, and—this is crucial to our decision to act early—the trend data suggest that, without action, a further deterioration would be likely. It is against that background that the national IMT advised moving Fife to level 3, and a proposal was endorsed by chief advisers and the four harms group, noting that the local authority leadership had indicated that they understood the reasons for the need to follow public health advice.

We are closely monitoring ICU admissions in Fife, and discussions continue to ensure that the NHS in Fife and elsewhere can cope with any increase in cases. There is the ability across the NHS and all health boards to double ICU capacity and, if necessary, to triple ICU capacity. Right now, we are projecting that Fife will not breach its doubled ICU capacity and that, if the additional restrictions have the effect that we want them to have, we should see the position improve. Nevertheless, I assure Annabelle Ewing that the matter will be closely monitored in the days to come.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): The First Minister will be aware that vitamin D is especially important in Scotland because Scots are at above-average risk of deficiency—particularly in winter. Is the First Minister confident that the current supply of vitamin D for people who are shielding is sufficient, and will she answer campaigners' calls to extend the vitamin D scheme to care home residents in Scotland, as has been announced in England?

The First Minister: The supply of vitamin D has been challenged in recent months and throughout the pandemic, but we are now in a position to offer a four-month supply of vitamin D to anybody in the shielding category who wants it. Of course, they must have advice about potential contraindications if they are taking other medication.

The situation in care homes, which we are looking at right now in relation to whether we need to make any changes—supply will obviously be a factor that we need to take account of—is that the residents can, if they are clinically advised, access vitamin D. Until now, access has been based on clinical advice in order to guard against contraindications with other medication they are taking. We are currently considering whether we want to change that position in any way to make vitamin D available more on a par with its availability to those in the shielding category who are not in care homes. Nevertheless, right now, anybody who is in a care home who is deemed to benefit from vitamin D is able to get it.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): We all know that the restrictions that were confirmed today will have a major economic impact. Due to the uncertainty caused by the UK Government's failure to extend the furlough scheme until the last moment, many employers have already made the difficult decision to make people redundant. However, it is important to stress that employers can bring back people who have been made redundant and re-furlough them. Will the First Minister join me in encouraging employers—including a major theatre group in Glasgow and across the UK that has been brought to my attention—to work urgently to bring back any employees who have recently been made redundant, to ensure that they receive the support that they deserve during the on-going restrictions?

The First Minister: Although the extension to the furlough scheme is welcome, as was commented on last week, it is regrettable that it came so late in the day, when many businesses had already made people redundant and some businesses had probably decided to close as a result of the uncertainty—or what appeared to be the certainty that furlough was not going to continue on the terms that it now has. I encourage any business in that position to consider bringing staff back, to take advantage of all of the support that is available. Obviously, I cannot make decisions for every business, but the Scottish Government will try to offer whatever support we can to help businesses in those circumstances.

If Bob Doris wants to give us more detail of the situation in his constituency that he referred to, we can certainly see whether we can make further support available.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): When the levels were first set, Edinburgh merited being placed in level 2 on the basis of four out of the five measures. Despite improvement, the city remains in level 3, and many may ask why.

I understand that the decisions are based on judgments and not simple arithmetic, but, in turn, I

think that that requires greater explanation and transparency. I ask the First Minister to provide a full minute or report of the decision taken in each local authority to be published, including the basis on which the judgments have been made, by whom they have been made and on what advice. I also ask that briefings be provided to all elected members when level decisions are made. That should include councillors, because, having spoken to councillor colleagues in Edinburgh, I know that they are far from clear about the basis for those decisions.

The First Minister: Cabinet makes the decisions—let me be very clear about that—and we do so after taking account of a range of advice from the chief medical officer, the national clinical director, the national incident management team and the four harms group.

There is consultation with local authorities. The Deputy First Minister spoke to City of Edinburgh Council yesterday and had a discussion about the most up-to-date data that we have published. I appreciate that members might not have had the opportunity to see it yet, but there is a page of data for every local authority. When they look at the data for each of the local authorities, most people will see the reasons why we have arrived at the decisions that we have made.

Daniel Johnson said that more explanation is needed of the decision on Edinburgh. The data on the number of cases per 100,000 people show that, in the most recent seven days, the change in Edinburgh has been zero; it has not gone up, but it has not gone down. Before we can be confident about moving Edinburgh down a level, with the significant opening-up that that would entail, we need to see a reduction in cases. We are hopeful that Edinburgh will see that in the weeks ahead, although data on test positivity in the past seven days show that it has increased marginally, by 0.2 per cent. That is marginal, but it does not show us a sustained decline. All of that data is published and, ultimately, judgments must be applied on the basis of it.

We are in a precarious situation with an infectious virus, and moving an area down a level is not a neutral act; it involves an opening-up, and an opening-up involves greater transmission opportunities for the virus. Therefore, before we do that, we must be clear that the authority concerned has the headroom to cope with increased transmission. I hope that that will be the case for the city of Edinburgh in the not-too-distant future. However, on the basis of the figures that we have, changing the level now would not be prudent and instead could run the risk of sending Edinburgh in the wrong direction.

Maureen Watt (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): Because of test and protect,

there is now much more information about where the virus is more likely to be contracted and spread. Can the First Minister confirm that the information gleaned from test and protect will be used when deciding which sectors can reopen and that those sectors—such as gyms and beauty salons—can know whether, in the main, they have been overwhelmingly safe?

The First Minister: That question is similar to part of Willie Rennie's question. I want to be very clear about the benefit and value of the information that we get from test and protect, but I also want to be straight with people about the limitations of it.

We look very carefully at the information that comes from test and protect. If someone tests positive, a contact tracer interviews them and asks them where they had been in the seven days before the onset of symptoms. That tells us whether someone had been in a pub or restaurant, or to work; whether they had visited a family member or been to the hairdresser or beauty salon; or whether they had travelled inside or outside Scotland. That is valuable information, because it allows us to build a picture and draw conclusions about the types of venue and premises that might feature more often than others. At an earlier stage, that—as well as the scientific evidence that pointed to it—allowed us to say that we thought that pubs were places where there was a higher risk of transmission.

To be frank, the limitation is that that information does not tell us absolutely where someone got the virus. The fact that someone was in a pub two days before they had symptoms does not mean that that is where they caught the virus—genomic sequencing is required to get that level of information. Scotland is doing a lot of genomic sequencing, which is very valuable.

We need to use that information sensibly and understand its limitations. We need to use it to build pictures and then we need to apply judgment to all of that. In all of this, we are seeking to suppress the virus to allow greater opening up of the economy and society. If we do not suppress the virus, the hard reality is that it will get harder, rather than easier, to open things up. That is not a position that any of us wants to be in.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): Covid has impacted those in Scotland's poorest communities the most. The percentage of pupils from deprived communities who are off school for Covid-related reasons is double that of pupils in wealthier areas. On top of that, the gap in overall attendance between those two groups is greater than in previous years. What does the First Minister think is behind that growing gap, and what is the Government doing to address it? Will the Government support our proposals for a national

tutoring programme, to ensure that those pupils who need extra help and support can access it, no matter where in the country they live?

The First Minister: We will consider all practical suggestions. We are providing a lot of support for children in low-income families, including free school meals during the holidays, a policy with which—I am delighted to say—the Conservatives now appear to agree. We have just opened applications for the Scottish child payment. We also have the best start grant, and we have increased funding for the welfare funds. In a whole range of ways, we are trying to provide targeted support where it is needed.

There are several reasons for the differentials in school attendance figures, and we look at them carefully. We examine school attendance figures daily—the Deputy First Minister, in particular, pays close attention to those figures. The most important thing is to take all necessary steps to support children to be at school and to support our schools to stay open for as long as possible throughout the pandemic. We are very focused on that. Where we think that there is a need for additional measures to support that or for additional help, we will always consider providing those.

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): My question on vaccines has been covered, so instead I have a question that follows up on Bruce Crawford's earlier question. Can the First Minister tell us about the 6 pm restriction that applies to restaurants in level 3 areas? They are still losing all their early evening dinner trade, and the recent relaxation has not really altered that very much. Will the Government give some consideration to extending opening to 8 pm, as that would make a huge difference to the ability of businesses to get through the crisis? Of course, the no alcohol rule would remain in force.

The First Minister: We will always consider such things and we will do so on an on-going basis; as the virus develops, we will look to open up and ease restrictions where we can. However, there are some really hard judgments and trade-offs at the heart of this. It does no one any favours for me to shy away from being open about what those are.

The issue around serving no alcohol is to try to remove the disinhibiting effects that alcohol can have that make it more difficult for people to socially distance. The restrictions on hours are hard and not welcome for anyone, particularly businesses, but they are also important.

We cannot lose sight of the fact that one of the things that we are trying to do is to limit the numbers of people coming together, particularly indoors, and interacting. The virus thrives on

passing from person to person and household to household. It does that more successfully indoors, in places where there is poorer ventilation and where people are less likely to observe social distancing. We know that people's houses are a significant risk factor, but so, too, are pubs and restaurants.

The restrictions on hours are not just about not having alcohol. We are also trying to strike a balance between allowing some businesses to trade to some extent and limiting the numbers of people who come together and interact. It is really tough, but it is necessary. As all the figures that I am sharing today show, it is necessary to continue to do these things if we are to prevent the virus from running out of control again.

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I seek some clarity. I have looked on the Scottish Government website for information on business support, and I understand that the coronavirus restrictions fund closed to applications on 3 November. Perth and Kinross and Fife have both moved from tier 2 to tier 3. How will businesses be able to access the higher level of support that comes with being in tier 3?

The First Minister: The two levels of grant support—one for businesses that are closed and one for businesses for which trading is restricted—will be available to any businesses on an on-going basis. There were temporary measures for the temporary restrictions, but those have now been replaced by on-going support.

I will make sure that somebody sends an email to Claire Baker later this afternoon about exactly where that information can be found and the process that businesses that are newly going into level 3 need to go through in order to access support. Support is available for businesses that have to close and for those that will have their trading restricted.

Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): A couple of minutes ago, the First Minister mentioned the Scottish child payment, which opened for applications yesterday. The payment will be a game changer that will help thousands of kids to get out of poverty in Scotland. How much could families with young children receive if they apply for the Scottish child payment together with the three best start grant payments and the best start foods payment?

The First Minister: I am very pleased to say that the Scottish child payment, which is the newest and biggest benefit so far that is being delivered under our new benefits system, opened for applications yesterday. Scotland is the only part of the UK where that additional payment for families with young children will be available. It is a significant anti-poverty measure.

The new benefit will give eligible families on low incomes—initially, it is for those with children under six; ultimately, it will be for those with children up to 16—an extra £10 per week for each child. The Scottish child payment, taken together with the best start grant and best start foods, will provide more than £5,200 of financial support for families by the time that their first child turns six. For second and subsequent children, more than £4,900 will be provided.

The benefits will provide significant support for families who most need it. I encourage anybody who thinks that they might be eligible to make an application in order to ensure that, if they are eligible, they get the support.

Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): The Government's winter plan states that some resumed services might have to be paused again, because we need to create more capacity to deal with Covid-19 resurgence and to manage other winter pressures. That appears to be already happening, with several health boards recently announcing the cancellation of non-urgent elective procedures, and the warnings about bed shortages. It is vital that the NHS is not plunged into crisis this winter. What is the current available bed capacity in the NHS? How many of those beds are staffed?

The First Minister: If I do not get the number exactly correct, I will be corrected later but, broadly speaking, there is capacity of about 13,000 beds in the NHS, and we have a contingency within that for Covid.

At the start of the pandemic, we paused elective treatment—apart from necessary and life-saving treatment—to ensure that we had the capacity for Covid patients. We do not want to do that again, but there will be pressures at given times that will interrupt elective and planned procedures.

The absolute priority is to keep the virus under control so that the NHS can cope with Covid and treat patients who have Covid, and so that patients who need the NHS for other reasons can be treated. That is one of the main reasons why the restrictions are so important. It is understandable and entirely legitimate that people will press for relaxations here or there and for this sector or that sector. I get all that and make no complaint about it.

However, the reason why we have to ensure that we take the necessary action to stop the virus running out of control is to save lives and stop people becoming ill. Ultimately, it is also to ensure that we protect the capacity of the NHS over the winter, when the pressures on it are greater than they are at other points of the year, even when we do not have a pandemic. That is the purpose of

the winter plan that the health secretary has already spoken about.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): Sadly, there has been a significant increase in the number of cases in Inverclyde in the past week. Will the First Minister commit to continuing to work with Inverclyde in seeking to keep the number of cases of Covid down? Will she also remain engaged with the local community and the local authority if Inverclyde is at risk of having more restrictions?

The First Minister: I absolutely commit to continuing to work with Inverclyde Council and with the public health authorities in Inverclyde to ensure that we do everything that we can to get the number of cases down.

The increase that we have seen in Inverclyde in the past seven days is very significant. It is more than 100 per cent and, obviously, it has to be taken very seriously. There has been a 2.1 per cent increase in test positivity.

I know that, when we did not put Inverclyde into level 2 in first setting the allocations, people in Inverclyde who were looking at the data questioned that—understandably, at the time. I think that the experience since then probably suggests that that was the right thing to do. If we are to avoid tougher restrictions for Inverclyde, we need to ensure that we all work together to make sure that the current restrictions are being adhered to and that the authorities locally are working in as targeted a way as possible to get the transmission down. We know from other parts of the country that, when that happens, it can be done, and I hope that the people of Inverclyde take some encouragement from that.

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): The announcement yesterday on the vaccine was very welcome, but does the First Minister acknowledge that there is a danger that it will cause people to take their eyes off the ball in relation to spread of the virus? I welcome the announcement that is going to be made tomorrow, I think, on universities, although European universities have been carrying out mass testing for many months and they have not seen the problems that we have seen.

In Liverpool, there is mass testing, and the UK Government is also talking about rolling that out elsewhere. Is the Scottish Government looking at that? What is the First Minister's view on mass testing, particularly in those areas in the west of Scotland that have been impacted the worst?

The First Minister: In short, we are considering all those things. Students are obviously a priority, given the looming Christmas period, and health workers, on whom I think that the Parliament will have a debate tomorrow, are another priority.

Whether it is the current polymerase chain reaction—PCR—testing or new technology such as lateral flow testing, using testing tactically in outbreak or high-prevalence areas is also under consideration.

There are some logistical, practical and clinical issues that we have to consider around all this, including the procured supply of some of the devices and the ways in which they can be used most effectively. There is lower sensitivity, I think—it is not about how specific such things are, but about how sensitive they are—than is the case with PCR testing. In some cases, the devices have to be used more than once in a short space of time, and where people test positive, that often requires to be followed up with a PCR test to confirm the positive. We are working through those things right now. We will set out the first steps on that, around students, tomorrow, and we will keep the Parliament updated more generally.

Finally, on the vaccine, like most people in my position, I have had to deliver so much bad news over the past seven months that I ask members to forgive me if I have enjoyed the ability to be a bit more positive over the past 24 hours. Of course there is a long way to go, and we all have to be open-eyed about this, but it is good news. As I said, it is probably the best news that we have had. If there is a risk to it, it is that people will sit back and say, "We can just wait for the vaccine now—we don't have to bother with the restrictions any more." That is not the case.

Right now, we have to make sure that we stick with all the restrictions, frankly to make sure that, by the time we get to the spring and the vaccine is—I hope—helping us to come out the other end, we get to that stage with as few lives lost as possible, as little ill-health as possible and the burden of Covid being as minimal as we can possibly make it. That will take all of us continuing to do all the right things all the time at the moment.

The Presiding Officer: I apologise to members whom I could not call, but we have to end questions there.

Remembrance Commemorations

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Lewis Macdonald): I remind members that social distancing measures are in place in the chamber and across the campus. Please observe those measures, including when entering and exiting the chamber this afternoon.

The next item of business is a debate on motion S5M-23291, in the name of Graeme Dey, on remembrance commemorations. I ask those members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak button now.

15:29

The Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans (Graeme Dey): Each November, Scotland comes together to pay tribute to and honour the brave men and women of our armed forces, who for generations have served to protect the liberty and freedoms that we all enjoy today. The poppies that we wear are a tangible symbol of remembrance and the enduring courage, loyalty and commitment of our regulars and reservists. They show that, no matter how much time may pass, their sacrifices, alongside those of their families and loved ones, will not be forgotten.

This year has seen some truly significant anniversaries of key events of the second world war. On 8 May, the nation commemorated the 75th anniversary of victory in Europe, marking the fall of Nazi Germany and the end of conflict on the continent. On 12 June, it was 80 years since the battle of St Valery—sometimes known as the other Dunkirk—which saw outstanding bravery displayed by the men of the 51st (Highland) Division, who won six Victoria Crosses and many other medals for their valour in the face of inevitable defeat. On 15 August, the nation commemorated the 75th anniversary of victory over Japan day, which marked the end of conflict in the far east, when the second world war—a war in which more than 50,000 Scots lost their lives—was finally brought to a close.

Earlier this year, I had the privilege of talking to Jack Ransom, who was one of the last surviving prisoners of war forced to work on the infamous Thai-Burma railway, which was also known as the railway of death, and Jenny Martin, who was born in a prisoner-of-war camp in Singapore and spent the first three years of her life under armed guard. Their experiences, and the experiences of millions of others around the globe, should not be forgotten.

Those anniversaries might be some of the last significant commemorations in which we will have the opportunity to directly thank the veterans of those events for their service. The Government

therefore worked in partnership with Legion Scotland and Poppyscotland, with support from the armed forces in Scotland, to plan an appropriate series of events to mark the dates. The May 2020 bank holiday was moved to coincide with the 75th anniversary of VE day. Sadly, the coronavirus pandemic made it impossible to carry out some of the commemorative events, such as the planned VIP reception for second world war veterans on VE day, followed by a parade and a concert for the public, in the manner that we had intended, due to the risk of public gatherings spreading the virus and endangering lives. That risk also significantly impacted the nature of remembrance Sunday commemorations at the weekend.

The decisions that resulted in restrictions to events were not easy ones to take, but it is right that we prioritised suppressing the virus to save lives. We will continue to work with our partners in the hope that we will be able to arrange a suitable alternative date next year for the live events that have had to be postponed, which will allow us to host the veterans who would otherwise have attended this year.

However, there have been many achievements in enabling commemorative events to proceed safely in some form throughout the pandemic, and I take this opportunity to acknowledge the incredible efforts of veterans charities, local authorities and local communities in adapting to ensure that they took place. In particular, I commend Legion Scotland and Poppyscotland for the enormous amount of work that they have done to ensure that commemorative events have been able to take place safely and successfully. I appreciate how challenging that has been, given such uncertainty and the efforts that have been required by a huge number of staff and volunteers to manage them.

Arguably, in terms of reach, those events have been an even greater success than normal as a result of the efforts that were made. They have reached millions of people across the country and, indeed, across the world. The various live broadcasts that Legion Scotland and Poppyscotland produced for VE day, VJ day and the anniversary of the battle of St Valery have reached more than 6 million users on social media, with the virtual events being viewed more than half a million times. I know that they are not the same as a real live event, but that shows members what can be achieved. I pay tribute to the innovation and imagination that our veterans charities have shown in difficult circumstances.

The hashtag #StValery80 reached more than 137 million social media users globally, with 450 pipers around the globe taking part in what was the largest ever mass participation piping event.

They performed the march “Heroes of St Valery”, which was composed by Pipe Major Donald MacLean, who was one of those who were captured during the battle.

For VE day, Legion Scotland hosted an online commemoration service, at which the First Minister delivered a reading. That was followed by an online concert that featured many of the artists who had been due to take part in the planned event in Princes Street gardens. Representatives of the armed forces joined the First Minister for a two-minute silence outside St Andrew’s house, and a flypast of Royal Air Force Typhoons took place over Edinburgh castle.

Following the success of VE day, Legion Scotland took a similar approach to victory over Japan day, with a virtual service of remembrance and a tribute concert that featured the stories of some of the incredible men and women who lived through the war in the far east.

The Scottish Government worked with Poppyscotland to create educational resources to mark both events, which were made freely available to schools. Following the announcement of school closures, Poppyscotland digitised those resources and made them available for pupils to support home-learning activities.

As many of us are aware, Legion Scotland also provided victory medallions and letters of thanks to second world war veterans prior to VJ day as an appreciation of their contribution to the allied war effort. I know from speaking to a number of those veterans and from their letters to me how much that was appreciated.

Legion Scotland and Poppyscotland have looked to replicate that success with a programme of virtual activities around remembrance 2020. The national service of remembrance, which took place on Sunday at the Scottish national war memorial in Edinburgh castle, was broadcast by the charities via their Facebook and YouTube channels. They will also broadcast a virtual service of remembrance for armistice day tomorrow, from around 10.45 am. I encourage everyone who can to join that service and the two-minute silence at 11.00 am. For members of the Scottish Parliament, a remembrance opportunity will also be facilitated in the Parliament.

The work that has been undertaken for those events and the numerous local services that are being held across Scotland honour the fallen and afford an opportunity to support veterans and recognise current service personnel. They are also vital in ensuring that our young people continue to learn about and engage with the impact of conflict and the cost of war, and they ensure that our young people are proud to honour those who sacrificed their future for our tomorrow.

I reiterate our continued support for the Scottish poppy appeal and the important work that it funds all year round in the armed forces community across Scotland to help those who have served, those who are still serving and their families by providing the care and support that they urgently need. The poppy appeal relies on the dedication and hard work of a huge number of volunteers across the country without whom it would be impossible to raise the vital funds that are used to deliver support to former service personnel and their families. All moneys that are raised in Scotland go back to the armed forces community here. As veterans minister, I give my personal thanks to all who are involved in that.

In particular, I note Poppyscotland’s innovative merchandising. Last year, badges that featured the crests of football clubs alongside the poppy were introduced. That range has been refreshed this year, and a range featuring the badges of Scotland’s historic regiments has been introduced. I am pleased to have been able to rotate between my brand-new Aberdeen FC lapel badge and one featuring the crest of the Gordon Highlanders, which is the regiment in which my grandfather served.

Scotland has a large and vibrant armed forces community, and the role of the charity sector is essential in delivering valuable support to veterans throughout Scotland. I am sure that I speak for everyone in the chamber when I extend my heartfelt thanks to everyone who has worked on behalf of those charities in whatever way they have. I congratulate them on the funding innovation that they have shown to raise critical sums of money, which are put to such good use.

The Scottish Government remains committed to supporting our armed forces and our veterans community and ensuring that they do not experience any disadvantage as a result of their service. Since I became Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans, I have been fortunate and, indeed, humbled to hear the stories and experiences of veterans whose service has varied from service during the second world war to service in Korea to service in more modern operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, and I have been inspired to ensure that we in Scotland do what we can to remove barriers to current and former service personnel enjoying access to the services and support that they and their families need.

We recognise that our veterans and their families are assets to their communities, employers and this country, although there is a small but important number of veterans who struggle to make the transition to civilian life and need additional support. We are keen to maximise the potential of and opportunities for all of them,

for example in finding good-quality sustainable employment. I intend to expand on that in my annual report to Parliament next week.

Tomorrow will be the 101st anniversary of the first armistice day, which was on 11 November 1919. Armistice day and the remembrance period more broadly serve a vital purpose in allowing everyone in Scotland a moment to pause, reflect and be thankful to those who have made the ultimate sacrifice for their country and to the families and loved ones they left behind.

I have focused so far on the anniversaries of the first and second world wars, but it is also important that we remember those who have served in other theatres throughout the years since then in Korea, Suez, Kenya, Northern Ireland, the Falklands, Iraq, Afghanistan and all the other corners of the globe.

We should recognise and be thankful for the vital humanitarian work that is carried out by the armed forces at home and worldwide, exemplified by the support that they have provided during the pandemic both nationally and locally, such as their aid in building NHS Louisa Jordan hospital in Glasgow and the deployment of thousands of personnel at short notice to support testing for the virus.

Remembrance and commemorations throughout the year serve a vital purpose to the people of Scotland by allowing time for reflection on the sacrifices that have been made to protect our freedoms. I am grateful for the work that has been done by our partners in the third sector to ensure that those events have been a success in the face of the enormous challenges that have been posed by the coronavirus pandemic. We will continue to work with them to ensure that that success is built on in the future.

I look forward to the contributions of members and to responding to them in due course.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises the impact that the coronavirus pandemic has had on planned commemorative events throughout the year, including Remembrance Sunday and significant milestones, such as the 75th anniversaries of Victory in Europe and Victory over Japan; acknowledges the fantastic efforts of veterans' charities, such as Legion Scotland and Poppyscotland, local authorities and local communities in adapting to ensure that commemorative events have been able to proceed safely in some form throughout the pandemic, and pays tribute to the sacrifices of those individuals from across Scotland and the UK, the Commonwealth and our Allied Nations, which ensured the peace and freedoms we enjoy today, as well as the contribution that the Armed Forces community continues to make to communities throughout Scotland, ahead of Armistice Day on 11 November 2020.

15:41

Maurice Corry (West Scotland) (Con): I declare that I am an armed forces veteran and convener of the cross-party group on the armed forces and veterans community.

It is a real privilege to take part in, and to lead for, the Scottish Conservatives in the debate. We will support the motion at decision time.

I record our appreciation for the considerable work that the minister has done in the past year for our veterans. He and I talk often about the work that is being done; I am glad that the Scottish Government has got behind it, and I hope that it will continue to do so in the coming year. I look forward to hearing the minister's statement next week about the annual review.

2020 has been a year like no other. Plans have been overturned, many businesses teeter on the brink of survival and, most serious of all, many families have lost loved ones and continue to suffer as a result of Covid-19. Hardships such as those have encouraged a sense of togetherness across our nation, and that has perhaps led us to reflect on and remember more keenly the contributions and sacrifices of others. This year's national remembrance of our fallen armed forces servicemen and servicewomen from past to present has been especially timely.

However, remembrance commemorations as we know and recognise them have not been possible, as the backdrop of Covid-19 continues to loom large. We have already witnessed that with the adapted 75th anniversaries of VE day and VJ day. Unfortunately, remembrance commemorations this year are no exception.

Traditionally, we commemorate with parades, services of remembrance and gatherings of serving personnel, veterans, cadets, friends and families. However, this year is so very different: we have been unable to gather in public groups at our war memorials and cenotaphs. Services of remembrance have either been cancelled or have undergone considerable changes. Of course, for safety to be our priority, the restrictions, although they are difficult, are necessary.

Event organisers across Scotland—I am grateful for what they have done this year—have had to adapt, rethink and reorganise remembrance campaigns and commemorations under pressure, and have done so admirably. I commend them for their hard work and for adhering to the guidelines that are in place with absolute care and thought.

I am pleased to see that the restrictions have not stopped an outpouring of remembrance and observance. Far from it: across Scotland and the wider United Kingdom, people have joined together in spirit. It has been so poignant to hear

of the many people who on remembrance Sunday observed the two minutes' silence from their doorsteps. Thousands have taken part in the poppy campaign and have tuned into virtual ceremonies from home. I was pleased to read of Poppyscotland's online virtual field of remembrance, where people can leave a tribute message along with a remembrance symbol, such as a cross or a poppy. Such opportunities have ensured that participation has been possible for everyone, not just a few. The enduring sentiment of remembrance and appreciation for our forces was as tangible as ever.

Many people, including me, were able individually to lay wreaths on Sunday. I laid wreaths in Hermitage park in Helensburgh, Christie park in Alexandria and in several villages in my area. The visit to the garden and fields of remembrance in Princes Street that was organised by Poppyscotland was very moving.

Many individual poppy crosses were laid out in the towns and villages that I visited—it was very moving, indeed—and considerably more were there than when I visited last year. Remembrance this year has very much been about acts of remembrance by individuals.

We remember those who have paid the ultimate sacrifice in service to their country: the fallen soldiers of the first and second world wars, and those who were lost to the Korean war, at Suez, in Northern Ireland, in the Balkans, in Afghanistan and in Iraq. We also remember the casualties of conflicts that we have witnessed in more recent years. Those lost lives speak collectively not just of the seriousness of war and conflict, but of the pressing need never to forget the cost of that commitment and selflessness.

It is equally important to keep in our minds the armed forces personnel who represent our nation today. I particularly want to spotlight the response of the armed forces in Scotland in meeting the logistical challenges of the pandemic. Their contribution has proved to be invaluable; I am sure that I will not be alone in sharing my immense gratitude for their continued commitment to our country.

Servicemen and servicewomen have been actively engaged in meeting the challenges of the pandemic head-on since the very beginning. The military have transported vital medical equipment and resources to and from our hospitals, and they have contributed their time and energy by helping at testing centres across Scotland. At the height of lockdown, the Royal Air Force assisted with airlifting critically ill Covid patients from the most remote islands to hospitals, in order to ensure that they received medical attention as soon as possible. The dedication of those men and women to their local communities and the wider nation

knows no bounds. I am sure that, as a result, this year we have seen nationwide remembrance and recognition of a special kind.

Our remembrance of our armed forces community today encompasses the families of our soldiers and veterans, as well. They are far from just waiting on the sidelines; I know from experience just how important and constant the family is in supporting loved ones. When the worst happens and those loved ones do not come home, it is the family that carries a lasting burden that we should never fail to recognise and never forget. Remember—when a serviceman or servicewoman is wounded, the spouse or partner and the family are also injured.

Always standing ready to support and assist the veterans community are a host of vital organisations. There include Legion Scotland, the Defence Medical Welfare Service, the Royal Air Force Benevolent Fund, Poppyscotland, the Royal Navy and the Royal Marines Charity, to name but a few. I am keenly aware of the amazing range and depth of support that all such veterans organisations offer to veterans who are in need. The challenges of the pandemic have brought to light their flexibility and incredible drive to revise, adapt and expand their services in the face of heightening demand. They meet not just the physical wounds that are plain to the eye, but the lasting mental wounds that some service users experience. Their contribution—especially as our thoughts turn to our armed forces community at this time of year—certainly does not go unnoticed.

That brings me back to the central focus of our debate: the willingness of serving personnel not just to give up their own comforts and freedoms, but to risk their very lives to offer their service to protect the liberties of you and me.

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): I appreciate the remarks that Maurice Corry has made so far. Is he aware of the campaign by Poppyscotland to stop the service charge that has to be paid by members of the armed forces from elsewhere in the Commonwealth and their families to stay in this country? Some are now facing bills for thousands of pounds. Would he support the campaign that Poppyscotland is leading to make sure that those charges are stopped?

Maurice Corry: I thank Keith Brown for his intervention. Yes—I know of that campaign and have already supported it. It is a worthwhile cause; we need to pay credence to those who have served from everywhere. The member will probably also remember Joanna Lumley's campaign for the Gurkhas, who are brave people. I have absolutely no problem agreeing with the member about supporting that campaign.

To conclude, I say that commemorations might have looked different this year, but we continue to remember the sacrifices of our armed forces servicemen and servicewomen with poignancy and sincere gratitude. Far from minimising their dedication to their country, which is evident across history up to the present day, I join the veterans minister and my colleagues in sharing our strongly felt thanks to those who have given so much, as their legacy will forever show—lest we forget.

15:49

David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):

It is an honour to open for the Labour Party in this important debate. I acknowledge that colleagues in the chamber have their own personal interactions with the armed forces family. We just heard from Keith Brown, who served with 45 Commando in the Falkland Islands. Edward Mountain served with the Blues and Royals regiment of the British Army, and Mike Rumbles served with the Royal Army Education Corps, and retired as a major. We have also just heard from Maurice Corry; I thank him for the work that he is doing in the cross-party group.

Like many—probably most—members, my interest in the debate is personal. My father did his national service with the RAF at Kinloss as a fresh-faced 18-year-old, nearly 75 years ago. During my time serving in another Parliament, I had the opportunity to serve with the RAF for two terms as part of the armed forces parliamentary scheme, and I am proudly wearing my tie this afternoon. I am sure that members will be able to pick that out from the televisions in the chamber.

I had direct experience of RAF Kinloss and RAF Lossiemouth, as well as a memorable week in Basra as one of the first elected members to visit Iraq. I flew in a Tornado fast jet, a Nimrod maritime aircraft and a Sea King search-and-rescue helicopter. On my final day with the RAF, the Sea King that I was with had to attend an emergency in Glencoe. I vividly remember flying a few hundred feet above Loch Ness on the way to Glencoe and observing at first hand the bravery, expertise and professionalism of the pilots and the winch crew as they saved the life of a young Swiss mountaineer who had fallen and suffered severe facial injuries. My experience was a brief snapshot, but it gave me tremendous admiration for the armed forces and for veterans.

As we heard from Maurice Corry, this has been an incredibly difficult year for everyone in Scotland as the Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted all our normal ways of life, including on remembrance Sunday—that most important of days in veterans' calendars, when we reflect upon, and are thankful for, the sacrifices that have been made by our

armed forces past and present, who gave up their safety and security for the preservation of others.

At the weekend, my colleague Rhoda Grant and I had the honour of laying our wreath at the war memorial in Inverness. As ever, it was a poignant moment for remembering the highlanders and islanders who made the ultimate sacrifice on behalf of the towns, villages and the small rural communities that they were from.

Sunday was a very difficult day for the more than 500,000 veterans and their families across Scotland. For many, it is the most important day of the year, as they remember friends and comrades who fell or were injured and, standing side by side once again, spend time with those whom they fought alongside.

Many veterans will have been shielding this weekend because of the risk of Covid-19. As ever, they were performing their national duty for the greater good of us all. I am sorry that the services and parades could not take place this year, but it was the right thing to do, and it takes nothing away from the emotional toll on many people over the weekend.

The circumstances were compounded by the effect that the pandemic has had on veterans charities. Our high streets echoed with silence, without many volunteers collecting money for the poppy appeal, as they shielded or self-isolated. I am conscious that that result of Covid-19 will have a significant knock-on effect on the appeal's collection and future finances.

I welcome the Scottish Government's funding for unforgotten forces, which is a consortium of armed forces and civilian charities that work for the health and wellbeing of older veterans in Scotland. However, we need to be clear that it is the responsibility of, first, the Scottish Government to support veterans. That will be more important than ever this year, as charities struggle with their revenue streams, through no fault of their own.

When a person gives up their safety and security for the sake of their country, they deserve to be fully supported as they return to civilian life within that country. That is the aim of the Armed Forces Covenant. The Scottish Government has made welcome progress in that area, and we will continue to hold it to account as it implements the "The Strategy for our Veterans—Valued. Contributing. Supported." report in full, but more needs to be done.

Those who have underlying health conditions are at greater risk from Covid-19. Will the Scottish Government consider whether it is doing enough to care effectively for the many veterans who have concerns and anxieties as a result of the pandemic, especially those who are having to self-isolate? Specifically, I ask the Scottish

Government to provide greater support for people who are currently serving and former services personnel who experience mental health difficulties, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and anxiety. Those problems have surely only been exacerbated by the pandemic.

We recognise how difficult a year it has been for social care staff and residents in Earl Haig homes and beyond throughout Scotland, so we call on the Scottish Government to ensure that it is doing all that it can to support social care staff in those vital roles, especially in how they support the older veterans in care homes who struggle with self-isolation and loneliness.

The last issue is to ensure that the Scottish Government is on top of homelessness. Shelter Scotland has reported that veterans in Scotland are 10 per cent more likely to become homeless than are those in England. In 2018-19, ex-services personnel homelessness applications rose by 22 per cent. That is a worrying trend. The Scottish Government must do all that it can to reverse it and it must reconsider the local authority budget cuts that have almost certainly contributed to those numbers.

We have been humbled again over remembrance weekend. Our veterans have given so much for our country—the fruits of peace that we continue to enjoy today. In response, they deserve all the support that they need from the country that they served. It seems apt to finish with the lines of John Maxwell Edmonds, which are repeated every remembrance Sunday throughout Scotland:

“When you go home, tell them of us and say
For their tomorrow, we gave our today.”

15:56

Mike Rumbles (North East Scotland) (LD): Remembrance Sunday was like none before. People heeded the request of the Scottish Government not to congregate around the very many war memorials in so many communities right across our country. I was fortunate on Sunday to take part in Christian worship, as I do every Sunday. Of course, being limited to a maximum of 50 socially distanced people, it was not the same, but it was, nevertheless, a moving occasion.

Remembrance Sunday always brings home to me the point that others made great sacrifices so that we at home may live in peace and freedom. However, it was not until an event in 1993 that I really appreciated that it was much more than that. Here is a personal anecdote about remembrance.

My father-in-law was a glider pilot in world war two. He took part in the Rhine crossings during operation varsity. I knew him as a very quiet and unassuming man. In 1993, I was stationed in

Germany as a member of the British Army of the Rhine. When he visited us, I took him to the place near Hamminkeln where he landed his glider under enemy fire back in 1945, because I wanted to capture his experiences with my video camera.

While getting him to talk, at last, about his experiences on that day, I noticed an elderly German lady walking towards us and so I switched off the camera to avoid upsetting any local sensibilities. I wish that I had not done that, because she came up to my father-in-law and threw her arms around him exclaiming “liberator, liberator” and “Frieden und Freiheit” and I can tell you that it was a very emotional moment for us all.

It was not until that point in 1993 that it really came home to me that so many people gave the ultimate sacrifice, and others were prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice, so that not just we at home, but those who were our enemies at the time could live in peace and freedom. Frieden und Freiheit.

The poppy appeal is the symbol of that remembrance, so I will end by slightly altering the last verse of a poem that was specially written for remembrance day:

“And so, when you see a poppy worn,
Let us reflect on the burden borne
By those who gave their precious all
When asked to answer their countries’ call
That we ALL in peace may live.
Then wear a poppy, remember, and give.”

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate.

15:59

Maureen Watt (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): I am really pleased that the Parliamentary Bureau timetabled the debate and has provided more speaking opportunities for only a little less time, because remembrance commemorations have been so different this year.

Normally, we would have had an evening event in the Parliament to celebrate the work of Poppyscotland, and MSPs would have attended one or more cenotaph ceremonies in their constituencies. Over the years, I have attended many such services at the war memorial at Schoolhill in Aberdeen, to pay my respects and to lay a wreath, as indeed I did this year.

For so many of us, these are times for personal reflection. My paternal grandfather fought in the first world war and, while wounded himself, carried a more severely injured colleague to safety. Forever afterwards, he walked with a limp, but he continued to work on the farm. I am sure that he was often in much pain, but he would never talk about that pain or about the war itself to me or his other grandchildren.

My mother's older brother, Jim, was a rear gunner who was shot down and killed in action in north Africa and is buried there. For that, he received the Distinguished Flying Cross, which my granny and grandpa collected at Buckingham palace.

I also remember our local greengrocer in Keith, who was a prisoner in the Japanese war camps and experienced unspeakable torture from which he suffered all his life. It really is a sorrow that we were not able to celebrate victory in Japan day properly this year.

I have to admit that visiting battle sites has not been top of my to-do list, but my husband has always been keen to find out where his great-uncle's grave lies on the battlefields of northern France. Our daughter's move to Paris provided an opportunity for us to do that and eventually, after visiting a few sites, we found the grave of a Robert Donald from Banchory Devenick, which is a small parish just outside Aberdeen. We thought that that was the grave of my husband's great-uncle. However, my sister-in-law, who has his medals, insisted that it was not. Having consulted the wonderful staff at the Gordon Highlanders museum in Aberdeen, we believe that she is probably right.

I have visited the museum fairly frequently, including with the minister. My husband and I intend to take up the kind offer of the wonderful museum staff to find out more about the other young Robert Donald of the same name, from the same parish, whose grave we did not find; we also hope to revisit the area around Arras and find the grave.

From the Arras museum, I purchased the poppy brooch that I am wearing, which is a special reminder. I hope that, at some point, we can also go to north Africa, not least to see more of the work of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. The way that the graves of all the fallen are tended throughout many countries is truly spectacular. The combination of plants is magical, and the way that the planting is so uniform when viewed from every angle is amazing.

In the United Kingdom, the War Memorials Trust does the same sort of work. It recently sent us a brochure to set out the tireless work that it does to protect and enhance the war memorials in the UK from the ravages of time and sometimes, regrettably, from vandalism, which is why the trust's other objective of highlighting public engagement is so important.

The debate is about remembrance. Time does not permit me to talk about our veterans and the need to look after those who survive war, who have often witnessed horrendous situations and are living with severe consequences. However, as

other members have noted, we will have an opportunity to discuss a strategy for veterans in the chamber next week, and I look forward to contributing to that debate.

16:04

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): On Sunday in Whitehall, the cenotaph, 100 years on from its unveiling by King George V in 1920, was once again the focus of the nation's annual remembrance. The monument's simplicity and grace, as well as the poignancy of the tomb of the unknown warrior, which was attended by Her Majesty the Queen just a few days ago, are, together, the most powerful symbols of our remembrance.

There may have been fewer wreaths this year, fewer veterans on parade and fewer opportunities for members of the public to pay their respects, but nothing can ever dim the memory of all those who gave their lives so that we can enjoy our freedom, or the nation's determination to remember them. As the years pass, so too do anniversaries of our war history, but the significance of our acts of remembrance only grows.

Those acts of remembrance, small or large, private or public, are part of the very being of this nation, and rightly so. They demand our gratitude for all those who made the ultimate sacrifice, but should also make us think about our past and about what we have to do to build a better future, because that is the real legacy that those who did not come home would want.

For all the stench and hell of war, so vividly encapsulated in many of the poems written by Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon in 1917, as they convalesced in Craiglockhart hospital in this great city, there is an obligation upon us all to reflect and, perhaps especially as politicians, to learn the lessons of the past, so that those who did make the ultimate sacrifice did not do so in vain. Their loyalty, their dedication and their unflinching sense of duty should not be treasured because of any glorification of war, but because those attributes are those on which we can build a better future.

The poppy, our annual personal symbol of remembrance worn on the left side, across our hearts, and representing all those battlefields in Flanders where once the guns and shells exploded, is a reminder of the peace that we seek in our world. Poppies matter so much because they are the life-blood of the Royal British Legion and therefore the life-blood of all the care that the legion provides for our veterans and their families, who need our assistance every day of the year,

whether that means helping them to address the physical or the psychological scars of battle.

In normal times, 30 per cent of the income of the Royal British Legion comes from poppy sales, but this year that income has, of necessity, been badly affected. It has therefore been really good to see the extraordinary efforts to which so many communities have gone in thinking of additional ways to support the poppy appeal, with many showing exactly the same dogged spirit that we have seen throughout those communities to support those who have become so vulnerable to Covid-19. It is particularly good to see how many young people have been involved and the lengths to which so many schools have gone, despite all the challenges that they face, to help children understand and remember.

On a personal level, raising money for Poppyscotland is part of my own small contribution, but it also helps me to remember my father, a corporal who served in the RAF in the dark days of the Mediterranean battle in Malta. Unlike so many men in his air squadron and in the ground crews in Luqa, he came home from the war, but not without many difficult memories that stayed with him for all the time that he lived.

When the Parliament commemorated the centenary of the Royal Air Force not long ago, I recalled that one of the most visited exhibits in the war museum in Valletta is a Gloster Gladiator biplane known as Faith, the sole survivor of the trio of biplanes, Faith, Hope and Charity, whose pilots, single-handedly and against all the odds, defended the tiny island of Malta before the full onslaught of the Luftwaffe. For my father, those aeroplanes symbolised not only the ordeal of the RAF servicemen and the people of Malta, who stood courageously against the axis nations, especially when all looked lost, but also the human qualities that we need most as we each face the challenges of life. It is those human qualities that we commemorate now, and we thank the Royal British Legion for being the mainstay of our remembrance.

16:09

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I pay tribute to the servicemen and servicewomen from across Scotland, the UK, the Commonwealth and allied nations whose sacrifices were instrumental in guaranteeing the peace and freedom that we enjoy today. I thank the Scottish Government for securing the debate. I was particularly pleased at the earlier mention of my Largs constituent Jack Ransom.

The armistice between the allies and Germany was signed on 11 November 1918, and ended hostilities in the great war, as it was then known—

the war to end all wars. Its anniversary has focused our appreciation of those who made the ultimate sacrifice.

We remember those who served in all conflicts. For my family, the great war had the biggest impact. My maternal grandfather was only 18 when he was mustard gassed a month before the end of the war. He never fully recovered, and died at 41 of emphysema, leaving a widow and two daughters aged 18 months and three months.

My paternal grandfather lied about his age to join up at 15, and served at Gallipoli and in Flanders. Sent home at 17, he missed Passchendaele before being recalled on his 18th birthday. He survived physically unscathed; however, two grand uncles died at the Somme. Another, who was captured at 19, was sent to the Silesian salt mines. Hit by a guard's shovel, he died as a result of those injuries in 1921, aged only 23. His name appears on no war memorial.

With Scotland suffering almost 19 per cent of the UK's great war casualties, no doubt each of our families has been shaped by that and subsequent conflicts. When the treaty of Versailles officially ended the war in June 1919, it understandably led to an outbreak of joy and the spontaneous organisation of victory parades across Scotland and Great Britain. However, having witnessed so much destruction and misery, many ex-servicemen and women refused to participate, believing the act of remembrance should be commemorative rather than triumphant. The events that took place on 11 November 1919 reflected that sentiment, and many traditions that were formed on that first remembrance day, such as the 11 am two minutes' silence, still take place.

Sadly, our traditional remembrance Sunday, including wreath laying at the Scottish national war memorial at Edinburgh castle and across Scotland, had to be scaled back this year due to the on-going coronavirus pandemic. However, many local commemorations, such as the remembrance Sunday service at Kilbirnie auld kirk, which I have participated in every year since 2006, took place in line with current guidance in places of worship. I subsequently laid my wreath at Kilbirnie war memorial, as I do every year. I therefore extend my gratitude to innovative organisers across Scotland who made huge efforts to ensure that commemorations took place, either virtually or physically.

One important tradition that is unaffected by the pandemic is wearing a poppy. Poppies were first worn in the early 1920s after Earl Haig noticed French widows selling silk poppies to raise money for disabled ex-servicemen. Haig recognised the symbolic significance of poppies as a means to support the welfare of ex-servicemen and women, and more than 9 million poppies were sold prior to

remembrance day 1921. The funds raised were used to help veterans to return to civilian life, as many were frequently confronted with unemployment, financial ruin and homelessness, while struggling with injuries and the psychological trauma resulting from the horrors that they witnessed on the front line. Since 1921, the Scottish poppy appeal has raised tens of millions of pounds to help veterans and their families.

Sadly, veterans today still face many challenges when returning to civilian life. The most common include unemployment, education and skills issues, debt, health issues and challenges in making a home. The sacrifices that are made by veterans often create unique difficulties that require support that is different from that offered to the civilian population.

I commend the incredible work that is done by Poppyscotland in partnership with Legion Scotland. Together, they raised £2.95 million through the poppy appeal last year, backed by the Scottish Government. Those funds are absolutely vital in delivering life-changing services that make a real difference to Scotland's armed forces community. That includes working with specialist partners such as the Scottish Association for Mental Health, Veterans First Point or Combat Stress, each of which provides a wide range of practical support and mental health services to ensure that veterans and their families enjoy the highest possible quality of life. The Scottish Men's Sheds Association also plays a positive role.

It is our duty to both remember those who made the ultimate sacrifice and appreciate our living veterans by continuing to support them in any struggles that they might face after their service to the country.

16:13

Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab): Thank you, Presiding Officer, for the opportunity to speak today. I thank Graeme Dey for bringing this important debate to the chamber.

Freedom is a gift, as many generations have acknowledged during the year 2020. Watching the remembrance service on television made me reflect that the global pandemic has removed the opportunity for our veterans, young and old, to visibly honour and recognise the fallen and those injured in service of their country. The restrictions on gathering together to remember our veterans made Sunday a difficult day for many. However, we must continue to prioritise suppressing the virus to save lives, and I applaud the people who stood at their doorsteps on Sunday.

How we support our veterans is a measure of our remembrance. I pay tribute to charities such as Legion Scotland, Poppyscotland and Erskine,

which I have the privilege of representing in my region. I applaud them for the way in which they have adapted during the pandemic and continue to deliver the highest possible standard of support to our veterans.

Scottish Labour welcomes the funding from the Scottish Government to unforgotten forces, a consortium of armed forces and civilian charities working to boost the health and wellbeing of older veterans in Scotland. However, it should be noted that not all veterans charities receive such a level of funding, and that funding will become a major issue as the pandemic continues and charities deal with increased pressure on resources and decreasing revenue streams.

In 2018, the poppy appeal across the UK raised a record £55 million, distributing 40 million poppies and 7 million pin badges. However, organisers state that they are bracing themselves for a greatly reduced collection this year because of the impact of the pandemic. The number of volunteers who are normally out in public, rattling collection boxes and selling poppies, has fallen sharply, because many are shielding or self-isolating.

I highlight some of the key workers who have tried to keep some sort of normality for our veterans throughout the pandemic. One of them is Allana Kerr, who lives in my region and who works for the Coming Home Centre, a Glasgow-based charity that supports 400 registered veterans. Since March of this year, with the assistance of David Gibson from Fares4Free, it has distributed weekly food packages to 120 families in the west coast of Scotland. Coming Home works with veterans at the point when they need assistance with issues of mental and physical health, homelessness and housing, and when they need benefits advice, employment, training and, most importantly, friendship and camaraderie. Its support is crucial to the veterans that it helps.

Housing is a key issue for veterans, especially for those who have been dependent on military-provided accommodation. Shelter Scotland tells us that veterans are more prone to homelessness than non-veterans, and we must ensure that all veterans, and in particular our older veterans, can rely on safe, good-quality and affordable housing.

Many of our veterans bring long-term conditions back home with them. It is crucial that we provide economic and social support for vulnerable veterans who are suffering from PTSD and other debilitating conditions, and that we give our veterans the support that they need to take part in further education and training. We must continue to ensure that veterans' specific needs are supported for the duration of the pandemic and beyond, taking account of the barriers that they face, particularly in relation to their mental and physical health and in accessing and retaining

housing. Long-term support is crucial for our serving and ex-service personnel who are experiencing mental health problems such as PTSD, depression, anxiety and alcohol misuse, and for those who experience concern, stress or isolation.

I put on record my support to all our service personnel, who continue to give so much for us all.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): I have two things to mention quickly, before we move on to Sandra White. First, I remind all members that speeches should be limited to four minutes, as we are already running short of time. Secondly, I ask all those who wish to speak to make sure that their cards are in the slot and that they have pressed the button.

16:19

Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): I will keep my eye on the clock, Presiding Officer.

Others have already mentioned that this remembrance day has been very different from any other. As we know, many events have been held online. Some people stood on their front doorsteps, and individuals paid their respects in their own simple ways. I thank them all for contributing and for doing that.

I want to start by quoting Keith Brown, the previous veterans minister—I hope that he will forgive me—who said something that encapsulates this debate. He said:

“We have a responsibility to learn from the lessons of the past, and Remembrance Sunday should be a solemn, dignified occasion when we commit ourselves to ensuring that our own and future generations are spared the horrors of war. A century on from the devastation of the First World War, which left barely a community or single family untouched by tragedy and loss, it remains as important as ever that we come together across Scotland to commemorate those lost in all conflicts, past and present.”

We need to remember all conflicts.

The reason why I raised that and wanted to speak in the debate is that, in my constituency, the University of Glasgow undertook a first world war project to commemorate every member of the university community who died in the war, regardless of the side on which they fought. The project was launched on 25 September 2014, which was the anniversary of the first war death of the university’s community—that of Harry Sherwood Ranken, Glasgow-born recipient of the Victoria Cross, which was awarded posthumously, after he died from his wounds. The university’s great war project to remember every member who had lost their life officially ended on 3 March 2020, with the final commemoration service.

The University of Glasgow sacrificed a significant proportion of its members to the great

war. More than 4,500 members served in the first world war, and 781 lost their lives. In acknowledgment and tribute, a memorial garden for the great war was planted. The garden was designed by William Bell, a gardener in the estates and buildings department, in time for remembrance Sunday—I am sure that some members are familiar with it. The colours that he selected were red to represent conflict, white to represent peace, and pink to represent hope.

The university chaplain, the Rev Dr Carolyn Kelly, said:

“the fortitude and courage of those we commemorate who faced life—and death—in the world wars and in conflicts since is an inspiring example to our communities grappling with the painful realities of this pandemic. During recent months, subsequent generations have perhaps gained greater insight into the hardships faced by those who lived through the hostilities and beyond. Perhaps we better appreciate what it meant to lose customary freedoms, to defer celebrations, to grieve loved ones’ distance or untimely death. Thus, we will remember them.”

Thank you.

16:23

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): It is a great privilege to speak in this debate.

As other members have said, it was a very different remembrance Sunday this year, and that was right. Covid-19 has had an impact on every aspect of our lives since March, and Sunday was no exception. It would not have been right or, indeed, respectful to have had the usual full gatherings and services at memorials up and down the country.

However, it is as important as ever that we remember those who sacrificed their today for our tomorrow. Indeed, in some respects, remembering them was even more poignant this year. The pandemic is the most challenging global event that we have experienced since the wars and, just as happened during the wars, we have witnessed people stepping up to the front line to protect us, including health workers, emergency services workers, supermarket workers and many other key workers, as well as members of the armed services, of course, who continue to play a key role in our fight against Covid, for example at testing sites.

This year has given us an opportunity to find other ways to remember. I thank the Rev Dave Slater of Gartcosh and Glenboig parish churches for his invitation to participate in a virtual service, which involved me attending at both war memorials to lay a wreath on the Saturday and recording that on video, with the recording forming part of the service that was aired the next day. I

thought that that was a very good way to mark the day.

There were some fitting tributes at both memorials from local schools, the Boys Brigade and others, through which the community still showed its appreciation and remembrance. I know that there were many other examples of that throughout Scotland and the rest of the UK, but I thank North Lanarkshire Council for ensuring that there was someone to lay a wreath at the major memorials across the council area. Examples of that could be seen on Twitter and Facebook later in the day; sometimes just one person—a councillor or an official—laid a wreath. Tomorrow—armistice day—I will lay a wreath at the cenotaph in Coatbridge on behalf of all my constituents.

Since being elected, I have had to condemn vandalising of that memorial on numerous occasions. I take the opportunity to reiterate the plea not to vandalise it. I ask people not to do it any year, but especially not this year, when we have all had enough. I will not labour the point, because the most recent incident of vandalism took place more than a year ago.

On a much more positive note, in thinking about innovative ways to remember, I want to take the opportunity, as I did in Tom Arthur's members' business debate last year, to pay tribute to three local men—Les Jenkins, Steven Buick and John McCann—for their incredible work to commemorate those who are remembered on the Coatbridge cenotaph. Mr Jenkins, who was a history teacher at Coatbridge high school, worked on the programme of the war memorial for more than 35 years. He might not like this, but that will have included the time when I was at the school and was one of his pupils. He completed that work in the centenary year and has compiled the stories of all 863 first world war fallen who are remembered on the Coatbridge cenotaph. Those stories are now in a series of folders that are available at Airdrie library.

John McCann and Steven Buick have worked together to create a website, which is a culmination of more than a decade of research by John, who travelled across Europe to piece together scraps of information that was recorded about the brave fighting men from Coatbridge who lost their lives during the great war. At the time of the debate last year, the website had received more than 54,000 views and had the support of the families of the fallen.

Those projects were started well before Covid-19 and were completed, relatively speaking, just before it, but they are examples of incredible work that will have brought comfort to so many this year, when we have had to remember in a very different way.

16:27

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife)

(Con): I am pleased to take part in today's debate, and I thank the minister, Graeme Dey, for raising this important issue in the chamber.

It is often easy to take the freedoms that we have for granted. This year, however, we have been confronted with the stark reality of what has happened, which has curtailed many of our freedoms. We have all faced restrictions on what we can do, who we can meet and where we can go. Although those restrictions, while we seek to tackle the coronavirus, are temporary and for good reasons, they give us an idea of what it might have been like if we had lost those freedoms for ever.

Brave men and women fought to protect our freedoms in the world wars and in conflicts since. Their sacrifice and selflessness ensured our freedoms—freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of association and freedom of religion—all of which we take for granted. Without their incredible efforts, our freedoms would have been very much curtailed.

Remembrance is a small, simple act, but one that is incredibly important, as we reflect on the veterans who have made a huge contribution to our society. As the motion and members across the chamber have acknowledged, the coronavirus has had a massive impact on our celebrations and commemorations this year. Sadly, social distancing has meant that communities the length and breadth of the country have not been able to do what they have done for many decades.

However, it is important that we stop and ensure that people remember. I thank Poppyscotland and Legion Scotland and acknowledge their efforts. Many churches, charities, councils, community groups and veterans organisations the length and breadth of Scotland worked hard to ensure that safe and socially distanced wreath laying could take place. I was glad that I was able to lay a wreath in Bridge of Allan and take part in the church service. Those acts of remembrance across the country are incredibly important.

Since I was first elected as a councillor back in 1999, I have had the opportunity to lay a wreath at the Polish war graves at Wellshill cemetery in my former council ward, and I was pleased to be able to do that this year. It reminds us of all the veterans from outside the Commonwealth who supported us and fought alongside our troops. It is vital that we remember the contribution that they made to ensure that we would have the liberties that we have today. We have already heard that anniversaries such as victory in Europe day and victory over Japan day that were supposed to be celebrated were not able to take place, but I hope that they will take place another time. I note that,

across Mid Scotland and Fife, much has been supported and many people have managed to participate.

In conclusion, I want to again pay tribute to the enormous contribution that our veterans have made at home and abroad to upholding the freedoms that we hold so dear. It is heartening to know that, tomorrow, people from different backgrounds and across political divides will come together across the country to remember. It is so important that we have that act of remembrance.

Let us hope that, next year, we can unite in person as well and come together to support one another and support those individuals who made the ultimate sacrifice to ensure that we could enjoy the liberties that we have today.

16:31

Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): As we have heard, as a result of the global pandemic, we have had a very different remembrance Sunday this year to those that we have marked in previous years, but notwithstanding Covid-19, communities across Scotland have ensured that their respect was marked. In my constituency of Cowdenbeath, we witnessed commemoration in every community in some form or another. I will list the communities because their marking of respect is hugely important to them. There was commemoration in Aberdour, Dalgety Bay, Inverkeithing, North Queensferry, Hillend, Rosyth, Cowdenbeath, Hill of Beath, Crossgates, Coaledge, Lumphinnans, Lochgelly, Kelty, Benarty and Cardenden.

In each of those communities, community councils, local volunteers, Fife Council workers and of course the veterans charities Poppyscotland and Legion Scotland ensured that the war memorials were prepared and community spaces were tidied and that there was an organised structure in place to meet the needs of commemoration while adhering strictly to the coronavirus regulations, which are designed to keep us all safe. I express my heartfelt thanks to all those community councils, local volunteers, Fife Council workers, veterans organisations and of course, as Maureen Watt rightly said, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and the War Memorials Trust for all that they did this year and all that they do every year.

For my part, I laid Scottish Parliament wreaths on behalf of my constituents in my allotted time slot, not only at Cowdenbeath town hall but at the first world war memorial. I was struck, as I always am, when looking at the long list of the names of the fallen engraved on the memorial, by how young the men were who made the ultimate

sacrifice and how many were from the same families.

In this year, the year of the 75th anniversary of VE day and VJ day, my thoughts turn to my late uncle David Woodburn, the elder twin brother of my mother, for he had served in the far east and was held as a prisoner of war in the notorious Japanese POW camp at Changi in Singapore. Happily, he returned home to raise a family and pursued a successful career with the Forestry Commission in the north of Scotland.

There is no community across Fife, or indeed across Scotland, that has not been impacted by the losses of war, and not even a global pandemic has stopped the people of Scotland from sharing their experiences and showing their respect, albeit in a different manner to that in previous years.

Tomorrow is 11 November, which is another opportunity to mark our respect by observing the two minutes' silence at 11 am, for it was on the 11th day of the 11th month at the 11th hour that the armistice treaty of Compiègne was signed.

In marking the occasion, the writer and poet Thomas Hardy penned his poem, "And There Was a Great Calm". I will quote from its last stanza:

"Calm fell. From Heaven distilled a clemency;
There was peace on earth, and silence in the sky;
Some could, some could not, shake off misery:
The Sinister Spirit sneered: 'It had to be!
And again the Spirit of Pity whispered, 'Why?'"

16:35

Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): It is a privilege to be here and to speak in a debate of this kind. That privilege is, of course, entirely due to the sacrifices of hundreds of thousands of people who have gone before us to protect our freedom.

One of my hobbies is researching my family tree. I have been doing so for more than 50 years, so I am able to say that I have 38 relatives in my family tree who died in various conflicts. Every other member who has spoken will have similar numbers; they just have not done the research to find them all. Mine range from first cousins of my father, to great uncles and to someone as distant as a seventh cousin.

On the library shelf that is beside me I have a naval telescope from the first world war, which was one of my father's cousin's telescopes. He was with my father and the rest of the family on the Black Isle when the siren went to recall him back to Invergordon and his duty on the minesweeper that was based there. The minesweeper left port but never returned, because it collided with a mine and was blown up. That telescope is the tangible memory of that member of our family.

The Covid crisis has caused me, and many others, to do much more walking. Within the compass of the walks that I have been able to undertake from my home here in Banffshire I pass four war memorials. The closest is half a mile away, the next is about two miles away, and so on.

I also pass graveyards in which there are graves that are tended by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. During the debate, we have so far not heard any reference to its work. Around the world there are memorials to those who fell in the wars. Those memorials are maintained to the highest and most impeccable standards, and with the most fulsome and appropriate records kept in books that people can inspect at most of them.

It was quite a long time ago, in 1978, that I went to the most poignant one that I have ever visited. It was about 20 miles north of what was then called Rangoon, in Burma. There was a Commonwealth grave there. It was a huge cemetery, and every blade of grass was cut to exactly the same height. It was impeccably kept, and the contrast with the state of the Burmese country at that point—where I could get only a 48-hour visa and only one hotel in the country was working—could not have been more stark. The efforts made in that very difficult environment to respect our war dead were extremely impressive indeed.

My ancestors and relatives fell at the Somme, Passchendaele, Ypres, Flanders, Normandy and around the world.

We have talked about all the men who fell, but there are also women on war memorials, although rather fewer. I would like to remember in particular the women who served as agents in enemy-occupied Europe. Because they were solitary, they made an even greater sacrifice than many who fell on our battlefields. It is a time to remember and a time for gratitude.

16:40

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): Labour supports the Government's motion and we appreciate the importance of honouring those who made the ultimate sacrifice. The way we did so was different this year and we applaud those people who stood at their doorsteps on Sunday, laid wreaths at war memorials or went to church to remember those who had fallen. Right across Scotland, people marked the fact that we should honour those who paid the ultimate sacrifice. The restrictions on gathering together to remember our war dead made Sunday very difficult for many. However, we agree that we must continue to prioritise suppressing the virus and saving lives.

That said, this year's remembrance was particularly poignant, coming as it did with the

world's eyes focused on the election in America. The American election had its largest turnout ever, which is a vote of confidence for democracy. It is always worth reminding ourselves that, if it had not been for those who gave their lives in the world wars and those who suffered so much, there would be no democracy. We owe a debt to the people who gave so much so that we can live in a democracy.

I also want to mention those who lost their lives in recent conflicts. Last year, I lodged a motion in Parliament that named every person from Scotland who had lost their life in the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts. Today I think of their families—the mums and dads, the wives and the sons and daughters—for their grief is still very raw and their loss unimaginable.

We salute the work of charities in their support for veterans, but we have to accept that, if the state asks people to go to war, it must bear the responsibility of addressing the sacrifices made by soldiers and ensure that they are looked after when they come home. That is particularly the case this year, when many charities, such as Help for Heroes, are struggling with the strain on their resources that has been brought about by the pandemic. On remembrance Sunday, it is important to remember those who died, but it is equally important in debates such as this one to remember those who lived and who need our help and support now.

Many people who have fought for their country come back with long-term conditions. We need to provide top-class economic and social support for vulnerable veterans who are suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and other debilitating conditions. The Government has acknowledged areas for improvement under key themes, including employment, education and skills, finance and debt, health and wellbeing and making a home in civilian society.

We need to have better collection and use of data to identify and address veterans' needs and to increase public recognition of the positive contribution that veterans make to wider society. Labour also wants to see more support for serving and ex-service personnel experiencing mental health problems, such as PTSD, depression and anxiety disorders, and alcohol misuse. There needs to be earlier identification as found in a new review that was commissioned by the Forces in Mind Trust and conducted by the National Centre for Social Research. There also needs to be further support for older veterans through the delivery of services and enhancements in areas such as advice, access to healthcare, social isolation and respite, along with creative activities and events for those in care settings.

We also need more support for veterans who are experiencing concerns, stress or isolation as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. Housing is a key issue for veterans, especially for those who have been dependent on military-provided accommodation. As Mary Fee said, Shelter Scotland has said that veterans are more prone to homelessness than non-veterans and that veterans in Scotland are 10 per cent more likely to become homeless than those in England.

We have come here today to remember those who paid the ultimate price. Speeches are one thing, but action is required. I look forward to the Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans making his report next week, and then we can perhaps pick up some more of those issues.

16:45

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands)

(Con): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests, in that I am officially a veteran. I have to say that that term makes me feel very old, which, according to my children, of course, I am. Knowing that, I prefer to call myself an ex-soldier. I was the third generation of my family to serve in the armed services, and my son is the fourth.

This past weekend felt very odd, as there was no formal parade to go to. Along with many ex-servicemen and ex-servicewomen, I wondered whether standing on our doorsteps would be the same as standing shoulder to shoulder with our colleagues. Obviously, it was not, but it allowed each of us to think about what the day really meant. It is not, as some people wrongly suggest, about celebrating or glorifying war; it is about remembering those who have answered the call and have often given their all to protect the very freedoms that we take for granted daily. We must cherish the freedoms that we have and never forget that they have been gained by the sacrifices of many.

I think that I, like most other service personnel, can confidently say that I hope that we will be able to take part in community remembrance services next year. I say that for the simple reason that I do not want only to remember those who gave their all; I also want to rekindle the friendships that I have with those who have shared experiences.

I want to mention an event that happened on Sunday. While laying my wreath, I met a young lady who was wearing a relative's medals. I chatted to her and discovered that they were her grandfather's medals, which, incidentally, were awarded during the time that I served. I said how important it was that she was wearing them, because we all owe her grandfather so much. As I left, her father turned to her and asked her

whether she was now happy that she had worn them, and I heard her say that she was. It is right that she was, because we need to recognise that, while we have laid sleeping in our beds at night, there are those who have watched over us to make sure that the peace that we cherish continues.

I want to take a moment to pay tribute to the residents in Grantown who created not only a remembrance cairn of painted stones but a special type of poppy—a poppy that was fashioned from the bottom of a plastic bottle, which, when shaped and painted, looks remarkably like a poppy. It was those poppies that were laid out in the town centre to show all those who had given their lives in wars.

In the short time that I have, it is very difficult to comment on the 15 contributions that have been made, but I will try to pick out some of the salient points that tie them all together. First, we heard from the minister about the contribution of Legion Scotland and Poppyscotland, which are so important in protecting and helping our veterans. We heard from Maurice Corry about how important it is to remember that the scars of war are not always visible; there are also real mental problems. He also talked about the importance of the families who are left behind. They have to pick up the pieces when things go wrong.

David Stewart told us that all of us have a connection, somewhere in our history, to the armed services. Mike Rumbles told us that his father-in-law met a German who recognised him as a liberator. We heard from Maureen Watt that veterans often do not talk about the things that they have been through. Frankly, it is sometimes too hard. That is a common theme that I hear.

I was interested in Liz Smith's contribution about Malta. There is an island that struggled. She told us about an aeroplane, and I note that Roald Dahl described that aeroplane by saying that, if a

"clever man"

set out

"to build a big thing that will burn better and quicker than anything else in the world",

it would be a Gloster Gladiator. Who would be brave enough to get into one of those flying machines, which burned so quickly that there was little chance of getting out?

We heard from Kenneth Gibson, who said that many young soldiers in the first world war had joined up having lied about their age. That was because they had a feeling of commitment. We also heard from Mary Fee, who said that the support that we give our veterans is an act of remembrance in itself.

Fulton MacGregor and Sandra White said that we must learn from the past, and Fulton MacGregor made an important point when he talked about the importance of involving local schools in events. Alexander Stewart stressed the importance of never taking anything for granted.

I want to pick up on something that both Annabelle Ewing and Stewart Stevenson mentioned, which is the importance of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. What an important organisation that is. It strives not only to ensure that we bury all the soldiers who are now continually being exposed in France but to look after the graves of those who were found after the war and buried in graves that were similar, not depending on rank or status.

At 11 o'clock tomorrow, the nation will fall silent as we remember those who gave their all for the freedoms that we cherish. I encourage everyone to stop, reflect and give thanks, because what we remember is encapsulated in my mind in chapter 15, verse 13 of the gospel of St John:

"Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends."

It is their sacrifice that we will remember tomorrow. Let us hope that, next year, we will all be able to stand together in national remembrance at the war memorials across Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Graeme Dey to conclude the debate.

16:52

Graeme Dey: I thank members for their contributions. Some really valuable points were raised, and I will begin by drawing some of them together.

Maurice Corry, Edward Mountain and others reflected on how different remembrance has been, out of necessity, this year. However, Maurice Corry noted that he has still been able to lay a wreath locally and visit the national garden of remembrance here, in Edinburgh. I managed to do the same thing. I laid a wreath at the garden on behalf of the Scottish Government privately, rather than with the usual formal ceremony, and I did not feel that it was less valuable because of that.

Maureen Watt and Mary Fee welcomed the scheduling of the debate. In proposing it to the Parliamentary Bureau, I felt that it was the least that we could do in the light of the special circumstances that we find ourselves in this year. However, I think that the Parliament would agree that future business managers might want to make this a feature of the parliamentary timetable, because the contributions that we have heard today and their volume have shown how valued it has been.

We heard very thoughtful and moving speeches from Mike Rumbles, Sandra White and Liz Smith. Liz Smith noted the threatened drop in income to be suffered by Poppyscotland in the appeal this year. I encourage everyone, even at this late stage, to donate and support the vital work that it does.

Kenny Gibson and Annabelle Ewing, among others, highlighted the extent to which families right across Scotland have, in one way or another, been impacted by war, and they were right to do so. Fulton MacGregor highlighted—as I did in opening the debate—local authorities' work in adapting the weekend commemorations. I again commend the councils for that work.

Mary Fee noted the work that has been done by the unforgotten forces consortium and charities before and during the pandemic. As the veterans minister, I was hugely impressed to learn of the projects that unforgotten forces has deployed the Scottish Government's funding to support. I can tell the chamber that, as recently as last week, I met—virtually—Poppyscotland and Veterans Scotland to discuss the financial and other challenges that the pandemic is posing for the charitable sector and the way in which the sector is responding to them.

Alex Rowley noted a number of things that we will, undoubtedly, cover in next week's veterans annual update.

On a much lighter note, Presiding Officer, I noted that you let Stewart Stevenson off with using a prop to illustrate his typically colourful contribution. It is truly amazing what members get away with these days when they are contributing virtually.

To be serious, I want to reflect further on the importance of the remembrance period in the present day. Tomorrow is the 101st anniversary of the first armistice day, which was 11 November 1919. Understandably, at that time, the focus was very much on the huge number of young men who never returned home from the first world war. In the century that has passed since then, the concept of remembrance has evolved and now encompasses a much broader range of individuals and events, which could not have been imagined at the time.

In my opening comments, I talked about some of the significant anniversaries that we have seen this year—in particular, the 75th anniversaries of VE Day and VJ Day and the 80th anniversary of St Valery. It is important, though, that we do not forget the huge range of other events that do not get the same level of attention or recognition because they could not compete with the magnitude of the tragedies unfolding on the battlefields.

I am speaking of events such as the Quintinshill rail disaster on 22 May 1915, which remains the UK's worst rail crash. More than 240 people died in a triple train pile-up at a siding near Gretna, 216 of whom were Royal Scots on their way to Liverpool to set off for Gallipoli. Then there was the loss of HMY Iolaire, which took the lives of 200 men as it smashed on the rocks within sight of their home port of Stornoway on new year's morning in 1919. How devastating the unspoken grief surrounding that would be—grief that has recently come more to the fore.

There are many stories of people who achieved remarkable things in the face of war. Not the least of those was Dr Elsie Inglis, who was more used to caring for new mothers in Edinburgh than for wounded soldiers. Despite the War Office telling her to

“go home and sit still”

when she offered her services, she recruited 1,500 women to go with her and set up front-line hospitals in France, Romania, Greece, Russia and Serbia, where she remains very much revered to this day.

The role of the merchant navy is often overlooked, despite the incredible bravery and resilience that it showed through, for example, the Arctic convoys transporting vital supplies.

The impact of war at home has been immense, and we should not forget the suffering of families at home, facing the future uncertain of what would become of their loved ones. For the war widows and other family members of those who did not come home, that suffering never ends.

Going back through history, we see that Scotland has always had a close link with its armed forces community, regardless of where those concerned originally hailed from. It is important to remember our links with the Commonwealth and the countless men and women from around the world who have fought and suffered alongside the people of the United Kingdom and Scotland.

Last year, I had the privilege of speaking at a commemoration of men of Force K6, which was the first element of the Indian army to be deployed in Europe during the second world war. Many of those men were at the evacuation of Dunkirk. It should go without saying that, had it not been for the 2.5 million men who volunteered for the Indian army during the second world war and the many millions of others from elsewhere around the Commonwealth, we, here in Scotland, would not enjoy the freedoms that we take for granted today. Their bravery and commitment contributed immensely to victory in 1945.

Remembrance is a time for reflection, and there should always be time within that to reflect on our personal links to the past, as we have heard today. I was particularly struck by David Stewart's speech, which reminded us of how difficult this time of year must be for many veterans, when they are prompted to recall comrades who were lost in past conflicts. That cannot be easy.

Armistice day and the remembrance period more broadly serve a vital purpose in allowing everyone in Scotland a moment to pause, reflect and be thankful to those who made the ultimate sacrifice, be that in either of the two world wars, in Korea, in Afghanistan, in Iraq or anywhere else. It is important that we continue to remember those who served and lost their lives in all conflicts, not to glorify war but to recognise the sacrifice made, which in many cases protected the freedoms that we enjoy today.

I again note my thanks to members for their contributions. To have had 15 or so members take part in the debate speaks volumes about the importance that the Scottish Parliament places on the remembrance period. I hope that we will have similar opportunities to commemorate it in years to come.

Business Motion

17:00

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S5M-23308, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a change to tomorrow's business. I invite Graeme Dey to move the motion.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees to the following revisions to the programme of business on Wednesday 11 November 2020—

after

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:
Finance;
Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform

insert

followed by Ministerial Statement: Universities and Colleges: Supporting Students to Return Home Safely at the End of Term

delete

5.10 pm Decision Time

and insert

5.40 pm Decision Time.—[*Graeme Dey*]

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

17:00

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): There is one question to be put as a result of today's business. The question is, that motion S5M-23291, in the name of Graeme Dey, on remembrance commemorations, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament recognises the impact that the coronavirus pandemic has had on planned commemorative events throughout the year, including Remembrance Sunday and significant milestones, such as the 75th anniversaries of Victory in Europe and Victory over Japan; acknowledges the fantastic efforts of veterans' charities, such as Legion Scotland and Poppyscotland, local authorities and local communities in adapting to ensure that commemorative events have been able to proceed safely in some form throughout the pandemic, and pays tribute to the sacrifices of those individuals from across Scotland and the UK, the Commonwealth and our Allied Nations, which ensured the peace and freedoms we enjoy today, as well as the contribution that the Armed Forces community continues to make to communities throughout Scotland, ahead of Armistice Day on 11 November 2020.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time. We will move on to a members' business debate shortly. I remind members that social distancing measures are in place in the chamber and across the Holyrood campus, so please take care to observe them when you are leaving the chamber.

World Stroke Day and Stroke Care (Covid-19)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): The final item of business today is a members' business debate on motion S5M-22992, in the name of Alexander Stewart, on world stroke day and stroke care in Scotland during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament recognises World Stroke Day, which is observed on 29 October each year to raise awareness of stroke and what can be done to tackle the condition; understands that stroke is a non-communicable disease that affects millions of people worldwide every year; believes that, although the COVID-19 pandemic has had a huge impact on everyone, the lives and recoveries of stroke survivors in Mid Scotland and Fife, and across Scotland, have been particularly badly affected; recognises what it sees as the disparity in the levels of stroke care between NHS boards in Scotland; acknowledges the publication of the Stroke Association report, *Stroke recoveries at risk*, which highlights how much stroke survivors' lives and their recoveries have been affected, and notes the calls on the Scottish Government to make urgent progress on the stroke commitments that it made prior to the COVID-19 pandemic in its Programme for Government 2019-20, as well as on the establishment of a regular reporting mechanism to the Parliament on these commitments in order to track progress and ensure full transparency and accountability.

17:03

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am delighted to take part in tonight's members' business debate, and I thank members who have signed and supported the motion.

First, I pay tribute to and acknowledge world stroke day itself. Observed on 29 October each year, world stroke day raises awareness of stroke and of the contribution made by individuals who have suffered, and it is in that spirit that I once again bring this simple message to Parliament.

Back in June 2017, I secured a members' business debate on stroke care in Scotland. My speech at that time highlighted the sheer number of people in our country who experienced stroke annually and the efforts that were being made to look after and support those who survived. I highlighted the level of stroke care that existed in Scotland and the need for the provision of thrombectomy to improve. In my conclusions in that debate, I welcomed and acknowledged the work that had taken place to ensure that we had facilities to support victims and their families. The debate recognised the general optimism about ensuring that we had high-quality support for stroke nurses, with support systems and pathways in place to support individuals. We also noted the pragmatic approach of survivors towards recovery, wellbeing and aid in secondary prevention.

That previous debate took place nearly three and a half years ago but, since that time, despite all the good intentions that were echoed in the chamber by the then Minister for Public Health and Sport, not much has changed. Why is that? The same loyal constituents are still in touch with me, the same highly dedicated healthcare professionals contact me on a regular basis and I still work with the hard-working stroke charities across Scotland. The cross-party group on heart disease and stroke, which I co-convene, holds regular meetings.

I commend the stroke charities in Scotland—the Stroke Association and Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland—for their fantastic work and their contribution. I put on record my gratitude for the commitment of their fantastic staff. I mention, in particular, Colin Oliver of the Stroke Association and Katherine Byrne of Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland. They support the cross-party group, and they support individuals right across the country. Both charities have identified that stroke care in Scotland has been failing in key areas for some years, despite the best efforts of some truly extraordinary stroke specialists and staff across the country.

We know about the commitment to improve key areas, as announced by the Scottish Government back in September 2019. That work is welcome, especially given how stroke care has been massively impacted by Covid-19. We cannot blame Covid entirely, however, as many people call for. Back in 2017, promises were made and commitments were sought in the chamber, but, over the past three years, some of those commitments have not come to fruition.

I know that there have been major difficulties in supporting thrombectomy. As we have heard, many people have suffered—600 people across the country could have benefited from thrombectomy. The treatment is cost effective, and many people know about developments in that regard. I am delighted that there have been some reassurances recently at NHS Tayside, which has definitely helped with thrombectomy in that area, and things are beginning to move forward in other areas. I welcome that progress, although it has come too late for some people. Thrombectomy is cost effective, and we have all seen the quality of stroke care, as well as the awareness and understanding of what is happening. There is a postcode lottery, however, and we must recognise that. That simple action is not helping everybody, and more people may be becoming disabled because of a stroke. Every 10 minutes of delay in treatment, between arriving at a hospital and receiving clot-busting drugs, has been shown to take a month off a patient's life.

“Scottish Stroke Improvement Programme: 2020 National Report” on the NHS Scotland stroke improvement programme has shown that key targets in the assessment of vital stroke care were still being missed significantly in 2019, well before the pandemic started. Furthermore, the latest stroke care audit figures, which were published in September 2020, show that a third of stroke patients do not receive even the most basic level of care, which is known as the stroke care bundle. Stroke care-bundle compliance is 64 per cent across Scotland. Admittedly, that is a small improvement on the figure of 59 per cent in 2018, but overall compliance still remains far below the 80 per cent standard that has been set.

Many health boards have not managed to challenge that and ensure that the standard is reached. There have been some improvements in NHS Dumfries and Galloway, NHS Tayside, NHS Ayrshire and Arran and NHS Highland, but we have seen no statistically significant change or improvement in the other health boards. That has to change, because compliance ensures that people have the opportunity to get the support that they need.

We know that someone who lives in Scotland is more likely to have a stroke at an earlier age than someone who lives in another part of the United Kingdom, and we know that more people die from strokes in Scotland than in other parts of the UK. During the pandemic, access to rehabilitation has been limited or has stopped altogether for many individuals, who feel that they have gone backwards.

We are well aware that all those areas are devolved to the Scottish Government, so it is vital that we work together and embrace the opportunity to change the quality of stroke support, to ensure that individuals get the access and the support mechanisms that they rightfully require.

In conclusion, I support and echo the Stroke Association’s principles, and I call on the Scottish Government to continue to make urgent progress with the stroke commitments in its programme for government; to establish a regular reporting mechanism for all stroke conditions; and to ensure that the Parliament receives regular updates. Only regular progress updates will ensure that stroke care does not become lost in the midst of the current pandemic.

17:10

James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP): I thank my colleague Alexander Stewart for bringing this incredibly important debate to the chamber, and I thank Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland for its helpful briefing and for all the good work that it

does in keeping the dangers of stroke at the forefront of our thinking.

Stroke is a many-headed monster that attacks in so many different ways that it is almost impossible to prepare for. When it hits, it affects everyone differently. I will give three examples of how people have been affected by stroke and outline their different roads to recovery.

My partner Elaine had a stroke five years ago. You would never know it to look at her, except sometimes when she walks for too long, but she assures me that the long-term damage is still with her. She forgets things regularly and can be a bit unsteady at times, and we are still dealing with some of the other long-term issues. The good thing—if that is the right way to put it—is that she was young and fit enough to be able to get where she is today.

My mother had a stroke in February this year. She is older, and it is clear that recovery can be much more difficult for older people. In addition, we are living through Covid-19 and, despite the care and attention that my mother gets, she lacks some of the on-going physical and emotional support responses that may otherwise have helped her to recover more speedily.

The last example is a friend of mine named Paul. He had a stroke a month ago, with all the usual recognisable symptoms such as paralysis down the left side and slurring. Paul is a writer and blogger, and he is also left-handed—within the first week of his hospitalisation, he started typing slowly with his right hand. He did all the physiotherapy that was asked of him, and he told me just this afternoon that he expects to get home on Friday, which is good news.

In all three cases, the early impact was one of fear: that they would not walk or talk properly again, and that life as they knew it was over. However, as the examples show, that is not always the case. All strokes have a different impact and the pace of improvement is different. Nonetheless, in experiencing that fear, those three people all have something in common.

Sadly, their experiences are not unique. Countless families have had their world turned upside down. The effect of stroke can be life changing, whether for the person who experiences the stroke or for family and friends, who often undertake unpaid caring duties.

In Scotland, stroke remains a leading cause of disability and is the third biggest killer. In 2018, in more than 3,800 deaths in Scotland, cerebrovascular disease, including stroke, was the underlying cause. However, there is some cause for tentative optimism. Over the past 10 years, the number of people dying from stroke in Scotland has decreased by more than 35 per cent.

According to the Stroke Association, there are almost 120,000 stroke survivors living in Scotland. As I have described, however, surviving stroke is one thing, but being able to live with the resulting health implications is another. All survivors deserve the best possible chance of living without disability or dependence after stroke.

That is why I welcome the Scottish Government's commitment, in its programme for government, to

"Introduce a high quality and clinically safe thrombectomy service in Scotland".

As Alexander Stewart said, thrombectomy delivers significant benefits for some patients who experience sudden onset of stroke, with significantly improved outcomes and a reduced level of disability. The new service, once it is established, will ensure that those who experience severe stroke receive the best possible care, thereby reducing their risk of long-term disability. Figures cited by Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland show that at least 600 people in Scotland per year would benefit from a thrombectomy. I am delighted that the Queen Elizabeth university hospital campus in Glasgow will provide a hub service for the west of Scotland by 2023.

Someone has a stroke every five minutes in the UK—it can happen to anyone of any age at any time. All members who are participating in the debate will share a desire to reduce further the number of deaths from stroke and improve treatment and care. At a time when Covid is understandably grabbing most of our attention, it is vital that we keep stroke on the agenda, and I thank Alexander Stewart again for affording us the opportunity to do so today.

17:15

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I thank my colleague Alexander Stewart for bringing this important debate to the chamber.

I have spoken about the subject before, but this year it is even more important given the extraordinary situation in which we find ourselves. Prior to the Covid pandemic, stroke care had been falling generally in Scotland. The Scottish Government made a commitment in 2019 to address that trend. Covid has exacerbated the issue.

The recent "Stroke recoveries at risk" report tells us about the impact of Covid-19 on stroke survivors and their carers in Scotland. More than half say that they have received less support from health and care services than usual. More than half reported that their therapy had been cancelled or postponed, and two thirds reported feeling more anxious or depressed. Of course, that is a general theme throughout the country, although those

concerns are exacerbated by conditions such as having had a stroke.

As members know, I speak a lot in the Parliament about the preventive health agenda, and stroke fits into that well. Scotland has a poor health report card and the impact of Covid on ill health highlights that. A person is more likely to have a poor result from Covid if they suffer from a condition such as having had a stroke. It is important that we tackle that.

As Alexander Stewart said, in Scotland a person is more likely to have a stroke than in any other part of the United Kingdom, they are more likely to have a stroke at a younger age—Scotland's average age is four years below that of the rest of the UK—they are more likely to die from a stroke, and Scotland has the largest percentage of population who are stroke survivors. We know the scale of the situation in which we find ourselves.

There are, however, some good practices out there that I will highlight. I have spoken before about the stroke physiotherapists in Kilmarnock, who have, with the help of a grant, taken it upon themselves to look at extending the care for stroke survivors beyond the six weeks that they get in hospital. They have taken that rehabilitation into the community and, as well as looking after stroke survivors, they treat a lot of other comorbidities. The group has highlighted to me that there are positive outcomes after strokes.

Prior to the stroke physiotherapists taking their service into the community, they told me that a lot of stroke victims sit at home feeling scared and worried about having another stroke. However, taking the service into the community through the cunning use of a cup of tea and a biscuit, which stroke patients can get to if they do a little bit of physical exercise, helps them to get back into the community and into the mainstream. For some, it can help them to get back to work. That is exactly what we want.

As I said, and as has been well rehearsed in the chamber, Covid has highlighted a major issue regarding the number of conditions that have been impacted by the restrictions that have been put in place. I was contacted by a constituent who said that they feel

"Let down by the system. There was no support at all for stroke survivors in the area. Everyone is having a challenging time just now, but the lives and recoveries of stroke survivors across Scotland have been particularly badly affected. We need you to stand up for us."

Their call to the Scottish Government is to make urgent progress on the stroke commitments that were made prior to the pandemic and to regularly report to the Parliament so that we all know what is going on. It is vital that people who have been affected by stroke are not forgotten due to the

Covid-19 pandemic. That is why I once again thank Alexander Stewart for bringing this important debate to the chamber and enabling us to highlight current issues.

17:19

David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):

I too thank Alexander Stewart for securing this evening's important debate and for the quality of his speech. It is crucial that we pay attention to the care of victims of strokes and that we be clear on the symptoms if we are to prevent some of the life-changing ordeals that individuals endure.

The excellent briefing provided by Chest, Heart & Stroke Scotland raised the issue that improvements to stroke care have stalled since Covid-19 arrived in the country, and that will be the sad story across many areas of health. Problems with access to support and rehabilitation because of delays to non-urgent and outpatient appointments have led stroke survivors to report that their recovery has not only stalled, but gone backwards.

The strong campaign on the alert message of FAST—face, arms, speech and time—has been a positive way to make communities aware of the signs of a stroke, and I hope that it has meant that more victims have been able to get help in time. It is now more critical than ever that we spread the message, as evidence suggests that Covid-19 increases the risk of blood clots and strokes.

As previous speakers have said, strokes are the third most common cause of death in Scotland and the most common cause of disability. That is why it is so important that we help to make more people aware of how to help, and also that we call for increased support, both through the national health service and through the important work that is being done by the third sector.

Again as we have heard from previous speakers, the chances of having a stroke are sadly higher in Scotland than in other parts of the United Kingdom. Strokes are also more likely in younger people, as the average age for having a stroke in Scotland is four years below that in the rest of the UK. People are more likely to die from a stroke in Scotland than in the rest of the UK, and Scotland has the largest percentage of population who are stroke survivors. Those are some pretty sobering facts.

It is estimated that the number of stroke survivors in Scotland will increase by a whopping 50 per cent over the next 20 years. It is vital that we put in the resources now to ensure that the NHS is able to support victims and families in the years to come.

We have also heard about the importance of thrombectomies, which are an innovative surgical technique that removes blood clots from arteries and veins. Some pioneering work has been done on that in NHS Tayside. Thrombectomy is not currently a national service but, as we have heard from previous speakers, it has been suggested that it will be rolled out to other parts of Scotland; that is crucial.

Alexander Stewart made a very important point when he mentioned the stroke care bundle. Its aims include reducing the risk of death from stroke; increasing the likelihood of people returning home to recover; quick admission to a stroke unit; and fast access to vital interventions such as brain scans, swallow screens and the administration of aspirin. The bundle was set a compliance target of 80 per cent across NHS health boards. Although compliance went from 59 per cent in 2018 to 64 per cent in 2019, it still fell significantly short of that target. It should be noted, however that four health boards improved their compliance, including my board, which is NHS Highland.

A joined-up approach by the NHS, social care services and charities is needed, to ease pressures on stroke services and staff so that the quality of stroke care can improve and so that community-based holistic support can be provided.

I thank the dedicated NHS staff who are working flat out in these trying and complicated times. I thank the charities and third sector organisations that dedicate their time to supporting this work, and I thank social care providers and community pharmacists and physiotherapists, who are all part of it. I thank the families and the thousands of unpaid carers who are giving their time, energy and love to those who need it through the trauma and the often lasting effects of strokes. Finally, I thank Alexander Stewart for taking the initiative to secure tonight's debate.

17:23

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): I, too, thank Alexander Stewart for securing this important debate and for raising the importance of strokes and world stroke day. I am pleased to support the motion.

Strokes have not stopped because of Covid, so we must ensure that stroke survivors have equity in stroke care during and after the pandemic. Each year in Scotland, 10,000 people have strokes. For survivors, the impacts can include speech and communication problems and physical disability. It can be devastating and, as others have said, the impact is not just on survivors, but on their carers, families and friends.

In Shetland, around 40 people a year have a stroke. In the past 15 years, the figure has come down from 55 a year. Two thirds of patients survive their stroke. Lifestyle changes and improved treatments have made an impact on the figures, as has the work of dedicated healthcare professionals across the country. I am thinking of professionals such as Dorothy Storey, who is a recently retired specialist stroke nurse. I pay tribute to Dorothy, whose dedication to the care of stroke survivors is well known in Shetland. She has also played an active part in Shetland Stroke Support Group. I wish her well in her retirement.

I recently met members of the Shetland Stroke Support Group—it was a virtual meeting, of course. They are a fantastic group of people who, under normal circumstances, have a busy schedule of get-togethers and outings to various parts of Shetland. They have missed those visits this year and are, like everyone else, having to adapt to the new normal. They have a strong networking bond and provide one another with much-needed support.

Such support is especially needed in island and rural areas, where it is not always easy to access treatment and support services. Services are centralised in Lerwick, so for a stroke survivor from the north isles of Shetland there can be a tiring journey to hospital—for example, for a physiotherapy session.

I have personal experience of the impact of stroke on a family. My mother was living in Aberdeen at the time of her stroke in 2004. I rushed to Aberdeen on the first flight that I could get from Shetland, but by the time I saw her in the accident and emergency department she had lost power down one side of her body and her speech was obviously affected. I am firmly of the belief that by the time the consultant came—eventually—to discuss her prognosis, the idea of her receiving any treatment had been dismissed, simply because of her age. She was 81. Even if she could have benefited from a thrombectomy, she would not have received one. “She’s had a long life”, said the consultant. That was true, but he did not know her spirit; he knew only her date of birth. She returned to Shetland to live in a care home, but the effects of the stroke caught up with her, and she spent a prolonged period in hospital until her death, aged 87. She was cared for by a wonderful dedicated team in the Ronas ward.

I use that experience to illustrate how far stroke treatment and care have come in the past 15 years. However, as the Stroke Association highlighted in its briefing for members, there is wide variation in the performance of NHS boards, and a patient’s outcome is dependent on where and when they have a stroke. I add my voice to the association’s call for a national thrombectomy

service that works, and for improvement in door-to-needle times. Please let us end the postcode lottery of stroke care in Scotland.

17:27

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I congratulate Alexander Stewart on securing valuable debating time on a matter that affects so many of us.

A stroke can happen to anyone, anywhere and at any time. Stroke is the most common cause of disability and the second most common cause of death worldwide. According to the World Stroke Organization, globally 14.5 million people have a stroke each year and, sadly, 5.5 million people die as a result, although research shows that almost all strokes can be prevented.

Here in Scotland, about 15,000 people have a stroke each year and hospital care for stroke patients accounts for 7 per cent of all NHS beds and 5 per cent of our NHS budget.

Despite the frequent occurrence of strokes, many people are unaware of the numerous and often life-changing challenges that are faced by patients who survive a stroke, which include communication difficulties, physical disability, changes in how they think and feel, and loss of employment, income and social contacts. It is fortunate that research has proved the effectiveness of organised specialist stroke care in improving outcomes.

However, in its report, “Stroke recoveries at risk”, the Stroke Association reported that almost all aspects of stroke treatment and care have been impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic is affecting the lives of stroke survivors and their families across all stages of their recovery, and in all countries of the United Kingdom. The association found that because of the Covid-induced severe pressure on the national health service, more than half of all stroke survivors in Scotland had had their therapy cancelled or postponed during lockdown. Other survivors’ stroke-related appointments were conducted over the phone or online to protect them from contracting Covid-19.

It is encouraging that people reported being reasonably satisfied with their virtual or phone appointments, although people felt that there was room for improvement. Some 58 per cent of stroke survivors in Scotland were satisfied with virtual methods of rehab and healthcare, compared with the UK average of 52 per cent. That underlines the innovation and dedication of our fantastic NHS workers, even in the most challenging of times. I also welcome the report’s finding that, compared with the UK average, a high percentage of stroke survivors in Scotland felt that they had been given

enough information about how lockdown guidance applied to them.

However, stroke survivors' mental health has, unfortunately, worsened significantly in Scotland and across the UK. Many survivors have reported feeling more stressed and depressed during lockdown, and carers are also feeling additional pressures. I therefore agree with the report's conclusion that

"Now is the time to deliver stroke improvements, from prevention through to long-term support."

It is encouraging that the Scottish Government continues to implement what is in "Stroke Improvement Plan", which reaffirmed stroke as a clinical priority for NHS Scotland. In the past decade, the number of people in Scotland who have died from stroke has decreased by a heartening 42 per cent. Although that progress makes me optimistic, we must continue to improve care and outcomes.

I therefore welcome the fact that, after the delay that has been induced by the coronavirus pandemic, a pilot thrombectomy service is due to launch at Ninewells hospital in Dundee. I also welcome the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport's announcement that similar services will be available in Edinburgh and Glasgow in 2021 and 2022 respectively. It must be our goal to have thrombectomy available for everyone who needs it by 2023. For that to be workable, a strong supporting framework also needs to be in place for all stroke patients before and after their stroke.

It is promising that the latest Scottish stroke care audit report showed a 5 per cent increase in stroke care-bundle compliance. That means that a growing number of hospitals and units now meet the standards of basic care that every stroke patient should receive when they arrive in hospital, including access to swallow testing, aspirin and brain scan.

However, the remaining variations in how stroke units and health boards meet those standards must now be addressed, as the Scottish Government continues to progress its ambitious 2019-2020 programme for government commitments.

I am confident that we will not only carry on reducing the number of deaths from stroke, but that we will make a positive difference to the lives of survivors and their carers, while easing the growing burden of stroke on our health and care system in the years ahead. I thank Alexander Stewart for bringing the debate to Parliament.

17:31

The Minister for Public Health, Sport and Wellbeing (Joe FitzPatrick): I am delighted to

respond to the debate on behalf of the Government. I thank Alexander Stewart for lodging the motion to secure the debate and members of all parties for their speeches.

Mr Stewart is absolutely right about the importance of raising awareness of stroke and I join him in his acknowledgement of world stroke day. I also wish to acknowledge the important findings of the "Stroke recoveries at risk" report published by the Stroke Association, which has been mentioned by several members. I fully agree that stroke has a significant impact on people across Scotland and that the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated that impact.

Stroke is the third most common cause of death in Scotland and the most common cause of severe physical disability among adults. The condition has a significant impact on NHS resources, accounting for approximately 5 per cent of total NHS costs. It has an even higher societal cost. The personal impact on people who experience a stroke and on their family members and friends is massive, as James Dornan and Beatrice Wishart outlined.

The Scottish Government is committed to ensuring that people who have had a stroke receive the best possible care, as quickly as possible, to enable them to live longer, healthier, and independent lives. To achieve that, we continue to implement our stroke improvement plan, which sets out our priorities for improving diagnosis, treatment and care for stroke. We also continue to support the Scottish stroke improvement programme. That enables us to ensure that NHS boards appropriately plan and deliver the high-quality, safe and effective stroke services that people in Scotland expect and deserve.

Significant progress has been made. As James Dornan said, the mortality rate for stroke has decreased by 35.2 per cent in the past 10 years and the number of new cases of cerebrovascular disease, which includes stroke, has fallen by 12 per cent over the same period. That shows that our plan for tackling stroke is delivering real improvements. However, we want to continue to make progress on that and we will do so.

David Stewart outlined the medical benefits of thrombectomy. As Alexander Stewart and others noted, the first step towards a national thrombectomy service for stroke patients was taken yesterday with the launch of a pilot for the north of Scotland in NHS Tayside. Kenneth Gibson outlined how that would be rolled out for the rest of Scotland. It is important that that life-saving procedure is available across Scotland.

I am also pleased to let the Parliament know that Professor Martin Dennis has been appointed as the chief medical officer's speciality adviser for

stroke care and that Dr Fiona Wright has been appointed as deputy speciality adviser for stroke. Both advisers are tasked with progressing the programme for government commitments to which members have referred.

Work is under way to review the current stroke care bundle and to scope out what a progressive stroke unit will look like. We are working closely with our third sector partners, Chest, Heart and Stroke Scotland, and the Stroke Association, across all our commitments on stroke. We are particularly grateful for their work with us to ensure that people with lived experience of stroke are closely involved as we make progress against those commitments.

Mr Stewart, Mr Dornan and others mentioned Covid-19. We are all too aware of the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic has had on all our lives. Some have faced the personal experience of ill health, some have lost a loved one and everyone has had to deal with the impact of restrictions and adapting to a very different way of life. Brian Whittle and Kenneth Gibson mentioned the "Stroke recoveries at risk" report, which details how the pandemic has affected every aspect of stroke treatment and care and has had a significant impact on people living with stroke.

The recent publication of the Public Health Scotland report on the underlying causes of excess deaths in Scotland during the Covid-19 pandemic by area deprivation, clearly shows us the impact that Covid has had on those living with underlying health conditions. I recognise that Mr Whittle has a particular interest in that area. It is important for us to fully understand the situation. That is why we are working with Public Health Scotland and National Records of Scotland on a programme of research to understand the wider impact of Covid-19 on Scotland's population.

Kenneth Gibson mentioned the "Stroke recoveries at risk" report's recommendations on access to mental health provision and support for carers. Those are important areas and the pandemic has had an impact on people's mental health and wellbeing. That impact is likely heightened for people who are living with, or caring for someone with, a long-term health condition, such as stroke. To respond to those challenges, the Scottish Government has worked with organisations from across Scotland to create a new online hub that provides a range of resources to help carers look after their physical and mental health. I encourage anyone concerned to look at that and the range of other support that is available.

I would like to conclude by acknowledging again that, despite progress over the past decade, stroke continues to have a significant impact on people in Scotland. Further to that, it is clear that

the Covid-19 pandemic has created pressure on healthcare services and affected service delivery in a variety of ways. That has undoubtedly had an impact on people living with stroke and on the services that provide diagnosis, treatment and care to those people.

The Scottish Government continues to learn from our experiences throughout the pandemic. Kenneth Gibson outlined some of the innovations that have been brought about because of the pandemic. Some of those may continue after the pandemic to improve people's experience, although perhaps they will be a bit less virtual and a bit more blended. However, the experience has been positive. We continue to support healthcare services to build on the new and innovative ways in which they have responded to the challenges during this time to remobilise services, which we hope will minimise future delays.

Alongside that, through our programme for government commitments, we continue to drive improvement in diagnosis, care, treatment and support for people with stroke, taking into account the legacy of Covid-19. By combining our efforts and working with partners, we can make a real difference to those living with stroke in Scotland. I look forward to continuing those constructive and productive discussions and to continuing our improvement of stroke outcomes in Scotland.

Meeting closed at 17:38.

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

Published in Edinburgh by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP

All documents are available on
the Scottish Parliament website at:

www.parliament.scot

Information on non-endorsed print suppliers
is available here:

www.parliament.scot/documents

For information on the Scottish Parliament contact
Public Information on:

Telephone: 0131 348 5000

Textphone: 0800 092 7100

Email: sp.info@parliament.scot



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba