



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

COVID-19 Committee

Wednesday 18 November 2020

Session 5



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COVID-19 COMMITTEE

21st Meeting 2020, Session 5

CONVENER

*Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)

*Maurice Corry (West Scotland) (Con)

*Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)

*Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)

*Shona Robison (Dundee City East) (SNP)

*Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Dr Liz Cameron OBE (Scottish Chambers of Commerce)

Matt Crilly (National Union of Students Scotland)

Professor Jason Leitch (Scottish Government)

Willie Macleod (UKHospitality)

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD) (Committee Substitute)

Michael Russell (Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, Europe and External Affairs)

Dr Maureen Sier (Interfaith Scotland)

Adam Stachura (Age Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Sigrid Robinson

LOCATION

Virtual Meeting

Scottish Parliament

COVID-19 Committee

Wednesday 18 November 2020

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:00]

Subordinate Legislation

Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Restrictions and Requirements) (Local Levels) (Scotland) Amendment (No 2) Regulations 2020 (SSI 2020/374)

The Convener (Donald Cameron): Good morning, and welcome to the 21st meeting of the Covid-19 Committee. We have received apologies from Beatrice Wishart MSP, who is attending another Parliamentary committee this morning. I welcome to the meeting Willie Rennie MSP, who is attending as substitute.

This morning's meeting will include two evidence sessions. We will take evidence from the Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, Europe and External Affairs on subordinate legislation until 10:30 am. I will then suspend the meeting for up to 15 minutes to allow a changeover of witnesses. The committee will then take evidence from stakeholders on the impact of possible restrictions during winter.

The first item on the agenda is evidence from the Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, Europe and External Affairs on the Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Restrictions and Requirements) (Local Levels) (Scotland) Amendment (No 2) Regulations 2020. The SSI gives effect to the restrictions that were announced by the First Minister last Tuesday, 10 November, which have now come into force.

The cabinet secretary is accompanied by Professor Jason Leitch, who is the national clinical director in the Scottish Government. I welcome you both to the meeting and invite the cabinet secretary to make a brief opening statement before we turn to opening questions.

The Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, Europe and External Affairs (Michael Russell): Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the regulations with the committee. As on previous occasions when I have appeared before the committee—which have been many and varied, I have to say—I am open to questions, as Jason Leitch will be, on issues that arise.

The regulations to be discussed formally today adjust the levels-based approach that is currently in place across Scotland. They modify some

restrictions and requirements for the different levels, and set out changes to the level that applies to three areas of Scotland. All other areas remain in the same level under the regulations. The areas that are affected are Fife Council, Angus Council, and Perth and Kinross Council local government areas. All of which moved to level three as a result of the regulations.

The Scottish Government made regulations by way of made affirmative procedure on 12 November, and the regulations came into force on 13 November. Of course, as the First Minister set out in Parliament yesterday, we will be making further changes to the levels that apply in certain areas of Scotland. We intend to bring in legalisation later this week to move areas from level 3 to level 4, as outlined in the First Minister's statement yesterday.

That is a basic explanation of what the regulations are about. However, committee members will want to reach more widely—I am sure of that.

The Convener: Thank you, cabinet secretary. I will turn to questions. The first is about anomalies in local authority areas. For example, rural areas with low transmission rates are being affected by urban areas with higher transmission rates. Has any decision been made about applying a more regional approach within local authority areas? I ask that with special regard to the Highlands and Islands and your constituency of Argyll and Bute, which is a potential example of such a situation.

Michael Russell: You and I are both very aware of that issue, particularly in Argyll and Bute. We are taking part in a discussion with the Islay resilience committee on Friday morning about that issue. In places like Islay and Mull, and in mainland areas of other local authorities, there will clearly be concerns—as there are in mainland areas of Argyll and Bute—about substantial differences in prevalence between areas. I will ask Jason Leitch to say a word or two about that, because we addressed it last time we were both at the committee.

However, although there remains a commitment to examine the matter, it is complex and complicated. There are issues of observance, information and unexpected outbreaks. There have been cases on Mull in recent weeks, and there are cases on Benbecula, which is in a level 1 area. I would like to see such changes, but I think that it is not currently possible to completely embrace and encompass them because of their complications. For example, there remain issues in relation to travel that are contentious even between local authority areas.

At present, the best opportunity for any area is for the whole area to come down through the

levels. However, I am still keen to see progress as we move forward, and I remain committed to achieving that.

Perhaps Jason Leitch would like to say a word or two about our approach. Issues of commonality, such as in use of medical services, also impinge on decisions; they are not simply about geography.

Professor Jason Leitch (Scottish Government): Thank you for having me back, convener. Good morning, everyone.

I want to underline two points, both of which Mr Russell has covered. One is the communal nature of our healthcare services. For example, for people on Arran, University hospital Crosshouse and the Queen Elizabeth university hospital would be used as the principal escalation hospitals. If those were busy with cases from Glasgow city, I am afraid that that would be a consequence of our needing intensive care units. Much of that work can be done in NHS Ayrshire and Arran, but as we escalate cases, we escalate numbers. For a child from Arran, escalation would be to one of the Ayrshire hospitals and then the Royal hospital for children in Glasgow—quite rightly, because that is where the high-level expertise is.

The other issue is, unfortunately, the nature of the infectious agent—how quickly the virus takes hold. Since we last met, there has been a significant outbreak on Arran. Because the island previously had almost no cases, in the restrictions that we are discussing, which were made a week or so ago, we could have decided not to put it on the same level as the rest of the Ayrshire and Arran NHS area. That would probably not have made any difference to that recent outbreak. However, that outbreak illustrates that one case becomes 13 cases then 40 cases before you can turn your head—it is so quick. That is why we are being cautious, but are not completely ignoring geography.

It has been quite a big step to go from national measures to local authority area measures. The number of conversations that we are now having with local authority leaders, officials and elected members is time consuming but justified, and are the right thing to do. To go down one more level would add complexity for which we are not ready.

The Convener: Thank you for that. My second and final question is about the efficacy of measures that have been in place for some time. It is probably more for Professor Leitch than for the cabinet secretary.

Many of the areas that were moved to level 4 yesterday, which were in level 3 last week, have had a ban on households mixing since 1 September, which is more than two and a half months ago. Hospitality restrictions have been in

place, in different forms, for around a month. In the light of the sustained high number of cases, have those measures been effective? I would also welcome your views on whether the level of public compliance has changed over the past few months.

Professor Leitch: That is the million dollar question to which the world wants an answer, and it is one that I am commonly asked. The second most common is, “Why can I do this but not that?” and the most common is, “Where is transmission happening?”

We can never be absolutely sure where transmission is happening. We can get themes from test and protect data, and the genomics helps us a little. From the fundamental science on the virus, we know that transmission happens when people come together—when a positive case meets a non-positive case. All the virus wants to do is jump from someone in whom it is already hosted to a new person in whom it is not. Every time people meet—at work, at play, at school or wherever else—that is possible, therefore trying to reduce such opportunities is the way forward.

That is why the lockdown worked, from 23 March in our country and in multiple other versions around the world. However, if we look at the data, we can see that it took eight weeks for us to get to very low numbers of cases, because it takes a long time for the virus to come out of the system and the numbers to go down.

On 9 October, I and my senior clinical colleagues published an evidence paper that said that the doubling time for positive cases of the virus was nine days. At that time we had around 1,000 cases per day. That meant that we would have had 2000 cases per day on 18 October and on 27 October, nine days later, we would have had 4000 cases per day. That did not happen. The population of Scotland stopped that happening.

What appears to have happened since—one cannot know such things when putting restrictions in place—is that the system that we created for the population, and the population’s compliance with that system, has got us to 1200 cases a day, with 40 to 60 deaths. That is roughly where we are, and it appears to be stubbornly stable. We appear not to have turned the corner, hence the advice and decisions of the past 24 hours.

That is hard. The science cannot know that X will lead to Y—it is not as simple as that. People should be hopeful because what they have done so far has worked, but it has just not worked quickly enough to get the misery of the virus over with. Too many people are dying because too many people are being infected.

The Convener: If the cabinet secretary does not want to add to that, I will move on to Monica Lennon.

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): I will ask about travel—the travel ban comes into effect this week—and households mixing.

Can the cabinet secretary and Professor Leitch say what data they have about compliance across the country? Are there areas—perhaps because of geography or because they are tourist destinations—where there is more travel? People have been asking me what has gone wrong in Lanarkshire and why we are going on to level 4. There is a perception that lots of people have been breaking the rules and going into each other's houses.

What are the facts? Are people travelling outwith their local authorities? To what extent are they mixing with other households?

Michael Russell: It will be helpful if Jason Leitch begins by addressing the science behind the travel regulations. I am happy to come in after that.

Professor Leitch: We cannot know for sure: we are not in everybody's house. I think that the vast majority of people in Lanarkshire and everywhere else are following the rules and doing a good job. There are people on the edge in every local authority area who are not following the rules. Interaction and transmission are happening; they must be, for us to be getting 1,200 new cases a day. Transmission does not just happen; it happens in places where people mix, including people's houses.

The restriction on travel is principally to stop people moving from areas of high risk to areas of low risk, whether it is a Greek island, Elgin or Somalia. We are trying to reduce transmission from high-risk areas to low-risk areas, and to stop low-risk people moving to high-risk areas, because the opportunities for the virus to spread increase if that happens. That is why the advice is to impose travel restrictions.

Michael Russell: I am happy to furnish the committee with the travel information that we have. We have information on the prevalence of car use and public transport use. That information indicates that travel has been rising from its low level in the first complete lockdown. Putting the travel restrictions in place is designed to make sure that travel is reduced. We want to see how much it is reduced by the level 3 restrictions, and by the level 4 ones.

If Monica Lennon would like it, I will ensure that the committee gets information on the travel detail that we have, which is reasonably comprehensive. I know that the committee will want to return to the

matter after we have seen the effects of the travel restrictions.

There is a lot of anecdotal evidence. I think that Monica Lennon is referring to people who say, "So and so is travelling from here to there." I have heard in my own area about people travelling so that they could go to a different area for a meal or something like that. It is important that we discourage that.

The First Minister addressed the issue of enforcement, which was raised by Donald Cameron yesterday during questions on the Covid-19 statement. As has been the case so far with the police, enforcement should be done sensitively and should observe the four Es—engage, explain, encourage, and enforce. However, in the end we must ensure that travel does not disrupt what we hope will be successful attempts to reduce prevalence of the virus.

09:15

Monica Lennon: That is very helpful, and I am sure that the committee appreciates the offer of further information.

Professor Leitch said that transmission happens where people come together. I will raise the issue of schools, because I became aware from a media report last night—it is just one example, but it concerns a lot of pupils—that 400 pupils from a high school in Glenrothes in Fife are self-isolating after a Covid outbreak there. There are 16 positive cases that include pupils and staff. The headteacher has said that half the school's pupils are currently attending school.

In big schools, potentially hundreds of households are mixing and coming into contact. The Parliament will have a debate on schools this afternoon, but every day and every week, the Government is studying patterns of behaviour and looking at the genomics and all the evidence. What is the latest picture on schools, given that we are seeing such outbreaks, and levels of disruption to young people's education such as the case in which 400 pupils from one school are having to stay at home?

Michael Russell: I will let Jason Leitch talk in more detail about the situation on the ground.

We have clearly tried to maintain as much normality in schooling as possible. That remains a key objective. Clearly, there are strong reasons for doing so—we are aware, not least, of criticism about disrupting young people's education, and of a range of issues to do with mental health and wellbeing, which are really important. Learning is at the top of the list, but there are other issues.

Maintaining education is extremely important, and we must do it safely and in a way that is

carefully monitored. We intend to do that and to ensure that normality in schooling is restored and sustained to the greatest possible degree. With your permission, convener, Jason Leitch will say what the situation is on the ground, and comment on the fact that there are, in young people, slight differences in prevalence and outcomes of the virus.

Professor Leitch: Partly as a result of the question about transmission possibilities in schools that Ms Lennon has asked, and which has been repeated by me and many others, Public Health Scotland has done a study of five to 17-year-olds. Again—I am so sorry to say it—we cannot tell where people caught the virus; that is simply not possible. However, if there is infection in five to 17-year-olds, that is a risk group.

Public Health Scotland will publish that information later today. I am not going to tell you the numbers in that study, but the number in that age group who have positive tests is proportionally small, compared to the rest of the population, as we see around the world. For young people, the virus is harder to catch and harder to spread, and they do not get as sick. We know that for sure. That is particularly the case for the very young—for people in primary school. It is a bit more difficult for those who are 16 or 17 and whose bodies are a bit more adult-like, and who cough and splutter as an adult—if you will forgive the shorthand.

Infection among teachers and staff roughly follows community transmission; one would expect that in a call centre, a school, a university or wherever. Therefore, of course, there will be adults who could spread the virus to other adults, so we have to be very careful about that. That is why we have put in place in schools mitigations that are as strong as possible.

However, the advisers and decision makers are combined in the effort to keep schools and early years settings open as much as possible, because school is a public health intervention. It is good for children, from a public health perspective and a learning perspective, to be in school. We did not like having to advise schools to close in the first few months of the pandemic.

The data will be kept up to date and, of course, we will follow it. I expect that as transmission rises, cases in schools will increase, too. That is inevitable; cases will rise everywhere. However, the best way to get school transmission down is to get population transmission down. As the number of cases falls—which we hope level 4 will do for us—school prevalence will fall along with community prevalence.

Monica Lennon: I appreciate that you are saying that you cannot tell exactly where people

catch the virus, but that means that we cannot fully rule out that it happens in schools, so there is a lot of public concern.

I have heard from both witnesses that compliance is high and that the public deserves praise for the sacrifices that it is making. Despite that, more than 2 million Scots are in level 4 protections or restrictions, or whatever way we want to look at that. What more needs to be done to get us out of the situation without completely wrecking the economy and without further harming people's mental health at this time of year? In these dull, dark days, people are struggling. Do you want to do more on test and protect? Do you consider that we have not done enough on that?

Michael Russell: I will start with what appears to be a truism but is a really important point. What is damaging the economy? What is damaging people's mental health? I absolutely accept Monica Lennon's point that the dark and wild days of November and December are very tough times, and it would be a foolish person who said that they were not affected by them, because everybody is. However, the virus is doing the damage, and it is the virus that we have to tackle. It is not the Government or the regulations but the virus that is the cause. Therefore all of us collectively have to take the necessary actions to suppress the virus, and, in time—we hope—to eliminate it. It is not an exact science—the First Minister has been very clear about that—but it is a process that is informed and driven by the work of clinicians and scientists, and judgment comes to bear at the final stage of making decisions.

The virus is what we have to defeat. That is the focus of our attention and what we are endeavouring to do. We are using the tools at our disposal with sensitivity. On every possible occasion—I think I have been before the committee 14 or 15 times—we are recognising the exceptional nature of what we are trying to do and being as accountable as we possibly can be for that. We are always questioning the actions that are being taken collectively and discussing them in that way as widely as possible. That is the task that we are engaged in and that we must follow through on—in the short term, in order to have a relaxation at Christmas and, in the longer term, in order to get us to the stage at which a vaccination programme will make the difference. Jason Leitch might want to give detail that is more scientific than that.

Professor Leitch: Actually, there is not a lot of science behind my answer. However, according to the World Health Organization, and to developed countries—I talk to many of them—the worst thing for the economy and for the mental health of a nation is not to control the virus. That is the doomsday scenario. If you allow the virus to get

out of control, you damage the economy more and the mental health of the population more. The dilemma that the decision makers in France, Scotland and everywhere else face is that they have to reduce the direct harm from Covid while mitigating the other harms.

You have to get the prevalence down—even in Scotland, which now has the lowest prevalence of the four United Kingdom nations. The Scottish people have done well, but it is not a competition. It is a communal global effort to reduce the harm from the global pandemic and, at the same time, mitigate all the other elements—the economic harms, the societal harms, the mental health harms, the loneliness and the school issues. That is what makes the situation unprecedented: nobody has ever had to do that before. That is why it is so difficult, and that is why questioning such as this is absolutely appropriate, to get us to the right answers.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): My first question is a quick one. For people who, as of this Friday, will be living in levels 3 and 4, will international travel be illegal?

Michael Russell: International travel will not be illegal—it would require the UK Government to bring that about. However, travelling to an airport or a port for that purpose would be against the regulations.

Willie Rennie: Could people who live in Glasgow go to Glasgow airport to go on a non-essential international trip?

Michael Russell: No—I do not believe that they could.

Willie Rennie: Right; okay—that is helpful.

My second question is about behaviour. I am keen to understand what the thinking is behind the Government's approach. Yesterday, the First Minister indicated that many people are not adhering to the ban on indoor visiting. There is a line of thinking that supervised, regulated and organised environments such as pubs, cafes and restaurants are safer places than unregulated homes. Given that we have not managed to get the virus down to the levels that we wanted using the current restrictions, does such an argument now carry added weight? That is probably more a question for Professor Leitch.

Michael Russell: Yes, I think that it is.

Professor Leitch: It is a good question, Mr Rennie. I can tell you that no country in the world has chosen to keep its hospitality venues open when its virus prevalence has risen. That is the position of the WHO and pretty much every Government in the world on cafes and restaurants. Even France, with its famous cafe culture, has shut such venues—and on curfews it has gone

further than many other countries. In certain regions of Italy people cannot leave their homes without written evidence of their reason for doing so.

I think that people are still meeting in households here. Although some of them might be doing so safely, the rule is that they should not do it. That is very restrictive. I cannot think of a way of regulating or enforcing that further that would not take away hugely from people's civil liberties, which none of us wants to do.

In order to get transmission down, we are therefore left with considering everywhere else that people can meet. Unfortunately, I do not think that having cafes and restaurants open means that people will not meet in their houses, and I think that our evidence now suggests that that is the case. Imposing level 3 restrictions has managed to get the numbers stable, but in the main it has not been done quickly enough to get the numbers down and stop deaths.

Willie Rennie: You do not support the argument that the situation is a pressure cooker and you believe that people, if they are desperate to have social engagement and to meet others, will find ways of doing so. Is there no weight to the argument that we should release such pressure through those who are trained and organised supervising their environments and controlling it? If we have been able to do that on construction and manufacturing sites, is there not an argument that pubs and restaurants are also capable of doing so?

Professor Leitch: Your argument is compelling, but construction and manufacturing involve tiny numbers compared with the 5 million people whom you suggest should be released to go to hospitality venues.

We have kind of done that already in any case. I previously came to the committee and said that the reason for our keeping cafes open was to prevent social isolation. Many people use cafes as community centres to meet their pals. I want all that to happen. Your argument is hugely compelling in saying that such people—for example, older people, single parents and those who have no work or other connection such that they do not otherwise meet people during the day—should be allowed to meet others in such a safe environment. However, that approach has not worked quickly enough, which is why—very reluctantly—this weekend, our advice was to move some areas to level 4.

We know that the lockdown on 23 March worked, in the sense that the prevalence of the virus fell. Of course, harms have resulted from that approach. We have touched on the business and economic harms, social isolation and loneliness. I

am not dismissing those, nor am I immune to them. However, the reality is that we have too many infections and we must get those down.

Willie Rennie: Okay. My final set of questions are for the minister. There are two examples of businesses that are not receiving support when, in principle, they should. The first example is businesses that are required to close, such as nightclubs, which are not receiving the business closure support grant. Why is that?

The second example is businesses that are restricted in their activities by the new arrangements yet are not getting access to the hardship fund, such as holiday accommodation and bed and breakfasts. Why is the grant system not comprehensive enough to cover the businesses that, in principle, should get support?

09:30

Michael Russell: The grants system is comprehensive and wide ranging. However, anomalies will, of course, always develop in any system—Mr Rennie is, as I am, a constituency MSP and will know from his mail bag that that will occur. As constituency MSPs, I am sure that you and I will take up those issues both at local level, with local authorities that are distributing the money, and at national level, with Kate Forbes and Fiona Hyslop.

A system changes and develops. The announcements that the First Minister made yesterday about level 4 areas will come into effect as quick as possible, and that will widen the net.

I have two or three individuals in my constituency whom I believe should have received support and have not. I suspect that you, too, will have people like that. It will require continued persistence and work to try to develop and change the system to make that happen—that is one of the reasons that we are here and we are trying to do that. As MSPs, all of us should make representations, on the individual level and on the generic level, where we see that things are not working and we should try to get the system changed.

I want to pay tribute to the local authorities. They have done a remarkable job. I am not well known as a close friend of the local authority in my area, but I have been, and continue to be, unstinting in my praise for it and the work that it does.

It is incredibly difficult, and we must keep trying to work to ensure that as many people as possible are covered.

Willie Rennie: I have heard from Councillor Aileen Morton that you have been full of praise for Argyll and Bute Council. I am sure that it

appreciates that. Perhaps you and I can join forces to persuade Kate Forbes to change the grant scheme.

Michael Russell: Nothing is impossible, Mr Rennie.

The Convener: I turn next to Willie Coffey.

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): This question is for Professor Leitch. I will turn the conversation to Ayrshire. As you can imagine, a number of constituents have been in touch to ask for an explanation as to why East Ayrshire has been moved up to level 4.

If we look at some of the data in the tables that were issued alongside the First Minister's statement yesterday, we can see that East Ayrshire's test positivity rates have been dropping steadily since the middle of October. One of the questions that I am being asked is why East Ayrshire is going to level 4 if that is the case.

One of the other tables in the data—this data was also published yesterday—predicts the probability of infection during the next two weeks in both East Ayrshire and North Ayrshire. The probability figures are lower for East Ayrshire than they are for North Ayrshire. I have been asked to offer explanations as to why East Ayrshire has been moved up to level 4, and I would be obliged if you could help to explain why that is the case.

Professor Leitch: I have the 32 local authority data charts with me, because I figured that one of the essential questions today might be about those. We have published the charts. They are a little bit tricky for people to find, and I think that it is important that we point people towards them as much as we can.

The charts do not give the whole picture. Therefore, before I describe East Ayrshire's data in more detail, I will say that there is not a formula. You do not take this and that number and decide to put an area into level 4; it is not as easy as that. We have to question local authorities and directors of public health, and think about where people go to hospital and the geography of the area. We also have to think about the stability or otherwise of the data—are the numbers moving upwards, downwards, or are they stubbornly stable? Therefore, it is not just about the data.

However, let me take prevalence, which is probably the principal data point. We describe that as a seven-day average per hundred thousand people. That allows us to compare Liverpool with Nigeria with East Ayrshire. That is the same calculation around the whole world, so you can take the number of positive cases during a seven-day period and divide it by 100,000. The Scottish average is about 140; we want it to be below 50 across the whole country. About half of the

country, inevitably, is above the Scottish average of 140 and, in the main, that is the group that we have moved to level 4, because those are the areas that are too high. Unfortunately, East Ayrshire falls into that group. In the past five days, on that data, East Ayrshire has been at 179, 180, 184, 179 and 165. It is stubbornly stable. The figure of 165 might be the beginning of a fall, but, unfortunately, there is no reliable data over time to suggest that.

East Ayrshire illustrates the challenge. We can see from the graphs that we published, that the line is absolutely straight in cases per hundred thousand and for test positivity in the past few days, unfortunately. The people of East Ayrshire have done a good job—they have done well—but, because of the proximity to the rest of the central belt and that stubborn data, we advised East Ayrshire to go up a level. Nobody, including me, wanted to do that.

Willie Coffey: I will take you up on that analysis. I am looking at the East Ayrshire test positivity chart. I suppose that it depends where you take your starting point—

Professor Leitch: Correct.

Willie Coffey: —to say whether the line is flat or whether it has gone down or up. I have chosen to look from the middle of October to now, and the overall trend is downwards for East Ayrshire, and you have chosen the past few days and said that it is flat. How do you pick which starting point to use in order to make the decision whether to be in level 3 or level 4?

Professor Leitch: It is a good question. You are right. Since the second peak—let us call it that—the numbers in East Ayrshire have fallen. I refer to the graph that we published. On 5 November, East Ayrshire had a positivity rate of 7 per cent. You need to remember that we want that rate to be lower than 5 per cent. The two WHO targets are 50 cases per 100,000 of population and a 5 per cent positivity rate.

Scotland's overall positivity rate is about 7 per cent, which is too high. East Ayrshire has been, starting on 5 November, 7 per cent, and then 7.2 per cent, 7.4 per cent and 7.7 per cent for the following days. The rate was higher—I absolutely accept that—but, now, it is stuck at 7 per cent, along with much of the rest of the country. That is why we think that less interaction will bring it down. That is why, unfortunately, the decision was to move East Ayrshire to level 4.

Willie Coffey: I mentioned that the prediction for the next few weeks is that the rate will be lower in East Ayrshire than in North Ayrshire. How do you answer that point?

Professor Leitch: Again, that is about comparison of single data points. North Ayrshire has slightly better data across the board, as well as different geography, different advice from others, including from directors of public health, and different local on-the-ground outbreaks and so on. Therefore, in the round, the decision was that North Ayrshire only just scraped out of level 4, and that a very close watch will be kept on it. People were concerned about the nature of movement. You know that area better than me. The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport knows that area well and was concerned about travel and movement around the Ayrshires. However, on balance, the decision was that, in the round, North Ayrshire should not move to level 4.

Willie Coffey: My last question, which is about the test and protect process, might be more for the cabinet secretary. Big retail stores, supermarkets and so on do not take contact details. Perhaps it is too impractical for them to do that. Some of them are already announcing that they are extending their opening hours. They do not manage the movement of the public in the stores in any meaningful way. I was in one last week that was absolutely chock-a-block with customers.

Surely that is a prime candidate for causing one of the major problems that we face. What can we do to enforce the proper management of the numbers of people being allowed into the stores and the proper management of people once they get inside? People are not part of the track and trace system when they go into bigger retail stores and supermarkets. Is any work being done to develop an app that can announce your arrival at those stores, so that you are part of that system?

Michael Russell: You make a good point that we need constant vigilance about how social distancing is observed. We now have a legal requirement that people wear face coverings in shops, which needs to be observed. However—I think that the Deputy First Minister mentioned this the other day—we have recently intervened again to remind supermarket chains and others of the importance of managing crowds and groups of people shopping, particularly in two sets of circumstances: now, in level 4 areas, where there will be a limited number of places that where people can go; and, secondly, in the run-up to Christmas.

You make an important point. It is impractical to expect there to be a technological solution to that, but there is a simple solution, which is the one that applied from March onwards: rigorous observance of those requirements. We know more now; we have learned a great deal. Therefore, the requirements need to be observed by the people running the stores at every level.

I suspect that, as an MSP, you have had the same experience as me. When we have spoken to chains, we are told that it is a matter for the local manager, but the local manager says that the measure is not being enforced by headquarters. The reality is that the requirement must be enforced. That should happen.

You have drawn attention to the issue, and I am glad to have had the chance to respond to it. I hope that large and small chains and smaller shops are looking at this and saying, "We have got to do it properly." There have been some imaginative approaches taken. Some small shops that I know have been very imaginative, rigorous, and they have done it well. That is what we should all be doing.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): Good morning. I want to return to the question that I asked you at the last meeting about the black spots in Scotland where there is a lack of testing centres. I raised the issue of Perth at the last meeting, and I was very pleased that, within a couple of days, a testing centre was set up in Perth. How confident are you that we have the right testing centres on the ground in Scotland to meet the current objectives on testing?

Michael Russell: I will allow Jason to answer that, as he works more closely on day-to-day testing. However, the health secretary has made it clear that the programme that is in place to expand testing in a variety of ways is moving forward with the full weight of her department and the Government behind it. That is how it will continue to be done. Nobody is complacent about that, and nobody is avoiding doing that. It is what we wish to do within the confines of human possibility, and it is what we are trying to do.

For example, I was involved in a discussion last week about a walk-in testing facility in my constituency and where the best location would be in an area of challenging geography. A range of actions are being taken as quickly as possible. Jason might want to say a word or two about what is happening on the ground and how testing is changing and developing. In her statement yesterday, the First Minister indicated the way in which things are progressing technologically.

Professor Leitch: I am glad that the challenge in Perth that you raised last time is at least partly resolved. I am as confident as I can be, which is relatively confident, about what we have seen with testing around the country. It gives me the opportunity to thank hundreds of people who now do this for a living—people who were working in our laboratories or in our health and social care system and a huge number of new employees who have come in to help us with testing, as well as the military and the logistics people who are

doing this, both at UK Government level and at a Scottish level.

It has been an enormous human endeavour to get the testing centres set up. We now have fixed sites; mobile sites that we can move around the country, depending on where the numbers and the outbreaks are; and walk-in centres, principally but not only around student hot spots. Those are all going very well. The testing logistics is also going well in the laboratories.

09:45

Of course, there are days when there are blips, because it is a massive human endeavour. Unfortunately, it comes at the same time as we are trying to vaccinate the population for flu and get ready for a Covid vaccine. The testing technology is changing, too. It is an absolutely massive effort.

Compared with other European countries, we are testing high numbers of the population, and we continue to have testing available for all symptomatic people; there is not a problem in getting an appointment. We are also increasing the number of asymptomatic tests that we are doing around the country for different hot spots, let us say, whether care homes or whatever group we might want to do next. Although the technology is not entirely as reliable as the polymerase chain reaction test, it is getting better.

Last night, I took part in the Tuesday night call involving the senior clinicians of the four UK countries—about 20 of us have been meeting every Tuesday and Thursday evening since the pandemic began—to discuss what to do with the next level of testing technology, which, again, will be a big logistical challenge. Some of that testing will be done in people's homes and some will be done at testing sites.

I am confident that the process is going as well as it can.

Mark Ruskell: I turn to the experience in schools. Cabinet secretary, you said that the normality of schooling is absolutely critical for children. I want to ask about the experience in our schools, in level 4 areas in particular.

For example, I am aware that, in Stirling, there is one school in which six classes are self-isolating at the moment. Entire classes are self-isolating, classroom teachers are off, learning support assistants for children with additional needs are off and supply teachers who do not necessarily know the classes are being brought in. Teachers are working extremely hard. You talk about the importance of the normality of the school experience, but is there not a case that there

should be a shift to some form of blended learning for those schools in level 4 areas?

Michael Russell: I hope that the phase that I used—I will certainly use it now, if I did not then—was that schooling should be “as close to normal as possible”. Of course, we are in the midst of the second stage of a pandemic, during which numbers have been rising very fast. There will be pressures on individual schools. Professor Leitch indicated that in the answer he gave earlier, and nobody would deny it. The Deputy First Minister has also indicated that there might well be circumstances in which, in some places, there have to be changes, even if they are short lived, in order to cope with those struggles.

However, I go back to my main point. There was unanimity across the Parliament that we should endeavour to get education back to as normal a situation as possible as soon as possible, and to maintain it there, as difficult as that might be in certain circumstances. I pay enormous tribute to parents, teachers and the school community. I am a former education secretary. Scottish education is strong and performs well, but people are being asked to go well beyond what any of us would have expected six or nine months or a year ago.

In those circumstances, keeping as close to normal as possible, recognising that when problems occur, they need urgent action, and attending to them is the right thing to do, and that is what is being done. Given the ability, strength and commitment of teachers and school communities, we should thank them and do our best to support them.

Jason might want to say something about the situation on the ground, but trying to maintain as normal an education as possible is a goal that is supported across the Parliament.

Professor Leitch: Rather than repeat the data that I gave earlier, which Public Health Scotland will issue later today, I might use narrative on this occasion.

I live with a North Lanarkshire teacher, and you can be absolutely certain that I hear teaching stories from North Lanarkshire and other areas. For decades, my wife was an English teacher and a pupil support teacher, but she now teaches English as an additional language. She teaches a young Syrian girl who was blown up in an explosion, with her sister, when she was in primary school in Syria. Scotland took her in and has now taught both those children for the past couple of years. I have seen images of that little girl beaming when she has pals around her, when she has support and when she has everything that schools provide around community care. The thought of removing that young girl’s education again in any meaningful way—not only the English

teaching, which is a by-product of what the school provides for that young lady—is horrible.

I know that sometimes that will have to be done, as Mark Ruskell illustrated when he mentioned classes and teachers having to self-isolate, or even testing positive, with the result that some of that continuity is lost. However, my advice has consistently been that we should try to keep the schools open as much as we can, not only for that Syrian young lady but for all the population of Scotland.

Mark Ruskell: I will ask a final question on the topic. The First Minister announced yesterday that children who were previously in the shielding category should not go to school. That is a clear category of children who are being advised not to attend school. However, teachers who were previously in a shielding category are still being advised to attend and be in that school environment. Is it fair or good practice to ask teachers in that position to continue to come in?

Professor Leitch: To be fair, that is not quite what we have said. We have spoken about children who were previously in the shielded group, which is a very small number, because we have adjusted the shielded group for children as we have learned more about the virus. There are therefore a small number of children in level 4 areas in relation to whom we think that the risk is high enough that we should keep them out of school for the period of the level 4 restrictions. That is a risk-adjusted and risk-based judgment that we think is appropriate.

We have said that all employees in level 4 areas—including teachers—should work from home if they can. If they cannot work from home, they should have a conversation with their employer—which might be their head teacher or the local authority; equally, it could be their call centre boss or the head of the Scottish Parliament—and, if mitigations can be put in place, they should be. We should remember that shielding is not binary; it is not no risk versus high risk. However, if a teacher is in the group of people who are very high risk, it could be that they could have a back-office job for three weeks or do some work from home on behalf of the rest of the teachers in their institution or whatever. We are not forcing anybody to go to work and put themselves at risk; we are suggesting that a conversation should take place with those in the high-risk group inside their workplace, whether that is the civil service, the Scottish Parliament or a high school.

It is more difficult to work from home if you are a teacher; again, my wife is one, so I completely understand that that might be a little bit tricky. However, the decision should be made at that local level. People can now do an individual risk

assessment on mygov.scot that allows them to answer questions about their own risk. Because we have learned so much about the virus, we now know that obesity is a much bigger problem than we thought it was before. Although we have always known about age, we now know that heart failure and diabetes are a little bit more of a risk than we thought they were before, and the shielded group has been adjusted to allow for that.

The Convener: We have a couple of supplementary questions; I ask members to be as quick as possible, please.

Willie Rennie: It does not seem to be working that way in practice, Professor Leitch. I have constituents in Fife who have had a blanket instruction to return to work and whose only route out of that is to sign off sick. Can I provide that information to you and your colleagues to see whether that policy can be looked at again?

Professor Leitch: Of course, Mr Rennie; I would be happy to do that. We are sending letters out today or tomorrow—we drafted them yesterday—to people who were previously in the shielded group to give them the instructions that I have just outlined, and we will of course share them with local authorities and headteachers. It will not be an exact science; it is tough for a headteacher who already has people off to juggle kids being off. I completely understand that, but let us try to make that as smooth as we can and reduce the risk as much as we can.

Monica Lennon: On the issue of children who are in the shielding group who are now being advised not to attend school in person if they are in a level 4 area, does that guidance also apply to siblings of those children who live in the same house?

Professor Leitch: No, it does not.

The Convener: That is a helpful clarification. We turn to Annabelle Ewing.

Michael Russell: I am sorry, convener, can I come in to make a point? Whoever is operating the microphones does not appear to have recognised my request.

I just want to make a point to Willie Rennie about the issue of those people who might be forced to go to work. There is a legal protection for people in those circumstances—that has been clear since the very beginning—but it is difficult for people to exercise it, because they are worried about their employment and their employment prospects. There is a place for representatives to be active in that and to make sure that they are active on behalf of individuals, but people should be in no doubt about the fact that there is a requirement for safe workplaces. That is an

absolute right that people have, which is protected by law.

The Convener: Thank you for that.

Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): I have a few questions. First, as the MSP for the Cowdenbeath constituency, I am particularly interested in the position of Fife, and the formal agenda item requires us to look, *inter alia*, at Fife.

In relation to yesterday's announcement about the 11 local authorities that will move to level 4 until 11 December, I assume that that means that the weekly review will continue as far as the other 21 local authorities are concerned and that, therefore, the possibility of movement up or down will continue to exist. Could I get clarification on that from the cabinet secretary or Professor Leitch?

Michael Russell: Yes, that is the case. The reviews will continue; the First Minister made that clear in her statement yesterday, and there is no doubt about that.

Annabelle Ewing: I thank the cabinet secretary for that unequivocal clarification; I ask because people have been asking me.

Secondly, in relation to Fife, one of the issues that resulted in Fife going from level 2 the previous week to level 3 was a slight and worrying increase in the number of ICU beds being used. Could Professor Leitch confirm that that matter, which causes some anxiety for my constituents, is being monitored carefully?

Professor Leitch: Of course. The answer is yes. Intensive care works as one big system around the country; of course people go to their closest unit, but we need to have capacity in neighbouring health boards and around the country, and there is no intensive care on the islands, so we move people off when they need it. Intensive care provision has been expanded. We should remember that we already have more people in intensive care than at conventional times, so if someone is taken into intensive care, they are very seriously unwell. We have already had to move it to bigger numbers, and we are ready to move it again if we have to, which is why the horrible restrictions have had to be imposed.

I wish that I had printed the data sheets in slightly bigger type, but the forecast for intensive care numbers in Fife has risen in the past week, which is what we would expect—the restrictions that were put in a week ago will not have had any effect yet—so it looks worse in Fife this week than it did last week, but that is the nature of the virus, and the nature of the restrictions is such that we are always playing catch-up with the virus.

The prevalence in Fife has risen in the past week, but not to the extent that we thought that

level 4 would be necessary, so Fife is now a high 3. As I said, the Scottish average is about 140 positive cases per 100,000 people; Fife is now just about on that margin, and we want it to be 50 everywhere.

10:00

Annabelle Ewing: Thank you for the clarification. That will be a further worry to my constituents and other people in Fife, but perhaps it will be a carrot to reinforce the message about sticking to the rules.

In that regard, I have heard a number of queries—I am sure that all members have—such as, “Can I see somebody in a care home?”, “Can I visit somebody in a hospice?” and, “Can I go to visit my mother?” Helpfully, there is an exhaustive list of exceptions in regard to what will become, as of Friday, a travel ban in level 3 and 4 areas.

My plea to the cabinet secretary is to make the information about that more publicly accessible. I know that it is on the website, but the number of queries that members get—from, “Can I move from A to B?” to, “Can I be part of an extended household?”—suggests that it would be helpful for people to have a much clearer idea of what the exceptions are. Most people want to abide by the guidance and, from Friday, the law.

Michael Russell: A clear list of exemptions will be published as part of the regulations. The exemptions—which already exist, plus one or two additions—will be laid out very clearly. I am absolutely in favour of having maximum clarity. However, in any set of circumstances, there will always be questions that require some thought, and there will always be interpretations about certain issues.

The list of exemptions on travel will be clear in the regulations. I commend it to every MSP. I keep it on my phone and computer, so that, when people ask me, I am absolutely clear what the exemptions are.

Annabelle Ewing: I appreciate that, as well as our job as MSPs, we have a job to do around disseminating that information. However, I still make my plea, because, in the main, people want to abide by the rules and they just want to know what they can do.

Guidance about Hallowe'en was published. Moving beyond Christmas—I have a longer focus—what about hogmanay? Will the cabinet secretary and Professor Leitch comment on where matters stand anent hogmanay?

Michael Russell: Jason Leitch has been involved in the Christmas discussions more than I have, and I am sure that he will want to say something about that.

“Anent hogmanay”—two good Scots words together in the same sentence—there is a recognition that hogmanay is an important issue in Scotland, but there is also a recognition that the virus is a continuing threat.

Jason might wish to say something about the discussions that are taking place on the Christmas and new year season.

Professor Leitch: On a radio programme this morning, I was asked which week—Christmas or the new year—the Scottish population would choose, if we polled them and said that they could have only one. I am not quite sure what the answer would be, but I think that we would probably choose both.

There are conversations about Christmas and the new year taking place at the four-country level, and at two further levels: the clinical and official level—my level—and the political level, which are conversations between the First Minister, Michael Gove and others. We want to do that at the four-country level, but time is marching on and Christmas will be on us soon.

We would all like household mixing to be possible, and the prevalence rate is the crucial decider in that. We do not want people to have to do it surreptitiously or to break the rules in order to have some kind of safe Christmas, but we do want a safe Christmas and new year. It will not be normal—nobody thinks that it will be the same as 2019, or 2021, I hope. There will be differences, but we are keen that something will be allowable, and we will be clear about what that should be.

Other countries and other cities are struggling with the issue as well. The City of New York put out its Christmas guidance a couple of days ago on a big graphic sheet. The guidance is pretty good, but it is quite restrictive. We will look at that and at examples from other places, and we will make a judgment on what is safe based on the prevalence of cases here.

The last thing that we want is to have freedom and then to see increased infections and deaths in January among families that met at Christmas. That would be a horrible scenario to face.

Reducing prevalence now is the number 1 strategy for Christmas and the new year. Then we need to have guidance about what we think a safe Christmas and new year will look like.

The Convener: That is helpful background information, because we have a session about Christmas and new year after this one.

Shona Robison (Dundee City East) (SNP): My first question leads on from Annabelle Ewing's question about the coming travel restrictions for areas in levels 3 and 4.

Things are very integrated in Dundee and Angus. That is not unique to here. People share leisure and shopping facilities. I have had a flurry of inquiries from people making the point that they would have to travel further within their own local authority to access those facilities than they would if they could go to a neighbouring authority. How does the idea of non-essential journeys apply to shopping and leisure? Will that be laid out clearly in the guidance? People have detailed questions about access to leisure and shopping.

Michael Russell: We must be clear in the regulations that we will publish this week and in the communication that goes with those regulations. People are being told that they cannot travel outside their local authority area. Willie Rennie raised one example. People are being told that there are international travel restrictions and they are being advised against international travel. There will be quarantine for people coming into Scotland from a number of places.

There are always grey areas at the edges. There are some people who will wish to exploit that and there are some who are uncertain about what the regulations say.

We must be clear about what the exemptions are for travel, but we must also be clear about the intention. That is important. Jason Leitch and I have both strongly stated the intention here and the First Minister indicated it yesterday. We are doing this to tackle a situation in which the prevalence of the virus is not falling fast enough and because we are concerned that, if it does not fall fast enough, the national health service will be put under enormous and inevitable pressure that is difficult to deal with and that will result in loss of life.

We must sort this. We have not yet succeeded. As Jason Leitch has indicated, and as we all know, we have had some success, but we must get it sorted. That requires the far stronger regulations—although not as strong as those that we had during the lockdown in March—that will take effect this Friday.

People should understand the intention and should want to be part of that—as the majority of people do—for the limited period of time that the First Minister has committed herself to. That is important. I always learn from this committee that we must be clearer, and as clear as possible. I am learning that lesson again here today and I will make sure that, when we publish the travel recommendations, we will do all that we can to be clear.

The intention is the most important thing. If you are in doubt, do not do it. If you are in doubt, recognise the intention and ask yourself if that

squares with what you want to do. That is important.

Shona Robison: Thank you for that. A few questions are being raised about people who have been in a family bubble across different local authority areas. From Friday, are they still able to travel to be part of that family bubble, even if they are in a level 3 or 4 area?

Michael Russell: One of the exemptions is for extended households; it is absolutely clear that extended households continue to operate. There is a set of regulations and guidance about extended households on the web and it is really important that people understand that information.

Shona Robison: That is very helpful. Finally, I have a question for Jason Leitch about the figures. Dundee has been fluctuating; its rate has gone down by 29 per cent one week and up by 11 per cent the next. I presume that you are looking for the trend, because there will be those fluctuations. In order to come down from level 3 to level 2, I presume that Dundee would have to be consistently on a pattern, trend or trajectory across those figures. I know that you look at other issues as well but, sticking to the number of cases per 100,000 people, when you are making the judgment, would you be looking for that trend?

Professor Leitch: [*Inaudible.*]—the curve, statistically, to see whether it is continuing to fall and at the pace of the fall. If it falls over six months, that does not help us much; we want it to fall over, for example, a three or four-week period, because two incubation periods give us three to four weeks. That is where we are. I brought Dundee up because I saw you starting to speak and I am learning which area each MSP represents, although I know yours for historical reasons. Dundee has been pretty flat in the past few days and that needs to tip over and come down. It is at about the Scottish average. As I said, areas above the Scottish average have, in the main, been moved to level 4; those around and below the average have been maintained at their level; and those that are quite far below the average have been moved down a level. Midlothian and East Lothian have come down a level; therefore, it is possible for those numbers to fall and be consistently low, so that we can move down a level. However, Dundee City, having moved up, has stabilised and now needs to turn that corner.

Shona Robison: Thank you.

Maurice Corry (West Scotland) (Con): Cabinet secretary, I will follow on from a point that Shona Robison made about shopping. I will talk about Helensburgh, so Jason Leitch might want to bring up his information on that. Helensburgh is at level 2, because it is in Argyll and Bute and, over

the hill, Dumbarton is at level 4, because it is in West Dunbartonshire. I am constantly asked about travel for shopping, because, in Dumbarton, there is a big Morrisons store, a Lidl and an Aldi. Are people allowed to travel from a level 2 area to a level 4 area in order to do essential shopping?

Michael Russell: I strongly advise against it. I want to go back and look at the exemptions; there would have to be an understanding of essential shopping. Helensburgh has shops, which remain open, and the opportunity exists for people to shop there, so I strongly advise against such travel. I will look at the exact wording of the essential travel exemptions and come back to you, to make sure that it is clarified for you and others, but my very strong advice—I cannot put it strongly enough—is that such travel is not a good idea.

Professor Leitch: It goes back to Mr Russell's earlier point about what we are trying to do here and, unfortunately, we are not allowing shopping for social reasons. My father loves nothing more than a trip to the supermarket, but it is not to buy shopping, it is to chat to pals that he meets in the shop. Whatever level people are in, we are not allowing that, because we need to remove that human interaction in order to reduce the prevalence. If people can get their essential shopping in some other way, we would like them not to go out of their area. We would like them to get deliveries or get other people to bring their shopping. My father is no longer doing his shopping; my sister is doing his shopping and delivering it to his back door. However, it is a mindset and it is really difficult. Of course, we want people to get their essential shopping.

If they can get that delivered, they should. If they can do that locally, they should. I understand Ms Robison's example, where one street might be in both Dundee City Council and Angus Council areas. If your local corner store is in a different local authority to you and it is 50 feet from your door and you need to go there for milk and bread, I do not think that anybody is going to stop you doing that. However, if I possibly could, I would avoid driving into the Dundee City Council area to go to Morrisons.

10:15

Maurice Corry: That is fine; that is quite clear. Cabinet secretary, it would be useful to have that definition.

Under the regulations, at level 4, driving tests are out for the next three or four weeks. People who have taken their theory tests face a dilemma, because some theory tests will expire within the three-week lockdown period. Will the cabinet secretary consider an extension to the theory test, in the same way that MOT tests for vehicles have

been extended by six months? It would give people a fair opportunity, because a few people have come to me and said that their theory tests are going to expire and that they cannot face sitting another one. We have got to get drivers through and there is a backlog of driving tests, which means that some people cannot get jobs because some jobs involve driving. Will the cabinet secretary look at that?

Michael Russell: I am greatly sympathetic to that—it seems entirely sensible—but that is a reserved matter, so it is a matter for the UK Government.

Maurice Corry: Yes, but can you bring the matter up in your discussions with the other Governments and the UK Government, please?

Michael Russell: I will ask the Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity to raise that. I have raised the issue of driving tests on behalf of a constituent who had difficulty with that and needed a driving test to get a job. However, I just make the point—it is an important point—that not everything is within the gift of the Scottish Government. That is a matter that needs to be raised with the UK Government. I will ask the transport secretary to raise it, and I am sure that others will wish to raise it too.

Maurice Corry: My final question for the cabinet secretary and Jason Leitch is: what is the exact definition of an “extended household”?

Michael Russell: It is on the website, Mr Corry. The definition of what an extended household is and how you form an extended household is very clear. I commend that information to you. I could go online and read it out, but it would be best that you look at it and read it. Jason Leitch wanted to say a word on that.

Professor Leitch: I do not want to read it out. Mr Russell is correct in what he says and, strictly speaking, you should read it, but, in simple terms, you can combine your household with somebody who lives alone or somebody who lives alone with children. Therefore, that becomes one household both for the purposes of test and protect and in that no distancing is required and you are able to gather together.

Maurice Corry: That is very clear, thank you. That is what I was looking for.

The Convener: Finally, I will bring in Stuart McMillan.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): Before I ask my question, I want to say thank you, because Inverclyde has stayed in level 3, rather than move up to level 4 with neighbouring authorities.

Cabinet Secretary, with 11 local authorities moving to level 4, what consideration has been given to student teachers, who might be on placements and travelling between areas with different levels of restrictions, particularly those who rely on public transport or who live in student accommodation?

Michael Russell: It is a very good point. There is an exemption for work and for essential work. I would like to get that clarified as quickly as possible, and I undertake to ask John Swinney to do that for you and the committee very quickly indeed.

Stuart McMillan: Thank you very much, cabinet secretary.

My second question is about supermarkets—an area that was touched on earlier by Willie Coffey. I was contacted last week by a constituent who works for a large supermarket in my constituency, and who raised concerns about the lack of health and safety measures being put in place by that particular store. They were concerned about their own health and the health of the patrons of that particular supermarket.

I think, cabinet secretary, that you mentioned earlier that dialogue and discussions continue between the Scottish Government and the retailers—in particular, the large retailers. As we are about to go into what could be seen as the most important time for any retailer, can that message be strengthened, please, so as to highlight to them how important it is that they do the right thing by their staff and by their customers?

Michael Russell: It can be strengthened, and it can be amplified. Local members have a role, in that when they have—*[Inaudible.]*—to escalate that, both to Government and to stores and store management locally and nationally. It is a matter not of a single voice but of as many voices as possible.

However, I also go back to my point about the legal duty for a safe working environment. Employers have that legal duty. Trade unions also have a strong role to play in that matter, and I know that they are very active in making sure that those points are put across.

Stuart McMillan: Thank you. I have certainly taken up the issue with that particular supermarket, but I also take the opportunity to raise it publicly this morning, bearing in mind that this is a parliamentary committee.

The Convener: I thank all members and witnesses for that session.

Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Restrictions and Requirements) (Local Levels) (Scotland) Regulations 2020 (SSI 2020/344)

Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Restrictions and Requirements) (Local Levels) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2020 (SSI 2020/347)

The Convener: The second agenda item is consideration of motions on the subordinate legislation that the committee took evidence on at its meeting on 4 November. The SSIs give effect to the Scottish Government's new strategic framework for Covid-19, which came into effect on 2 November.

Cabinet secretary, do you wish to make any remarks on the SSIs?

Michael Russell: No; I am happy just to move the motions.

The Convener: Thank you. Are members content for motions S5M-23215 and S5M-23366 to be moved en bloc? If any member is not content, please type N in the chat bar now. Since no member has indicated otherwise, we are agreed to have the motions moved en bloc.

Motions moved,

That the COVID-19 Committee recommends that the Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Restrictions and Requirements) (Local Levels) (Scotland) Regulations 2020 (SSI 2020/344) be approved.

That the COVID-19 Committee recommends that the Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Restrictions and Requirements) (Local Levels) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2020 (SSI 2020/347) be approved.—*[Michael Russell]*

Motions agreed to.

The Convener: The committee will, in the coming days, publish a report to the Parliament, setting out our decisions on the statutory instruments that have been considered at this meeting.

That concludes our consideration of agenda item 2, and our time with the cabinet secretary. I thank the cabinet secretary and Professor Leitch for their evidence. I will suspend the meeting to allow for a changeover of witnesses. Members are advised that there is time for a short break of up to five minutes during the suspension.

10:24

Meeting suspended.

10:41

On resuming—

Covid-19 (Social and Economic Impact of Restrictions over Winter)

The Convener: Welcome back to the meeting of the COVID-19 Committee. Under item 3, which is on the social and economic impact of restrictions over winter, we will take evidence from a range on stakeholders on the social, cultural and economic impacts of possible restrictions on travel and social gatherings over winter, particularly over the festive period.

I welcome Dr Liz Cameron, director and chief executive of Scottish Chambers of Commerce; Matt Crilly, president of the National Union of Students Scotland; Willie Macleod, executive director of UKHospitality Scotland; Adam Stachura, head of policy and communications at Age Scotland; and Dr Maureen Sier, director of Interfaith Scotland.

I ask each of the witnesses to give brief opening remarks and to comment on any issues that they wish to raise with the committee on the subject matter that I have just detailed.

Dr Liz Cameron OBE (Scottish Chambers of Commerce): Thank you for the opportunity to speak to the committee. There is no doubt that, from a business and economic point of view, our priority was and remains being able to trade as successfully and safely as possible. Given some of the previous remarks, it is worth mentioning that businesses have invested millions and millions of pounds in making our environments as safe and secure as is practically possible. We already have a massive amount of regulations that we follow in order to make our premises safe and secure. It is important to make that point.

There is no doubt that the words that have been used in the past 24 to 48 hours have been “desperate”, “disillusioned” and “fatigue”. People have asked where the light is that we can all move forward in order to be able to open up our trade as practically as possible.

There is also an issue around the travel restrictions, which will have a major impact. They will not just affect our retail and hospitality industries, although they are the top ones that are suffering. There is also the issue of having our lights put on and then put off. As far as business is concerned, this is now the third round of restrictions. Many businesses will now not be able to put their lights back on after the additional lockdowns, which have had and will continue to have an impact.

Although we understand the Government’s intentions, and we absolutely support the need to look after our people—our employees, suppliers and customers—we challenge and question the reactive nature of the plans that have been put in place for business. We care desperately about our people, and we have secured very safe environments, but that does not seem to have been recognised.

We are concerned and uncertain about how the Government is measuring movements from tier to tier in different geographical areas, and about how it is weighting economic factors. We got buy-in from everyone three weeks ago about the necessity of what was happening, but we are now struggling to understand how the decisions are being driven and what data and evidence are being used to get us all back on board as quickly as possible.

10:45

Matt Crilly (National Union of Students Scotland): Thank you for having me along today. Students have unwittingly found themselves at the heart of the Covid crisis in Scotland. We support any measures to ensure the safety of students, staff and all our communities.

I will start with the winter break. We welcome the Scottish Government’s announcement of mass testing of students. That is of central importance for student welfare, and we support it as a strategy for getting students home for their winter break. We have had a really difficult term, with many students, particularly those who stay in student accommodation, having to self-isolate for extended periods. The announcement gives some real certainty for students. We have conducted mental health research that has shown that students often rely on family and friends as support networks, so we are very grateful to hear that the Scottish Government is considering mass asymptomatic testing to try to facilitate them going home.

We need to make sure that students who remain in student accommodation are supported through the winter break. Staying there could be an isolating experience for those students, so we need to make sure that support is available to them.

I will touch on some of the restrictions more broadly. Students often struggle with their mental health. Research that we conducted immediately prior to the pandemic showed that nearly half of students struggled with their mental health because of a lack of money or financial pressures. Although the increase in restrictions on the hospitality industry and the retail sector is completely understandable for health and safety

reasons, and we support that, we need to ensure that students are supported while those restrictions are in place. Students often find themselves employed in those sectors. It is often the more precarious work in our society, so if bars, restaurants and cafes are closed, students lose access to the tips and things that they often rely on to get by.

We welcome the moves by the Scottish Government on the mass asymptomatic testing of the student body. We would welcome a wider look at mental health and the financial position that students find themselves in.

Lastly, we are not entirely sure what things will look like in January, but if there is a return to campus, we really want to avoid outbreaks like those we saw in the late summer and early autumn, particularly in student accommodation. We think that learning should be online as a default, and we should be looking at whether practical courses can be delivered in person. Students need a bit of clarity. We need the public health officials to look at that, so that we avoid repeating what happened in the late summer.

Willie Macleod (UKHospitality): Thank you for the opportunity to speak to the committee.

From a business and a hospitality industry perspective, I endorse much of what Liz Cameron and Matt Crilly have already said about hospitality. The main issues that I want to mention up front are covered by the overview that Covid has clearly had a huge impact on businesses' turnover, profits and viability. They have little or no cash flow. They have unbalanced their balance sheets by incurring additional borrowing, and they have coped with constant change, often at short notice. Dr Cameron mentioned the investment in safety and personal protective equipment, which probably amounts to between £80 million and £90 million for our industry in Scotland. There has also been an impact on our staff through loss of jobs and income; Matt Crilly touched on that point.

Our chief executive gave evidence yesterday to Westminster's Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee and said that, based on Office of National Statistics data and our own surveys, we think that 600,000 jobs have been lost or remain at risk in hospitality—which would translate to about 50,000 jobs in Scotland. Earlier this year, I estimated that as many as 70,000 to 100,000 jobs in hospitality could be at risk in Scotland; to put that in context, the wider hospitality industry employs 285,000 people.

I will also touch on the impact on our customers, who have been denied normal social activity and life events through travel restrictions and restrictions on leisure day trips with their families and their ability to take holidays. There has been

an impact on local and business customers. Last week, we saw impacts on people's ability to celebrate Diwali and we are looking forward to the festive period with considerable uncertainty.

If there is an opportunity later, I can perhaps say more about the impact on business. Nonetheless, I note that we will publish a survey later today that shows that businesses think that they will trade at about 72 per cent of last year's level at level 0 in Scotland, which declines to 13 per cent of last year's level at level 4. There is therefore significant impact on viability and profit under the current five levels in Scotland.

Looking ahead, the industry needs on-going sector-specific support. We do not think that we will see much recovery in 2021; we think that it will begin in 2022. We need to look at the adequacy of support to meet the fixed costs of closure and not only the fixed costs when businesses are closed; there is a cost associated with actually closing down and reopening a business, which is significant. The principle issues in relation to which we need help to get us through this are an extension of the business rates holiday, an extension of the reduction in VAT—which is of course a reserved matter—and the ability of tenants in rented property to be protected from repossessions.

The hospitality and tourism industry is innovative and resilient. Given the opportunity to trade at normal levels, our industry will recover quickly. We will begin to employ people, we will kickstart our extensive supply chain, and we will quickly contribute to public sector revenues through the taxes that we collect. I will finish there; I thank the committee for the opportunity to give that summary.

Adam Stachura (Age Scotland): I thank the committee for the invitation to join the evidence session. I will be brief, as I think that we put a fair bit in our written submission, although that was also brief. There is no doubt that, although Covid has had a massive impact on all our lives, it has been particularly devastating for older people in Scotland, considering the high death rate among people over the age of 75. Three quarters of deaths have been in that age group and about half of all deaths have been in care homes.

Winter will be a really difficult time for older people. We anticipated back in the summer the necessity of looking forward and having an action plan for winter in order to support older people through it. One of our principal concerns is the astronomical level of loneliness and isolation that has been prevalent throughout this year, and which will only increase through the winter months with shorter days, poorer weather and all the restrictions that are in place. The Scottish Government and health officials must tread a fine

line between protecting lives and public health on one side and the quality of life on the other. That is important.

Regarding loneliness and isolation, although not all pensioners will fall into that category, 350,000 pensioners in Scotland live alone. Our research showed that over 100,000 older people ate their Christmas lunch alone last year. We expect that figure to increase exponentially. That is equivalent to one older person in every street. Before the crisis, 200,000 older people could go for at least half a week without seeing or hearing from anyone. We know that has gone up.

We would like to see all older people having the support that they require to get through the next few months. That could include support with access to medical treatment, which could be challenging to get to depending on which level their local authority is in. Access could also be challenging if they are shielding. The service for people who are shielding has essentially stopped, but there are people who feel that they need to stay in that category. It is important that the services and support that were put in place in response to the first lockdown can be quickly turned back on so that folk can have a good quality of life.

Dr Maureen Sier (Interfaith Scotland): Thank you for the opportunity to speak to the committee.

Everything that has been said also applies to faith communities. Members of those communities are not very different to other members of society and are involved all sorts of things, from running businesses to being elderly.

There is a sense of community at the heart of faith. It has been difficult for faith communities to give up getting together: going in large numbers to the mosque on Friday, or to the community hub that is the gurdwara, or to the synagogue or church. There is a sense of what it means to be a faith community. People get support from being together and that has been taken away.

Faith communities offer rites of passage, such as marriages and funerals. Humanists also do marriages and funerals. That can be complicated. Families have expectations that cannot be met because of the pandemic. That is a burden for faith communities, although they have been resilient.

There has been good dialogue between the Scottish Government and the faith communities about safely reopening places of worship and ensuring that there can be limited engagement with community gatherings and places of worship so that people can come together. That guidance has been helpful for faith communities.

The impact on the elderly has already been mentioned. Many faith communities have an elderly population, which has been mentioned in some of their written submissions. Those people may not be connected online, which exacerbates their loneliness and isolation. A wide range of faith communities are involved with Interfaith Scotland. They have moved almost everything online and have done so creatively and dynamically, but there are still people who are unable to connect online. They miss that community connection, which impacts on their mental health.

Everything that has been mentioned already also has an impact on faith communities.

Festivals such as Guru Nanak's birthday, Hanukkah and Christmas are coming soon. Christmas is a festival for the Christian community, but there are also cultural implications to how that is handled. The current lockdown and the system of levels are there in order to perhaps free people up and allow them to come together for that religious and cultural festival. The faith communities have been supportive of all that the Scottish Government is doing to keep people safe and looked after.

I want to touch very briefly on funds. Some of the minority faith communities pay for their priest through donations. At the Hindu temple, for example, weekly donations pay the wage of the priest. That has been removed, because they cannot have large numbers of people at temples, so there is some financial struggle in the faith communities.

11:00

The small grant funds that the Scottish Government has made available to ensure that there is PPE, cleaning of places of worship and ability for faith communities to come together—albeit in small numbers—have been much appreciated.

It is very hard to imagine how things are going to change. There is continuing support for faith communities, which is much appreciated. Taking care of the lonely and vulnerable and collaborating with the faith communities when guidance is being prepared that the communities will have to implement has been really effective and appreciated.

Everything that impacts on all the other sectors of society, also impacts on the faith community.

The Convener: Thank you all for those useful and illuminating comments.

I will now bring in members of the committee. If witnesses want to come in, the best way to do that is to type R in the BlueJeans chat box. We will try to hear from as many people as possible but,

obviously, we are time limited. Therefore, we will try to fit everyone in if we can.

If members want to direct a question to a specific witness, they should please do so when they ask the question.

The first question is from the deputy convener, Monica Lennon.

Monica Lennon: I thank the witnesses for their helpful opening remarks. There are a lot of questions and not a lot of time, so I will try to pick out a few questions and return later if there is time in hand.

I will start with the economic and business support side. It has been good to hear from Dr Cameron and Mr Macleod. Given that a lot of areas of Scotland are now under level 4 restrictions and we know that businesses rely on the run-up to Christmas and the holiday season, are there estimates of what the losses will be to the retail and hospitality sectors, which will be hit the hardest as a result of level 4 restrictions? What will be the impact on jobs?

I was struck by what Dr Cameron said about the challenges with the reactive nature of some of the plans. Others, including Dr Sier, have said that there has been good dialogue and consultation with Government. Is that still not happening well enough between the business community and Government?

Dr Cameron: In answer to the question about estimates, we have recently carried out a survey among our members—it is on-going—in which we asked about the strategic framework and the various levels. We asked about the financial support in particular, and more than 68 per cent of survey respondents said that the financial support was not appropriate. It does not even scratch the surface for a number of businesses that are now entering their second or third lockdown. The financial support is absolutely not sufficient.

Furlough has been hailed as the panacea for everything. It has absolutely stopped or delayed the job losses that we expected to hit in November or at the beginning of December, and its extension has been helpful. However, we have to understand that the scheme makes up a low percentage of the basic costs of opening the doors and running a business and that rent, rates, hiring equipment, loan repayments and employer's national insurance all add up. The business support sounds good, with the one-liner of £30 million being announced yesterday, but businesses this morning and late last night still did not know how to apply, and that pattern has been repeated with many lockdowns. Local authorities did not even know what guidance they should be following, except that it is discretionary. The

funding might not hit businesses for another few weeks, but businesses cannot wait that long.

There is a pattern. We have fed that back and there have been lots of opportunities to learn—for example, from the initial closedown of Aberdeen. The learning is that, when policy announcements are made, we must be certain that the process is ready immediately after that, because expectations are being created in the business community and, as I said, it is already desperate. How long will we have to wait to understand whether we can apply? We know that local authorities, irrespective of which level they are in, will need to know what support will apply.

The situation in relation to businesses in the tourism sector is interesting because, as Willie Macleod will confirm, a high volume of their customers come from other parts of Scotland—in some cases it is as high as 90 per cent. There are businesses in the Borders that are sandwiched between different levels, many of whom have decided this morning that they are closing, even though they are not in a level where that restriction applies. They are being forced to close and have the horrendous situation of employees potentially being out of a job, with everything that that means.

Mental health and wellbeing are an issue. It is not just about business; it is about the business community, and employees rely on us being able to keep our doors open. There needs to be, and there should have been, an awful lot more forward planning. Governments have been looking at the issue for nine months, although I am talking only about Scotland for the moment. There needs to be a bit more forward planning, because the Government has the intelligence, the data and the information, so we struggle to understand why we are getting only three days' notice of a change in restrictions. We are struggling to understand why areas that are moving down to level 2 from level 3 will not move for another week—why is that?

On business engagement, since the outset of this horrendous pandemic that we all face as human beings, we and other business organisations have thrown everything that we have at working in partnership with the Scottish Government. We have influenced it in a number of areas and we have given our guidance when that was required. We will continue to do that, because we are all in this together. However, can that engagement be improved? Absolutely, and we are about to commence a discussion with the Scottish Government and its officials on how we can map out a future flow of quality engagement.

That does not mean simply consultation, because we need to go up a level. You can consult and just tick a box, although I am not saying that that is happening. We have to redesign the engagement and partnership between

parliamentarians, whoever is leading the Government at a particular time and business, because we will not survive this situation if we do not focus on that and on improving and investing in testing in Scotland. We want as many business premises as possible to be able to initiate testing. That is where the investment needs to go and that should be the priority.

The restrictions that were placed on us last time round did not work, so I am not yet convinced that closing down businesses constantly is the answer. It is clear that the pinch points in the spread of the virus are home environments. Unfortunately, none of us has the real levers to close down homes. We need to redesign how we develop our future plans and our exit strategy.

Monica Lennon: That is helpful.

Willie Macleod: I feel that I need to put an absolute figure on each of the five levels in Scotland. I will preface what I am about to say by saying that I am speaking about the situation in which the hospitality industry finds itself in Scotland, but the situation is no different in any of the other component parts of the UK. Much of what I am saying is being said by my colleagues in Westminster, Cardiff and Belfast. This is very much a UK-wide issue. We need to look at the recovery of hospitality and tourism at a UK-wide level.

I am not sure who stole whose script this morning, but I endorse everything that Liz Cameron has said. We got the results of our survey last night, and we can look at the response across the hospitality sector in Scotland as a whole. At level 4, 75 per cent of the businesses that responded to the survey said that they would no longer be viable. To me, that suggests that they are at the point of closure. Nineteen per cent of businesses reported that they would operate at a loss, only 3 per cent thought that they would break even and only 3 per cent thought that they would return a profit.

There is clearly less of an impact at the other four levels, with level 0 representing a much more positive outlook, but there is no doubt that hospitality businesses are in deep trouble. A number of business types have not been able to reopen since the first lockdown. Those businesses, which include music venues, meeting and conference centres and nightclubs, are in deep trouble.

Every pound that the Government—whether it is the Government at Holyrood or the one at Westminster—allocates to our industry is welcome, but the sad fact is that, even with support through 100 per cent relief on business rates and the reduction in VAT, we are still in

trouble. Our revenues are not growing and our cash flow is in a dire strait.

On the grants that are currently available, again, I endorse what Liz Cameron said about the need for a lot more detail about the financial support. We are looking at somewhere between £1,500 and £4,000 of grant support per four weeks for businesses that are closed. We also have to think about businesses that are in effect closed because the regulations have such an impact on their ability to trade and are tantamount to closing them down. In other words, the business model is severely constrained because of the restrictions.

We can compare the grants that are available with the fixed costs of closure. The average hotel in Scotland incurs £62,000 in fixed costs when it is closed. The average medium-sized pub incurs between £6,000 and £10,000 a month in fixed costs when it is closed. There are also costs related to closing down—stock needs to be written off, for example—and there are costs when businesses reopen. We need financial support that matches the costs that are being suffered by such businesses, because otherwise they will not survive and we will not have an industry to deal with the recovery when it comes.

11:15

The furlough scheme helps, and we very much welcome its extension until the end of March. That will give us some breathing space, and we might need that to continue. However, it is important to realise that, although furlough rightly provides an underpinning of the income of individuals who are affected by the pressures on our businesses, it does not actually put money into their cash registers. Businesses still have to meet their share of employment costs and bear the costs of closure. We must consider how we will support businesses adequately as we move forward.

Both the Westminster and Holyrood Governments have engaged well with the industry. However, there is a question about how we should define engagement and consultation. Although there has been a lot of dialogue on guidance, I am not sure that we have had meaningful consultation to the extent of allowing the business community to contribute to setting the regulations or the pace at which they are introduced. However, we believe that, through proper consultation, we could make a contribution to the decisions that Governments reach. We could help to get those right first time, and we might be able to iron out unintended consequences, examples of which have been most evident in areas such as licensing law.

Monica Lennon: Those first answers were long, but they have been useful.

I turn to our remaining witnesses. We have heard a lot about the impacts of business closures, such as what they could mean for job losses. Those all add to the uncertainty and the poor mental health that we have heard others talk about. I ask Matt Crilly, Adam Stachura and Maureen Sier to respond briefly on those aspects.

There has been a lot of hype around and focus on the festival of Christmas. Irrespective of whether people are of the Christian faith, Christmas matters to many of them, because it is all about togetherness. There is a lot of pressure on people to have a normal Christmas, and to be happy, joyful and grateful for whatever time they might get to spend together. However, at the same time, we hear that there will be a lot of economic pain and uncertainty about jobs. We know that, in the hospitality sector, that will affect many younger workers. However, we have a lot of age discrimination in this country, so older workers will also be worried.

In a nutshell, could each of you name one thing that the Government could do to help in that respect? Is there more of a role for our third sector, which is close to communities, and for our faith communities to support people who might be struggling with mental health issues, loneliness and isolation?

Matt Crilly: A crucial step that the Government could take to help students through the current restrictions is to invest more in discretionary funding. The areas of the economy that have been hit hardest by the restrictions are the ones where students work. Scottish Government research that was published on 30 October noted that our education institutions reported significant financial hardship in students who have lost employment opportunities or whose families' income has declined. Most students are not eligible for universal credit so, if their income is hit, it is really hit and they will struggle. We need more investment in discretionary funding so that universities and colleges can support such students.

As for what the third sector could do, we have also been calling for investment in student associations, universities and colleges to help students to get through the winter period in particular. At this time of year, students have exams and their final assessments are due. For those who are currently on campus, lockdown will be difficult. Even at the best of times, things are difficult for students when they are in the middle of exams; they will be a lot harder if they cannot take a break from that intensity.

We would like investment in student associations, universities and colleges to help students, particularly those who will stay in their accommodation over the winter months. We have

care-experienced students, estranged students and international students for whom their halls are their home. They are not going home for Christmas or for the winter break. People are really vulnerable at that time, so we need to ensure that there is investment so that they get wellbeing support, access to food and drink if they have to self-isolate and so on.

Monica Lennon: That is an important point. I am getting in trouble now for taking too long, so I will ask Adam Stachura and Maureen Sier to be really brief. I am sorry to race through this, because your points are really important.

Adam Stachura: The point about older workers is important. Obviously, the group that is most impacted economically is younger workers, but the second most affected group is older workers. We have an ageing population and a rising retirement age. We have people who do not have enough in their retirement savings and who will have real difficulties in future. Furlough has been hugely important, because it has allowed people who are working to delay being laid off, but it also gives them hope that they can continue in employment. There are big challenges in that regard. We cannot forget about that group, because older workers are not having it easy by any stretch of the imagination.

Over the festive period or the month of December, the Government should consider the big challenge for community groups that normally help to tackle isolation and ensure that people have access to food to tackle malnourishment and so on. Those groups are closed—the doors are closed—because they cannot operate. They are largely run by voluntary organisations that do not have the right kind of support to operate, and they also might not have the guidance that they need to keep the doors open. Those places are going to struggle throughout the Christmas period to support people across the country. We need a package of support—not just financial but in-person support—to enable community groups and organisations to operate for all the people who will be isolated and lonely and having a difficult time.

Maureen Sier: I will take a slightly different approach and say that I encourage the Scottish Government to see the faith communities of Scotland as an incredible resource. They have already demonstrated how committed they are to supporting the lonely, the vulnerable and the isolated, and how able they are to do so through all kinds of measures such as food banks and food deliveries. They know their communities. Although only just over 50 per cent of the Scottish population is affiliated in some way with a faith community, that is a lot of people, and there are lots of volunteers in faith communities. There are structures, buildings and religious leaders who are

listened to, so the messaging gets out to the communities and, in that way, we are reaching at least 50 per cent of the population. The messaging will be really important, particularly around the Christmas festival, but around all festivals. Hanukkah and the birthday of Guru Nanak are coming up, as well as other festivals.

Faith communities are built on things such as inspiration. How will we inspire people to see that the festive period can still be festive, but in a very different way from what we are used to? There will be massive disappointment and challenges. I was touched by the figure that Adam Stachura gave of 100,000 elderly people eating Christmas dinner on their own. The Covid pandemic has shown us that people are prepared to reach out to their neighbours. They are prepared to open their metaphorical doors—they cannot open their literal doors—to phone someone who is lonely and isolated, for example. Faith communities have done that. They have set up communication networks to ensure that everyone on their books who lives alone gets a call or is supported to know how to engage with technology.

We should see the faith communities as a resource. Like everybody else, they might be vulnerable, struggling, disappointed or short of money, but they are also an incredible resource. We need to get the messaging right and make sure that the faith communities are getting that messaging out to their respective and diverse communities.

A tiny final point is that we should not take our eye off the ball on issues such as hate crime. While all that we are talking about is going on, hate crimes are still being committed against those who are perceived as other or different.

The Convener: Thank you. We have about an hour left, and six members of the committee have still to ask questions, so I ask witnesses to give slightly briefer answers. I remind everyone that we have submissions from all the organisations on the panel. The focus of the session is on winter and the festive period, rather than the general effects of Covid, although I know that it is sometimes hard to untangle all that. The answers have been useful and incredibly helpful, but it would be good if we could focus them.

With that rap on the knuckles, I turn to Stuart McMillan.

Stuart McMillan: My question is for Dr Cameron and Willie Macleod. In the submission from UKHospitality, Mr Macleod touched on extension of the current restrictions, and welcomed the fact that they will be reviewed each week. Dr Cameron's submission highlights that

"support interventions must be directed by real-time data and business intelligence".

Do the witnesses consider weekly review, which is based on the most up-to-date data, to be the correct approach? I am aware that the current one is the most important quarter for the retail and hospitality trades. Do the witnesses want a different mechanism, going forward? I put the question first to Dr Cameron.

Dr Cameron: I was hoping that you would not ask me to go first, Stuart, but thank you.

Yes—weekly review is appropriate and review should remain at that frequency. However, we hope that if, leading into the Christmas period, we see quick decreases in spread and the right trajectory is achieved, we could consider more reviews per week. I do not think that that will be possible, because of the data that the Scottish Government is working to. Experts tell us that they are, in some cases, a week behind so, at times, we are two weeks behind the ball. I do not have knowledge to enable me to say that it could be done quicker, so I will stick with weekly reviews.

On real-time data, in normal sources of information our economic data always lags behind, but the Government has the opportunity to have daily calls with the business community. Witnesses here today represent many different business organisations, but in this situation and leading into the festive period, we all have the same view of the impact. Therefore, it would be helpful if we could sit down more regularly with key ministers and the people who make the decisions.

Willie Macleod: I am mindful of the need for brevity—much chastised, am I. The winter period is—*[Inaudible.]*—our businesses and our customers.

The importance of the weekly review—particularly for businesses in level 4 areas—is that businesses can see the direction of travel, provided that the data that the Government is using is up to date. We have been told that the current levels will apply until 11 December. A business in a level 4 area will want to know the direction of travel—are they likely to stay in level 4, or might they move out of it? That applies right down through the levels, because there is also a risk for businesses in areas that might move up a level. Regular weekly information would be useful. The winter period is crucial to businesses' turnover and profitability, and many will not experience that this year.

11:30

Stuart McMillan: As Willie Macleod knows, I convene the cross-party group on tourism. At our meetings in the past, we have discussed many aspects of hospitality, and we will continue to do so.

Some written submissions touched on the travel ban. There are areas that have higher numbers of Covid cases than neighbouring authorities, which are in lower tiers. Do witnesses—in particular, Willie Macleod and Dr Cameron—think that travel restrictions are the correct thing to do in order to protect areas that have lower Covid levels?

Willie Macleod: I fully understand and appreciate the reason for travel restrictions and the reports that they could well be enforced legally. There is no doubt that the travel restrictions are placing a significant additional burden on businesses that would otherwise want to be open at this time of year. The restrictions have resulted in cancellations, and have put pressure on hospitality businesses to decide whether to accept reservations from particular groups or families. A lot of responsibility should be placed on private individuals to respect the restrictions that are placed on them; I do not think that businesses can monitor that.

Dr Cameron: We would have liked the travel restrictions to remain as guidance, with encouragement of compliant behaviour, rather than the legislative approach, which I understand has just been approved. We do not agree with that.

Some evidence quite clearly shows which events cause growth in the number of cases of the virus in geographical areas where it is increasing. It shows the cause and it shows what percentage of growth comes from which events and where. We are not fully convinced that individuals travelling is the cause of a high percentage of cases of the virus being transmitted.

Stuart McMillan: I will make a final point before I move on, convener. Dr Cameron's point about events is a valid one. In recent weeks, there have been some major sporting events, as well as bonfire night events but—and I am talking about my constituency, here—they have not permeated into the figures. There might end up being a pattern that ties in with sporting events being shown on television.

In addition, every week people go to supermarkets to purchase food. One of the reasons why I posed the question in the earlier evidence session, especially in relation to larger supermarkets, is concerns that have been raised with me by a staff member in a supermarket.

Mark Ruskell: Mark Crilly mentioned in his opening statement a move to online learning or blended learning, as the default. I am aware of concerns that in August some institutions, including the University of St Andrews, decided that face-to-face teaching would be the default.

How have the universities and colleges moved on from that, in the past few months? Is there

certainty for students about what they will come back to in January? I am thinking about the fact that, under the Covid regulations, students have the right to cancel their leases within 28 days. Right now many of them might be asking, "Actually, will I be going back to halls in January? What if it's all going to be all online learning? Why don't I just do it from home?"

Matt Crilly: My worry at the moment is that we have not learned the lessons from September and October, so I do not think that students have certainty about what teaching will look like in January. In fact, it seems that for some institutions, especially the universities, there is a financial imperative to have students arrive, because they could otherwise suffer the loss of international tuition fees income and rental income from students. Some institutions are still promising a blended-learning approach, in which students will be expected to have some in-person delivery and some online delivery. We are also worried about that.

You are right that students will be considering now what they want to do after their winter break, including whether they want to go back permanently. However, to make an informed decision about that, they need to know what January will look like; I think that students do not have that certainty, at the moment.

It is really hard for us to plan. We do not know what the pandemic will look like, and we do not know how the virus will spread, but students would really value some medium-term certainty about what their learning will look like. I think that things that can easily be done online should be done online, in order to try to mitigate some transmission.

Mark Ruskell: Are there particular institutions that are hedging their bets and not telling students whether teaching will all be online? Can you, at least, point to universities that are giving students clarity?

Matt Crilly: I am not sure that I want to land individual institutions in it, at the moment. The problem is not necessarily that one institution is doing one thing and another is doing something else; it is very much a sectoral issue.

It seems that we are all in one basket; again, there is talk of blended learning coming in in January. Some institutions are promising that, but I think that students will ask with some degree of scepticism whether it will be possible. Given where the virus is now, I do not know that it will be significantly safer for us to be on campus for in-person delivery come January, at the peak of winter.

Mark Ruskell: Does that mean that clearer guidance is needed from Government?

Matt Crilly: Definitely—we think that there should be strengthening of the guidance. Actually, the new level 4 guidance states that everything that can be done online should be done online, and that only the most essential practical and placement-based learning should take place in person. We think that that is a sensible approach, given that we are in a pandemic.

Mark Ruskell: Thanks for that.

I turn to our business representatives. From the written submissions, we see that it is obviously hoped that we will have an economic recovery. One submission talked about the potential for a K-shaped recovery, in which there will be substantial winners in sectors that are able to adapt and grow, but in which other sectors will really struggle.

I point to larger corporations, such as Tesco. In the first half of this year, between March and August, Tesco's profits went up by nearly 30 per cent. Amazon's profits went up 35 per cent last year; I suspect that they will be a lot higher this year. That is before we even get to the golden quarter for retail sales.

Do the business representatives see growing inequality between the large corporates and the small business sector? If so, what should we be doing about it? Should we be attempting to introduce a windfall tax or a business rates levy on the larger organisations that are, in a way, being incentivised by the current lockdown arrangements because they are selling essential goods and are also able to sell other goods to consumers? I will direct that question at Liz Cameron, to start with.

Dr Cameron: As we all know, different models of doing businesses are being driven by our behaviours. Food and drink sales went up dramatically—they have gone up dramatically over the past 10 days of lockdown, as well. We are not going out and there are restrictions around alcohol in restaurants, so people are buying more alcohol; apparently sales of a particular drink—I was about to say it—have gone up dramatically in the past week. That, in itself, is storing up major problems for us post-Covid—although that is not the remit of the committee.

The ways in which we shop, engage and interact, and how we live and work are driving all the increases and consumer behaviour, and that will continue. Some businesses have increased substantially in the past nine months; information technology, for example, is a sector that has increased, because of our hybrid working models.

As to Mark Ruskell's question about what we do about that, do we leave it to market forces and the free economy that we are in? As the committee has probably gathered, my inclination would be to do that.

However, here is my "but": having said that, I note that small businesses in particular are really struggling, and have been for some time. Many people have already lost not only their jobs and businesses, but the focus of their livelihoods. We need to look at how we can support entrepreneurs to start new businesses. Regardless of whether they are sole traders, in my book entrepreneurs are key.

The big corporates—retailers such as the one that Mr Ruskell mentioned, in particular—have increased their turnover, but they have also changed and have invested in changing their business models. With that, new supply chains have been created.

We therefore need to have a round-table discussion about what the new economy in Scotland will look like in quarter 1 and quarter 2, and about how we can support diversification and the creation of new opportunities for individuals and businesses that have employees whose sector has slumped and cannot, to be frank, be restarted. That discussion could include where funding comes from, although I do not want to go into that right now.

That is what we should focus on and plan for now, to be ready to help to restart our businesses and to give people hope that we can do that. They may not be in the same businesses as they were in before, but it is about giving people hope that they can work with Government and Government officials. We need to look at where business support is focused, the level of investment in it, and whether it is working or we have to revisit where it is being made.

Mark Ruskell: Governments are always going to have limits on how much they can invest in small businesses to support that economic recovery. Would you not want even a small amount of Tesco's £551 million profit from the first six months of this year being spent on small high street retailers?

Dr Cameron: If someone were sitting here representing Tesco, they could say, first, that they have shareholders and, secondly, that they pay their corporation tax to the Government.

That said, there could be an opportunity to have a conversation with Scotland plc to ask what we can now do together that will help to restart the economy, although it might be a short-term lift. We have, for example, the youth guarantee and the kick-start schemes. Many businesses are already supporting those Government initiatives, but not by creating jobs that would not exist otherwise; we were already doing that, because, in our hearts and minds, we believe in our communities. There are different ways in which Scotland plc is

supporting others and communities, and there could be an opportunity to have that conversation.

11:45

Willie Coffey: Matt Crilly, at the beginning, you told us a bit about some mental health research that had been carried out or is perhaps being carried out—I am not sure. Particularly in the run-up to Christmas and new year, which is an important time for everybody, not least all our students, are there any key messages emerging from that that you can share with the committee? What might we be able to do to help?

Matt Crilly: That was research that we commissioned and conducted just prior to the pandemic and which released around three weeks ago. There are some lessons from that, because it points to some of the crunch points for poor mental health among students. Seventy-two per cent of students said that their first year of study was a time when they had concerns about their mental health and wellbeing. What does that mean for us just now? In student accommodation, where we have seen the virus outbreaks, it is predominantly first-year students, who might be 17 or 18 years old. Nearly three quarters of students said that their first year was the time when they struggled with their mental health. That is a big worry going into the winter break for those students in student accommodation.

Around half of students were struggling to cope with workload. Again, more than half had to wait for access to the support that they needed. Students struggle in winter because that is when their assignments are due. Fifty-nine per cent of students said that they turn to their friends for informal mental health support, and 54 per cent of students said that they turn to their family for informal support to get through times with poor mental health.

The move that we are seeing from Scottish Government to try to safely get students home for the winter break, if that is what they want, is positive. The testing that is being done to allow that is very welcome. We ask for funding to support those students who remain in student accommodation and in private flats around campus to ensure that they have access to enhanced mental health and wellbeing support and some sort of social interaction. In normal years, student associations put on events such as Christmas dinners for the students who are left isolated in their accommodation. That will be harder this year, of course, but there are lots of supportive things that we can do.

Willie Coffey: That is very good.

Liz Cameron, we are coming up to the Christmas and new year period and we are in the

second wave of the virus. As a constituency MSP, I was inundated with inquiries from small businesses across Kilmarnock and the Irvine Valley, many of whom said that they did not qualify for any assistance or support as part of the official Government schemes. Has Scottish Chambers of Commerce been able to assess the impact of that? Are we in a better position now, as many parts of Scotland move to level 4, to help those businesses that might have fallen through the gaps between schemes in the first place, so that that does not happen again this time?

Dr Cameron: We have improved. When we entered this situation, big announcements were put out, but I do not think that we fully understood the assets that we have and how fragile some of our businesses are. We have learned from that experience.

However, there have been gaps. In particular, sole traders and businesses such as tourism companies, food suppliers or events consultants who are on their own—of whom there are hundreds or thousands—all fell through such gaps. We lobbied the UK Government about that where it was appropriate, and we also highlighted cases to and lobbied the Scottish Government. In the past couple of weeks, we have had some movement, in that we have managed to get such individuals incorporated into the criteria for certain grants, but there are still gaps.

If we look at the discretionary funding that has been announced, let us be clear about where that will go. Sectors involving one or two-person businesses—for example, small retail or tourism organisations—that are on our high streets and might be family businesses have not had access to any funding whatsoever. For small businesses that look after playgroups and play centres, there is movement in the right direction, but for the past eight months they have had nothing.

I know that the committee is in a rush, but I would like to read from an email that was sent to me by the operator of a hospitality business in the Highlands. He said that his business is now in quite an eerie position, with

“nothing to apply for, no forms to fill in and no battles left to fight. It’s like a sudden fall over the cliff. We all hear what is happening and [are] on the receiving end of the new laws and restrictions, but the focus is on those who are actually in the restricted areas”.

His question is, what about those who are not, as well as being in level 4? We have two or three other such examples, which we are pulling together to present to the Scottish Government.

Therefore there have been gaps, and there are still. For example, it has been announced that taxi drivers, who are a massive group, are now included in the support criteria. However, the

playgroup area employs nearly 5,000 people across Scotland. Such remaining gaps need to be filled quickly. We have been saying that for a long time, during which we have already lost a lot of businesses. When I hear people say that they are working at pace, I am not quite sure what that pace is. Businesses need money now—not in two weeks' time, because they cannot survive if they have to wait until then. As we head into the festive period, we are now at the point when some businesses' hope of a last possibility for them to bring money in has been taken away from them because of the restrictions. We need a reality check on that situation, to see what we can do.

Willie Coffey: Thanks very much for highlighting that, Liz.

Matt Crilly: One of the gaps in the hospitality sector support that the Scottish Government has introduced relates to student associations. I am sure that committee members who have been students will have many fond memories of student union bars. Student unions are charities, so they are excluded from accessing the hospitality sector support. We have heard indirectly that they are suffering financially from not having their traditional levels of bar income, but they are not necessarily eligible to apply for the available support.

Maurice Corry: Dr Cameron, is Scotland's warehouse and delivery network infrastructure coping with the shift to online buying for the festive season?

Dr Cameron: It is coping right now, but gaps are appearing, especially after yesterday's announcement. There could be opportunities in that area if we could get more businesses to diversify. For example, we have an army of taxi drivers. We should be using that resource to fill those gaps. The period leading up to Christmas has always provided a business opportunity, and that area is very much growing. More businesses are putting their stuff online, and we would like to see more small businesses involved in that regard.

On warehousing, we could be putting quite a lot of products in offices that are not being used right now. Businesses that are involved in warehousing and delivery are struggling, but they will get through it, because they are considering other ways to take people on in the short term. They always recruited employees in the short term leading up to the Christmas season, and that has now increased substantially.

Some retailers that are not able to open up are already exploring the possibility of increasing their click-and-collect services, which will give them some ray of hope for increasing that opportunity. Click and collect has an additional role that will be played in the run-up to the festive season.

Maurice Corry: This season and the situation that we are in can be viewed as an opportunity for entrepreneurial members of your organisation.

I come from a business background, and I would say that your ideas are extremely good, Dr Cameron. Have you put them to your members?

Dr Cameron: That is an interesting question. I have not put that idea to our members in the way that I have just presented it to you. Businesses are already making that move themselves. We are quite resilient when we need to be, and we are desperate, so we are looking at every opportunity.

Many businesses have already moved to using click and collect more, and they are moving more stuff online where they have the capacity and competence to do that.

Turning to restaurants, the supply chain and food suppliers, I know that there is a great company down in Ayrshire that has already been involved in the creation of food boxes. It launched its Christmas-in-a-box idea last week, which involves a full Christmas dinner delivered to people's homes. That sort of idea gives businesses a way to bring in some level of income. We are quite resilient.

As I say, I have not put that idea to our members in the way that I have just presented it to you.

Maurice Corry: That is a good idea—it is something that you could put forward.

I turn to Willie Macleod on the question of the festive season. Where are the specific sectors that are falling through the cracks, particularly those that rely on the festive season for making most of their income?

Willie Macleod: In our sector, that is probably felt most acutely in level 4 areas, where businesses are closed and hotels are restricted to accommodating essential travellers and workers only. The cracks are also being experienced by businesses in places where there are travel restrictions and by businesses whose customers are less inclined to—[Inaudible.]—even in level 3 areas.

Christmas will be extremely difficult for businesses in level 4 areas. Many hotels have closed, because they are not getting forward bookings and there is no anticipation of a buoyant festive period. In the other areas, the restrictions on opening hours will have a significant impact, too. Impacts on businesses also impact on customers and their ability to do what they would normally be doing at this time of year.

Maurice Corry: On that basis, is the support there for them? Are they getting support in their time of need?

Willie Macleod: As I think I suggested earlier, the Government has made grant support available to businesses that are legally obliged to close. I made the point earlier that we do not think that that is adequate. In many circumstances, it is not available to businesses that can continue trading but whose viability is so compromised by the restrictions on trading that they might as well close, even though they are not legally obliged to do so.

12:00

It comes down to the adequacy of the support to meet the costs that those businesses are incurring. Many will have done everything that they can to keep their staff on the books, and the extension of furlough has helped with that, but it does not help the business cash flow and it does not help to meet the remaining fixed costs that those businesses are incurring.

Maurice Corry: Thank you; that is super.

My final question is for Adam Stachura. What special communications are you doing for the festive season among your clientele?

Adam Stachura: Throughout lockdown and going into Christmas, we have been doing and looking at doing a range of things. The Age Scotland helpline was scaled up in March to take more than 10 times its usual level of calls, and we got support from the Scottish Government to do that. A lot of that was about signposting and referring people to the support mechanisms that existed through lockdown and beyond.

The level of calls resulting from loneliness and isolation has increased massively. We have a friendship line, which was developed and properly launched in June but which has a big focus on the period going into Christmas; I use Christmas to mean the months of December and January. People can call us on a freephone number—0800 124 4222—to speak to somebody. People we are speaking to have not spoken to anyone in days or weeks. I spoke to somebody a couple of months ago for whom I was the first person they had spoken to all week. It is devastating and heartbreaking to realise that that is the impact of the restrictions. Those communications are going out through media channels and we are looking to get support from members of the Scottish Parliament, members of Parliament and councillors in disseminating that information to their constituents. There will be information about that in due course.

Maurice Corry: Thank you very much.

Annabelle Ewing: Good afternoon. It has been a comprehensive discussion, so I will try not to duplicate anything. I thank all five witnesses for

your time today and for all that you are doing behind the scenes, because I am sure that your lives have gone from fairly to exponentially busy, and it is much appreciated.

My first question is for Liz Cameron and Willie Macleod, in that order. In the past, I have run a small business and I recognise the pain that you both talk about. I have enormous sympathy for that and I note what you have said about support. This committee meeting will be actively listened to and reflected on, and you have made your points extremely well.

I turn to broader issues that we have not really explored. Yes, 11 local authorities in Scotland are at level 4 and 21 are not. Last night, to catch up for my information, I looked at where we are in comparison with Belgium, France, Italy, Spain and Germany. [*Inaudible.*] Spain has been closed and, in France, people get fined €135 if they leave their home without meeting the requirements of the essential purpose for that. Bars and restaurants are closed. In Belgium, no essential shops are open. In hotels, people can have a meal only in their room. We are seeing that right across Europe.

I understand the frustration, but it has to be directed at the pandemic, because there is not such a difference in the way that the virus is presenting in Scotland that we would be in a position to take an entirely different tack to that being taken in many other countries across the European Union.

Dr Cameron: Thank you for your comments acknowledging the work that we are all doing. We appreciate that. I also want to say that, when we come to committees, there is no blame factor. That is not where we are coming from in making our comments. We are not blaming the Scottish Government for the position in which we find ourselves.

You are absolutely right that it is a global pandemic, and we have been watching what is happening in Europe, particularly in France and Germany. In fact, Germany went into its second lockdown way before the United Kingdom and Scotland. You make a valid point about what we could have done differently, if we compare ourselves with other areas in Europe.

I am also looking outside Europe at countries that probably responded faster than countries in Europe and elsewhere, although hindsight is a wonderful thing. Those lessons are there for us to learn, which is why we keep pushing for our forward plan. We were entering a dark tunnel, and nobody knew whether there was any light coming. Nobody knew what was ahead of us. I have to say that Governments and others were very much in a reactive mode, and in some cases, we are still

reacting. We must look ahead, because it is important to learn and to improve on where we are at in Scotland.

We are an exceptionally small nation. Our economy was not as strong as those of our friends, cousins and colleagues in Europe, so we were behind the curve. For us to catch up, post Covid, we need to move faster. I know that I am not answering your question directly, but, looking forward, let us look at countries that brought in mass testing earlier. Let us look at the Liverpool example. That has been criticised by some because only 100,000 people were tested. So what? I want to see somewhere in Scotland doing mass testing. I do not know whether that would be an additional pilot scheme—I do not care what we call it—but we want mass testing to be introduced as soon as possible. Investing in testing has the potential to get us out of this situation faster, while safeguarding against job losses in the areas where that is possible. It is about investing.

We are all talking about the vaccine right now. Does the Scottish Government have a plan? I do not want to wait until other nations in the UK have their plans. Have we got a plan in place? Can it be shared with our communities, so that we understand that the short-term pain might be even shorter if we have the confidence and information to say, “Here’s Scotland’s vaccine plan. It’s going to start on 1 February, and this is how it’s going to take place.”? That has the potential to change the behaviours that we are having to sweep up behind right now, that we cannot control. That is the best answer that I can give you.

Annabelle Ewing: I understand that the health secretary will be making a statement to Parliament tomorrow on the vaccine, so watch this space. Willie Macleod, you have heard what Liz Cameron has said, and the point was raised earlier that there has been a lot of investment by businesses, particularly hospitality businesses, in trying to make premises as safe as practicably possible, which is recognised, but the virus does not really respect that. Having said that, looking forward to next year, we know that we are not going to see our lives go back totally to normal as a result of the vaccine per se. Realistically, there will be a period in which our lives will be a lot better with regard to how much freedom we have, but they will not be quite back to normal. Therefore, investment now is crucial for that period—for next year.

Looking forward, the hospitality and tourism industry has been working on a plan for recovery. It would be interesting to hear from Willie Macleod about a few key points in that plan and about his key asks for what he sees as vital to secure the recovery that we all want to see next year.

Willie Macleod: I will focus on the Scottish tourism recovery task force, which is an industry-based group that looked at how we might move forward as we cope with the current issues from the pandemic and how we might move beyond it while retaining our competitiveness internationally, which will be important. We have a very competitive international hospitality industry and the same applies to tourism. The task force report is due to be considered by the Cabinet later this month or in early December, and it contains a wide range of recommendations about how to help businesses recover—[Inaudible.]—considering future investment levels and, importantly, how we stimulate demand.

Some of the issues in the report are as broad as how we best resource VisitScotland and VisitBritain to promote our countries to the international market to get international tourism to return. That has all but collapsed because of international confidence levels and the problems faced by the aviation industry. To be able to offer a safe product and service to domestic and international consumers will be important. In addition to supporting our industry, which is my job, we will have to support the aviation industry and get the ability to travel back to as near normal as possible, which will depend a lot on testing at airports.

I hope that we are not setting too much store by a vaccine, but if we can get an effective vaccine and effective global vaccine arrangements, that will hasten our return to normal. However, I do not think that anybody anticipates a return to normal in the near future. Our estimates are that it will be well into 2022 before businesses recover.

I also hear about the difficulties of the in-bound travel trade—the tour operators and destination management companies that are an important part of our supply chain in bringing international visitors to the country. I am hearing harrowing tales about how their turnover has dropped, and they do not anticipate any recovery until the second quarter of next year.

I urge the Scottish Government, and all politicians, to have a look at the recovery task force and move at pace to implement its recommendations. Having said that, we recognise that money does not grow on trees and there will have to be priorities.

Annabelle Ewing: Thank you for that comprehensive answer. There are indeed many issues to be considered in relation to hospitality and tourism. I will ask one more question, convener, if I may, of Maureen Sier. I appreciate the other witnesses, but the questions that I was going to ask Matt Crilly and Adam Stachura have been answered, so colleagues have done the job there.

Maureen has raised important issues about faith groups, the importance of faith to people's lives and all the various festivals that are coming up and that, in fact, have been happening under restrictions. We have the—[Inaudible.]—at Christmas, which is important for Christians and non-Christians alike. There have been calls for a 24-hour armistice in churches and so on, but I wonder in relation to the discussions and the planning that is going on among interfaith groups, what concrete ideas are you coming forward with that you could put to Government and that would meet the overarching safety considerations? What ideas do you have to make that work?

12:15

Maureen Sier: Thank you very much for your question, Annabelle. I would like to look back just for a second, if that is okay. Interfaith Scotland had an online festival just last week, which was Scottish interfaith week. Its purpose was to lift the spirits of faith communities, interfaith groups, organisations, and people who were engaging with the festival, which had the theme of connecting. That is a really huge theme in relation to what faith communities do; they connect. They connect with their parishioners, for want of a better word, whether that is through the mosque, the gurdwara, the synagogue, or the churches. They stay connected with people.

I have been listening really intently during the meeting and behaviours or the way that people behave have been mentioned a number of times. Faith communities have a very powerful role to play in getting their message out to the 2.5 million people that they represent—the half of the population who deem themselves to be affiliated with a religious tradition—and helping them to abide by behaviours that are helpful to the country when it comes to keeping people safe.

The Government has also done some simple things, and I think that it should continue. For example, Interfaith Scotland has managed a small grant fund for small places of worship, which are getting less income than usual because people are not going there, and they want to stay open and enable that community connection. That small grant fund has allowed for the cleaning of those vast buildings, and for them to put in place PPE, hand sanitisation, clear signposting and all that kind of thing. A community safety fund is also being rolled out, because, again, when buildings are lying empty, vandalism and all that kind of thing can take place. A lot is already being done.

On what Interfaith Scotland and the faith communities can do, I think that messaging and behaviour are the key things. We need to get the messages out to those communities. There is evidence that the black and minority ethnic

community is negatively impacted by Covid. I think that it is really important to get clear messages out, particularly to minority faith communities with which black and minority ethnic communities engage.

I will touch a tiny bit on travel, because that has been mentioned. One of the things about Christmas, and perhaps all festivals, is that people travel to their families and places of worship. If, for example, people cannot go out of level 4 in the central belt, how do we tell them that they are not going to be with their family at Christmas if their family happens to be in level 3, 2 or 1? What has been said about students applies widely to those in particular levels. There will be a huge cultural expectation that people will be together at the festival period; Hanukkah and Christmas come particularly to mind. If that is not going to happen, what will it be like to deal with that disappointment?

There is something that I want to mention very briefly, although it is a tiny bit off topic, albeit not too far. Scotland is a wealthy nation, compared with the majority. I think that it is the 14th wealthiest nation in the world. There is wealth. For example, I was stunned to hear about the kind of wealth that is available to the multinationals through the huge increases in their profits. Although there might be a little bit of resistance, how can that be redistributed? Faith communities have always had the poor and vulnerable at heart. Ensuring that there is equality of treatment and of access to things, and of just being fair to people is very much the *raison d'être* of faith communities.

I wonder whether something could be done with what I think is extreme excess. There must be a fair way of redistributing it that does not negatively impact on those businesses in a huge way. If they are making profits of £560 million, while small businesses are suffering, there is some imbalance. Perhaps the Christian community is the prophetic voice of religion. Something is out of balance; how do we rebalance it and give people fair access to the wealth that is in Scotland? If we are the 14th wealthiest nation, there is no doubt that somebody somewhere has got that wealth. Looking at redistribution is really important.

Annabelle Ewing: Thank you, Maureen. You end on a thought-provoking proposition, which I am sure is also being listened to carefully elsewhere, including the Scottish Government's finance team.

The Convener: Our final questions come from Shona Robison.

Shona Robison: Most of my questions have already been asked, but I want to pick up on Dr Sier's final point. We all understand the frustrations of businesses and the challenges that

they face. Liz Cameron and Willie Macleod in particular have spoken about the need for more resources for those who are struggling, especially small businesses. However, Willie also made the point that money does not grow on trees. I therefore want to push Liz Cameron a point that Mark Ruskell made earlier.

When we consider who will pay for our recovery, it surely cannot be right for the whole burden to fall on individual taxpayers. There will have to be a proportionate contribution from the large corporations that have made the most money during the pandemic. I understand that Liz Cameron represents a number of organisations and might be reluctant to come out explicitly in favour of that suggestion. However, it would be interesting to know two things. The first is what she thinks her organisation's small business members would think of that as a way of supporting their recovery as we move forward. Secondly, would she be willing to canvass those members about balance in the matter of who should pay? I will be interested to hear her comments on that.

Dr Cameron: You asked whether I would canvass our members on your suggestion, which we might say is about equality and sharing wealth. Such an agenda item has been out there for a wee while and has been moving higher up the priority list. At one end of the scale, some of our corporate members who might be making millions—and others who might still be making lots of money—might say that they have already contributed through paying corporation tax. That is one view—please stick with me on that for a moment. If they were sitting here, they would probably tell the committee that they also contribute greatly to their communities in a variety of ways, such as through creating or maintaining jobs and supporting employees, communities and charities. The starting and stopping points for that list could be quite long. In creating supply chains, many of them already develop and support buy local campaigns. Ensuring that more of their supplies come from local suppliers helps small businesses, which in turn helps them to build up their own businesses.

I will take your suggestion on board, Shona. I will ask the question and put the idea out there. I will ask how our corporate members feel about it. As I said in my response, there is a conversation to be had. I am always one for encouraging, engaging and working in partnership for the greater good of Scotland's communities. Local chambers of commerce are central levers for local communities. Although we represent businesses, we also represent the third sector and a number of other organisations, so we contribute greatly to our communities.

That suggestion is worth discussing. I will take it away, ask the question and enter into discussion as we move forward. There is something there. Whether it should be, for example, a one-line question about tax bands—such as whether a proportion of corporate members' earnings of X amount over a profitable margin should go to X, Y and Z—is an interesting concept. It will be worth discussing that to find out whether it would be the best way forward in growing our overall economy. Alternatively, if we are talking about having new tax bands, would such a potential move impact on investment coming into Scotland and on Scottish businesses' competitiveness?

There is a lot in that question. Although I have not given a direct yes or no answer, I have said that there is a discussion to be had. I will canvass our members, because we will need to do so. If we are looking in that direction of travel we must consider carefully the potential positive and negative impacts.

Shona Robison: I thank Liz Cameron for her positive response. Those are the big discussions that we will all have to have. I recognise what she said about some big businesses having protected local supply chains and looked after their staff, but I point out that not all have done so. I put on the record that there have been big differences in how companies have responded to the pandemic, particularly in regard to their workforces. That is all from me, convener.

The Convener: I have a final question, which is for Dr Maureen Sier. I ask for your reflections on our approach to places of worship over the festive period, given that in the normal course they are busy, with a lot of people attending services. The answer might depend on where we are with restrictions at that stage, but do you have any observations on that?

I note that your computer appears to have frozen, so you might not be able to answer that question, but I would be interested to hear your closing reflections if you are still online. If not, we can leave it. Can you hear me?—*[Interruption.]*—I do not think that Dr Sier can hear me, so we will leave the question there. Perhaps we could catch up on it offline.

I thank all our witnesses for their evidence and for giving us their time. That concludes our meeting. In due course the clerks will advise members of the arrangements for our next meeting, which will take place next week. I again express my grateful thanks to all our witnesses for a really interesting session.

Meeting closed at 12:27.

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