



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

COVID-19 Committee

Thursday 10 December 2020

Session 5



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COVID-19 COMMITTEE
24th 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)
*John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
*Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
*Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Gordon Dewar (Edinburgh Airport)
Robbie Drummond (CalMac Ferries)
Alex Hynes (Scotland's Railway)
Professor Jason Leitch (Scottish Government)
Michael Russell (Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, Europe and External Affairs)
Alastair Wilson (Wilson's of Rhu)
Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Sigrid Robinson

LOCATION

Virtual Meeting

Scottish Parliament

COVID-19 Committee

Thursday 10 December 2020

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:00]

Interests

The Convener (Donald Cameron): Good morning, and welcome to the 24th meeting in 2020 of the COVID-19 Committee. At its plenary session on Thursday 3 December, the Parliament agreed to changes to the committee's membership, which means that Shona Robison has moved on to another parliamentary role. I put on record the committee's thanks and appreciation to Shona for her valuable contribution to our work this year.

I welcome our new member, John Mason MSP, to the committee. John, do you have any registrable interests that are relevant to the committee's remit that you wish to declare?

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): Thanks, convener. I am very pleased to be on the committee. The only thing that I will mention is that my mother is in a care home and I have power of attorney for her.

Covid-19 Restrictions (Winter)

09:01

The Convener: Item 2 is on the social and economic impact of Covid-19 restrictions over winter. This morning's evidence session forms part of the committee's work on the Scottish Government's preparedness for key issues that lie ahead in its response to Covid-19. The purpose of the evidence session is twofold. First, it is to hear views on the economic impact that the restrictions are having on the travel and transport sector more generally, and what difficulties the sector might face as a result. Secondly, it is to hear views on the travel and transport industries' preparedness for the increased travel that will arise from the upcoming easing of restrictions over Christmas, from 23 to 27 December 2020, and the impact that that might have on operations.

We will take evidence from Gordon Dewar, chief executive of Edinburgh Airport Ltd; Robbie Drummond, managing director of CalMac Ferries Ltd; Alex Hynes, managing director of Scotland's Railway; and Alastair Wilson, director of Wilson's of Rhu Ltd. I welcome all the witnesses to the meeting.

I invite each witness, in the order that I read out their names, to make a brief opening statement of up to two minutes or so.

Gordon Dewar (Edinburgh Airport): Thank you for the opportunity to present evidence to the committee. To begin with, I thought that it would be useful to give an overview of the current situation at Edinburgh airport. Everyone will be aware that it has been an incredibly tough time. Unfortunately, our industry felt the impact of Covid-19 before many others did, and it will undoubtedly be one of the last to recover.

Where do we stand? Normally, we are Scotland's busiest airport, with almost 15 million people having passed through our doors in 2019. Today, we are running at about 95 per cent down from that; we are operating at 5 per cent of our normal level of demand. We are flying fewer flights with fewer airlines to many fewer destinations.

As a result, we have unfortunately had to make about a third of our workforce—about 250 people—redundant, through absolutely no fault of their own. Those people have contributed to eight years of some of the fastest growth in Europe. If we apply that across the campus, where, in 2019, about 7,000 staff worked across many companies, that is likely to equate to more than 2,000 job losses already. That is before we go into the depths of winter and even more difficult times.

We face losses of about £16 million this year. We have had to borrow significant amounts to stay open, but we will need to service that additional debt in the coming years, so the problem will not go away when we get back to something approaching normality. We estimate that we will see a total of between 3 million and 3.5 million passengers in 2020, and we forecast that the figure for next year will be, at best, 7 million or thereabouts, which would be less than half the figure from 2019.

Despite all that—this might come as a surprise to the committee and the Government—I have not come here today to ask anything of Government. Instead, we have come with an offer of help. The offer is that we will use our expertise to assist in any way that we can to bring Scotland out of this desperate crisis.

We have already helped throughout the crisis. We stayed open to help people to get home to Scotland and to leave, when we would have lost a lot less money if we had closed. We helped to reunite families and got medical supplies to those who needed them. We helped to get Amazon and Royal Mail parcels and letters to where they needed to be, in order to keep things moving as best we could. We also hosted a Covid testing site.

We want to continue to do our bit, and we have offered to help the Government to design and deliver a vaccination programme that delivers at volume and at pace. Vaccine delivery is the only route out of the crisis, and speed is absolutely everything. In every week that goes by, businesses are going out of business, and people cannot plan for the future. However, I think that there will be another missed opportunity and that we will not see any shared ambition for the pace and scale that we believe are essential and possible if we set our minds to it.

I will give an example. At the start of the year, in the early weeks of the pandemic, we wrote to the First Minister to offer support and assistance, but that offer was simply not taken up. We have spent the past three months—nearly four months now—trying to agree on and implement a robust aviation testing regime. Hurdle after hurdle has been thrown at us and put in our way, and we are now in the bizarre position of possibly having to submit a freedom of information request to see a submission to ministers that contains—we hope, at least—a proposed solution that is based on a study that we and AGS Airports have sponsored and funded. We are still talking while the rest of the world has already acted.

The response that is required to the medical and economic crisis is simply too important for the Government not to accept offers of help. I am not speaking about Edinburgh airport or even the

aviation industry; I am speaking about the whole country. I know that many private sector companies are willing to step in and help in any way that they can, but we are simply not being given the opportunity to do so, despite our best efforts.

It really is in all our interests to help each other, pull together, and navigate our way out of a horrific pandemic and towards the long-awaited recovery. I am sure that I am not alone when I say that we have found the Government to be very difficult to help. We can only hope that the response to our offer of help in vaccine delivery is more welcoming and open than it has been in our experience of other matters to date, particularly testing.

I understand that the committee will have a number of questions that it would like me to answer. I would be very happy to do so after the presentations.

The Deputy Convener (Monica Lennon): I thank Gordon Dewar for his opening remarks. We are having some technical issues, so our convener is not able to chair the meeting at this point. As deputy convener, I ask Robbie Drummond, who is the managing director of CalMac Ferries, to give an opening statement before we go to Alex Hynes.

Robbie Drummond (CalMac Ferries): Good morning, everyone. We have already made a submission to the committee, so I will keep my remarks short.

Our submission focuses on the impact during the Christmas period. I am pleased to say that we believe that we will be able to accommodate demand during that period and that we have contingency plans in place should there be any disruption because of bad weather.

I would be happy to talk later about the impact on CalMac, how we have managed through the process, and how we see the future building. In the meantime, I pay tribute to the professionalism and commitment of all our staff and to the role that they have played in keeping our tremendously important lifeline services going. I am immensely proud of them all.

Alex Hynes (Scotland's Railway): Good morning, everyone, and thank you for inviting Scotland's Railway, which is a partnership that involves the ScotRail Alliance and Network Rail Scotland, to participate in this meeting.

Coronavirus has fundamentally changed our railway, as it has every aspect of our lives. During these tough times, the priority of our amazing staff has been to keep people—doctors, nurses, care workers and other key workers—moving across the country. Right now, our focus is on the new timetable, which will come into effect from Sunday,

and the upcoming travel window, as people consider visiting their loved ones this Christmas.

Scotland's Railway is doing all that it can to bring people together. Although we do not expect a huge spike in passenger numbers this Christmas, we have plans in place to provide extra capacity if it is needed. Our gold command centre will monitor weather forecasts in anticipation of any bad weather and analyse stations and trains for any increase in travelling customers.

From Sunday, we will provide around 85 per cent of pre-pandemic capacity for what is currently just 15 per cent of pre-pandemic passenger numbers. We are therefore confident that our service will continue to deliver, but we also need customers to play their part. We are asking customers to plan their journeys in advance, to check the latest information for their journey before they travel, and to leave slightly longer for their journeys.

Looking beyond Christmas, we are working hard to be ready to welcome back more customers when restrictions are eased for good. Customers will, of course, have different demands compared with those before the pandemic. Whether it is new ticket types or timetables, smarter ways of delivering improvement works or better technology, we know that reform of the railways needs to match the transport expectations of potential customers and, of course, the economic reality. The pressure on public finances will mean that all parts of the rail industry—the operators, Network Rail, the Government, supply chains, trade unions and others—will need to work much harder to deliver a more cost-effective railway.

Those are all big challenges that our industry faces, but I reassure the committee that we are working hard to meet them, despite the uncertainty. The work that the railway in Scotland does, whether it is investing in our people, growing our economy or connecting communities, should never be underestimated. Now, more than ever, we are ready to play our part in the economic recovery and to make the case for continued investment in Scotland's railway.

The Convener: Thank you. I briefly lost connection between the end of Gordon Dewar's statement and the start of Robbie Drummond's, so I apologise for that.

I ask Alastair Wilson to give his statement.

Alastair Wilson (Wilson's of Rhu): Thank you for the opportunity to attend today's meeting. Wilson's of Rhu is a small family-run bus and coach operator that operates 12 vehicles. We do a mix of work including providing local bus services, home-to-school transport, works contracts and private coach hire, much of which is tourism related.

At the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, our workload was decimated. Patronage on our local bus services fell dramatically, forcing a major cut in services. Two thirds of the works contracts stopped, schools closed and, day after day, we received cancellations amounting to the loss of a six-figure sum relating to all our coach work for the normally busy summer season. That position has continued until this point.

In relation to bus operations, the Covid support grant has been most welcome. It has protected vital rural bus services, assisted in getting services back to normal frequency and allowed drivers to be brought back from furlough. The grant is due to end on 17 January. Quite simply, services are unsustainable without that support.

In the first instance, there is a need to extend the support until, at the very least, the end of the financial year. The impact that Covid has had on bus patronage is such that we are likely to require support beyond the end of the financial year to protect our services and those of other operators. With social distancing, capacity is essentially down to 50 per cent of pre-Covid levels. The introduction of lockdown levels has had a further effect on the drop in patronage. While social distancing measures are in place, it is likely that the bus network will require support.

Government communications are essential as we come out of lockdown. People have had a strong message to avoid public transport and coach services. We hope that the Scottish Government will be proactive in encouraging people back on to those modes of transport.

The coach sector has been decimated by Covid-19 and has received no specific support. Coach operators have been either excluded from or largely unsuccessful in accessing wider funds. The sector is on a cliff edge and, without support, many more operators will cease to trade. From April to October this year, we have carried out only 4.2 per cent of the coach work that we carried out during the same period last year. This month, we have less than 1 per cent of the bookings that we had in December last year.

I must add that, yesterday, there was the announcement that £6 million will be made available to coach operators. That is most welcome. Although the details of the scheme are yet to be announced, I encourage the Scottish Government to work closely with the Confederation of Passenger Transport to ensure that money from the scheme is distributed sensibly.

We do not see the lifting of travel restrictions at Christmas having much effect on what we do, but there is the high possibility that the rail network, for example, will be stretched throughout the period.

Coaches might well be called on to provide vital links in order to supplement or even replace rail journeys.

09:15

The Convener: Thank you to all our witnesses for those statements. We turn to questions and I begin with a question for Gordon Dewar on quarantine and airport testing. There has been a suggestion—I think at United Kingdom Government level—to shorten the quarantine period. Do you have any reflections on that? Also, I ask for an update on airport testing. What has the uptake been on your fit-to-fly programme?

Gordon Dewar: Throughout the summer, there was a lot of discussion about the effectiveness of the quarantine policy and alternatives for it. Quarantine is, in effect, a travel ban because almost no one can find a sensible reason to travel if they must self-isolate for 14 days at the end of it. The effect has been that almost nobody flies and, therefore, the routes cannot fly because they are not cost-effective. We need to find an alternative to that.

The English proposal, or I should say the UK Government proposal that will apply in England, is for a test after five days. There would be five days of quarantine and then, if a traveller passes a polymerase chain reaction—PCR—test, they would be released into the community. The issue is that five days is not much better than 14. Thinking in particular about the economic benefits of inbound tourism, the idea that somebody, even if they are coming for two weeks, would spend five days in a hotel waiting to be released is just not practical. In that sense, we do not believe that the five-day regime adds any great value in commercial or economic terms. I do not think that it is the way forward.

We have been working with Government for three to three and a half months on an alternative proposal for a double-testing regime. The tests would happen on arrival and five days later, without quarantine between them. We have worked on that using Government statistics and modelling, which shows that the regime would not only be safer than the UK Government's five-day test to release scheme, but safer than quarantine.

The point is that quarantine does not work. People either do not travel, which is an entirely different policy, or those who travel do not observe the quarantine, which is, therefore, not having the desired effect. The best estimates for observation of quarantine are 65 per cent, and anecdotally the Government admits that we are probably operating at closer to 20 per cent. Quarantine is not the answer, either economically or in effectively controlling the disease.

We are ready and we have put in a testing regime at Edinburgh so that people have that choice. Ironically, the test is therefore able to meet the requirements of every other Government in Europe or further afield. We are servicing their requirements for a clear test prior to departure. Although we have that capability in Scotland, we are still the only country in Europe that is not using a testing regime to support flying and make it safe again.

The Convener: Thank you for that. I have a slightly different question for our other witnesses in relation to ferries, railways and coaches. To what extent do they think that there will be a great change in use by the public? Also, will they comment specifically on social distancing measures and issues of overcrowding? Do they think a high degree of public compliance will be achieved?

Robbie Drummond: We have well-defined protocols for managing passengers through our ports and vessels and we believe that we have good processes for keeping our staff and passengers safe. We are currently running at around 10 to 15 per cent capacity, so we are carrying small volumes on our vessels. That is about half of what we would normally run at this time of year.

We anticipate that it will increase a little during the Christmas period but we do not think that it will introduce any pressures in our ports or on our vessels that we cannot manage. Our biggest concern is possible disruption caused by bad weather, because that might cause a bit more stress for particular sailings. However, we have processes and protocols in place to deal with that eventuality.

Alex Hynes: We review Christmas demand every day. We are looking at whether people will travel and, if they will, how they will travel and when they will travel, but all the research suggests that people will travel less this Christmas than at a normal Christmas.

Around 5 per cent of travel will be on the train and we expect rail travel to be particularly prevalent before the Christmas window and after it. We have spent the past nine months physically distancing the production of our railway and all the customer-facing areas. We are asking customers to follow the five rules of safer travel to keep themselves and our staff safe. That is something that we will keep under review every day before, during and after the Christmas window by looking at sales data.

We will look at how railway demand changes tomorrow as restrictions are eased in some parts of the central belt and, if we need to make trains longer or add additional services, that is what we

will do. Our command centre will be monitoring that 24/7 and our customer service centres will be using our 6,500 closed-circuit television cameras to make sure that we are able to respond if we see any issues that cause us concern.

We are on high alert, but we think that our customers can travel safely and with confidence, and we will do the best job that we can for our passengers within the Christmas window.

Alastair Wilson: We have virtually no coach bookings. We have one booking between now and the end of the year. Passenger numbers are easily managed in coach work because we know who is travelling. It is a wee bit more difficult to estimate for bus services, but we do not expect any increase in patronage over the Christmas period. Historically, patronage would generally be lower between 23 to 27 December with services stopping on Christmas day and services on boxing day being reduced. At the moment, we are carrying around 50 per cent of our pre-Covid capacity, which at 1m distancing is feasible on local service buses. Overall, we do not see any rise in passenger numbers happening.

The Convener: I have no more questions at this stage, so I turn to Monica Lennon.

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): I am glad that the convener is back with us. I am grateful to our witnesses for their written comments and opening remarks. I have been scribbling notes because my questions have changed, now that I have heard witnesses' opening remarks.

First, I am sorry to hear about the impact on Alastair Wilson's business and on people in the sector. You said that rail could be stretched and that, in that situation, coach companies could be called on, but that it is vital that your industry gets support. It is great to hear about the £6 million fund, but I understand your point that you need to get your fair share of it quickly.

From listening to Alex Hynes, it sounds as though Scotland's Railway is relatively confident that rail will be able to cope.

I will ask questions of both of you first. Does Alex Hynes accept that rail might struggle? I also ask Alastair Wilson how quickly coach provision could be mobilised if that were to be the case. Alex has talked about modelling that is being done. Could I get a bit more clarity on that, please?

Alex Hynes: Yes. This Christmas, 99 per cent of the rail network is open. As I mentioned in my opening remarks, we are operating about 85 per cent of seats for about 15 per cent of normal demand, so we could accommodate double, triple or quadruple that amount of demand.

However, it is clear that we need to be alive to the risk from having large numbers of passengers, which is why we are establishing our gold command, and why we will make trains longer and will operate additional train services, if we need to. We have spare resources. We are in the business of running trains; when we have a planned disruption or, indeed, an unplanned disruption, a dedicated team in our control centre arranges rail replacement transport for our customers, as we do in normal scenarios. The bus and coach industry helps the railway industry when we need it.

Those are all established processes that we use during bad weather or planned engineering work, and they will continue throughout the Christmas period, albeit that we will be on higher alert than normal.

Alastair Wilson: We operate only a small amount of rail replacement. We are called on from time to time, and can be mobilised very quickly. It is not unusual for us to get a phone call in the middle of the night—the call would come to me. As with all other coach operators, our phone is on 24/7. It is not unusual for us to get a call at midnight from someone who is looking for a coach to be positioned somewhere at 6 am, and that can be achieved. We can get a phone call at any time of the day, and we have often replied within 15 minutes and been at a local station within half an hour.

Monica Lennon: So, you are constantly on call. What additional measures are being taken to protect staff during a period in which we could see very high travel demand, compared with what we have been used to recently? I appreciate that Alastair Wilson will probably have to step up and do lot of that work himself.

I also have a question for Alex Hynes. Have there been discussions between the Scottish Government and ScotRail about the need to put on additional services? Have additional services been requested?

I emphasise that the question about staff is about managing public expectations and behaviour. People also need to be called on to do shifts at very short notice. I appreciate that that might happen in normal years, but what will that look like and how will it be managed in this Christmas period?

Alastair Wilson: On managing staff, the buses and the coaches are a wee bit different. To protect staff on buses, there are temporary screens around the drivers, which avoid their having to wear face masks behind the wheel for a full shift. They have the option of wearing masks for additional protection.

On the coach side, seats are marked off so that nobody sits within 2m of the driver; the front row of

seats is marked as being out of use. The drivers wear face masks, hand sanitiser is in all the coaches, and measures are in place to do what we can to protect the staff.

Alex Hynes: In the rail industry, one thing that has characterised our approach throughout the Covid pandemic has been partnership. We quickly established our rail recovery task force, which comprises Transport Scotland, ScotRail and Network Rail Scotland, to navigate our way through the pandemic and our response to it. Ensuring that our staff and our customers are safe has been at the heart of our approach.

One of the task force's working groups deals with partnership working. Trade unions have therefore also been the heart of our approach. Everything that is done between the rail industry and the Government is done hand in glove. Our staff and trade unions are working in partnership with us. I chair a twice-weekly call, in which we plan our response to Covid. Therefore, Transport Scotland is, in essence, part of the decision-making process. We do the work in consultation with staff representatives, and we make a recommendation to the Scottish Government, which says yea or nay.

Since March, we have continually refined and tweaked our approach to ensure that we can continue to operate services for people who need to travel, and to keep our customers and staff safe. That has been our approach to date, and it has been successful. It will also be our approach in the coming weeks and months.

09:30

Monica Lennon: I sensed from Gordon Dewar's opening remarks a real sense of frustration. You made reference to missed opportunities, hurdles, the lack of a written response from the First Minister and the fact that the pace and scale of the vaccination programme were not as ambitious as you would have liked.

Many committee members also want us to do much more on testing—specifically for aviation. Can Gordon Dewar return to that and say exactly what the impact on your industry is of the absence of a robust testing regime? If you were to get a response from the First Minister today, what would you like it to say? You might also want to comment on the Christmas peak situation, but I would be grateful if you could address those questions first.

Gordon Dewar: The issue with testing is that we are at a standstill, while the rest of the world is moving forward. That is disappointing because, as we have demonstrated in the report that we shared with Government advisers and which we believe has now gone to ministers—at least in some format—testing people is safer than what we

are doing. We are not suggesting that we need to take more risks in order to look after the economy; we are saying that we can make the current situation safer and start our recovery towards some sort of normality.

I will explain why that is urgent. We are talking about demand over Christmas increasing from 5 per cent of normal demand to 10 per cent of normal demand. I am not worried about our ability to provide that. What worries me is whether we will have an industry at all by next summer, if we do not do very different things.

If we got the green light today to put our testing regime in place, realistically, we would not be ready until March to do volume testing, which would be 40,000 tests a day, if we are to get back to normal levels of demand. In the space of three months, we would be trying to deliver the levels of testing capacity that the Government has not managed to deliver in eight months. That is the level of ambition that we need, if we are to get the industry back up and running.

Of course, we hope that the vaccine replaces that, so we need to be able to signal that we are ambitious about that as well—I will come back to that later—because airlines are planning now for next summer. We are going to be competing for a much-reduced fleet, because airlines across Europe have made massive cuts. They will come to where they think they will get the best support and the best return on their investment, and they are fighting for their survival.

Even before the crisis, we were the least cost-effective country in the world, because of our taxation regime. We have, arguably, had one of the worst-managed Covid crises in Europe, if we judge it by any of the statistics for levels of infection and deaths, and we are now the slowest in responding to aviation and tourism. Yesterday, the First Minister called for people not to book their summer holidays for next year—we now have the First Minister campaigning against our industry. If I were an airline, I would say, "Let's forget about the UK next year", and I would certainly say that we should forget about putting in any of our faster start-up or our focus on the UK. That is all before I get on to Brexit.

We have a huge opportunity because, apparently, this country is ahead in scoping out and delivering on the vaccine, but the plans to deliver the vaccine are woefully inadequate in terms of making a difference. I sit on the Scottish Tourism Alliance, and I worry most about the tourism industry because many businesses are family businesses and the sector is the largest employer in Scotland. Normally, those businesses struggle to get through a five-month winter. They are already in a 17-month winter, because the summer was, in effect, written off—it is worse than the worst winter

to date. Unless the vaccine is deployed by early summer and late spring, we will be facing a 29-month winter. Very few companies in the sector will survive that. Even if travel restrictions have gone by 2022, there will be nothing to service that—there will be no reason to come to Scotland.

Monica Lennon: Thank you; you have spoken very much to the point and have not minced your words.

You have criticised the First Minister for her comments about not booking a summer holiday. Last week, I think, I heard Professor Jason Leitch suggesting that people should not book anything unless they know that they can get their money back. Do you not accept that they are simply following the best available public health advice? Surely the First Minister is not trying to do your industry in. Is there not a middle ground, somewhere? What else would you expect the First Minister to say?

Gordon Dewar: What I expect from the First Minister is to hear how to get the vaccine rolled out in time for next summer, so that we do not have to worry about that. We are talking, and Edinburgh Airport has offered assistance both as a site and, which is probably more important, through people who have expertise in passenger flows and volume movements.

We have looked at the designs for delivering vaccine roll-out. They are woefully inadequate. As things stand, they will not deliver wider vaccination capability until the back end of next year. To put that in context, there is no attempt even to start mass drive-through vaccination centres until February.

I genuinely think that it is extremely probable that, come March, vaccines—potentially multiple vaccines—will be in fridges in Scotland, but there will be no method of delivering them. People will still be dying of Covid and there will be no prospect of taking away travel restrictions. If the First Minister is assuming that the vaccine is not going to be delivered, she is probably right to tell people not to go on holiday, because we will be one of the few countries that are left with extremely strict transport restrictions—simply because we will not have delivered vaccination.

Monica Lennon: Thank you. The committee will be looking at the vaccination strategy next week, so your evidence today is good to have on the record.

Finally, before I move on—I know that other colleagues need to get in—do you want to say something about the Christmas period and peak demand?

Gordon Dewar: Yes. I do not want to be flippant, but moving from 5 per cent capacity to 10

per cent is not a problem. We can do that. It is quite a depressing challenge. We have to face such challenges all the time. Last week, we had snow and, despite huge numbers of our staff being on furlough, we managed to deal with that very well. I am therefore very confident that we can deal with such an increase.

I urge the committee to think more about the future, rather than about the immediate challenges, which are not very significant for the transport industry because demand is so low that a small blip, in relative terms, really does not touch the sides when it comes to commercial or operational reality.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): Good morning. I want to ask about the medium to long term, and, in particular, what kind of recovery you would like for your sectors. I am mindful, from looking at the statistics, that every sector has seen a massive drop—a collapse, in many ways—in patronage over the past few months. That is obviously to do with the restrictions that are in place, but it is also due to changing patterns. More people are working at home, and there is perhaps greater reliance on personal transport than there is on public transport. What trends do you think are going to stick? How will you respond to those, and what do your business strategies therefore look like, for the medium term?

What does the recovery or relaunch of your sectors look like, for you? You have to persuade people to get back to using your services again. I have not been on a train for months, but I am looking forward to getting back on one. What is your offering to your customer base, as we start and move through the roll-out phase of vaccination and there is light at the end of the tunnel?

We will start with Alex Hynes, although I am happy to hear everyone's views.

Alex Hynes: That is a great question. The honest answer is that nobody knows what the future will look like. As Gordon Dewar said, we do not even know when we will get the green light from public health authorities to return to some sort of normality—we do not know whether that will be in the spring, the summer or the autumn.

We think that coronavirus will have accelerated trends that were already happening. For example, in Britain, prior to coronavirus, rail patronage had never been higher. However, season-ticket journeys were 14 per cent down from their peak, because the product mix was changing, and Monday to Friday commuting was becoming less prevalent.

We are all expecting passenger demand to take some years to return to pre-coronavirus levels. If and when it does so, the market is likely to be

different to the one that we had prior to 23 March. For example, we are expecting commuting to be lower than it was. That market might never recover, given that we have given the whole world a crash course in video conferencing, and commuting has essentially now become a discretionary activity.

We can expect leisure to be a bigger part of our market. Since March, Saturday has often been our busiest day on Scotland's railway, which would have been unheard of prior to coronavirus. We need to think about what services we offer to customers—the timetable—and what products we offer in terms of fares and ticketing. We are working on some exciting proposals; recently, we have gone out with a special offer for students. However, there is no point in us, as an industry, going out to try to generate customer numbers and revenue until we get the final green light from the public health authorities. At the moment, the public health restrictions, more than anything else, are driving rail patronage.

Mark Ruskell: We will move on to the bus industry. The changes that are planned, such as an extension of concessionary travel, are difficult now, given the restrictions on public transport. What are your views on the relaunch of the bus sector in the months to come?

Alastair Wilson: Ultimately, concessionary travel is way down in numbers, even compared with the fare-paying passengers. As Alex Hynes said, nobody knows what is coming. Due to the changes, such as people working from home, I do not think that numbers will ever get back to what they were. I have spoken to office owners who believe that working from home works quite well, and they do not know if they will reopen their offices. Therefore, I do not know whether passenger numbers will ever get back to what they were.

A strong message to avoid public transport and only use it for essential journeys has been put out there, so the message that buses and coaches are safe modes of transport needs to get back out there, to build up passenger confidence.

Mark Ruskell: Who should lead that? Should it be Government or the industry? What will you look for when we are the end of the current situation?

Alastair Wilson: The message that buses and coaches are safe modes of transport needs to come from Government. So far, the Government has put out the message that public transport is not to be used other than for essential journeys, so the message needs to go back out that they are a safe mode of transport. Tests have been carried out, and there are statistics that show that public service buses are clean—no germs were found on them. They are a cleaner mode of transport than

those in many other industries. We have in place a thorough sanitising process. Other bus and coach companies throughout the country are doing the same. We have machinery to sanitise vehicles daily, and some vehicles are sanitised twice a day; for example, after every school journey. We have a clean, safe mode of transport, and that message needs to get out there.

Mark Ruskell: I will ask the same question with regard to ferries and airports. In the medium term, what do you see as the key elements of the recovery and relaunch of your sectors?

09:45

Robbie Drummond: As the committee can imagine, it has been an exceptionally challenging period for CalMac. However we are fortunate in that we have support through our Transport Scotland contract. Our concern is really about what the medium term into next summer will look like and how the tourism businesses on our islands will recover. Our strategy will be to work with the local marketing organisations, VisitScotland and our communities to support that recovery at a pace that those businesses and those islands will be comfortable with.

There is a degree of optimism in the ferry market on the islands that the current emerging trends, including staycations, wilderness seeking and eco-conscious tourism, may increase local travel. However, that is very much dependent on the roll-out of the vaccine and on travel restrictions being lifted so that people believe that they can book with confidence and travel safely into the summer period. Our concern is about how we get that recovery going and how the island businesses can be supported to have a successful summer.

Gordon Dewar: The other speakers have hit it on the head. First, we need to get rid of the restrictions, as there is nothing to market until we have done that. Then we will need to listen to the consumer. Consumer patterns will have changed and as Alex Hynes has said, it is impossible to predict what they will be. However, the fundamentals of why people travel have not changed, whether they are off to see family, on a leisure break or a business trip. There is no doubt in my mind that the weekly trips down to London for a few meetings will be reduced, however, that will not stop people from wanting to go on sales trips, sign deals, launch products and so on. Travel patterns will be different, but the fundamentals will be the same. Consumers just need to be reassured that it is safe to travel. They certainly do not need to be told that they should not travel, which is the current environment.

We need to get rid of the restrictions, express confidence in the fact that people can travel

safely—which can be the case very quickly—and think about how Scotland or the UK could stand out from the crowd and do better. The pace of the recovery and some competitive advantage will be hugely important. In my industry, that could include things such as considering an air passenger duty holiday to try to encourage the airlines with their reduced fleets to look at the UK more favourably, which will be massively important. If we are at the back of the queue, there will be nothing left to compete for, which is the biggest worry.

The pace of the recovery and the reassurance that safety management is in place will be key. Consumers will then decide for themselves how they want to spend their money.

Mark Ruskell: Finally, I will ask about public financial support for your sectors. We saw conditionality being applied to public financial support quite early on in the Covid crisis. For example, the French state invested in Air France on the condition that that operator would not undercut the French rail TGV services. We have seen something similar in countries that rely on rail. For example, Germany decided to alter the framework of rail user rights at the same time that it bailed out its rail industry.

Have there been any discussions about conditionality of public financial support for your sectors? Obviously, a lot of public money is going into keeping your sectors afloat at the moment.

Alex Hynes: At the height of lockdown, ScotRail was carrying only 5 per cent of our normal customers, yet we continued to provide a service for the entire rail network in Scotland, and we have been keen to protect things such as first and last trains, wherever possible. The additional funding that we have received from the Scottish Government has enabled us to keep operating vital services that key workers rely on, and keep our employees in work too.

Mark Ruskell: Are there any views from other sectors on that?

Gordon Dewar: We have not really had any direct sectoral support at all. To be fair, we got help from the council with our rates relief, which was very welcome and was approved by the Scottish Government. I would argue that that was reasonable, given that rates are meant to be a reflection of the commercial value of a business and we did not have any commercial value during that period—we continue to be underwater, commercially. The other big assistance that we got was the waiving of the police costs that we pay separately in addition to our business rates. Again, there was no service for the police to provide because the airport was all but closed. That was

very helpful and I was very impressed with the pace of response on that.

However, that does not really address what I would call sectoral support. We have not had direct subsidy to keep things running. We are not asking for that; we are asking for the Government to create the conditions for recovery so that the conditions for the airlines are more favourable and we can look at other bits of the supply chain more favourably, such as the handling companies. Thankfully, none of those companies have folded yet but are we ready to step in if we have lost the ability to carry out handling in our airports? That is an issue that applies to all the airports across Scotland.

We are looking for greater engagement and more underwrites in case things go wrong that have not yet gone wrong—there is still a high risk of that happening. More importantly, we want the Government to start to signal now, for next summer, how it will support the recovery of airlines coming back to connect Scotland to the rest of the world. Those industries that rely on us, particularly the tourism industry, have been very vocal in supporting that, but we have not seen any indication of that so far.

Robbie Drummond: We have received significant support from Transport Scotland. At the height of the pandemic, our customers were down to about 5 per cent of what they normally are, so we faced a significant deficit in revenue. However, we were paid by Transport Scotland to keep the services going and were able to keep lifeline services going to the islands, which was a fortunate position to be in. There was no conditionality attached to that.

One of the concerns of CalMac as a business is that, when the restrictions are lifted next summer, we are going to be facing a very challenging financial environment. We are going to have to be very careful about our costs and how we manage them to ensure that our business is sustainable in the future.

Alastair Wilson: Likewise, Transport Scotland stepped in to support the bus sector. The Covid support grant has kept our rural services and services throughout Scotland running. At the height of lockdown, we cut back to about 30 per cent of what we operate normally and, on some services, passenger numbers were down to about 10 per cent. Transport Scotland introduced the Covid support grant, which made a vast difference and helped us to get services back up to normal.

Transport Scotland wanted to get services back to 100 per cent in a couple of stages. We achieved 100 per cent frequency by the beginning of August and we have been operating at that level since then. The support grant has been fabulous for

that. However, it runs out on 17 January and there is no word yet on whether it will continue. We are now up to between 50 to 60 per cent of pre-Covid passenger levels. However, our buses are unsustainable without that grant.

The coach sector has had absolutely nothing throughout. There was an announcement yesterday about a £6 million fund, but nobody knows the mechanisms for distributing it yet. Without tourism, the coach sector is dead. We need tourism to get coaches back out there and operating. Operators have got coaches of the value of £200,000 to £300,000 that are just parked up, incurring huge monthly payments. We have had no support with that. Finance holiday payments have now come to an end and we are back to paying £3,000 per coach—those coaches are just sitting there, not turning a wheel. The announcement that was made yesterday will help, but we do not yet know to what extent.

The Convener: We are aiming to finish this session at 10.30 and there are still several members who wish to ask questions. I ask our witnesses to give slightly shorter answers where possible. Please do not feel obliged to answer a question if it does not apply to you.

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): Good morning. One of the reasons why we invited you was to get you to tell us a bit about your experience of how the various regulations and so on have impacted on your industry, and you have offered some fairly robust comments on it all.

I want to ask about the public messaging side. As a constituency MSP, it is hard enough for me and my staff to keep pace with the guidelines and regulations that are changing each week in order to respond to our constituents and try our best to explain what is happening. What kind of experience do you all have in that area? Are you finding it difficult to keep pace with what is going on, to make sure that staff throughout your industries can liaise and engage with the public in a simple, clear and meaningful way to explain what is required of them, and to know what kind of advice and guidance you can provide? What are your ideas and thoughts on that and do you have any suggestions for improvements that we could make so that it is a bit easier for everyone to understand?

Alex Hynes: Clearly, we are operating within a public health framework for both the guidance and the legislation and that has changed over time. That is why the task force approach between Network Rail, ScotRail and Transport Scotland has been so important, to make sure that we are joined up and able to respond to whatever the public health guidance is at that time. There is no Covid manual—none of us have done this

before—so some of the guidance and legislation has emerged over time. That is why it is a dynamic process.

The task force approach has been very effective. Early in the pandemic, we developed the five rules for safer travel, which are very strong, clearly understood by our customers and communicated across all channels including television. We have kept that message consistent throughout the pandemic and I think it is quite clear. Public testing shows what the rail industry can and cannot do at the moment and that approach has been effective in making sure that our customers and colleagues are kept safe and keep within the public health guidance and legislation.

Gordon Dewar: We have obviously tried to stick with all the guidance and we have developed our own brand of fly safe, which tries to capture all the components of washing hands, distancing and so on and put it into the context of the airport. That seems to be doing very well. We work hard on promoting Government messages throughout, whether that is UK Government messages around the border restrictions or whatever.

I say again that we are very focused on being an international business and we are trying to talk to airlines—mostly—in terms of what is going on. What has been really disappointing is that this crisis really needed proper international solutions, particularly around aviation, and collaboration at least at the European level. I contrast the present situation with aviation security after 9/11 when the whole industry managed to get a consistent standard delivered within three months.

We could not even co-ordinate within the four countries of the UK. Different rules were emerging at different times for different reasons and through different communications. That is really difficult when you are trying to talk to an international audience such as the airlines. It was deeply unhelpful and unfortunately it continues. The most current issue is the fact that the UK Government is going to introduce a different quarantine and testing regime in England and we have no idea what we are getting for Scotland.

Robbie Drummond: Our experience was similar to that of rail. We worked closely with Transport Scotland on guidelines as they emerged. We worked really hard on communicating those clearly to our staff and customers with pre-board emails, through the ports and with onboard communication. It has been complex, as things have changed, but we have worked hard on communications and I think that our customers have responded well to that. Adherence to the guidelines and the wearing of face coverings has been very high, so our staff

has worked effectively in what is a difficult situation.

10:00

Alastair Wilson: I echo what Robbie Drummond has said. We followed guidelines from the Government and Transport Scotland. Guidelines have not changed very much for public transport—originally they were for 2m distancing, and then that dropped to 1m where possible. Drivers are doing their best to encourage passengers to wear face masks and so on, and there has been a good uptake on that.

Willie Coffey: As MSPs, we often get complaints from the public, perhaps because of a lack of understanding, about the guidelines and sometimes a refusal to obey or follow the guidelines. I was just curious about the type of passenger that the witnesses deal with and whether there were similarities or differences within your sectors that we should be trying to pick up on and learn more about, in order to help the Government ensure that its messaging and communications are as simple and clear as possible.

From what you have said—other than Gordon Dewar—people seem to be fairly compliant and the guidelines seem to be well understood in the sectors that you deal with. However, we can always hope for greater clarity when we are communicating these fairly complex messages to the public. Those messages change—they can change from week to week, as we all know. It is a bit difficult to keep on top of it. I just wanted to know what the impact of all that has been on your staff, whether they are finding it easy or challenging to engage with the public to liaise and explain what the rules and regulations are and whether you might need more help and guidance from us. I am grateful for the contributions that I received on those issues, and I am happy to leave it at that, convener.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): I would like to reflect on how important transport is to island communities and to on onward business travel, particularly for those who carry out national or international business. I can give the example of oil workers leaving Shetland and having to go to Aberdeen for two days to get a test before they can travel onwards for work in international areas.

I turn to Gordon Dewar. You have been quite robust in your comments this morning. If you could list three things that would make a huge difference but which need to be done now, what would they be?

Gordon Dewar: It is difficult to be specific about actions, because I am not really that au fait with what the options are. As I said, the one glaring

thing is that having the most aggressive and ambitious vaccine plan has to be at the forefront. The speed that we come out of this is going to be the most important thing from a health perspective, because in every week that passes when Covid is still running riot, we lose people and the health disaster continues. The vaccine is also the only long-term way out of this, economically.

We should be setting the ambition of not having one single vaccine dose sitting on a shelf; the vaccine should be out there as fast as we receive it. We should plan to be more aggressive and more daring than we might think of being at the moment. I do not know what the current expectations are, but it would seem to be a very bad outcome if we got higher levels of vaccine than were anticipated but are not able to deliver it because we had not thought about that in advance. We should plan for very optimistic levels of vaccine availability and ensure that we are ready to deliver that amount of vaccine if it arrives. That is the way out of this, and it is also important in terms of competitive advantage, because it will kickstart the economy.

The other message is more of a theme: how do we deliver this as a country? I am struck by how centralised everything is. It is centralised in the thinking—it has to be a national strategy; I get that—but it also appears that, under the current approach, there is no room for others to get involved in assisting. We are held at arm's length.

I think about other scenarios, such as aviation security, which I have mentioned. After 9/11, Government came back with a completely new standard around liquids, screening and all the rest of it. The entire industry across the world responded and delivered a new regime in three months. That was not pain free, as we all know, but it got going and it worked.

It will not work if the Government tries to deliver everything itself—you cannot get the best out of the system that way. We are all sitting on our hands, waiting for our business to restart, and the Government is struggling with capacity. There are some great people doing the best that they can, but the Government simply does not have the resources. We should be setting standards that the Government believes are the right answer—whether for a vaccine, for testing or for anything else—and we should then invite everyone to see where they can contribute.

To take another analogy, in the second world war, the Government gave the design for Spitfires to trusted people, and it then bought every one that was made; it did not try to make them all itself, as that would not have been effective. We must find the equivalent of that. If the Government sets up a design for how a vaccine could be delivered and then invites anybody who can contribute to

see how they could help with that, we will be at the front of the queue, and I guarantee that there will be a long queue of people wanting to help.

At the moment, we are held in isolation. We do not know what is expected, we do not know what the plans are, and we are not being allowed to offer help, or to step in and help. That seems to be a massive missed opportunity.

Beatrice Wishart: Thank you for those comments.

I now want to ask Alex Hynes about ScotRail and the restrictions around Christmas. We note the reduction in the number of trains and that 20 per cent will be taken away before the travel window starts. What will that mean for people trying to connect with other services? I am thinking of people coming back to Shetland, who may have to get the ferry from Aberdeen. I know that the message is that people need to plan such journeys but there is a concern that, just before the 23rd, there might be a sudden rush of people who have not planned their journey. Could you give a bit more detail on the logistics around that?

Alex Hynes: Yes, of course. We are monitoring demand on a daily basis. At the moment, we are operating around 92 per cent of the service for about 15 per cent of the passengers. That is not a good use of taxpayers' money.

We have taken a look at the service that we provide, and we are changing it on Sunday of this week. We are reducing it ever so slightly: we will be providing around 85 per cent of normal seated capacity for about 15 per cent of the passengers. In some circumstances, that might mean people having to wait slightly longer than they would ordinarily do for a train, and that is why we are asking customers to plan their journeys in advance, following the five rules for safer travel, so that we can be there for them this Christmas.

Beatrice Wishart: I am given to understand that the InterCity trains are used on longer routes. There used to be two or three-carriage units, which could be combined to make six or eight-carriage trains. Can you give me an idea of how that will work and about the intention to extend trains if that is needed?

Alex Hynes: In the past few years, Abellio has invested £475 million in new and upgraded trains. The rolling-stock fleet is now 25 per cent bigger than it was just three years ago. We have lots more carriages at our disposal if we see greater demand.

We continually examine the demand data, and we tweak the service accordingly. Tomorrow, for example, we are adding extra carriages to existing trains in the Glasgow area to take account of the easing of travel restrictions and the move from tier

4 to tier 3. We are literally reviewing the position on a daily basis, ensuring that we get the right balance between the number of seats for our passengers and the demand that we see, so that we do not run services unnecessarily. We will continue to do that before, during and after the Christmas window.

We are establishing a gold command, so that we can add additional carriages and additional services if we need to. That is something that we will manage for the Christmas window.

Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): Good morning to colleagues and those on the panel. The discussion has been wide ranging thus far, and I will pick up on a few points.

With regard to the vaccine issue, we have been talking about instilling public confidence in travel and the downstream impact on each of the sectors that are represented today. It is important to stress that there is a vaccine plan; it has been worked on carefully by the Scottish Government, which has brought in relevant expertise from a host of places.

It is important that we—[Inaudible.] If Edinburgh Airport, together with other airports, wishes to make a joint submission on the role of airports in the process, that would be as welcome as any other submission. However, it is important to clarify that there is a detailed plan, as the public want that reassurance. We can pick up that point with the cabinet secretary and Professor Leitch in our next session.

I want to raise two issues with Gordon Dewar. He referred briefly to Brexit, at which I think he was going to express further anger. Perhaps he could clarify briefly what impacts he thinks that Brexit will have, both immediately and in the medium term.

On the foreign summer holiday issue, I asked Professor Leitch about that last week, and he said that he would not book a holiday if the deposit was not refundable. As we are talking about instilling consumer confidence, what discussions has Edinburgh Airport had with airlines about potential caveats when a consumer books a flight?

I have heard from constituents that, when they have been unable to take a flight that they have booked, they have found it very difficult to get a refund, or a timely refund, from the airline. That might be a factor in consumer behaviour. If the issue were to be addressed by building in a proper exclusion clause, that might encourage more people to book a holiday. I do not know whether Mr Dewar has any comments on that.

Gordon Dewar: The airlines have responded very well in dealing with the situation. One of the problems is that Governments have been a bit disingenuous, in the sense that they are saying,

“You shouldn’t travel, but you can.” Passengers are therefore not covered by their insurance, and in many cases the plane has in fact flown, even though the passenger has been told that they should not travel. Who is at fault there?

Where Governments have the courage of their convictions and want to impose travel bans, which is what our quarantine is in all but name, they should impose them and bear the commercial consequences, but they do not do that. We then have a situation in which airlines, which are fighting for their very survival, are criticised for not paying refunds for travel that they have been desperate to offer while being prohibited from doing so.

It is even worse when consumers are being told—as they currently are—that they are allowed to fly to Tenerife, but they are not allowed to drive to Edinburgh airport. That is the problem—we are getting mixed messages that are not based on the evidence. Quarantine has not worked, and it does not work in that way. If it has reduced infection rates, that has worked simply by reason of what is a travel ban in all but name. We are not looking at the alternatives.

We are saying that we should be confident that there is a way out of this with the vaccine. We should plan for how it will be effectively delivered; communicate when we think that that will happen; and let people make informed decisions. The airlines have been exceptionally good at giving people almost total flexibility in rebooking. There are always isolated cases in which people do not get their refunds, and I am not suggesting that the system is perfect, but we are talking about businesses that are fighting for survival. At this rate, the alternative will be that we will have no airlines to worry about in terms of giving refunds or any other service.

Annabelle Ewing: I hear what you say—you have your perspective, and you are trying to run your business at Edinburgh airport—but I have to say that the constituents who contacted me were not happy that they did not get their refunds. That money was important, if only to them.

Yesterday, the scientific advisory group for emergencies published a genomic study that pinpointed a big problem with travel in reigniting, if you like, the virus in Scotland after July and August. That problem was particularly related to international travel, but also to travel in the rest of the UK. Perhaps Mr Dewar might want to look at that study in detail. That would be helpful.

Gordon Dewar: I had a look at it, and it certainly demonstrates that quarantine did not work.

10:15

Annabelle Ewing: We are going through a pandemic, and each country will try the best that it can to do the best that it can. Before the second wave, we were certainly doing very well indeed in Scotland.

I turn to Robbie Drummond and Alastair Wilson on the theme of holidays and summer. People are not going to book holidays abroad in the same numbers. However, every problem usually brings an opportunity for somebody else. What should CalMac and people with businesses like Alastair Wilson’s be doing now—with support from VisitScotland and so on—to try to catch that business this summer?

Robbie Drummond: I mentioned our concern about the summer period. We will work closely with our tourism bodies and local marketing organisations to try to recover at a pace that communities want to go at.

My concern is about confidence. There is some evidence that people want to do more staycations and perhaps go to different areas, which gives some confidence. However, a fast roll-out of the vaccine is required, and people will need to be confident that it is safe to travel and that there will be facilities and things for them to do when they get to their destination. Destinations will need to be open and thriving to give people that confidence. It is all about how quickly we can recover and get confidence going. We will play our part, working with all those partners, to build travel, but it is all about confidence.

Alastair Wilson: Ultimately, confidence is a big thing. Social distancing still has a huge effect. We do not operate our own holidays or tours as such, but we are contracted in by tour companies. A lot of our summer season work involves cruise ship tours and we do not yet know whether cruise ships will be running next year—certainly, they will not be running to the extent that they ran last year. There is also event transport and weddings, and we do not know whether, for example, large numbers will be allowed at weddings next year. It comes down to social distancing, passenger confidence and getting tourism and events up and running again.

Annabelle Ewing: Obviously, there remains uncertainty, which is inevitable. I hope that we start to see a bit of a clearer picture emerge as the weeks go by and, for your business, I absolutely hope that that happens sooner rather than later.

Very briefly, I note that Mr Hynes and I have had many discussions over the years about the Fife circle. Given that I have him here, I cannot miss the opportunity to ask him about what he thinks the impact will be on all the good things that ScotRail said were going to happen to the Fife

circle. How has the timetable for those been impacted?

Alex Hynes: The great news is that our long-promised InterCity fleet has arrived, which has allowed us to operate longer trains from Fife into Edinburgh if we need to. Clearly, customer numbers are much suppressed. However, pre-coronavirus, we talked about operating six-carriage trains from Fife into Edinburgh, and we now have the ability to do that because the InterCity fleet has arrived. Clearly, coronavirus has changed the railway significantly and, sadly, customer numbers will be lower for some time. The good side of that coin is that the customer experience will be a lot better, because we have more seats for them. I therefore expect great things for passengers who travel between Fife and Edinburgh, particularly during the peak.

Annabelle Ewing: That is very upbeat, Mr Hynes.

Maurice Corry (West Scotland) (Con): My first question is for Gordon Dewar. You said that the airlines are having to deal with four different regimes in the four nations of the United Kingdom. Could you, through your work on the ground at Edinburgh airport, persuade the airlines to try harder to push for a more unified approach?

Gordon Dewar: Are you suggesting that the airlines should try harder to co-ordinate the British Government?

Maurice Corry: No. I am saying that you could co-ordinate an effort to get the UK Government, the Scottish Government, the Welsh Government and the Northern Ireland Executive to come up with a more common approach to your industry.

Gordon Dewar: We have been calling and screaming and crying for that for the past six months.

Maurice Corry: What has been the major factor preventing it?

Gordon Dewar: We are being ignored.

Maurice Corry: And that has continued up to date.

Gordon Dewar: The latest example is the testing regime. The UK Government has published a five-day test to release strategy, which I think takes effect from January, but the Scottish Government is silent on that. That is the biggest divergence since the start of the Covid crisis.

Maurice Corry: So the Scottish Government is not listening, basically.

Gordon Dewar: It is not acting; whether it is listening, I cannot tell.

Maurice Corry: You talked about underwriting the service recovery for your industry. How do you see that playing out?

Gordon Dewar: To be honest, there is still a very high risk of failures in the industry. That will not involve Edinburgh Airport—thankfully, we have quite deep pockets, because we have managed to borrow huge sums of money to survive this. We will get through this, but there are many parts of the supply chain that may not. I am quite worried about handling companies, for example. We are entirely reliant on the airlines having access to handling companies that turn aircraft round, get passengers and freight on board and so on. I am not saying that we are at risk, but if this continues much longer, we will see some failures in the supply chain.

It would be good to see Government having some forethought and plans for what to do if we see failures that would stop the operation of airports but which are not the failure of airports themselves. We have been asking for that for six months but have been told that it is all a bit too difficult. As we go into another bleak winter, with no guarantees that next summer is going to be any better, I worry that we have still not got plans to deal with failures in advance, rather than waiting for them to happen and then panicking or living with the consequences.

Far more important, given that airlines are planning their summer schedules now for next year, is that we should be giving signals to airlines about what we are going to do to restart our tourism sector and create the business environment for recovery. The most obvious step would be to take away APD for at least a year, or to reduce it substantially. We are the highest taxed aviation country in the world and we are going to suffer more than most, partly because of our Covid performance, but partly because we are so dependent on aviation, which is taking the hit. Whereas every other major European country has either thrown money at its airlines or substantially reduced tax burdens and so on, we have done nothing—we are not even talking about it.

Maurice Corry: Thank you. That is very helpful.

I want to ask Alex Hynes about rail travel and the issue of rural and urban services. In my region—West Scotland—I have a bit of both. There has been a tendency to cut some of the early morning trains in my area, which is hindering the movement of people who live further out of town. Is there any likelihood of those trains coming back? Is that being done because of a lack of support from the Government or Transport Scotland?

Alex Hynes: We have been keen to ensure that the entire rail network in Scotland continues to

receive a service, even though demand is only 15 per cent of normal and it was as low as 5 per cent of normal at the height of lockdown. Clearly, Scotland is a big country, and it has a big rail network. We have worked with the regional transport partnerships and consulted them on our timetable proposals. We are continually tweaking the timetable based on the feedback that we receive from the regional transport partnerships and passengers themselves. However, the primary reason for operating 85 per cent of the normal number of seats from next week versus 100 per cent pre-pandemic is that we are carrying only 15 per cent of the passengers.

Maurice Corry: On that basis, will you be thinking about reinstating any of the early morning trains that I am talking about, such as the Arrochar to Glasgow train?

Alex Hynes: We will look at any requests that we receive on specific train services. We have been doing that continually throughout lockdown. Our approach has been to work within the travel restrictions, the public health guidance, and the demand that we see, which we review daily, and to continually tweak our timetable, as we are doing tomorrow for the Glasgow area.

I am happy for you to write to me about that. We will respond to you in due course.

Maurice Corry: Thank you.

Finally, I will ask Alastair Wilson a couple of questions. On your points about the bus and coach trade organisations, do you think that they are pushing hard enough on behalf of you and your colleagues in the industry?

Alastair Wilson: Absolutely. The Confederation of Passenger Transport UK in Edinburgh has worked with—[*Inaudible*.] There is an executive committee of about six to eight coach operators, as well. Since March, they have been working tirelessly to get support for the coach industry, but they have been banging their heads off a brick wall. The work and the hours that the CPT and the coach operators have put in have been fabulous.

The fund was announced just yesterday, so we do not know how far it will go. There are 3,000 coaches in Scotland and a £6 million fund is available, so we need to see how that will be distributed. There needs to be a workable mechanism that suits all operators, whether they are large or small, have older or newer vehicles, or have minibuses or coaches. There can be big differences between the operating costs of the different vehicles, and the fund needs to be distributed evenly and fairly throughout Scotland. However, I cannot fault the guys at the Confederation of Passenger Transport UK in Edinburgh.

Maurice Corry: Has Strathclyde Partnership for Transport been helping, as well?

The Convener: I am sorry to interrupt, Maurice. Given the time and the fact that we have two more members to get to, I hope that you do not mind leaving out your last question. John Mason has the next question.

John Mason: My question is about enforcement; I will start with Alex Hynes. We have already heard that, on buses, drivers encourage passengers to wear masks and that some of the seats are marked off and some are not. However, on the railways, it appears to be a free-for-all. I understand that there are ticket collectors on trains, but we never see them. Does the rail industry need to encourage passengers a bit more, and take more enforcement action?

Alex Hynes: Our advice to customers is to follow the five rules for safer travel, one of which is to wear a face covering at stations and on trains. That is now the law in Scotland, and compliance levels have been very good. We have 6,500 closed-circuit television cameras across the network to continually measure compliance with face covering requirements, and we take action where we have hotspots of non-compliance. It is for the police to enforce the law, and we work with the British Transport Police to make that happen.

John Mason: Passengers are reassured when they see a member of staff walking through the train, but we never see anybody. Frankly, it is groups of younger guys who do not wear masks—it is a macho thing. They are challenged in the shops and on the buses, so why are they not challenged on the trains?

Alex Hynes: Our priority is to keep our staff and customers safe, and the physical distancing between staff and customers is very important to us. In the future, we want to reinstate ticket checking on board trains, but we have to risk assess that in order to keep our people safe. We will work with the trade unions to do that. If customers follow the five rules for safer travel, they and staff will be kept safe.

10:30

John Mason: Maybe Mr Wilson can tell us whether his drivers have had bad experiences when they have encouraged people to wear masks.

Alastair Wilson: Overall, the uptake of mask wearing has been pretty good, but it is not a driver's job to police that. The driver is there to drive the bus. We recommend face masks, but there are exemptions. Some people will take advantage of the exemptions but, overall, the uptake has been pretty good.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): At the outset, I declare, as I have done before, that my wife works part time for Caledonian MacBrayne.

I want to look at the lessons that have been learned from the current processes, bearing in mind the five-day travel window that we will have over the festive period. Some areas will have moved from level 4 to level 3 or from level 3 to level 2. In Inverclyde and parts of Argyll and Bute, there have been reports of people travelling from Glasgow and elsewhere to go to Dunoon or Helensburgh, to go to pubs and, obviously, drink alcohol. They will have used ScotRail and CalMac services to get there. That goes back to John Mason's question about the actions that you have been taking to check passengers on vessels and trains. Are you aware of that type of activity, with people using those forms of public transport?

Robbie Drummond: As I said before, we have well-developed protocols to address the guidelines that the Scottish Government has issued. We expect our customers to follow those guidelines. We see our role being to inform, and we take that role very seriously, but we are not there to enforce. Responsibility for decisions on whether to travel lies with individuals. We inform customers through boarding emails, information at ports and harbour welcome announcements and, on longer journeys, we repeat those announcements. Customers have adopted those guidelines, and that adoption has been strong.

There is a difficult balance for our crews in maintaining compliance and not aggravating a situation that could escalate into an act of aggression. If there is aggression, dealing with that is clearly a role for the police, and we would involve the police, if required. However, ultimately, it is up to customers to follow Government guidelines or, indeed, the law as it stands.

Stuart McMillan: Have CalMac staff had to call the police because of unruly passengers?

Robbie Drummond: Yes, we have, and that was a regular occurrence before the pandemic. We have a strict rule that we do not accept any aggression towards our staff, and we have a clear protocol that means that any aggression is reported to the police. We have good links with local police stations, so that officers are able to attend. During the pandemic, there has been a slight increase in the incidence of acts of aggression, but it is still at quite a low level. We are clear with our staff about what is and is not acceptable, and we support them to manage such situations.

Alex Hynes: Obviously, our advice to customers is to follow the five rules for safe travel and to adhere to local travel restrictions, which

vary depending on where people live. The vast majority of customers adhere to them, which is great news. We monitor compliance, whether that is through our network of 6,500 closed-circuit television cameras or by listening to our passengers and staff.

When we get intelligence on potential breaches of regulations, we pass that to the British Transport Police. We work with the British Transport Police every day—they are part of our task-force arrangements—and it is for them to enforce any travel restrictions or regulations. That process has worked well. Where we have seen adverse trends, we have worked with the British Transport Police to nip them in the bud.

Stuart McMillan: I do not want to contradict you on that point, Alex, but I had a meeting yesterday with representatives from the British Transport Police, Police Scotland and ScotRail because some issues have occurred locally. This touches on John Mason's question from a few moments ago. The Fife circle service was referred to as a route where there have been a number of unruly passengers—predominantly youths not following the rules or putting fear into other passengers.

Alex Hynes: I agree with you on that. Last weekend, we were working with the British Transport Police on the Fife circle in order to nip in the bud behaviour we saw that we did not like. We are working with the British Transport Police to ensure that people comply. It is for the police to enforce those regulations, not the rail industry.

Stuart McMillan: We all accept that, because of how things stand at the moment, the revenue situation is somewhat different from what it was pre-Covid. When we get to the point of once again allowing revenue collection to take place on the trains, that will probably have a positive effect, as you and I have discussed before.

Alex Hynes: We are looking to reintroduce revenue collection as soon as we can, but the most important thing for us is to work with the trade unions on that and to keep our staff safe.

Stuart McMillan: I have a question for you all, as the subject touches on you all. Mr Wilson discussed cruise ships a few moments ago. Cruise ships come into Greenock every year, and it was anticipated that more than 100 ships were due to come in over the next year. That would have had a hugely positive effect across the wider economy. The situation for that sector is considered to be quite unsure for the next year.

Do any of you have a potential number in mind for how many people you would like to see vaccinated in Scotland by the time we get to the summertime, which is when the majority of ships would come in? How confident would you then feel

about that particular part of the tourism economy potentially starting up again in Scotland?

Alastair Wilson: Vaccination is probably the key to the cruise ship industry. Whether it should be a condition that passengers must be vaccinated before they travel I do not know, but I think that vaccination is essential if we are to get cruise ships running again and back up to where they were previously.

Gordon Dewar: According to the people we are speaking to in the Government, we need 9.6 million vaccines to be delivered for about 4.8 million people, as people need to take the vaccine twice. We need to be pretty close to that total before we can be safe in the community again, I understand—although that is a bit beyond my area of expertise.

If we work that through, in order to have a meaningful summer—which the cruise ship sector is part of, but so are the other parts of our community, including events and hospitality—we need to do the vaccinations before the summer is in full swing, and we need to tell people that they can plan with confidence that that will happen.

I have no idea whether we are planning on it—we are certainly not communicating on it—but I would like to see a plan that gets all 9.6 million vaccinations done before the start of the summer, so that we can start trading our way out of this situation.

We have had small glimpses of what has been planned in our early conversations, on the basis of what we are offering to do in order to help. That is the key theme: we can help. However, the level of ambition and the scale of delivery will not get anywhere close to that aim, and we will be lucky to finish by the end of next year. That is why I am saying that the problem is that we will not have an industry to save in the end if we do not get our skates on and deliver the vaccine so as to allow a normal summer to happen next year.

Robbie Drummond: I am not really qualified to comment on that area but, to go back to the point about confidence, we are in competition for tourism spend, and we are in competition to encourage people to come to Scotland. If we are not at the forefront of making those efforts and giving people confidence that we are making things safe, that money may go elsewhere. A key part of our recovery strategy has to be to get people vaccinated and to give people the confidence that they can come and start spending that money. People will be starting to look at planning things now.

Alex Hynes: We have been led by the public health situation throughout, clearly. If the vaccination programme is successfully delivered, that will enable us to release the travel restrictions,

and we can then set about building up our business. However, there is a high degree of uncertainty around when that will happen. We are planning on a number of scenarios but, until the travel restrictions are eased, it will continue to be a very difficult time for the rail industry in Scotland.

The Convener: That concludes this agenda item. I thank all our witnesses for their evidence this morning. We have had a wide-ranging discussion.

10:41

Meeting suspended.

10:45

On resuming—

Subordinate Legislation

Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Protection from Eviction) (Scotland) Regulations 2020 [Draft]

Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Restrictions and Requirements) (Local Levels) (Scotland) Amendment (No 7) Regulations 2020 [Draft]

The Convener: We will now consider agenda item 3. This morning, we will take evidence from the Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, Europe and External Affairs, Michael Russell MSP, and Professor Jason Leitch, national clinical director, on this week's review of the restrictions and levels imposed by the Government. The committee will also consider draft regulations arising from this week's review. We will not vote on the regulations until a later meeting of the committee.

I welcome the cabinet secretary and Professor Leitch to the meeting.

The Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, Europe and External Affairs (Michael Russell): As the committee is aware, on Tuesday, the First Minister set out the outcome of the fifth weekly review of the allocation of levels. Since our levels approach under the strategic framework was introduced at the end of October, we have been seeing a decrease in the number of positive cases being reported each day. Encouragingly, that suggests that our approach, with the different levels of protective measures, is having the positive impact that it was developed to achieve.

Although prevalence of the virus is still too high, we hope to see further improvements over the coming weeks as the data reflects the impact of the temporary level 4 measures that we introduced. However, we are not complacent. Although the four-nations agreement for a limited relaxation of rules over the festive period will help to combat social isolation and loneliness, it brings with it risks of increased virus transmission.

We have already made it clear that the safest way to spend Christmas is for people to stay within their own existing households, but we acknowledge that there will be demand to see family and friends at this time. The significant risk that that mixing will lead to a rise in the R number and increased cases of Covid-19 is a real one. That is why it has been necessary for this week's review to continue to take a cautious approach, to manage the risk carefully to ensure that the hard

work and sacrifices of people across Scotland are not undermined.

This week's review sees changes, including confirmation that all 11 local authorities currently in level 4 will move to level 3 from Friday. Those decisions have been made against the need to continue to lower the prevalence of the virus prior to the festive period. That is key to avoiding the need for more restrictive protective measures in the new year.

The 11 local authorities have seen prevalence of the virus fall significantly in each area—in some, the number of cases has more than halved. However, we need to remain cautious. Five other local authorities will see their allocation levels lowered from Friday: two in level 2, Dumfries and Galloway and the Scottish Borders, have had consistently low levels for some weeks now and will move to level 1, and three areas in level 3, Angus, Falkirk and Inverclyde, will move down to level 2 as they all now have relatively low rates of transmission.

We also looked carefully at other authorities, including Argyll and Bute and the City of Edinburgh. Edinburgh is a difficult decision. I am sure that Jason Leitch will have more to say about that. Although it is currently recording cases below the Scottish average, there has been a slight rise in Edinburgh in recent days.

The risks from increased social activity over the festive period are particularly acute in large urban areas such as Edinburgh. Edinburgh's good transport links and high concentration of hospitality and retail venues has always attracted—and will continue to attract—a large number of people from a wider area. In the current circumstances, that would increase opportunities for transmission. That additional risk was a factor for consideration in this week's review and in our decision not to move Edinburgh at this stage. We have acknowledged the local concerns around that decision and the First Minister has confirmed—and I do so again now—that we will consider the positions of Edinburgh and Midlothian again next week.

As with last week's review, the trends in case numbers and test positivity in Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire continue to be a source of concern. We will continue to monitor the situation closely but, in the meantime, both areas will remain at level 2.

In recognition of the need to combat social isolation in some of our more remote communities, especially during the winter months, and taking account of the persistently low infection rates, we have also announced an extension of the level 1 in-home socialising exception to Highland Council's islands that are not connected by road.

The next scheduled review will be on 15 December. We reserve the right to bring that forward for any one or more local authorities if the situation requires it.

We have provided the committee with two sets of draft regulations. The draft Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Restrictions and Requirements) (Local Levels) (Scotland) Amendment (No 7) Regulations 2020 make adjustments to the level allocation in 16 areas of Scotland, as I have just set out. The regulations also allow in-home socialising in certain islands, as I just mentioned. They also adjust the travel restrictions in relation to Jersey and the Republic of Ireland. Those regulations will come into force on 11 December.

The second set of regulations is the draft Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Protection from Eviction) (Scotland) Regulations 2020. Previously, we introduced a ban on the enforcement of eviction orders. The draft regulations provide for a ban across the private and social rented sectors for six weeks, from 11 December to 22 January. That reflects the First Minister's announcement last week and provides support for people who should not be facing the anxiety of eviction during a pandemic and over this period.

I hope that those comments were helpful. Jason Leitch and I stand ready to answer any questions that we can.

The Convener: Thank you, that was helpful.

You mentioned Edinburgh, cabinet secretary. There has been a huge deal of unhappiness about the position that Edinburgh is in. Even if Edinburgh were to drop a level next week, that would not take effect until next Friday, which is less than a week before Christmas, with all the impact that that will have on the local economy. What is the likelihood of Edinburgh moving down a level? What changes would have to happen for that to occur?

Michael Russell: I will let Jason Leitch answer that in detail, but first I will repeat the point that I have just made, because it is very important. No one is unaware of the difficulties that the decision causes, and that has been a major issue in our considerations. As I have pointed out, Edinburgh is in a uniquely difficult position. It will be a draw and is a transport hub, particularly at this time of year. The risk that already exists for the Christmas period would be exacerbated if Edinburgh were to move down a level this week, and therefore the decision was taken that it should not move down. I am not pleased with that decision and I recognise and hear the substantial concerns that have been raised. However, the decision has been made considering all the relevant factors, including those that I have mentioned. That is why it stands at present.

Jason Leitch might want to say something about prevalence and the figures. The figures have seen a small uptick. I have not seen today's figures, so Jason Leitch may be more up to date than I am on those.

Professor Jason Leitch (Scottish Government): Before I answer, I want to thank you, convener, for considering adjusting the timing of the meeting so that I could do the Scottish Government directors of public health update first thing this morning, as well as answer the committee's questions. That update is hugely important for the public health advisers, so I appreciate that.

The cabinet secretary is correct. The advice around the marginal decisions is hugely difficult—it is difficult in Argyll and Bute, Dumfries and Galloway and the City of Edinburgh. The public health advice is much more rounded than just the data, although the data is central. As the committee has heard many times, it is not an algorithm into which we feed data and out the other end comes a level. We have to take into account the geography of the area, the advice of the director of public health, the ability for people to travel in and out, the time of year and everything that goes with that. It is not an exact science—it cannot be.

Members will have seen Wales deal with the issue in an entirely different way. Wales decided to take the whole country in and out of a level of restrictions together. That is a policy decision and not a public health one. As a country, we have decided to take a more regionalised approach, which throws up challenges in relation to where a region is in the scale of the data and what the region is.

Yesterday, we learned a number of things from the publication of the genomics data, which we may come on to in a different form in relation to travelling. One of the things that we learned from that data was that it is harder to get rid of the virus in urban areas. It makes perfect sense that it spreads in urban areas more easily than it does in rural areas. Edinburgh has that challenge, and it has stubbornly stable data. Edinburgh's data is not falling. In the round, the Lothian NHS Board area had 150 new cases yesterday, and 5.1 per cent positivity. Information suggests that today's data will be about the same when the First Minister announces it, and we publish it at 2 o'clock. The rate per 100,000 is pretty stable; from day to day, you could choose different points to make today a rise or make today a fall, but, in the end, the rate is pretty stable.

We also have to take into account your point that, in the week before Christmas, the shops need to be open. My counterargument would be that, in the week before Christmas, the shops are

a real risk. Both those things are true, so it is a challenge for the decision makers to make a decision. We are worried about Christmas and the lead-up to it. From Thanksgiving in Canada and America, we have seen what a holiday period can do if it is not dealt with well.

The Convener: More generally, people look at the indicators, and they compare local authority areas with one another. A lot of people feel that Edinburgh meets the requirements for level 2. Government and officials have always been clear that the indicators are not conclusive, and that it is a matter of overall judgment. Given that public confidence is so important, are you concerned that people may lose trust or faith in the indicators if they see those anomalies?

Professor Leitch: Yes, I am worried about that. I think that we were slightly between a rock and a hard place. When we went to a regional approach, of course we wanted to be as transparent as possible about the decisions that were made, but there is no black box with secret data in it. There is not what every sector seeks—the sudden secret of where the transmission is happening. The data is an attempt to both guide the decision making and be transparent with the public.

I absolutely agree with you that too much focus on the indicators—which is our fault, not anybody else's—could begin to fray some people at the edges and suggest that perhaps these decisions are not as transparent as they are. I assure you that the data is taken into account very deeply by the directors of public health, as is other data that they have about outbreaks in Dumfries or Edinburgh that cannot be put into a spreadsheet or a table. That is the difference between, for example, the decision that we have made about Argyll and Bute, and the decisions that we have made for other areas that have gone up or down. We know that there is a big outbreak in Argyll and Bute, and there is not sustained community transmission. That information is hard to put in an Excel spreadsheet.

As the First Minister said, over the next few weeks—the Christmas and new year period—we will look at the levels, the frequency of the reviews, and the nature of the data that is in them. We do that all the time, but it might be the moment to draw breath and work out what we think January and February will look like, particularly after the Christmas break. As I have said already, I am worried about the Christmas break.

Michael Russell: I will address an additional point, which I think is germane. There has been pressure from members across all parties about the publication of data, and I fully appreciate why. We publish almost every bit of data that we have, which runs the risk of people looking at it in a cursory fashion, or perhaps interpreting one bit

and not another. However, the data has been asked for, and it is out there.

I am more than willing to talk about the issue of judgment based on that data. It is always an issue of judgment based on the data, but I hope that the confidence comes, in part at least, from the openness about such matters. Nothing is being held back, and nothing is secretive. We are being absolutely open about what the situation is, describing how difficult it is when there are marginal cases and why the decision has fallen the way that it has. We need to go on doing that. As Jason Leitch says, we constantly examine the processes that we are engaged in.

11:00

The Convener: I thank both of you for those answers.

My final question concerns the period after Christmas. According to what has been said today and elsewhere, there is the risk of a surge following the Christmas period. Is the Government confident that services are prepared for that surge, in terms of both the numbers of people catching Covid and perhaps an increased requirement for testing and so on? Could I have the views of both of you on that?

Michael Russell: I will point out a number of things.

The capacity for testing is increasing. A new laboratory opens on Saturday—the First Minister has given details on that.

One of the strong reasons for the actions that we have taken over the past six weeks to two months was to drive down the prevalence and the number of cases, so that if there were difficulties, as there will be, not just from Christmas time but from the normal winter pressures on the health service, we would be in a better position to address that than we would otherwise have been, had the situation continued to grow—exponentially, in some cases. That is the entire purpose.

In addition, there is a series of concurrent winter risks, and we have to be very straight about that. Two days ago, I made a statement in the chamber about the difficulties that will arise from Brexit and which are part of the concurrent risks. Covid is a concurrent risk, as are whatever happens with the winter weather, the pressure on public services and the fact that we are dealing with people on the front line who have been working solidly, certainly since March.

There are risks, and we have said constantly that we are as prepared as we can be. We have stood up the emergency arrangements and are continuing to develop those—my statement

indicated how that will happen during this month. The ministerial oversight is there; last night, we had another meeting of the winter pressures group, which is looking at all these things—including the supply of medicines in light of the Brexit situation. We are therefore as confident as we can be and will do everything that we can. The regulations are designed to assist us in that task.

Professor Leitch: I am confident in the ability of the services, post-Christmas, to deal with Covid. The fundamental answer to the convener's question is therefore yes. I could stop there, but I think that something else is very important.

Once Covid has to be treated, it is too late for some people, because we have no treatment. Many people will recover. If you catch the disease, you should not be scared, because you will almost certainly do well. However, some people who catch the disease will die, irrespective of how much test and protect we have, how much testing we do, or how many intensive care beds we have.

That is what worries me—not that the services will not cope with that surge. We will absolutely cope with the surge, but we have no treatment for the disease. That is what makes it different from a car accident or from something else that could happen during the winter. That is why the public health community will be so worried, until science and pharmaceuticals get us out the other end of this.

I am very confident that we will manage whatever happens, whether that needs more hospital beds or the ramping up of test and protect or whatever. The important thing is that, once you are infected, services do not get you out of this pandemic.

Monica Lennon: That has been a helpful beginning. It was welcome to hear Professor Leitch say that there is no secret data. I do not think that anyone believed that there was, but I think that the convener's point, which many people who speak to me have made, is that people do not fully understand the interpretation of the data and the advice that is presented to ministers.

Professor Leitch is right to say that it is not an exact science, and, ultimately, ministers have to make decisions on a Tuesday morning. With that in mind, will the cabinet secretary say more about what additional information could be made available? I welcome the fact that the Government is actively looking at how this could be made more transparent and easier for the public to understand.

In respect of this week's decision, there has been some commentary to suggest that public health experts and the incident management team recommended that Edinburgh move to level 2. Can we get some clarification on that? If that was

the case, why did the Government not accept that advice?

Michael Russell: I will let Jason Leitch talk about public health and the discussions around that. There are always wide-ranging discussions, not just with public health directors, but with councillors, council administrations and all the rest of it.

I will see whether I can talk Monica Lennon through the process. I do not think that there is material that ministers can see but which is not in the public domain. We see the material that is published. Material will come to ministers not just on a Monday or over the weekend, but more regularly.

Some ministers will see more material—it depends on where their central involvement lies. I am involved in regulation, so I may see a bit more; others with different portfolio interests may see things that I do not see. For example, John Swinney would deal with education material that would not be shared with everybody.

A paper will come to Cabinet—it is usually presented by the Deputy First Minister, who is in charge of such matters day to day—and there will be an extensive discussion. As you would expect, the chief medical officer will be a key figure in that discussion. Ministers will look at the paper, discuss it and ask questions. They will draw on some of their own experience and listen to people with experience, and come to a conclusion. The four harms group has looked at the matter, and the people who are looking at the other harms will have commented on it. We will be aware of the local public health views.

All those matters are weighed carefully by the Cabinet, both as individuals and collectively. The discussion is sometimes very detailed. Sometimes it is quite clear what the outcome should be, and sometimes the decision will be—as the First Minister has described it—on a knife edge, and it is difficult to say what the outcome should be.

We will come to a common mind, based on what we believe is needed, in—I have to say this—the most cautious way possible. Caution is not a dirty word in all this—it is essential. If we look at prevalence elsewhere, we can see examples of where regulations may have been taken off, abandoned or weakened too early and problems have arisen.

We are not unique: such decisions are having to be made globally. Many members will have seen Angela Merkel commenting on that yesterday in the German Parliament. She talked about the way in which the fondness that she, and everybody else, has for Christmas markets has to be weighed in the balance against the risk to life. There is a

substantial risk to life from what is, as Jason Leitch said, a disease for which there is no cure.

In the end, that is the decision that we have to reach. It is reached cautiously, carefully and thoughtfully, and it is based on data that is published. There is not much more that we can say about that, other than what I have just said. Jason Leitch will tell you what happens on his side of the house, with regard to all the expertise that feeds into the process at the local level, the national level and the four-nations level, because there is consultation on the four nations' activities. Perhaps he can illustrate some of that.

Monica Lennon: I fully understand what the cabinet secretary says about the transparency around data, and I accept that, as Professor Leitch said, the data is not being withheld. I am asking about the presentation of the data and how it is interpreted, and the recommendations that are being made through Cabinet.

You said that everyone in Cabinet has full oversight. I think that we would expect everyone in Cabinet to be an equal in the process. I suppose that, given that we are in a national crisis, the public would expect more transparency, because accountability is clearly important. Could the Government do more to be open about what was recommended and, if there are legitimate grounds on which to depart from that advice in any way, to publish the reasons for doing so?

Michael Russell: I have just fully explained the process. If we were then to say, "Well, that is what that person said, and that is what another person said", this being politics, that would create confusion rather than clarity. The data on which the decisions are made is published. There is detailed discussion among people who are genuinely always trying to do their best. There has to be a level of trust in the process, and there has to be a level on which we all trust each other so that we can think and say things and have the conversation, and come out at the end of the process saying, "We have a common mind." That is why we have reached the decision." That is really important, and that is what is happening.

We have never resisted the publication of information or data. What you see is what I see. We come to the judgments that we do because we listen to people with vastly more knowledge or expertise than either you or I have in this area and, at the end of the day, we come to a conclusion based on what they have said and what the data shows. Jason Leitch should comment on that.

Monica Lennon: Before Professor Leitch comments, I want to be clear that I am not doubting the good intentions of ministers or the experts in the field. I asked whether there was any

departure from the advice of public health colleagues or the incident management team in making the Edinburgh decision. It was a very direct question.

Michael Russell: There will be a range of views about what should happen and whether criteria have been met. They will all come together in the Cabinet discussion and the major views will be balanced. There will be individuals who think that Edinburgh should move to another level and individuals who do not, and that applies to every area. It will be true of Argyll and Bute as well as of Aberdeenshire. At the end of the day, a decision is reached based on the collective wisdom, or otherwise, of all the people who are taking part.

Professor Leitch: I will add two contextual points before I describe the public health ladder of advice.

First, the Government has published a strategic aim for Covid-19, which is to reduce the prevalence of the virus to as low as possible. That strategic aim guides the decision making, as it should. If our strategic aim was to create a stability of Covid presence at around 100 per 100,000, that would generate a different set of decisions. Our strategic aim, which was outlined by the Cabinet, drives our advice, and that aim is to drive the prevalence of the virus as low as possible, because, globally, the economies of the countries that have done that have recovered faster.

The second contextual point is caution. It is quite difficult to be cautious in my seat, because everybody wants to come down a level. Nobody has written me an email to say "We would like more restrictions"—not a sector, not an MSP, not a local authority leader—not one. Every single piece of advice that I get from those areas is that we should go easier. "Be easier on us." "Our local authority should come down." "Our sector isn't the cause." Caution is therefore really difficult for public health leaders. I do not want you to feel sorry for me, but in the group of people who are giving public health advice, it is tough to be cautious.

We make decisions with the five-step ladder of advice. Every local authority has a director for public health who works for the health boards but covers multiple local authorities with teams of people. They are level 1. They feed in to the national incident management team, which is chaired by Public Health Scotland; Jim McMenamin, is the clinical lead of that organisation. The IMT's advice then goes to what we call our senior clinicians: Gregor Smith, Fiona McQueen and me, roughly. There is a broader group of eight clinicians at a senior level in the Scottish Government, but the ones who you would know are Gregor, Fiona and me—the chief

medical officer, the chief nursing officer and the national clinical director, respectively.

The senior clinicians' advice then goes to the four harms group. That is where we join with the chief economist, the chief social researcher and other analysts, who then, in tune with the director general for Covid, go to the Cabinet, which is the final decision-making point. By then, the public health advice has been through a number of iterations to make it as robust as it possibly can be, before it goes into that conversation that Mr Russell has just described.

Monica Lennon: [*Inaudible.*—departure from the public health advice on Edinburgh, or will we just move on from that question?

Professor Leitch: I am not sure whether it was my computer or yours, but I did not hear that.

Monica Lennon: I was going back to the point about Edinburgh. Was there any divergence between the advice of public health colleagues and the management team, and the eventual decision? Do you want to make a further comment on that or will we just move on from the Edinburgh question?

Professor Leitch: I honestly think that that is a matter for the Cabinet and not for me. My job is to give the best advice that I can, along with all of my colleagues. The Cabinet gets to make the choices.

11:15

Monica Lennon: Thank you for that.

I am conscious of the time, so I will just raise one other matter. The cabinet secretary referred to Angela Merkel, who made a powerful contribution, and my main takeaway from it was her plea for schools to close on 16 December to allow 10 clear days for the Christmas break. We are not doing that in Scotland. I note that there has been a little bit of a change in England, where schools are going to have an earlier in-service training day and close on 18 December.

Cabinet secretary and Professor Leitch, are you keeping that under review? I know that the picture is different across Scotland. I have worries about Lanarkshire, where lots of children and staff are self-isolating. I have heard a lot about the need for caution. Are we being cautious enough on the issue of the school holidays?

The Convener: I ask for brief answers, please.

Michael Russell: Mr Swinney has indicated what he believes the advice has led him to decide, and he has decided what should happen. I am not aware that there will be any reconsideration of that, but I would ask John Swinney to communicate with the committee if the committee

wants more detail on why he reached that decision.

Mark Ruskell: Perhaps I could pick up on that point. I am starting to hear about some practical implications stemming from the decision to keep most schools in Scotland open until 3.30 on 23 December.

I have been speaking to a number of headteachers, who are very much engaged with the contact tracing and incident management regimes in their schools, so I am aware of their burdens. One headteacher told me that, to deal with one positive Covid case in a school took between 9.30 in the morning and 4.30 in the afternoon. Obviously, extensive assessment procedures were required to assess whether the child had been in contact with other children and staff members. There was consistent liaison between the health board, the staff and a range of other people. At the end of the process, it was necessary to contact all the parents of the children who had been in contact with the child.

How do you view that working on the 23rd, on Christmas eve and, potentially, on Christmas day? If positive cases come back from testing, do you expect headteachers to phone parents on Christmas day and inform them that they and their families need to self-isolate?

Michael Russell: I will let Jason Leitch respond on what is clearly an important issue with regard to advice. The clear advice, on which the Deputy First Minister has operated, is that the right thing to do is to continue with the present arrangements for schools. As I have said at the committee before, we have always regarded the need to ensure that education is not interrupted as an extremely important part of our strategy, and it remains so.

The Deputy First Minister had a long consultation with the various interested groups who are concerned about this matter, and many views were expressed. In the end, the Deputy First Minister went with the public health advice that he believes is most cogent and necessary, as I think he was bound to do.

I am happy to ask him, as a matter of urgency, to outline in further detail what the thinking is and to cover the specific issue about testing. However, there is an absolute need to ensure that, if there is a follow-up, that follow-up takes place, if not necessarily in the way that has been described.

Jason Leitch will have more information about why the decision has been reached. I say again: it is a decision made on a balance of factors, and those factors have all been taken into account. Jason might want to say what those were.

Professor Leitch: Yes—it was a finely balanced decision, and there was a long conversation at the Covid-19 education recovery group, which included educationists and public health advisers. The advice was that, on balance, schools should stay open.

The particular point that you raise, Mr Ruskell, was part of that consideration. I cannot remember whether it was in his statement or in a letter written post statement, but Mr Swinney has made it clear to local authorities that arrangements will have to be made, in some form, for test and protect to be active during the holiday periods.

The national health service will not be having a day off—you can be assured of that. It never does. Test and protect will be active on Christmas day, whether you are a school pupil or a call centre worker. We, the national health service, will do our absolute best to support anybody who has to deal with contact tracing that day.

There have been particular relationships between public health leaders and school headteachers. I have done two headteacher events over the past few days, involving hundreds of headteachers, to talk through some of these issues and to try and get them in a place where they would be able to use the national contact tracing centre. Their local knowledge is of course crucial for contact tracing, just like it is for a pub owner or a workplace owner. We often need to speak to them about layout—where corridors and bathrooms are, for example.

I cannot guarantee that every headteacher in the country will not have some work to do during this period, but we are hoping to keep that to an absolute minimum.

Mark Ruskell: The point here, though, is that that is not standard contact tracing, where somebody has been in contact with a few people. It is about whole classes having to go into self-isolation because they sat in the same classroom as somebody who has tested positive. Can you see how that creates a problem around Christmas time in those last days of term? Did that not form part of the decision making in England—having at least a couple of days when teachers and headteachers are not contact tracing and can continue with their activities as schools wind down for Christmas?

Professor Leitch: It is standard contact tracing—that is how contact tracing works. It happens to be a bigger room of individuals—I take your point—but it would be exactly the same for a university class or college class or for a big pub. We need the help of those who know the layout of the rooms and who know the relevant names and addresses according to the registration, whether in a pub or a school.

Schools are not all finishing at 3.30 on 23 December; some finish on the 18th—and some are finishing on the Monday, the Tuesday and the Wednesday. The balanced public health advice that went to Mr Swinney was that they should stay open.

Mark Ruskell: I will move on to a slightly different topic. I was contacted by the League Against Cruel Sports, which monitors hunts. It tells me that there are hunts going out three times a week, with more than 40 people attending those events. The league has been informed by Police Scotland that that is permissible. Effectively, the hunts are applying two separate exemptions: the first is on pest control, whereby six people from two households can meet to carry out that activity, and the second exemption is based on equestrian events, whereby 30 people can gather. Does that reflect your understanding of the regulations? Is it acceptable that groups are effectively stacking exemptions to try and create a super-exemption, allowing them to gather in larger numbers?

Michael Russell: There are no super-exemptions. I have not heard that from anybody else—this is the first occasion on which I have heard about it. If you wish to send me the details, including where that is taking place, we will quickly seek to look into it.

I say again: there are no super-exemptions. The regulations do not work like that—I wish to make that clear. The regulations say, “This is what should not happen,” and they then indicate those exemptions that may well be legitimate excuses, although they are not automatically that. Intention is really important. I have not heard about such an event before, and I am sure that you would not be so unreasonable as to expect me to react to it without seeing the evidence, but I am of course willing to look at the evidence and to direct it to whomever it needs to be directed to, should I need to do so.

Mark Ruskell: Okay—thanks. The issue is that the police have accepted the excuse.

Michael Russell: Although I am happy to take your word for it, I do not know that, so I need to find out.

Mark Ruskell: Great—thank you.

We started off with questioning about Edinburgh, the data and the various criteria for going into the different levels. I wish now to ask about Clackmannanshire. The area was retained in level 3, primarily because of the prevalence of enhanced data, which we got through asymptomatic testing.

It is great that we got more knowledge about with the prevalence of Covid in Clackmannanshire, to make a more informed judgment, but do you

see an issue with the fact that decisions are being made in different local authority areas with different levels of knowledge? Can you understand people in Clackmannanshire feeling that they have been kept at level 3 because they have had all that additional asymptomatic testing, when other areas do not have that data and so decisions are being made without access to that level of information? Does the inconsistency of data across Scotland cause a problem?

Michael Russell: I will let Jason Leitch answer that, but I just make the point that I know many places—the place that I represent, for example—where people will feel angry and frustrated that changes that they anticipated have not happened. I understand that fully—I live in that area, and I feel it myself. However, I also have to recognise that there are different prevailing circumstances. As Jason said earlier, that is one of the reasons why we felt that it was right to have a local authority approach, but no approach is perfect. Clackmannanshire is the smallest local authority in Scotland. I represent one of the biggest local authorities in Scotland, and there are people in both places who are frustrated for different reasons.

We are trying to say to people that, with the best intentions, the best will and the best information that we have, we have come to a judgment that does not please us any more than it pleases anybody else, but which we think is the right judgment for this particular period and which will be reviewed within a week. It is, I hope, always undertaken with a genuine concern for the core objective that Jason has outlined. Perhaps he would like to say a word about what has happened in Clackmannanshire, which was also the subject of discussion in Cabinet, of course.

Professor Leitch: Again, it is a request to think about bringing a local authority down a level and not up a level, just for context. Clackmannanshire—

Mark Ruskell: No, I am not suggesting that. I am suggesting that there needs to be clarity about the basis of the decision making, and, clearly, you had access to—[Inaudible.]—in Clackmannanshire.

Professor Leitch: That was because we sent asymptomatic testing to a place with a high prevalence of the virus—that is how we chose the areas. We chose the areas for asymptomatic testing because the levels of cases were high, and—[Inaudible.]—we have found positive cases, which is something to be celebrated, because we have protected people from those chains of transmission. Of course, that has led to more positive cases. The alternative would be to not find those and to put people at risk. The prevalence would stay low, and we would reduce the level,

even though there were positive cases. In the first phase of asymptomatic testing being available to us, we have chosen, rightly, to pinpoint high-prevalence areas—areas of Pollokshields, Dalmarnock and Clackmannanshire—and, lo and behold, we have found positive asymptomatic cases.

As we learn more about asymptomatic testing—it is not perfect; we have been over that many times—we will deploy it in areas where we are worried about the prevalence of the virus, which, of course, will drive up positive testing, which is what is what I want it to do, and break those chains of transmission.

Stuart McMillan: I have a question about the process for decision making. It is clear that some members are a bit frustrated about what has happened, as I have been in the past. I seek clarification. I assume that the process that has taken place thus far has not changed in any way. Is that correct, cabinet secretary?

Michael Russell: It depends what timescale you are talking about. The introduction of the levels has meant that the rhythm of decision making has changed, the focus of the information has changed—because we are now looking at information on a local authority basis—and there has been a refinement of some of the criteria. Therefore, I would say that, rather than being unchanged, the situation has improved progressively over the past months.

Of course, the decisions are now being made on a weekly basis, whereas, previously, we had a three-week cycle—although things could change between those cycles. We have moved to a weekly cycle, with a decision being reached by Cabinet on a Tuesday morning, which is announced to the chamber on a Tuesday afternoon. There is then the opportunity to have this discussion and for draft regulations to be considered.

Therefore, there have been changes and improvements, and I hope that it is a more responsive and a continuously more open process, because there is nothing that people are not seeing and there is absolute frankness in discussions such as this one about how the decisions are reached.

Stuart McMillan: Thank you for that. I wanted to get that clarification, because, a few weeks ago, the figures were really low in my local authority area, and I was disappointed that we did not go down to level 2 from level 3. Within two weeks, we were struggling to stay in level 3 and were potentially moving to level 4.

When I asked the First Minister about that at the committee, she highlighted the strategic framework and the categories, but she also

referred to the discussion that takes place with officials and in the Cabinet. I just wanted to get clarification that that particular part of the process has not changed and that, therefore, the decisions for this week will have been based on the same process that happened for my area a number of weeks ago.

11:30

Michael Russell: Yes. The decision is taken on the Tuesday morning. A great deal of work goes on over the weekend—a great deal of work goes on all the time, but it goes on over the weekend, too—through Monday and into Tuesday, and a lot of information goes backwards and forwards. Papers are written and changed and thoughts come through, and we get all the information that Jason Leitch talked about from local areas. Broadly, the decision is evidence based. It is based on the data that we have, the four harms and then the view and judgments that are reached in the light of that.

Stuart McMillan: Just for the record, I welcome the decision that was taken this week to put Inverclyde at level 2. I will not lie—I was a bit surprised by that, because the surrounding areas remain at level 3. However, I was genuinely pleased about it, so thank you for that decision.

Professor Leitch, when you answered questions earlier, you highlighted some of the potential challenges in the post-Christmas period and you gave a list of actions that could be taken, one of which was the provision of more beds in hospitals, if that were required. If that happens, would it mean more beds in hospitals that are currently delivering level 3 intensive care unit services, or would it mean more beds in hospitals that have recently lost their level 3 ICU care?

Professor Leitch: We have contingency plans for every eventuality. I remind the committee that we already have more people in intensive care than we had intensive care beds a year ago. We are still above the pre-pandemic capacity, but we have the ability to double, treble and even quadruple that capacity. We would tend to do that in centralised intensive care, because that is safer and is where we tend to put really sick people. We know from around the world that that approach is better for such individuals. We would then have a cascading set of beds for whichever dependency was required. Therefore, Inverclyde royal hospital would have the level of intensive care that was appropriate for it but, for those people who get particularly sick with Covid, that becomes a more specialist matter. If you will forgive the shorthand, we would tend to batch those very seriously ill people together.

We have contingency, and not only for ICU high dependency. Because we are learning a bit more about how to treat Covid patients, we are now not moving to ventilation quite as quickly as we did in the first wave, which is helping. We are doing other things with dexamethasone and oxygen therapy, which pretty much every hospital in the country can give. Then, if patients have unfortunately deteriorated and need to be ventilated, that means treating them more centrally.

Treating Covid is not all about ICU; it is also about general medical beds—acute receiving beds. We have about 2,000 of those, and they are not all full. We have capacity, but we flex in and out of that. We do not keep 1,000 beds and 1,000 nurses waiting just in case a Covid patient comes in. We model against that, so that we can treat people in the interim period, and then we are ready if we need to treat Covid patients. As you say, the winter is exactly when we might need those beds.

Stuart McMillan: I have a quick question on level 2 ICU care, which you touched on. You referred to the better treatment that has been provided. Do you have any figures on, or has a report been published to indicate, how many level 2 patients have been dealt with to such an extent that they have not needed level 3 care?

Professor Leitch: That is an excellent question, Mr McMillan. You have clearly been paying attention. The Scottish Intensive Care Society will publish exactly that—information on the demographics of the people who have been admitted, and survival and treatment—but it is not quite ready to do that. I saw a draft about 10 days ago. The information is coming, but not quite yet.

We also have a UK-wide Covid disease-based registry, which I think is called CoMix, although I might have got that wrong. Every person who has had Covid is in a registry so that we know exactly what we did to them and exactly what their outcomes were. That means that we can learn as a whole UK. There is a similar system for Europe.

In time, we will publish that information, and we will get better. We published between wave 1 and wave 2—we publish continuously—and we learned from that. This week, I had a conversation with one of our intensive care leads at Monklands hospital, and he described the clear difference between what we are doing now and what we were doing in wave 1, because the science has moved on.

Stuart McMillan: When the report is published, will you ensure that it is sent to the committee, please?

Professor Leitch: Of course.

Stuart McMillan: Thank you.

Beatrice Wishart: Being a new parent can be a very complicated time, and peer or family support can be a lifeline, especially if people are struggling. This year, for obvious reasons, such support has been severely limited. Following Willie Rennie's question in the chamber yesterday, what consideration is being given to changing the household criteria policy to allow people with very young children to form a support bubble with an additional family, as has been done in England?

Michael Russell: As I indicated to Willie Rennie, I will get him an answer to that. We need an answer urgently. I do not have the answer now, but we need to see whether it is possible for that change to be made. That is the indication that I gave to Willie Rennie less than 24 hours ago. We will try to make some progress on that.

Beatrice Wishart: Students might be away from campus for a long time. How will that work for students who need access to a lab or library for their work? For example, what happens if students need to access expensive books? What account has been taken of such students in relation to the staggered return?

Michael Russell: The academic requirements are an obligation and concern of the universities themselves. They have been deeply engaged in discussions on how students should leave and come back, and I am sure that they will make the necessary arrangements for individual students who require such access. That is a matter for universities to discuss with individual students, within the context of the overall agreement that universities have reached with Richard Lochhead.

Willie Coffey: I have a question on the changes to travel restrictions that apply to Scottish people travelling to the Republic of Ireland—if only to get the answer on the record, so that people are more aware of it. I understand that we are lifting the restriction on travel to the Republic of Ireland, except for travel to County Donegal, because we understand that the numbers of cases there are still pretty high. The cabinet secretary will know that a large number of people usually move between County Donegal and Scotland, especially at this time of the year. Will you emphasise that we recommend that people should not travel to County Donegal at this time?

Michael Russell: That is the recommendation, but I will go further. We are saying to people, "Please don't travel." The fact that travel to a place is permitted is not an encouragement to travel. Likewise, although we understand the social needs of people at Christmas, we are saying that they should, if at all possible, be very restrained in respect of how they take advantage of changes over the Christmas period.

That is my advice to people who are planning to travel to the Republic of Ireland: in fact, that is my advice to anyone who is planning to travel within Scotland. People should think very carefully about whether they need to travel, because we know that travel is a key issue in transmission. There is no doubt about that—it is a fact—so travel restrictions are essential. It is regrettable, but we should ensure that travel restrictions are observed and enforced. We also discourage travel even to places where there are no restrictions.

Jason Leitch might want to say something about the report that was published yesterday, because I think that it is important.

Professor Leitch: If committee members have not read the report, I commend it to them; we can provide it to the committee. In fact, there are two reports—one about Scotland and one about Wales.

The reports are very informative and provide evidence of three things: that lockdown worked; that travel reseeds the virus; and that urban areas are harder to deal with than rural areas. Those are the three principal lessons. We almost eradicated the virus in the middle of the summer, but we reseeded it with travel. Of course, while the virus came here, we also seeded it in other places, because travel is a two-way process—this is not just about people arriving in Scotland. We took the virus to Wales and Wales gave it to us, as was the case with other countries around the world.

Finally on travel, I emphasise for the record what Mr Russell said: we suggest that people think very carefully about travel, even where it is allowed. I am sorry to have to tell the committee that I have recorded a new television advert to which you will have to listen repeatedly. One of the lines in it is,

"Just because you can, doesn't mean you should."

That piece of advice is the one that we want to get out there. That does not mean that people should not visit others who are socially isolated or that they should not safely visit people whom they have to care for, but that relaxation of the rules is not for socialising and parties.

Willie Coffey: I understand that one of the main reasons for the continuing high prevalence of the virus in Donegal is that people are able easily to travel across the border between, for example, Letterkenny and Derry. There are few, if any, restrictions on people moving from one jurisdiction to the other. Can you offer our citizens any more advice to try to persuade them of the risks and dangers of such travel at this time, beyond that the regulations say that they should not go there?

Professor Leitch: I will make a generic travel point. Travel has become a bit iconic for us, but

the basic public health advice is completely apolitical. It is not about national boundaries or European boundaries, but about boundaries around prevalence. The example that I used at the First Minister's briefing yesterday was a school class with measles. It would represent a very small travel restriction, but you would not move that class with measles into the room next door with a class with no measles.

You can make that case about Elgin, the Highlands, Scotland, the UK or Europe—the travel restrictions can be of any size—but the fundamental public health advice, which is apolitical and is not about national boundaries, is to stay local, because the virus will not spread as easily if you do that. That applies to Donegal.

We now have very granular data—country by country, region by region—at which people who come to visit or who live in Scotland should look. The breakdown is as far as units of 4,000 people, so you can find out prevalence in a particular area. That is how we knew where to do the high-prevalence testing, for example. The same is true in the Republic of Ireland and in Northern Ireland: people can, in order to help them to make risk-based decisions, find very granular data about prevalence of the virus in the area that they would visit.

Michael Russell: I want to make a point about how the situation affects people. There are exemptions that people can utilise—work and other reasons. Even with those, we are asking people whether they really need to travel.

I will be very personal about this, Mr Coffey. One of the great pleasures of my life, as the MSP for Argyll and Bute, is to travel around what I think is—people may disagree—the most beautiful constituency in Scotland, and to meet people whom I have known and worked for for a long time. I feel the lack of that every day. I suppose that I could say that I will go to Mull on Wednesday, because it would be for work. However, I have said to my constituents and to myself that, regrettably, I will have to continue to work in this way and not to travel—possibly for the rest of the time that I am their representative, because I will retire next year. That is not huge, like someone not been able to see their granny, for example, but I feel that lack every single day.

However, I am not travelling. What people need to do is to say to themselves, “Even though I'd like to do that and I want to do it, I'm not going to do it.” That is the advice that I give to people. Whether I was going to Dunollie or to Donegal, the message would be the same.

Willie Coffey: I appreciate that. It was important to ask the questions and to strengthen the message.

My final question is, again, about international travel and the role of the vaccine programme. During our earlier session, Gordon Dewar told us that he thinks that we will not have a travel industry unless roll-out of the vaccine programme aids people's ability to book holidays in time for the summer. Will you share with the committee the purpose and priorities of our vaccination programme? The question might give you an opportunity to emphasise them and to remind the public what they are.

11:45

Professor Leitch: The vaccine programme fits into two phases—although maybe we should not talk about “phases”, because we might confuse that with the phases of roll-out. In general, vaccines do two things. Initially, they protect the individual who gets the vaccine. That makes perfect sense. Then, over time, because the percentage of people who are protected increases, the population becomes protected. That population could be of a country or of the world. We have eradicated smallpox from the world because we have vaccinated the world. We have gone some way towards eradicating measles across the western world—albeit that recently that has become a little more fragile—because we have vaccinated the western world against measles.

Initially, the Covid vaccine will protect only individuals who receive it, because we do not yet know enough about transmission risk; we do not know whether people will still get the disease but will just not feel sick from it. Because of what we know about coronavirus immunity in general, we are hopeful that we will get some protection from transmission. In addition, people will not be coughing and spluttering as much, so transmission will fall.

In the coming months, as we vaccinate more people, our country will become more protected and will be better able to get back to normal. The problem is that that has to be done worldwide. If, for example, we want there to be travel to France or to Indonesia, we need to know what is happening in those countries.

The World Health Organization has a very strong mission to vaccinate not only the countries that can afford the vaccine, but those that cannot. Pfizer and AstraZeneca, for example, have made it very clear that they are going to make vaccine available at cost price to low-income and middle-income countries, and the WHO is taking donor amounts from the UK and other places. An important ethical consideration for us all is that we should think about vaccination as a global mission, rather than just as a national mission.

Gordon Dewar was correct: at some point, that protection will allow us to change our advice about international travel, but it will not happen suddenly. It will not suddenly be the case that people can go all over the world. That will depend on a new version of the air bridge, whatever that might look like.

Willie Coffey: Thank you both very much.

Maurice Corry: My first question is for the cabinet secretary. The student union has produced a proposal for the return of students in January 2021. It is a good plan and, obviously, the union has raised it with the authorities and the Scottish Government. Are you aware of it, and is it likely to be implemented by the Scottish Government, on the basis of its main points of gradual return and separation with regard to bathrooms and kitchens and so on?

Michael Russell: It will be up to John Swinney and Richard Lochhead to discuss that with that body—is it the National Union of Students?

Maurice Corry: Yes.

Michael Russell: I have not seen that proposal, but I would be absolutely sure that they are discussing it, because students are key stakeholders in the decisions that are being made. I welcome any contributions, but the decision on how that will go forward is for Richard Lochhead, and I am sure that, at some stage, he will communicate with the committee on that.

Maurice Corry: Will Professor Leitch comment?

Professor Leitch: I am aware of considerable engagement with the NUS. I have done quite a lot of it myself, in fact. Along with Universities Scotland and other unions, it has been deeply involved in correspondence with Richard Lochhead and Dr Marion Bain, the deputy chief medical officer, who has led the education advice on our behalf, taking into account all the advice that we have been able to give.

I am not aware of that specific version. It sounds as though it fits pretty much with what has been decided about a staggered return, in looking at practical courses such as motor mechanics, dentistry and beauty therapy coming back earlier than courses that do not require quite as much hands-on or face-to-face teaching.

If the NUS advice is particularly about residences, I am very welcoming of it because, as you saw in the other publication that came out yesterday about student positivity in September, it was principally in what we colloquially call halls of residence. Pollock halls and Murano halls are at the top of that list, but it was also in shared accommodation—private and public—so any advice to help protect students in that environment would be welcome. The NUS is crucial to that.

Maurice Corry: Yes—it concentrated on accommodation and the residential side particularly, which is where we wanted to concentrate.

I have a second question for Professor Leitch about the process of decision making. In the table that you have provided, when you talk about directors of public health in the areas and their input, does that include input from the health and social care partnerships and the integration joint boards and their chairs or chief executives?

Professor Leitch: I will go back one step, because it gives me an opportunity to recognise those 14 individuals across the nation who, for nine months now, have led public health teams in every health board in the country. It is an astonishing achievement. They are the peak of a pyramid, and multiple staff, consultants and trainees in public health are helping them. I would expect that process to receive information from the integration world, the care home world, the hospital world and to lead up to that director of public health, who is also in charge of care home protection, test and protect and everything else. Therefore, we need a system by which those people can give that advice, which feeds into the national incident management team. A director of public health should be engaged with the chief executives and chairs of the integration joint boards and their chief officers.

Maurice Corry: Have you done a deep dive into that process with a couple of the directors of public health to find out how they are gathering their information and to ensure that you are happy that there is a robust transfer of information?

Professor Leitch: Yes, we meet those directors of public health at least once a week. Some of my colleagues meet them every morning; there is a huddle meeting with the directors of public health every day. During a pandemic, we would expect some level of communication on a daily basis. That can raise or lower priorities. Clearly, in the past few days, it has been all about vaccination; sometimes, it is about testing or relationships. I also have personal relationships with those directors of public health, which you would not be surprised about. They can reach out to me and I can reach out to them, if we need to do that. I am confident that those relationships inside the health boards are robust.

Maurice Corry: Thank you.

Annabelle Ewing: The convener will be pleased to hear that I will be brief, because time is marching on.

Perhaps my question is for the cabinet secretary in particular. There was some discussion yesterday in Parliament about whether any travel restrictions that are deemed necessary to ensure

the delivery of the strategic framework objectives should be hived off from the regulations as a subsidiary or secondary matter. However, taking into account the genomic study that has been referred to this morning and the impact of travel on transmission, I would have thought that travel restrictions, as a tool, should remain an integral part of the process, to the extent that they are deemed necessary in order to deliver the particular implementation of the strategy. Will the cabinet secretary clarify his position on that?

Michael Russell: That question was raised with me by Murdo Fraser and he raised it again during the debate against the regulations that was instituted by Labour; I was surprised by that. The process point is whether travel restrictions should be subject to separate votes. I can see an argument for that, but the argument that you make is very important. The restrictions are a principal tool in ensuring that we meet our objectives and that people's lives in Scotland are made safer. Therefore, we cannot separate them out in that way. Objections to the detail of travel restrictions—for example, “Should this restriction apply here?” or, “Should that restriction apply there?”—are legitimate matters to discuss, but any view that travel restrictions are in some way unnecessary is very wide of the mark.

As I said in the chamber several times yesterday, I was particularly impressed by the chief medical officer's explanation at the committee last week of the importance of travel regulations. I would commend that to people. I am sure that Jason Leitch will be and can be equally cogent in expressing his view of how important they are. Without them—if they were to be removed or defeated—it is the people of Scotland who would suffer very greatly, because they would suffer a resurgence of the virus: of that there is no doubt.

Annabelle Ewing: I had a substantive question for Professor Leitch, but if he wishes to make a supplementary comment on the issue of travel regulations and their usefulness as a tool, perhaps he could do so now.

Professor Leitch: I, too, would seek Gregor Smith's clarity, as he is often more cogent than I am, and I seek his counsel often.

We have probably covered these points in earlier answers. If we needed more evidence—frankly, I am not sure that the public health community did—the genomic studies that were published yesterday provide very strong evidence, in particular of spread from and to other parts of the UK, from and into Scotland in both directions and from and into Europe. There was also spread from further afield, with quite a lot from and to the US, in both directions.

It is exactly as I said: you can draw the line wherever you want to draw it for travel restrictions, but local is better during a pandemic.

Annabelle Ewing: I thank Professor Leitch for that clarification.

I want to ask about two issues regarding Covid vaccination. First, we received some robust evidence during our previous evidence session this morning, with one of the four witnesses suggesting that there is no plan. I am paraphrasing, but that is what I took from what he said: it was that there is no plan, that vaccination is not happening quickly enough and so on. I do not know whether Professor Leitch had an opportunity to hear that, but can he provide assurance to the committee that there is indeed a plan? I have listened carefully to the statements that have been made in the Parliament on the vaccination programme, and there is a plan, which has been worked on for months and has involved numerous experts from many disciplines. Judging from that one witness's view this morning, it is important to provide that information to the public.

Professor Leitch: I did not hear that. I was with the Scottish Government directors just before I came to the committee. However, I will listen back to that evidence, just in case there is anything that we should correct more formally.

I can absolutely guarantee that there is a plan. We have people working round the clock on that plan, and they have been working on it since long before the science created a vaccine, because we were very hopeful that a vaccine would come.

There are some unknowns in that plan, which might be part of the point. Of course there are unknowns. We are 11 months into a pandemic, and the vaccine has only just arrived in the country. It is vaccine number 1, and it is very difficult to use because of the nature of its storage and the logistics, but there is a plan, and we are confident that, when we get vaccine supply and we get authority to use from the regulators, we will be able to do that.

We are very confident in the ability of the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation to help us with the priorities and to decide which people should go first and in which order they should then follow. The JCVI has decided that for us. It is helpful to have an independent group of thinkers, comprising clinical leaders who have done that work for years and who can help us. Theirs is exactly the list that we are going to follow.

Annabelle Ewing: That is very reassuring. I am not sure whether the one witness who spoke this morning has any public health background at all or has had any involvement in the detail of the planning, so I am not sure on what basis he felt he

could make such sweeping statements. It is good to hear clarification from somebody at the centre of the process.

Turning to my other point, I note that the professor mentioned the priority approach that the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation has set forth, which I think is being followed across the UK. I have had a query raised with me about one particular category of people: the 5,000 or so folk in Scotland who have received a transplant. It appears to me that they are not part of the immediate priority process, and I wonder whether Professor Leitch has any information as to the thinking of the JCVI on the position of transplant patients.

12:00

Professor Leitch: Yes. Let me say one thing that I should have said in answer to your earlier question. If the plan has not already been published by SPICe, which is the Scottish Parliament information centre—for those who do not know, that is the parliamentary library; I do not mean that you do not know what it is, but the public might not know what it is—it will be published on the SPICe website at some point, once we have it in a position to be so. It is called a strategic delivery document or some such thing. That is the plan.

I would just counsel against certainty. There is a lot of uncertainty in the vaccine programme, because we simply do not know how many vials we are going to get and which day they are going to arrive. We cannot know that, so people will have to give us a bit of slack around when and who.

The transplant population are in what we used to call the “shielded” group; we now call them “the clinically extremely vulnerable”—the CEV group. That group has changed as we have learned more about the disease. Not every transplant patient will be in it, because lots of transplant patients are actually no more vulnerable than you or I. However, some are more vulnerable. If they are in the clinically extremely vulnerable group, they will be up the priority list. Speaking from memory, I think that they will be with the over-75s, or maybe the over-70s. As we come down through the age groups, we add in two clinical groups. We add the clinically extremely vulnerable to the over-75s group, and at the over-65s we add in “those at higher risk”, by which we mean, roughly, those who get the flu vaccine, not those who were shielding. It is a different group of individuals and—remember—it is a much larger group, which will require a lot more vaccine. There are nine layers in the JCVI’s principal original advice. We add in the clinically extremely vulnerable group, which will include a lot of our transplant patients,

and then further down, we add in the flu vaccine group.

Annabelle Ewing: Thank you, Professor Leitch. That will be very useful information to the person who has asked that question.

John Mason: I realise that we are tight for time. I have just one question, which follows on from the session with the previous witnesses. I was a bit concerned about the lack of enforcement on public transport, especially the railways. To get on a bus, you have to go past the driver, and we got the impression that drivers will ask someone to wear a mask if they are not doing so. On the other hand, when you get on a train, you do not need to pay the fare, nobody comes through the train while you are on it and some people are not wearing masks. Do you feel that public transport should be more consistent? In particular, do you feel that the railways should be making a little bit more effort to encourage people to wear masks and so on?

Michael Russell: I heard some of that evidence and I very much empathised, for example, with Robbie Drummond, with whom I have discussed that issue in the past with respect to the ferries. It is not the role of ferry staff to be enforcers. If they were required to be so, they would require different skills and would be taken away from their primary activity. In some communities, ferry staff are well known and they know people in the community and can be actively vigilant, and in other communities that will not be the case. We should distinguish between the role of enforcement and the role of those who are working to help us on public transport.

The role of enforcement is part of the four Es, and there are three Es before it. We need to make sure that all those are operating effectively through those whose job it is to enforce them, and that is the police force.

Of course, we all have a role. It is to make it clear that people should, if they can, wear face coverings, and to make sure that people do not travel to places and in ways that they should not be travelling—we should all be vigilant about that too. There is no reason why all of us should not be vigilant. I recognise the difficulties that transport staff have, and trying to change that role would be unfortunate and difficult for them.

John Mason: Thank you.

The Convener: Is that all, John?

John Mason: We are short of time, so I will leave it at that.

The Convener: I have one final point to raise; it refers to the evidence that we heard from Gordon Dewar this morning. I appreciate that neither the cabinet secretary nor Professor Leitch might have had an opportunity to hear that yet, but I think that

it is important to give the Scottish Government an opportunity to respond.

As Annabelle Ewing and Willie Coffey have pointed out, Mr Dewar made quite trenchant criticisms of the vaccination programme. To be fair to him, his comments were not that there was not a vaccine delivery plan but that its design was, in his words, “woefully inadequate”. He also made a point about various comments about not taking summer holidays. He said that that was “campaigning against our industry”. Professor Leitch, last week you said that people should ensure that they have insurance for their summer holidays. I want to give you and the cabinet secretary the opportunity to respond to those comments.

Michael Russell: I am sorry, but I missed those comments. What is Mr Dewar’s position?

The Convener: He is the chief executive of Edinburgh Airport.

Michael Russell: I will ask Jason Leitch to talk about the vaccination programme. There is a vaccination programme, which has been approved by the Cabinet and is being published. The health secretary has made a statement on it, and the First Minister has talked about it. The vaccine is being rolled out, so I find those criticisms rather difficult to take in those circumstances. It is simply not accurate at all to say that.

In relation to transportation, it is impossible not to have sympathy and empathy for people whose livelihoods have been severely affected, and we should do everything that we can to support them. The issue of travel will not go away; it is fundamental. We have dealt with it throughout the session. I would love to be able to sit here and say, “Everything will be fine. Come the end of March, everybody will be able to travel anywhere. Go on your holidays—great.” People should look at the documents that were published yesterday that show examples of the virus coming from Spain.

When we are able to do things properly, everybody will be delighted. It is not campaigning against anybody to say that, until we are at that stage, we have to suppress the virus to the lowest possible level. We hope that the programme of vaccination will mean that the virus will, in essence, be eliminated. I do not think that criticisms that there is no plan or that the plan is woeful are accurate; they are plainly wrong. It is absolutely not the case that we are campaigning against Mr Dewar’s industry. I would be delighted to see that industry flourish, and I hope that it will again.

Professor Leitch: I underline all those points. There is a clear plan. We might be conflating two separate issues. We might be conflating early

vaccination, when we have 60,000-odd doses of a vaccine that need to be kept in a fridge at -70°, with mass vaccination in the first and second quarters of next year, once we have hundreds of thousands of doses of the vaccine that do not need to be kept at -70°. That will be an entirely different logistical exercise, for which we are preparing and are prepared, but we do not have those doses yet.

Some of the criticism in the media is that we have not cordoned off all the football stadia in order to vaccinate everybody. There would be no point in doing that in December, when we have 60,000 vials of the vaccine. There might be a point in using conference centres, community centres and airports in the future, when we know that the supply is coming.

Those who know me know that I am a very keen traveller. One of the principal challenges for me, on a personal level, has been the inability to go through Mr Dewar’s airport and his competitors’ airports in order to travel. I look forward to the day when that all returns.

The Convener: I thank both witnesses for their evidence.

That concludes our business for the meeting. The committee will meet next Thursday, 17 December. The clerks will provide members will further information later in the week.

Meeting closed at 12:08.

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