



**OFFICIAL REPORT**  
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

# Meeting of the Parliament (Hybrid)

**Tuesday 22 September 2020**

**Session 5**



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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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## Tuesday 22 September 2020

### CONTENTS

	<b>Col.</b>
<b>TIME FOR REFLECTION</b> .....	1
<b>BUSINESS MOTION</b> .....	3
<i>Motion moved—[Graeme Dey]—and agreed to.</i>	
<b>TOPICAL QUESTION TIME</b> .....	4
Exam Diet 2021 .....	4
Emergency Measures Agreement (Rail Services) .....	7
Seagreen Offshore Wind Farm .....	9
<b>COVID-19</b> .....	12
<i>Statement—[The First Minister].</i>	
The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon) .....	12
<b>MINORITY ETHNIC PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES</b> .....	37
<i>Motion moved—[Shirley—Anne Somerville].</i>	
<i>Amendment moved—[Jeremy Balfour].</i>	
<i>Amendment moved—[Pauline McNeill].</i>	
The Cabinet Secretary for Social Security and Older People (Shirley-Anne Somerville) .....	37
Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con) .....	41
Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab) .....	43
John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Green) .....	46
Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD) .....	47
Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP) .....	49
Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con) .....	51
Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP) .....	52
Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab) .....	53
Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP) .....	55
Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP) .....	57
Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP) .....	58
Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con) .....	60
Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP) .....	62
Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab) .....	63
Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con) .....	66
The Minister for Older People and Equalities (Christina McKelvie) .....	68
<b>DECISION TIME</b> .....	72
<b>RESIDENTIAL OUTDOOR CENTRES</b> .....	73
<i>Motion debated—[Liz Smith].</i>	
Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con) .....	73
Bruce Crawford (Stirling) (SNP) .....	76
Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con) .....	78
Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab) .....	79
Maurice Corry (West Scotland) (Con) .....	81
Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green) .....	83
Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD) .....	84
Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con) .....	86
Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab) .....	87
Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP) .....	89
Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con) .....	91
Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab) .....	92
Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green) .....	94
The Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science (Richard Lochhead) .....	96

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# Scottish Parliament

*Tuesday 22 September 2020*

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

## Time for Reflection

**The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh):** Good afternoon. Before we begin, I remind members that social distancing measures are in place throughout the Holyrood campus. I ask members to take care when entering and leaving the chamber, in particular.

Our first item of business today is time for reflection. Our time for reflection leader is Dr Sohaib Saeed, who is honorary Muslim chaplain of the University of Edinburgh.

**Dr Sohaib Saeed (Honorary Muslim Chaplain, University of Edinburgh):** Bismillah al-Rahman al-Rahim—in the name of God, most compassionate, most merciful.

Some weeks ago, when it first became possible again to ascend the pulpit of my local mosque and lead Friday prayers, it was a surreal experience to go through all these motions and precautions: bringing our own prayer mats, wearing masks, sanitising hands and leaving our contact details at the door. Perhaps the strangest thing was replacing the usual instruction “Straighten the rows and fill the gaps” with “Straighten the rows but leave the gaps!” We had to replace the physical solidarity of standing shoulder to shoulder with glances of acknowledgement that we were doing the right thing for the right reasons.

This is what I reminded my fellow believers about—the values of vigilance and intention. Both ideas are about being conscious and aware, so that we “stay alert”—to use an official slogan—to our outer and inner states. “Spiritual vigilance” is one way of translating the core Islamic value “taqwa”, which is both a goal of worship and what gives it meaning. It means that we guard ourselves against anything that would harm us or hold us back on the spiritual path. One of the early Muslims likened it to a person gathering in his or her robes when attempting to walk through a thorny garden. I could not help thinking of that image as I made my way carefully to the front of the mosque.

That leads me to “intention”, which is called “niyyah” in the Islamic sources. The Prophet Muhammad—peace be upon him—said:

“Actions are judged according to intentions”

That teaching has so many important implications. Among them is the fact that two people could be

doing the same action, but one is more deserving of divine reward because of what each of them intended.

We each have a choice when faced with a situation that is beyond our control. Do we look out for just our own interests and convenience, or are we vigilant about the needs of others, so that we can do our best for their sake? Do we just shrug and follow the latest rules and regulations, or can we feel positive about temporarily giving up some dear things for the greater good?

By keeping in mind why we do what we do, we can see the present challenge through.

## Business Motion

14:03

**The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh):** The next item of business is consideration of business motion S5M-22789, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau.

*Motion moved,*

That the Parliament agrees to the following revisions to the programme of business for—

(a) Tuesday 22 September 2020—

delete

*followed by* Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee Debate: Complaints Against MSPs – Amendment of the Scottish Parliamentary Standards Commissioner Act 2002

insert

*followed by* First Minister's statement: COVID-19

(b) Wednesday 23 September 2020—

after

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:  
Education and Skills;  
Health and Sport

insert

*followed by* Ministerial Statement: Hate Crime and Public Order (Scotland) Bill

delete

5.10 pm Decision Time

insert

5.40 pm Decision Time—[*Graeme Dey.*]

*Motion agreed to.*

## Topical Question Time

14:03

### Exam Diet 2021

1. **Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its plans for the 2021 exam diet. (S5T-02399)

**The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney):** Our ambition remains to run a 2020-21 examination diet. However, Covid continues to present real risks of further disruption for individual learners, schools and colleges, and more widely across the country during the course of the year. Also, we do not know what situation we will face in spring next year, when the exam diet would normally take place.

Our approach to exams must remain appropriate to the circumstances that we face. It is critical that we take account of the lessons from the 2020 national qualifications. Professor Mark Priestley will report the findings of his independent review at the end of this month, and I will consider fully his recommendations for assessment this year. The Scottish Qualifications Authority and the education recovery group are looking at contingencies in relation to exams.

I have committed to providing as much clarity and certainty as possible on the matter at the start of next month, before the October recess.

**Jamie Greene:** The reality is that many parents, teachers and pupils are watching and listening with apprehension. Hundreds have already written to us this week with concerns that the Government might already be planning to cancel either some or all of next year's exams. Their plea to us is simple: please do not throw in the towel on the 2021 exam diet just yet. Does the cabinet secretary agree with them?

**John Swinney:** Parents, pupils and teachers understand that I have to look at all contingencies. We are about to hear a statement from the First Minister about the deteriorating situation in relation to Covid. I cannot ignore that reality; I would be foolhardy to do so.

The education recovery group and the SQA are looking closely at contingency options for the exam diet. As I have maintained throughout, our ambition remains to run a 2021 exam diet. However, I have to take a prudent course of action to ensure that we explore all possible contingencies, so that we have a means of effectively certificating in 2021.

**Jamie Greene:** No one denies that the virus situation is unpredictable. Such decisions are unenviable, but Scotland's young people have already suffered too much disruption to their education this year. I argue that there is time—time to plan, time to resource and time to offer certainty that, no matter what happens, the Government will pull out all the stops to create a credible awards system for all pupils in 2021.

Given that teachers are already teaching, and students are already learning, time is of the essence. By what date will we see robust plans, including contingency plans? When will a final decision be made on the full 2021 exam diet? More important, who is being consulted in the making of those plans?

**John Swinney:** I assure Mr Greene that the Government is pulling out all the stops to explore all the options. As he knows, the education recovery group is being consulted on the question, as are teachers. The SQA has carried out an extensive consultation exercise, to which many thousands of individuals and organisations have responded. We are, of course, awaiting Professor Priestley's review, which will contain important updated information for us all.

As I have indicated, I will provide as much clarity and certainty as possible at the start of next month, before the October recess. I intend, subject to the agreement of the Parliamentary Bureau, to update Parliament at that stage.

**Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab):** I know that the situation is difficult, but teachers and pupils are now six weeks into courses—longer, if we consider the time that was lost in June, before the summer holidays. Continuous assessment and the evidence that is required for it will, at the very least, be needed as a contingency. According to evidence to the Education and Skills Committee, the Priestley report should be with the cabinet secretary already. Could schools be given more guidance sooner than mid-October?

**John Swinney:** The Priestley report should not be with me by now. It is to be with me by the end of September, as the Education and Skills Committee was told.

One of the options that we are considering is the timing of the exam diet. If we have the exam diet slightly later, that will create more opportunity for learning and teaching to be undertaken, to ensure that there is adequate opportunity for courses to be covered properly. We are looking at all the options in coming to what is an incredibly difficult judgment in order to ensure that young people are able to undertake all the necessary learning and teaching, and have the opportunity for fair certification nationwide.

**George Adam (Paisley) (SNP):** During this period of uncertainty, as we see a worrying rise in the number of cases of coronavirus in Scotland, does the Deputy First Minister agree that it is more important than ever that parties across the chamber work together to ensure that pupils' hard work will be recognised fairly, and that the matter should not be used as a political football, as the Tories continue their attack on Scottish education?

**John Swinney:** A lot of detailed and challenging issues have to be addressed. The Government is doing that with our partners, so that we develop an approach that ensures fairness for all learners around the country. Ensuring that all learners have fairness in their experience is an important commitment. The impact of Covid, which Mr Adam has correctly highlighted, means that some learners might experience more disruption to their learning than others do. We have to find a way of ensuring that there is fairness for all learners throughout the process.

**Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green):** I note how convenient it is that Jamie Greene has parents, pupils and teachers getting in touch with him who want to keep next year's exams in place, whereas I have parents, pupils and teachers getting in touch with me who want them to be cancelled for the sake of certainty.

Does the Deputy First Minister agree that it would be unacceptable for some schools to be able to have exams go ahead and others not, in the event of localised lockdowns? That would result in young people receiving qualifications in the same course on the basis of entirely different assessment models in the same year. Also, does he believe that young people and teachers deserve a level of certainty now that simply cannot be provided by running the risk of exams that might be cancelled by events that are outwith our control?

**John Swinney:** At the heart of the first part of Mr Greer's question is the issue of fairness, which I have rehearsed in a number of my answers. I have to be mindful of the importance of ensuring that there is fairness in all the decision making that we undertake, for the benefit of all learners.

There are, of course, significant logistical challenges in guaranteeing that we can assemble all the necessary pupils on the necessary day to undertake particular examinations, which is why we have to explore contingencies. I acknowledge that it is important to give as much clarity as possible, as early in the school year as possible. However, I am sure that Parliament will understand that we can do that only when we have sufficiently strong foundations upon which to base those contingencies. I will do that at the earliest possible opportunity.

**Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD):** We are well over a month into the new term and we are fast approaching preliminary exams. Teachers are being asked to plan lessons without knowing what pupils will be assessed on or how those assessments will be made, and they seek clarity.

I acknowledge the very difficult circumstances that we all face, but I asked the cabinet secretary two weeks ago whether he has any idea of the scale of the extra hours that teachers work and I did not receive an answer. Can the cabinet secretary give Parliament the answer to that now, and can he say how any changes to the exams will avoid adding to teachers' workloads?

**John Swinney:** I made it clear to the Education and Skills Committee last week—in response to a question from Ross Greer—that, in carrying out the work on which I have reported to Parliament and on which I reported to the committee last week, my objective was that I wanted to do nothing that would add to teachers' workloads.

Therefore, we have to take a very detailed approach to ensure that the material that we ask teachers to gather—which we have already asked them to gather, through the guidance from the Scottish Qualifications Authority to enable and support continuous assessment—is the routine and rudimentary assessment work that teachers do in the course of the delivery of learning and teaching. We will ask them to do that and we will look very carefully at the impact on teacher workload of whatever changes we make, to ensure that workload is not enhanced in any way as a consequence of decisions that we arrive at.

### **Emergency Measures Agreement (Rail Services)**

2. **Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the plan to extend the emergency measures agreement to help rail services deal with the impact of Covid-19. (S5T-02403)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity (Michael Matheson):** Members will be aware that, on Friday, I announced that further emergency measures agreements have been agreed for the ScotRail and Caledonian sleeper franchises. That allowed staff to be assured about the stability of the future of their company prior to EMAs expiring during the course of the weekend. That was not the case elsewhere; the Department for Transport issued its update yesterday. The agreements will ensure that rail services continue to provide stability for passengers, employees and suppliers at a time of unprecedented uncertainty.

Given the extremely challenging budget position and the current uncertainty as to the consequentialities that will flow from the United Kingdom Government, the new agreements will cover the period between 20 September 2020 and 10 January 2021, with estimated additional resource expenditure of £103.5 million.

I have instructed my officials to commence discussions immediately with both operators, to seek agreement on a long-term plan for the period beyond January 2021.

**Colin Smyth:** The Government has made more than 40 announcements on transport, worth almost £650 million, since the beginning of March. Only three of those were made in Parliament; the rest were made on Twitter and in press releases, including the announcement that we are talking about, which was sneaked out on Friday.

In the interests of transparency, will the cabinet secretary publish the full emergency measures agreement that he has now agreed with the franchise companies rather than wait until the end, as he did with the previous agreement?

From what the cabinet secretary said in his announcement on Friday, it seems that one change will be that, under the new EMA, any payment of management fees to Abellio or Serco will depend entirely on their achieving satisfactory performance levels. Will the cabinet secretary tell us how much has been paid in fees to those companies under the first management agreement and what his estimate is of the fees for the new agreement?

**Michael Matheson:** I am surprised that the member suggests that the announcement was “sneaked out”. The member might not be aware that such agreements must be notified to the European Commission. That happened late on Thursday. We received the finalised, signed copy of the agreement at 12.30 on Friday afternoon. I wrote to the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee at 3 minutes past 1—33 minutes later—to inform the committee that the agreement had been put in place. ScotRail and Serco Caledonian Sleepers then made arrangements to notify the trade unions.

I could have taken the approach that the Department for Transport took, which was to ignore the concerns of staff and not to inform them that the agreement was due to expire over the weekend; I could have waited until Monday. Instead, we chose to move at pace to ensure that staff had certainty about their jobs, given that more than 5,000 jobs depend upon that EMA being put in place.

On the other points that the member highlighted, there is a copy of the EMA on the Transport Scotland website. The member is correct about

the performance payment, in that we have taken an approach that is different to that taken by the DFT. No automatic management fee is paid to Abellio ScotRail or to Serco. Any management fee must be achieved through performance and is capped at 1.5 per cent. As I also highlighted, the figure that will actually be paid is dependent on performance and will be reconciled only at the end of the EMA.

**Colin Smyth:** The cabinet secretary has had six months in which to make this announcement and is responding today only because of my topical question. He has previously used the excuse that he will not end the ScotRail and Serco franchises and run the services via an operator of last resort because he would eventually be forced down the route of another franchise.

It is clear, after the weekend's announcements, that franchising is dead. Will the cabinet secretary commit to end those franchises when the deal ends in January and to bring the services under public control so that every penny spent is focused on better services and on keeping fares down, instead of more agreements, more management fees and more shareholder dividends?

**Michael Matheson:** I am again surprised by the member's question, given that he is well aware that, under existing legislation, we in Scotland do not have the power to do anything other than to franchise our rail services. The power to take any other option is reserved to the UK Government.

I hope that the Labour Party is at last arriving at the position that all powers relating to rail should be devolved to this Parliament. The Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen—ASLEF—has now called for all powers, including those of Network Rail, to be devolved to this Parliament. I hope that the Labour Party in Scotland will finally find the courage to stand up and demand that those powers be placed here in this Parliament.

### Seagreen Offshore Wind Farm

3. **David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to reports that no fabrication work for the Seagreen offshore wind farm project has been awarded to BiFab. (S5T-02400)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Fair Work and Culture (Fiona Hyslop):** I am extremely disappointed that SSE decided not to award Burntisland Fabrications a contract for four jackets for its Seagreen project, particularly as BiFab's bid for the contract was competitive with all other United Kingdom and European bids. This would have been a good opportunity for SSE to demonstrate its support for the Scottish supply chain during these challenging times.

**David Torrance:** The BiFab yards in Burntisland and Methil are both situated in my constituency and have a huge impact on the local economy. Will the cabinet secretary outline what support the Scottish Government can give to BiFab to aid the modernisation of the yards and to make it more competitive, allowing it to diversify into different sectors?

**Fiona Hyslop:** The Scottish Government, along with Fife Council, Scottish Enterprise and BiFab, sits on the Energy Park Fife investment group. We continue to support plans to modernise and standardise the yard in Methil; for example, we have recently paid for areas of the yard to be concreted, which is vital for its ability to attract other opportunities.

**David Torrance:** The highly skilled and experienced workforce at BiFab have been dealt a massive blow and are understandably devastated by the announcement. Scotland has huge potential for renewable energy production. What role can the Scottish Government and the United Kingdom Government play in the procurement process to assist companies such as BiFab to secure contracts and create jobs in the sector?

**Fiona Hyslop:** The key financial support mechanisms, such as the contract for difference auction process, are controlled by UK ministers and it is those mechanisms that are driving costs down, pushing risks down the supply chain, making it more difficult for the domestic renewables supply chain and enabling cut-price, low-labour-cost yards in the far east and middle east to win out. We continue to call on the UK Government to amend the contract for difference auction process, under which contracts are currently awarded solely on price, to better reflect value added to the economy and the importance of supply chain sustainability. With our limited devolved powers, we have supported the introduction of a supply chain development statement by Crown Estate Scotland as part of the Scotwind leasing round, which will help to release economic benefits for the Scottish economy.

**Maurice Golden (West Scotland) (Con):** Under Alex Salmond, the Scottish National Party promised 28,000 green jobs, but we have seen only a fraction of those. When will they be delivered?

**Fiona Hyslop:** When we have the powers of independence, we will be able to deliver that green revolution. Under devolution, we have a green investment plan, with a green investment package of priorities for investment. We will use every power that we have just now to make sure that we can deliver. However, until Maurice Golden's party in the UK Government changes contract for difference, we will not see the jobs that we vitally need in Fife and elsewhere. Responsibility will lie

where the powers lie, and we want the powers and the responsibility.

**Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):**

The Crown Estate is about to embark on the first leasing round of Scotwind. Will the cabinet secretary ensure that local content and fair work practices form part of the leases? Will she also ensure that companies' historical commitment to fair work practices and local content will be taken into account when making agreements with them?

**Fiona Hyslop:** Clearly, the Crown Estate has its responsibilities in that, but, as I said in my earlier answer, the supply chain development statement that it has produced is part of that drive to make sure that the benefits of the procurement can lie with the Scottish supply chain. I take on board Rhoda Grant's point about the fair work agenda being part of that and I will look into her point about retrospective issues.

**The Presiding Officer:** I am afraid that we have to move on. There is a lot of interest in this question, particularly from local or constituency MSPs, but we do not have enough time to accommodate them all.

## Covid-19

14:23

**The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh):** We move on to a statement by the First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, on Covid-19. The First Minister will take questions at the end of her statement and I encourage all members who wish to ask a question to press their request-to-speak buttons.

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** I want to update the chamber on additional restrictions that the Scottish Government believes are now necessary to get Covid back under control as we enter winter. I will also set out why those measures are essential and the principles and priorities that have guided our decisions.

First, though, let me provide a summary of today's statistics. Since yesterday, an additional 383 cases of Covid have been confirmed. That represents 7.6 per cent of people who are newly tested and takes the total number of cases to 25,009. A total of 73 patients are in hospital with confirmed Covid, which is the same as yesterday, and 10 people are in intensive care, which is two more than yesterday. I am also sorry to report that, in the past 24 hours, one further death has been registered of a patient who had tested positive. The total number of deaths in Scotland under that measurement is now 2,506.

That reminds us of the impact of Covid. Those deaths are not just statistics; they are of real people whose loss is a source of heartbreak, and my condolences go to everyone who has lost a loved one to this illness.

Today's figures reflect the course that the virus has taken in recent weeks. In mid-July, we were recording an average of nine new cases every day. Around four weeks later, that had risen to an average of 52 cases a day. Three weeks after that, it was 102, and as of today the average daily number of cases is 285.

We have also seen an increase in the percentage of tests that are coming back positive. In late August, that percentage was consistently below 1 per cent. Today, it is over 7 per cent. The reproduction number is above 1 again. It is possibly as high as 1.4.

It is worth stressing that that growth in cases, because of the collective sacrifices that we all made to drive infection levels down over the summer period, is from a low base. It is also, at this stage, far less rapid than it was in March. However, it is rising faster than we can be comfortable with and we cannot let it continue unchecked.

Although, in recent weeks, the biggest number of new cases has been in people under the age of 40, we now see an increase among the older population, too. Unsurprisingly in light of that, hospital and intensive care admissions and also deaths are starting to rise as well.

All of that underlines what, for me, is and always has been a key point: we cannot and must not be complacent about Covid. It kills too many old and vulnerable people. For younger, healthier people, although the risks of dying from it are much lower, they are not non-existent, and it can still result in long-term serious health problems.

That is why action to bring it back under control is necessary. To bring the R number down again, the action that we take now must go beyond the step that we announced almost two weeks ago to restrict indoor and outdoor gatherings to six people from two households.

Over the weekend and in the course of yesterday, the Scottish Government considered a range of options. On Saturday, I had a discussion with other devolved Administrations, and I spoke to the Prime Minister yesterday. I also took part in this morning's COBRA meeting. I am pleased to say that, at that meeting, all four UK Governments committed to suppressing the virus to the lowest possible level and keeping it there. Our challenge in the weeks to come is to ensure that our actions are commensurate with that objective.

Following on from the COBRA meeting, measures to further control the virus were agreed at the Scottish Government Cabinet. I confirm that we will introduce measures on hospitality that are similar to those outlined for England by the Prime Minister a short while ago, and thereby align as far as possible with the rest of the UK.

However, the advice that has been given to the Cabinet by the chief medical officer and the national clinical director is that that on its own will not be sufficient to bring the R number down. They stress that we must act not just quickly and decisively, but on a scale that is significant enough to have an impact on the spread of the virus. They advise that we must take account of the fact that household interaction is a key driver of transmission.

To that end, we intend to introduce, as Northern Ireland did yesterday, nationwide additional restrictions on household gatherings similar to those that are already in place in the west of Scotland. I will say more about the detail of those measures shortly and, of course, full details will also be published on the Scottish Government website.

First, however, let me be clear about the priorities that have guided our decisions—and it is essential that we think in terms of priorities. Faced

with a global pandemic of an infectious and dangerous virus, it is not possible to do everything and it is not possible, unfortunately, to live our lives completely normally. No country is able to do that just now. Instead, we have to decide what matters most to us and make trade-offs elsewhere to make those things possible.

Of course, the most important priority for all of us is saving lives and protecting health, but there are other priorities, too. First, we are determined to keep schools open and young people in education. That is vital to the health, wellbeing and future prospects of every young person across our country.

Secondly, we must restart as many previously paused NHS services as possible so that more people can get the non-Covid treatment that they need. Our national health service must be equipped this winter to care for those who have Covid, and it will be, but it must be there for people with heart disease, cancer and other illnesses, too.

Thirdly, we must protect people's jobs and livelihoods, and that means keeping businesses open and trading as normally as is feasible.

To achieve all of that, we must stop the virus spiralling out of control, and we can only do that if we accept restrictions in other aspects of our lives.

The more positive news is that, because we did drive Covid down to low levels over the summer, and because we now have the test and protect system in place and functioning well, the restrictions can be more targeted than was the case earlier in the year. The measures that I am announcing today are tough—I will not pretend otherwise—but they do not represent a full-scale lockdown of the kind that was imposed in March. On the contrary, today's measures are an attempt to avoid the need for another lockdown.

I also want to address the talk that there has been in recent days about restrictions being needed for six months or more. It is certainly the case that, until scientific developments such as a vaccine change the game in the battle against Covid, it will continue to have an impact on our lives. However, that does not necessarily mean that all the new restrictions that I am announcing today will be in place for six months. Our hope is that, because we are acting early and substantially, the new measures will be in place for a shorter period than would be the case if we waited longer to act. In the first instance, we will review them in three weeks but, given the nature of the virus, it is important to be clear that they may be needed for longer than that.

Let me set out the package of measures that we hope can bring Covid back under control. I will focus first on the areas in which we intend to

reinforce existing guidance and provide better support for compliance.

First, everyone who can work from home should do so. That has been the Scottish Government's advice throughout, but we are reinforcing and underlining it today. To employers who have encouraged workers who could work from home to go back to the office, I say, "Please rethink that now."

We know that not everyone wants to work from home, and that it has an impact on our town and city centres, but, with the virus on the rise again, home working limits the numbers of people on public transport or gathering together for lengthy, prolonged periods indoors. That is why it is so important. We want employers to comply with that advice voluntarily, as the vast majority do. However, today I want to be clear that, if necessary, we will put a legal duty on businesses to allow home working where possible.

Secondly, in the coming days, we intend, through the media and social media, to reinforce the central importance of the FACTS advice: using face coverings, avoiding crowded places, cleaning hands and hard surfaces, keeping 2m distance, and self-isolating and booking a test if you have symptoms.

At the start of the pandemic, compliance with basic hygiene measures was very strong. We know that it really makes a difference, and it is just as important now—perhaps even more so—as it was back then. Therefore, I am asking everyone to make a conscious and renewed effort to comply with all that advice.

Thirdly, and related to the last point, we will introduce a package of support for people who are asked to self-isolate. Self-isolation of people who have symptoms and are awaiting a test, of people who test positive, and of household and other close contacts of such people is absolutely essential to helping to break the chains of transmission. However, we know that self-isolation is hard. It asks a lot of people and, for some, the financial implications make it even more difficult—perhaps even impossible.

We therefore intend, first, to raise awareness of the importance of self-isolation and what it entails. I believe that ensuring that people fully understand why we are asking them to do difficult things, and exactly what they need to do, is the first crucial step towards ensuring compliance.

Next, we are working with local authorities to ensure that, when someone is asked by test and protect to self-isolate, they will be contacted proactively and offered essential practical support—for example, help with delivery of food and other essentials. Most importantly, we will introduce financial support of £500 for those on

low incomes. More details of that scheme will be published shortly.

As I said yesterday, we will keep issues of enforcement for non-compliance with a requirement to self-isolate under review. However, at this stage, our judgment—particularly given the spirit of solidarity that is essential in our fight against Covid—is that supporting people to do the right thing is much more effective than threatening harsh punishment if they cannot.

Let me now turn to the new restrictions that we consider to be necessary to bring the virus back under control.

First, as I indicated earlier, we will introduce a strict nationwide curfew for pubs, bars and restaurants. From Friday, they will be required to close at 10 pm.

People sometimes ask me why we do not just close pubs again altogether, and I understand that sentiment. The answer, to be frank, is that we are seeking to find a balance between action to suppress the virus and the protection of people's jobs and livelihoods.

If the Scottish Government had greater powers to borrow money, or the ability to extend the job retention scheme, for example, it is possible that we could reach a different balance of judgment on some of these issues, but we do not. This decision means that we can reduce the amount of time that people are able to spend in licensed premises, thereby curtailing the spread of the virus while still allowing businesses to trade and to provide jobs. That is the best balance that we can strike for now.

However, I want to be clear with the hospitality trade about this. Notwithstanding the economic implications, further restrictions, including possible closure, will be unavoidable—locally or nationally—if the rules within pubs and restaurants on hygiene, face coverings, table service, maximum numbers in groups and the distance between them are not fully complied with. I want to thank those businesses—I believe that they are in the majority—that are making huge efforts to ensure compliance. However, to ensure that this is the case for all, we will be providing resources for additional environmental health officers and asking local authorities to significantly step up inspection and enforcement.

I turn now to the most difficult part of today's announcement—further restrictions on household gatherings. We know from the data that is available to us through test and protect that a high proportion of new cases come from social interactions between different households in people's homes. We also know from test and protect—and perhaps more so from our own experiences—that it is much more difficult to

maintain physical distance and to have good ventilation, for example, inside our own homes.

We know that when the virus infects one person in a household it is highly likely to affect others in the same household. It will also infect people visiting that household, who will in turn take it back to their households. Therefore, difficult though it is, any serious effort to reduce the R number below 1—which must be our objective—must take account of this key driver of transmission and it must seek to break that driver of transmission.

After careful consideration, we have decided that from tomorrow—to be reviewed every three weeks, and with exceptions that I will come on to—visiting other households will not be permitted. To be clear, this extends the restriction that has been in place across the west of Scotland for the past three weeks to the whole of Scotland. Regulations giving effect to this change will come into force on Friday, but I am asking people to comply from tomorrow.

One of the reasons that we have decided to do this is because our early data suggests that this restriction is starting to slow the increase of cases in the west of Scotland, so if we take the difficult decision to extend the restriction nationwide now, in an early and preventative way, we hope that it will help to bring the R number down and the virus back under control.

There will be exceptions for those living alone, or alone with children, who form extended households; for couples in non-cohabiting relationships; for the provision of informal childcare by, for example, grandparents; and for tradespeople. However, for everyone else, visiting each other's houses will, for now, not be permitted.

Those new restrictions apply to people's homes—in other words, to private indoor spaces. Rules for meeting other people in public indoor spaces that are subject to strict regulation and guidance remain the same—people can meet one other household only and in groups of no more than six people.

As I said earlier, we will be working with local authorities to strengthen inspection and enforcement in indoor public places and enforcement action, including closure if necessary, will be taken against shops, pubs, restaurants or other premises that do not ensure compliance. People can also continue to meet one other household in groups of up to six people outdoors, including in private gardens.

Outdoors, though, we intend to exempt children under 12, both from the limit of six and the limit of two households. There will be no limits on the ability of children under 12 to play together outdoors. Young people aged 12 to 18 will be

exempt from the two-household limit—they will be able to meet outdoors in groups of up to six, although we will need to monitor that carefully, and I stress that that is outdoors only.

Let me say to teenagers, in particular, that I know how miserable this is for you and I am so grateful for your patience. We are trying to give you as much flexibility as we can at this vitally important time of your lives. In return, please work with us and do your best to stick to the rules, for everyone's sake.

The last new restriction that I want to cover today relates to travelling by car. It may seem minor, but it is important. We know, again from test and protect data, that sharing car journeys presents a significant risk of transmission. We are therefore advising against car sharing with people outside your own household.

It is important that I indicate today, in light of the current situation, that the route map changes with an indicative date of 5 October are now unlikely to go ahead on that timescale.

I want to touch briefly on an issue that has been the subject of media speculation in recent days—namely, the possibility of a so-called circuit breaker that is timed to coincide with the October school break and during which people would be given much more comprehensive advice to stay at home. The Scottish Government has not made any decision at this stage to implement such a policy, but we are actively keeping it under review. What I would say to people now is this: please think of the October break as an opportunity to further limit social interaction, particularly indoors, and, given that this is a global pandemic, please do not book travel overseas for the October break if it is not essential.

Finally, I want to say a few words to people who were shielding earlier in the year. I know that you will all be feeling particularly anxious. However, the best way to keep you safe is by reducing the spread of the virus in our communities, which is what today's measures are all about. The steps that I have outlined today will help to keep you safe, so please follow the guidance for the general population with great care and, if you have not signed up for our text alert service, please do so.

Fundamentally, I want to assure you that your safety is uppermost in our minds, but we do not believe that asking you to return to shielding is the best way to secure it, given the impact that it would have on your mental and physical health. In our view, all of us acting together collectively to reduce the spread of the virus is a better way to keep you safe.

Those are the changes that we are making now. I cannot and will not rule out the need to make more changes, nationally or locally, in the weeks

to come. It is essential that we suppress the virus and get the R number below 1 again, and we will act in a way that can achieve that. Indeed, we will publish soon an overall strategic approach to escalation in areas with particularly high rates of transmission.

I am acutely aware that the restrictions that I have announced today will not be welcome, but it is our judgment that they are absolutely essential. Inevitably, some will think that they go too far and others will think that they do not go far enough, but we have tried to get the balance as right as possible and to act urgently and in a substantial and preventative way now to try to get the situation under control quickly. We judge that that will give us the best chance of avoiding tougher or longer-lasting measures later.

I know, however, that that does not make this any easier. Many people—me included—will find not being able to have family and friends in our own homes really difficult, especially as the weather gets colder. Today's measures, although tough, are not a lockdown; they are carefully targeted at key sources of transmission, and we believe that they can make a significant difference while keeping our schools, public services and as many businesses as possible open.

The success of these measures depends on all of us. The decisions that we all make as individuals in the weeks ahead will determine whether they work and how quickly they can be lifted. That fact is not just a reminder of the responsibilities that we all owe to each other; it is a reminder that we are not powerless against this virus. None of us can guarantee that we will not get it or pass it on, but we can all make choices that significantly reduce our own risk and help to keep our communities safer.

So, please make those choices. Stick with this. Please do not meet people in their homes or your home, because that is where the virus often spreads. Limit how often you meet up with people in public places and abide by the rules that are in force there. Work from home if you can. Follow the advice on self-isolation if you have symptoms, test positive or are a contact of someone with the virus. Download the Protect Scotland app. When you meet other people, remember FACTS at all times: face coverings in enclosed spaces; avoid crowded places; clean your hands and hard surfaces; keep a 2m distance from other households; and self-isolate and book a test if you have symptoms. Keeping to all those rules is not easy, but they remain the best way for all of us to protect ourselves, each other and the NHS, and, ultimately, to save lives.

All of this is incredibly tough, and six months on it only gets tougher, but we should never forget that humanity has come through even bigger

challenges than this one, and that it did so without the benefits of modern technology that allow us to stay connected while physically apart. Although it does not feel like it now, the pandemic will pass. It will not last forever and, one day—hopefully soon—we will be looking back on it, not living through it.

Although we are all struggling with this—believe me, we are all struggling—let us pull together. Let us keep going, try to keep smiling, keep hoping and keep looking out for each other. Be strong, be kind and let us continue to act out of love and solidarity. I will never be able to thank all of you enough for the sacrifices that you have made so far, and I am sorry to have to ask for more, but if we stick with it and if we stick together, I know that we will get through this.

**The Presiding Officer:** The First Minister will now take questions. I encourage all members to press their request-to-speak buttons if they wish to ask a question.

**Ruth Davidson (Edinburgh Central) (Con):** I thank the First Minister for advance notice of her statement. We are back where we did not want to be, with infections rising, transmissions concerning and medical facilities being put on alert. The public are worried, confused and, in some cases, feeling cheated because they have done exactly what was asked of them, when it was asked, often at great personal sacrifice, and they are now being told that it is not enough.

That is a tough message to hear. It is tough for those in high-risk groups, who are worried that, if they catch it, they are in trouble; tough for those who live alone and have spent the past six months working from home, on most days speaking to another person only through a computer screen; and tough for those not able to work at all or watching time run out on a business that they have built from scratch.

There is a palpable sense of dread surrounding the months ahead, but there were reassurances in the First Minister's statement today: children, whose lives and education have been disrupted too much already, will stay in school, and that is welcome; our NHS services, which we were all concerned about in March, coped well and have continued to build resilience in the months since; shops will remain open; and those employees who have been able to find new ways to work remotely will continue to keep the wheels of the economy turning

However, for all those steps forward since March, there is no denying that this is going to be a hard and dark winter, and for one group of people the impact has been particularly cruel and continues to be so. That group was not specifically addressed in the statement. Although restrictions

on care home visiting have eased a little over recent months, which has been welcome, the reality is that some family members have not been able or allowed to visit their loved ones for a full six months, causing enormous distress and even an impact on health.

The head of Scotland's care home industry, Dr Donald Macaskill, said this week:

"The longer we keep people apart, the more people will be lost to our Covid response rather than to the disease itself."

He set out a range of suggestions to allow families greater access including testing, private-room visiting and building Covid-secure visiting capacity inside and outside homes.

Everyone here recognises that the safety of residents and staff comes first but, as the country tightens restrictions, we also need to recognise that personal relationships have a part to play in helping people through. What further steps, exemptions or mitigations can the Scottish Government take to ensure that families have the ability to maintain contact with relatives, especially as the winter nears?

**The First Minister:** That last point is of fundamental importance and I will come to it directly. However, I want to make a further comment about the generality of the situation that we face.

I understand people's feelings of despair right now—believe me, I share them—but I want to make it very clear to people something that I think they know. The past six months and the sacrifices that everybody has made have not been in vain. They have allowed us to take the virus to low levels, given us time to build test and protect, which is functioning well although there have been frustrations along the way, and allowed us to continue to ensure that the NHS is ready for winter.

To be frank, without all those sacrifices and the outcomes of those sacrifices we would not now be able to have and keep schools open, be preparing to restart our NHS and be in a position to apply difficult but, nevertheless, targeted measures. People's sacrifices have helped to put us in a stronger position now and—difficult though it is for people to hear this and for me to say it—we need to stick with it in order to get that progress back on track as we go into winter and to keep the fight against this virus where we need it to be.

I put care home visiting in the same category as keeping schools open, making sure that we can restart our NHS and keeping businesses trading as far as possible. Part of the reason for acting quickly and substantially to try to drive community transmission down again is so that we do not have to go backwards in our plan to open up care home

visiting. A plan for that is being implemented right now. Not everybody, but many more family members have access to not just outdoor but indoor visiting.

There are greater restrictions in place in what I will describe as the hot-spot areas in the west of Scotland, but we do not want to go backwards in that plan across the country generally. That is why it is important that the rest of us do the things that are being asked of us to try to keep the virus low.

On Friday, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport met representatives of families of care home residents and she talks regularly to Scottish Care. We want to listen to people about how, as quickly as possible, we can safely get care home visiting back to as much normality as is possible. The importance of visiting to the wellbeing of older residents of care homes is as fundamental to them as being at school is to children's lives. That is extremely important, and we will continue to ensure that it is a priority.

**Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab):** I thank the First Minister for advance sight of her statement. I begin by restating that Labour wants the Government to succeed in containing the virus and saving lives and livelihoods. However, that also depends not just on the renewed effort of the people but on the consent, trust and confidence of the people.

When the Scottish Government announced its route map four months ago, we said that public consent depended on three guarantees being met. The first was that

"the Government should publish the evidence behind the decisions that it has taken",

but the local data that has driven local decisions in recent weeks has not been published.

Secondly, we said that

"we need to see maximum testing capacity and a fully working test, trace and isolate system that is rolled out universally",

but the system is not working and access to testing is chaotic. Too often, the system is overwhelmed, so public confidence in it is ebbing away.

Thirdly, we said that

"the Government's strategy must be flexible",—[*Official Report*, 21 May 2020; c 14.]

but the route map that was published in May was too linear and the new restrictions, as well as local lockdowns in the west of Scotland and Aberdeen, make clear that that old route map is now defunct.

Will the First Minister now publish in full the evidence that she is relying on, provide clarity on how the test and trace system will cope with increasing demand and, for these new times,

produce a new route map that commands the consent of the people?

**The First Minister:** I will try to be constructive in response to points that are perfectly valid. First, Richard Leonard talked about consent, trust and confidence. I believe to my core that those things are vital. Not everyone agrees with it, but that is why, day after day, I have continued personally to update the public and take questions from the media, so that people understand not just what I am asking them to do but why I am asking them to do it, as well as the thinking and rationale behind it. I take that responsibility seriously. I am not complacent about it but, thus far, as a collective in Scotland, I think that we have managed to proceed as one, with a degree of unity that is important. I hope that that will continue, and I will expend every effort that I can to ensure that it does.

On the three points that Richard Leonard made, first, I hope that we will soon publish data at a much more local level. Currently, we publish data by local authority and/or health board area. We plan to publish data at much more local geographies of around 4,000 people. When we go down to that level, we must guard against breaches of confidentiality and privacy, but it is important to give people as much clarity as possible about the virus in their localities. Those plans are under way and will materialise soon.

We publish a lot of evidence and views on things; the advisory group publishes its minutes and a number of expert papers. I do not underestimate the importance of that. We will try to continue to do that as expansively as possible but, at the heart of that, there is a fundamental and simple truth. This is an infectious virus and the ways in which we have to try and stop it spreading are difficult but simple: we have to reduce our interactions with each other—particularly indoors in our homes—and we must follow all the FACTS advice. Yes, the evidence and science are important but, at its heart, the truth is not complicated. That does not make it easy, but we know what we have to do and we all have to do it.

Secondly, I am not complacent about test and protect, but I disagree with Richard Leonard's characterisation; test and protect is working well. In *The Times* at the weekend, I saw a map of access to testing in the UK, which showed that it was working well in Scotland. We had a challenge with that when schools went back but, over the past couple of weeks, access to testing has not been an issue. We have had an issue in the UK-wide lab network with the speed of processing those tests, but as of now that problem has significantly improved, and the turnaround time of tests has speeded up again. We monitor that very carefully.

Our contact tracers are successfully contacting not just index cases but close contacts of people, and they are reaching well over 90 per cent. By any standard, that is successful. We monitor the system carefully and we will take steps to make improvements where necessary, but I do not want people out there to get an impression that test and protect is not working. That would be counterproductive, particularly when it is working so well and people should have confidence in it, because the experience is there to suggest it.

Thirdly, on our route map, we are going into a different phase. In my statement—I appreciate that I did this in a single line, so we will set out more detail—I indicated that we are going to publish a strategic approach to escalation in particular areas where there is high transmission. That will move us from a route map that applies countrywide into something that allows us to flex, on a much more transparent basis, depending on rates of transmission.

All those points are important and we will continue to take all of them forward. I hope that we can continue to have a spirit of collective endeavour, not just across the country but across this Parliament.

**Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green):** The Scottish Greens have throughout supported a precautionary approach to dealing with the pandemic. It is now quite clear that the virus is spreading and further action is urgently needed to get on top of it, so we support the measures that have been announced today.

The First Minister will be aware of the huge toll that months of restrictions have taken on the country's mental health. The thought of weeks or months more, although necessary, will be devastating for many, so it is vital that mental health support is available to all who need it.

The furlough scheme has been essential in supporting thousands of people who have been unable to work throughout the pandemic, through no fault of their own. Bringing an end to furlough while introducing additional restrictions is simply dangerous and wrong. Support for workers, including the self-employed, must be extended.

To suppress and, ultimately, eliminate Covid, we need the Scottish public to continue to abide by the rules, but none of us should be in any doubt that this is an enormous ask of everyone across the country, young and old alike. Equally, the Scottish Government must step up to the challenge and move mountains to make mass testing happen in Scotland. Mass testing, including weekly tests for those who are at heightened risk of exposure to the virus because they work in our hospitals, in our schools or provide care, is critical. If it is to be delivered, we need a new strategy to

rapidly expand NHS Scotland's capacity. Will the First Minister commit to investing in making mass testing happen in Scotland, rather than continuing to rely on the UK Government's failed testing programme?

**The First Minister:** I thank Alison Johnstone for all those points, and I will try to respond to them as briefly as possible.

I absolutely agree about the impact that all this is having on mental health. I doubt that there is a person in the whole country who would not identify with that, but the pandemic will be taking a particularly heavy toll on some people's mental health. That is why we thought very carefully about the household restrictions and made sure that there are some exemptions from them, particularly for children and younger people, but also for couples and those who live alone, to try to help with the burden on them. It is also why it is important to take action now to get the transmission of the virus down, in order that we can continue to open up the health service, which includes mental health services as well as physical health services.

I agree very much with the points on furlough. At the COBRA meeting this morning, all three devolved Administrations raised issues of on-going financial support for businesses, including for those in the hospitality sector that will be affected by the curfew that has been announced today. We continue to seek to persuade the UK Government to do more on that, as well as to extend the job retention scheme, which, given the position that we are in now, is even more essential, it seems to me, than it was just a few days ago.

On testing, I absolutely endorse the sentiments behind Alison Johnstone's question and agree with them, but there are perhaps points of detail that I would come at from a slightly different perspective. Our testing system right now is appropriate and clinically driven and it is providing access to the groups of people in Scotland whom we consider need access to testing. We are not deprioritising certain groups in the way that might be happening elsewhere in the UK.

We all want to see mass rapid testing, which opens up all sorts of possibilities. The technology for that is not yet there, but we need to continue to work towards it.

Alison Johnstone is absolutely right in saying that there have been problems, over the past couple of weeks, in the UK testing system. I know that. I have spoken about them. I do not think that it is entirely fair to characterise them in the way that has been done. We need to work through those problems and to build up our own capacity.

We are doing that. We continue to make progress in all those things.

One of the most important things that I want to get across today is that test and protect is functioning well. It is really important that we all encourage people to have confidence in that system, because it is important both in identifying cases and in allowing the follow-up that supports self-isolation.

**Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD):** I thank the First Minister for agreeing to publish the local data to which she referred—I have been keen for that to happen—and for the on-going dialogue on care home visits.

I will assist with the amplification of today's important messages, because it is important to help keep people safe. I am keen to explore, however, how this situation has happened. The First Minister told us in spring and summer that she was taking a more cautious approach, which we supported. She said that she was aiming for the elimination of the virus, and she praised people for sticking to the guidance.

Now, however, the R number has doubled and is broadly similar to that in the rest of the UK; and the incidence rate in some parts of Scotland is just like that in many parts of England. Having sacrificed so much, people want to know why this has happened. Will the First Minister help to explain why?

**The First Minister:** Yes; I hope that I can do that. I appreciate that things are complex and frustrating, and I think that the questions are perfectly legitimate.

I still think that our approach at all times should be to aim for the maximum possible suppression, to the point of elimination. I go back to everything that I said over the summer. I have always said that it is not the same as eradication; it is not a point in time. We do that when we can, in order to put ourselves in the strongest possible position for facing the more difficult periods.

We always knew that coming out of lockdown—and, in particular, going into winter—would put the situation under strain again, with the virus spreading more widely. That has happened. We were always going to have to face a situation in which we would potentially have to turn up the dial again, and that is what we are doing right now.

This morning's four-nations agreement is important. If we all work on the basis of refusing to let the virus spread out of control, suppressing it to the lowest possible level is really important. Now that we have other tools to bring to bear—as well as test and protect—our measures, while still tough, can be more targeted.

I know that it is difficult. I do not think that any country in the world is not having to face these challenges. The virus has run out of control again in many countries across Europe. Some are ahead of us, and we are trying to avoid following that trajectory. It is difficult for everybody. I understand that.

This is a global pandemic of an infectious virus and, until we get a vaccine, we are going to have to flex the way in which we live our lives, in order to contain it. Sometimes, during summer periods, a harsh lockdown will have allowed us to drive it further back, which helps us to be in a stronger position to tackle it when it will be on the upswing again. That is the complexity of the situation that we are having to deal with.

**Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP):** For those who are being asked to self-isolate because they have come into contact with someone who has tested Covid-positive, there are worrying reports that, in effect, they are being forced to choose between going to work—risking spreading the virus—or losing their pay.

Will the First Minister clarify whether she has received confirmation from the UK Government as to how much the Scottish Government will receive in Barnett consequential to support those who cannot work from home and who lose income as a result?

**The First Minister:** It is important that we have financial support for people and I am pleased that the UK Government has made similar announcements. We cannot expect people to choose between self-isolating for the greater good and, because they have done that, being unable to pay the rent or feed their families. People will not comply if that is the case, so it is important that we provide support. I prefer supporting people to penalising them, because my guess is that the vast majority want to do the right thing. The reasons why they do not do so are often practical reasons that make the right thing impossible.

The financial support that we have announced today will be important, as will the work that we are doing with local authorities to offer people additional support, similar to that which was provided for the shielded group, of having shopping or medicines delivered, if that is needed.

We are still in discussions with the UK Government about the quantum of the consequential, which it has confirmed will go through the Barnett formula. All three devolved Governments were pressing for an answer at the COBRA meeting this morning on whether that would be additional to, or part of, money that has already been announced. Discussions on that are on-going. We also have to accept, to a large degree, that such support will be demand-led. In

my view, arrangements will need to be made in the provision of funding that take that into account. We want to conclude those discussions as quickly as possible.

**Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** Even before today's statement, a significant backlog in scheduled hospital operations and routine tests had built up as a result of Covid-19. Further restrictions could impact on such services to the point at which the delays become insurmountable. The First Minister mentioned restarting paused NHS services, but does she have a plan to ensure that already postponed procedures go ahead? How will today's announcement affect that plan?

**The First Minister:** Yes—there is a plan and the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport has talked about it in detail in the chamber and further afield. I am sure that she would be happy to write to Donald Cameron with updates on that.

This comes back to what I spoke about earlier: when we live with a global pandemic of an infectious virus, we cannot do everything that we want to do, so we have to make choices. We have chosen to prioritise keeping kids at school and trying to open the NHS again for non-Covid-19 patients. That means that we have to accept other restrictions in trying to keep the virus under control.

What we have announced today is about ensuring that we can continue to deal with the backlog of procedures and have patients seen within the timescales in which we want them to be seen. However, doing so depends on the measures being successful. The really important point is to say that we must all comply with everything that the Government has set out in order that we allow other things to happen as we want them to happen. That will not be easy over the winter months, but right now we are placing more restrictions on people than other Governments might choose to place on them, because we want to create the space, if possible, to do those other very important things.

**Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP):** Although it is absolutely vital that we reduce Covid-19 transmission rates, action to do so has an economic impact, as many members have suggested. How important is it that the UK Government extends the coronavirus job retention scheme while financial measures are being put in place to limit job losses, particularly in the hospitality sector?

**The First Minister:** My views on furlough are well known and have been widely shared. I know that other devolved Administrations, business organisations and trade unions have made similar points. I hope that we will see a change of stance

on furlough over the next couple of weeks. I do not know exactly what that will look like, but we continue to seek to persuade the Chancellor of the Exchequer not to withdraw the scheme without putting something appropriate and substantial in its place.

The need for that was obvious before now, but today the Prime Minister gave in the House of Commons his view that some restrictions will be needed for six months. We can debate whether we think that that is essential or inevitable, but if that is the Government's view, it seems to be obvious that support for business will be required over that period.

The curfew in hospitality allows pubs and restaurants to continue to trade, but will curtail their trade. That curfew is likely to be in place in some form or another across the UK, although other Governments have to confirm that. It is important that we ensure that there is UK-wide financial support for businesses. I raised that at COBRA, and we will ensure that those discussions continue.

**Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab):** The First Minister said that she does not believe that asking people to shield again is the best way to secure their safety, given the impact that it would have on their mental and physical health. What evidence has the Scottish Government used to inform that position, and will the learning from that evidence be published? Does that mean that shielding has been ruled out for the future? How does the learning apply to what is happening in our care homes and to young people and children who are in residential accommodation and are not seeing their families very often at the moment?

**The First Minister:** On the shielding group, we take clinical advice from the chief medical officer and others. In the earlier stage of the pandemic, as we were seeking to develop the route map out of shielding, we were advised by a clinical group, and we continue to take that advice.

We have also heard a lot of feedback from people who have been shielding about its impact on them and what they want. Although this is not its only intended use, the neighbourhood data that I spoke about is intended to provide shielded people with much more visible information about any heightened risk in their areas.

It is a difficult issue. I suppose that the direct response to the direct question is to say that I do not rule anything out. Of course, we will not rule out a return to shielding for any group of people, if we are advised, and consider it to be the case, that it is necessary in order to keep them safe.

For me, the shielding debate goes to the heart of the debate about how we as a country deal with Covid. Right now, some people are of the

opinion—they include scientists, and they are entitled to hold this opinion—that we should basically seal off the vulnerable groups in our society, let everybody else live their lives normally and let Covid do what it will do among the healthier population.

I do not agree with that, practically or ethically. We cannot segregate our lives in that way. We live interdependently; younger people live with older people. I also do not think that it is ethically right to expect one group of the population to bear all the burden of dealing with the pandemic. We must all shoulder some of the burden. Ethically, that is important.

I also think that not doing that gives younger and healthier people the misleading message that they are not at risk. They are at lower risk, but they are not at no risk either of dying or—which is perhaps more likely—of infection having serious health implications.

Those are important ethical and practical considerations. It is better that we all try to keep shielded people safe than that we expect them to hide themselves away and take all the impacts while the rest of us go back to complete normality.

That is my view, but, of course, we have to continue to take advice and do what is required in order to keep people safe. That is what we will continue to do.

**Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP):** Home is not safe for everyone, and some women and children will feel fear and anxiety about the prospect of tightened restrictions. For the benefit of people who are watching at home now, can the First Minister outline where anyone who is experiencing, or who is at risk of, violence and domestic abuse in their home can get the help that they need and deserve in order to be safe?

**The First Minister:** When I and my ministerial colleagues are taking these decisions, that is one of the issues that is always high in my mind. It causes me a lot of anxiety, as we try to navigate our way through the situation, because I understand that, for those who are experiencing domestic abuse, any measures that keep people more in their homes and not at work and interacting with others can increase the risk that they face. We do not disregard that risk at all.

I want to be very clear: there is support for anyone who is at risk. Services are open and available. Police Scotland continues to prioritise responding to domestic abuse. Scotland's Domestic Abuse and Forced Marriage Helpline is also available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, for anyone who is seeking support. It is available by telephone, web chat or email, and details are on its website.

We have recently announced additional funding to enhance the ability of front-line services in domestic abuse. Those services stand ready to support anyone who is experiencing violence or abuse.

**Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** The First Minister advised people not to book travel overseas for the October break. Many of our constituents will already have booked, or will be looking to book, breaks within the UK for October. Does the First Minister have any advice for people in that situation?

**The First Minister:** I will try to be as frank as possible. I want the Scottish tourism industry to continue to recover and prosper. We all want that. However, I must also recognise that with the virus being on the rise, sometimes—even when there is not a lockdown—advising people to stay close to home and not to travel far is important. As we go through the next few weeks, we will try to get the balance as right as possible.

These are not easy issues for any Government anywhere. I know that the situation is difficult for our aviation sector and our airports, but right now, in an accelerating global pandemic, travelling overseas increases the risk of bringing back more of the virus. It also raises the risk for people that rules will change while they are away. The clear advice that I want to give people right now is this: please, do not book to go overseas during the October break. Think about how you might use that break to reduce your interaction as much as possible, and perhaps think about staying closer to home than you might otherwise have done.

We will continue to work with the tourism industry, which has done so much work to try to open safely, in order to ensure that the messages balance the various considerations of which we must take account.

**Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP):** Earlier in the pandemic, there was a huge rise in demand for online orders for deliveries from supermarkets, which resulted in long waiting lists and some people not being able to arrange deliveries at all. That was a particular issue in my rural South Scotland region, including in Dumfries and Galloway. Will the First Minister outline the measures and arrangements that have been put in place to ensure that people who are self-isolating can be prioritised for deliveries?

**The First Minister:** First, I stress that there is no need for people who are not isolating to change their shopping habits or to take up slots that could be used by people who are isolating. For people who are isolating, in many cases—as it was for people who were shielding—support from friends, family and neighbours will often be the quickest and simplest way to access the food and

essentials that they need. The national assistance helpline is available to anyone who needs to access support from the local authority. The number for that is 0800 111 4000.

As I said earlier, we are working with local authorities to ensure that, as well as the financial support that I talked about, a proactive approach is taken to people who are being asked to self-isolate, in order that we ensure that they have the support that they need.

**Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab):** The restrictions will be hard on everyone, but particularly on those in the 16 to 25 age group, who are at a critical stage in their lives. The further restrictions on pubs and the hospitality sector will mean that they miss interacting and socialising with friends. It is important to address that group directly.

How can we avoid a generation of young people in that age group being mentally affected by further restrictions on their lives at a critical stage of adulthood? Has any specific thinking been done about those in the 16 to 25 age group when planning for better times, to recognise what they have been through?

**The First Minister:** Of all the things that weigh on my mind and on all our minds every day, that is one of the most significant. I have a few relatives who are in that age group, so at a personal level I am constantly being asked what thinking we are doing about them.

What I am saying is really important, although it does not cover all those in the age group that Pauline McNeill spoke about—I will come on to talk about them more generally in a moment. We thought about this carefully, and as late as this morning I was discussing with the chief medical officer the extent to which we could exempt those in the 12 to 18-year-old age group from the outdoor household restriction. We decided, not without reservations, to allow them to meet as six people without applying the two-household limit, because that is not the way that teenagers live their lives. We are mindful of that, which is why I am saying to teenagers that we are trying to give them as much flexibility as we can and that, in return, they should try to work with us.

It is important to keep older young people in education—not just school education but university and college education—if not entirely normally, then with some semblance of normality. We recognise the need for interaction and we are trying to be as flexible as possible. Of course, we also recognise the economic implications for that age group, which is why the job guarantee is such an essential part of our thinking: that we do what we can economically to make sure that that generation does not bear a long-term legacy.

There will be other things that we try to do, because the issue will occupy us for some time to come. However, it is of absolutely central importance to all our thinking.

**Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP):** Will the First Minister outline the measures that are in place to support blended education for those children who have to self-isolate but are not unwell?

**The First Minister:** Supported by councils, Education Scotland and the Scottish Government, schools are taking steps to ensure that they continue to provide a full curriculum to all young people in all circumstances.

The national online learning platform, Glow, has seen a huge increase in the number of users and usage since March, and it continues to be a vital source for learners and teachers across the country. We are working closely with partners to develop and roll out more resources for schools to draw on.

Education Scotland is also providing training for teachers to ensure that they can manage students learning at home where that is necessary, and support for parents is available via the Parent Club website. We are also investing to support digital inclusion among school-aged children and young people.

Those plans will be important in supporting any young person who cannot be in school full time for any period. However, our central ambition is to do everything possible to keep schools operating as normally as possible, because that is in the best interests of the majority of young people.

**Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con):** In the early days of the pandemic, those who are over 70 and have underlying health conditions were on the shielding register and were able to receive up-to-date information either by letter or text message. However, we know that many older people slipped through the net, and were not able to access the most up-to-date information about what they needed to do. I know that shielding has not been reintroduced, but it is important that the same people are well informed about new restrictions and the actions that they need to take. Has the First Minister considered what the Government can do to make sure that those people receive the messages that they need?

**The First Minister:** Although we are not reintroducing shielding, the advice and information route to people who were in the shielded category continues. Many have signed up to the SMS text service—if they are not, they can get the details and do so. A message giving some up-to-date information went out just last week—I know that because my mother-in-law got it. That is a route that we continue to use. As I said earlier, the

provision of more local information will help with that. I come back to the point that continuing to update the public daily through the medium of television is important. More older people will see information in that way than by using phones or social media. All those things are important.

It is also appropriate for me to stress a point about the household restrictions. Earlier, I talked about exceptions, and one of the exceptions, which I do not think that I mentioned, is that, if people care for or deliver shopping to older or vulnerable people, they can continue to do so. We continue to take such matters seriously, and we will try to get people the information that they need in a way that is as accessible as possible.

**Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab):** The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport asked health boards to identify 2,000 contact tracers, yet there are only 874 of them—less than half what is required—and most are redeployed from existing work in the NHS. Given that we agree how important contact tracers and testing are to the control of the virus, what urgent steps will the First Minister take to increase the number of contact tracers? Specifically, what will she do to improve testing at airports to assist the aviation sector and to provide more local testing facilities, given that community transmission is high?

**The First Minister:** On the first point, I think that there is a bit of a misunderstanding. We have a pool of contact tracers in health boards that they can draw on if they need to. Right now, our contact tracers are tracing well over 90 per cent of index cases and close contacts, which I think is probably a higher percentage than in any other part of the UK.

As we said we would do at the outset, health boards initially identified the pool of people from within their workforces to be called on when needed. We are going through a recruitment process to permanently fill those posts, to allow people who are in the pool to be released as they are no longer needed. There is no shortage of contact tracers, but that does not mean that the system will not be under stress sometimes. That is why the national contact centre is so important to building resilience into the systems.

On airports, I will not go into detail—I have done so several times—but all four Governments are considering the issue. There is a balance of risk—we know that quarantine is not completely effective and that there will be people who get through the net. However, if we substitute quarantine for testing, it might be that more people get through the net. Therefore, we have to try to work with airports and come to a view on what is the best method of protecting ourselves against the importation of the virus. Those considerations continue.

We are expanding local access to testing all the time. We are expanding the number of mobile testing units that we have and, as I said, we are in the process of establishing a number of walk-in testing centres. The one in St Andrews was the first, one opened in Glasgow at the weekend, and others will be opening over the next couple of weeks.

**Andy Wightman (Lothian) (Green):** The Government's website states that

"Test and Protect ... aims to prevent the spread of coronavirus".

If test and protect is working well, as the First Minister claims, surely we should not be seeing rising case numbers on such a scale. What is going wrong? Are the index cases not self-isolating, are they not reporting all their contacts, and/or are all their contacts not self-isolating?

**The First Minister:** Nothing is going wrong in that sense. Test and protect is part of the suite of measures that we have to prevent the spread of Covid.

However, as we have said all along, test and protect will never be capable of doing that on its own—anywhere—so we all have to do our bit to help. Given the spread of the virus, if we did not have test and protect, we would probably be faced with a much stricter lockdown than we are faced with right now. Given that we have test and protect, we can be more targeted in what we are asking individuals to do. However, unfortunately, that does not mean that individuals are not expected to do something as part of all this.

Test and protect is working very well. The contact rate for index cases and contacts is very high. We need to keep that rate high. As I have spoken about in the past couple of weeks—and this has improved—we need to make sure that the turnaround time for tests is quick so that contact tracers can get on with that bit of the process as quickly as possible.

The system is working well. I am the last person to be complacent about that, because I know the strain that there will be on the system as we go into winter. That is why we continue to take steps to build the resilience of the system. I want people out there to have confidence in the system, because it merits such confidence.

**Mike Rumbles (North East Scotland) (LD):** Does the First Minister understand that forbidding people from visiting their family and other households cannot hold for long, and for the state to say that people cannot meet their family at home but can meet in the pub is simply wrong?

**The First Minister:** I do not agree. Mike Rumbles is probably on a different side of the debate from me on how we deal with Covid. That

is fine. I suspect that he is much more of the libertarian view that we should let people live normally and let the virus take its course. I think that that would be disastrous and is fundamentally wrong.

On the issue of pubs versus households—

**Mike Rumbles:** That is outrageous!

**The First Minister:** I apologise to Mike Rumbles. Perhaps I was a bit intemperate. I did not mean to offend him in that way—I hope that he will accept that. I was being generalist and I should not have been. I apologise to him for that.

Let me get to the heart of the issue. It is a difficult balance to strike. I understand that as the person who has to communicate such things. However, we have to strike different balances. We need to protect people's jobs as far as possible—particularly given that we do not have the financial levers that would allow us to do more to mitigate the impact on jobs—and to try as far as possible to suppress the spread of the virus. The environment in our houses is less regulated—understandably—than that in pubs, and we know that that is a key driver of transmission right now. In pubs, we can put more regulation in place.

Those balances are not easy to strike—I get that. However, we are trying to do our best to get them as right as possible and to protect people from a virus that is, unfortunately, infectious and dangerous. We will keep trying to get that balance right for as long as we need to.

**The Presiding Officer:** Thank you, First Minister. I apologise to the half a dozen members whom I was not able to call to speak.

**Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab):** On a point of order, Presiding Officer. The First Minister's statement is extremely serious for the country. Previously, she has been very generous with her time and has answered all questions—and you have allowed that to happen, Presiding Officer. Is there no opportunity to allow us to do that today?

**The Presiding Officer:** It is not possible to do that by extending this particular statement, Mr Findlay. However, I was about to finish my remarks by saying that First Minister's questions will be an appropriate opportunity on Thursday. I have taken note of the half a dozen members who were not able to answer ask a question today, and I encourage them to press their questions on Thursday.

There will be a short pause while members change seats before we move on to the next item of business. I urge all members to be careful when leaving the chamber and to observe social distancing.

## Minority Ethnic People and Communities

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Lewis Macdonald):** The next item of business is a debate on motion S5M-22770, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on advancing equality and human rights for minority ethnic people and communities.

15:29

**The Cabinet Secretary for Social Security and Older People (Shirley-Anne Somerville):** I do not believe that it is an overstatement to say that we are all living in unique times. In the past few months, we have faced some unique challenges as a society. The Covid-19 pandemic has also exposed, exacerbated and amplified some of the long-standing issues that we face here in Scotland and indeed worldwide, and one of the foremost among those is the journey that we still face to achieve real and meaningful equality for minority ethnic people and communities.

I am sure that everyone in the chamber is aware that, as we have moved through the Covid-19 crisis, we have seen tragic evidence of the stark health inequalities that some minority ethnic groups face. Again, I extend my heartfelt sympathies to everyone who has lost a loved one as a result of the pandemic. Covid-19 has shone a harsh light on the long-standing and deep-rooted racial inequality that exists not only in health, but across all areas of life including education, housing and employment. Racism and inequality are not new, and they will not resolve themselves even as we move out of the crisis into recovery. We must take action.

As the First Minister said in her introduction to this year's programme for government, we have an opportunity as we move forward from the Covid-19 crisis not simply to return to how things were before, but to address the challenges that we face as a society and to build Scotland back fairer and stronger. We must take that opportunity. We must address the inequality that is experienced by minority ethnic people and the systemic problems that allow that inequality to continue, and we must make the changes that are needed in order to make society fairer.

Before I come to the particular commitments in the programme for government and our wider work across Government, I want to make it clear that no single action that we can take will achieve equality. No one person or group of people carries the responsibility for this work. Every one of us, across every part of society, can and must think about what we can do to advance and promote equality for and with minority ethnic communities.

I know that others in the chamber have spoken about the need to be more than just not racist, and to be actively anti-racist. We can all take on that responsibility. Whoever we are, we can choose to educate ourselves on inequality. We can choose to speak up when we see something that is not fair. We can choose to talk to our children about right and wrong so that future generations are clear about the responsibility that they have, too.

However, there is, of course, a responsibility on the Government to drive that work forward and set the pace for progress. That is why we are working towards ensuring that equality and human rights are embedded throughout our work across portfolios. It is why, as the First Minister announced earlier this year, we will be scaling up our commitment with a new equality, inclusion and human rights directorate. That will help to ensure that we can continue to put equality and human rights at the forefront of everything that we do, and it will be central to all our future ambitions to create a stronger, fairer Scotland.

Supporting our young people to fulfil their potential is a key part of achieving long-lasting equality. We must amplify their voices today so that they can be heard clearly and loudly tomorrow. To help to achieve that, we announced in our programme for government that we would fund a leadership development programme for minority ethnic young people. The programme, which will be delivered by the John Smith centre, will offer living wage placements for up to 50 people across the public and third sectors. I very much hope that some of my colleagues who are here today will be able to take up the opportunity to have a young person placed with them. I have no doubt that the benefits of the programme will be felt by both parties in the arrangement.

Crucially, the programme is not just about short-term work experience. It is about helping us to break down the barriers that young people face when entering public service, and supporting them to develop the skills that they need for lifelong professional and personal success. It is about improving representation in public service, which will help us to deliver on our commitments to genuinely reflect the rich and diverse society in which we are fortunate enough to live.

Of course, such focused action is only one piece of the jigsaw. We must also look at the bigger picture, which is why we are exploring how to take forward the recommendations of the expert reference group on Covid-19 and ethnicity across all portfolios. That includes a commitment to look closely at undertaking an audit of our past and current initiatives to tackle systemic racism so that we can understand not only what we have done well but also, importantly, how we need to improve.

In a health context, the expert reference group made a number of recommendations in relation to data. We intend to act on those in order to improve our evidence base on health outcomes for minority ethnic people and allow us to take appropriate action to respond to those disparities.

There is far more to be said about the work of the expert reference group and its recommendations, which are wide ranging. They address real and very challenging circumstances for the Scottish Government, and rightly so. We will publish our response in the coming weeks, and it will reflect the actions that we are taking across many portfolios and the responsibilities that we have across Government. Today's debate will help us to formulate our response to that report.

I take this opportunity to thank the co-chairs and the members of the group for the remarkable work that they have done to date. They have given such a significant amount of their time to the group since it was established in June, and their contributions, which have been in-depth and complex, have been delivered to an incredibly challenging timescale.

The expert advice that the group's members have brought to the Scottish Government's Covid response has been and continues to be very valuable. That the group also provided evidence on systemic issues beyond the immediate aspects of Covid is invaluable.

This is a good point for me to say that I am happy to support the amendments in the names of Pauline McNeill and Jeremy Balfour. Jeremy Balfour's amendment could be construed as suggesting that we should not commit to responding to the expert reference group's recommendations until after the public sector equality duty review concludes. Given the impact of Covid-19 on minority ethnic people and communities, we would not want our response to the expert reference group to be delayed due to that separate work, and I am sure that Mr Balfour would not want that either. I reassure him that there has already been extensive engagement ahead of our review of the Scotland-specific sector equality duties, and that will continue.

I say again that inequality is felt across every part of society, and I have no doubt that the breadth of the expert advisory group's recommendations will be a guiding light on our forward path.

As well as the work that was outlined by the expert reference group, we have of course continued to take forward the activity that has been on-going since before Covid struck. It is clear that education has a vital role to play in building a society that actively challenges racism, eliminates racial discrimination and advances equality. Our

curriculum for excellence provides opportunities to teach black history and race equality. However, we are clear that that is not always the experience that our pupils have. We will work with our stakeholders and partners on what further opportunities there are to make sure that all children and young people understand Scotland's history and how that history impacts our society today.

Although minority ethnic representation in teaching has increased since 2015, we are working to ensure that the numbers continue to improve. We are exploring alternative pathways into teaching for minority ethnic and other underrepresented groups, and we will do that in part through the increasing diversity in the teaching profession working group.

Beyond the formal education in our schools, we are all continually learning at every age and stage. Our museums and cultural offerings play a huge part in that, which is why we confirmed in our programme for government that we will sponsor an independent expert group to advise on how Scotland's existing and future museum collections can better recognise and represent a more accurate portrayal of Scotland's colonial and slavery history. That understanding of our history is vital. However, we are all very clear that, even today, racism is something that no country, Scotland included, can claim to be immune from.

We remain committed to taking the opportunity to shape hate crime legislation so that it is fit for 21st century Scotland and, most important, that it affords sufficient protection for those who need it. The bill will make it clear to victims, perpetrators and communities that offences that are motivated by prejudice, including racism, will be treated seriously and not tolerated. Sending that strong message is a vital part of ensuring that minority ethnic communities are able to live in a fair and equal society. Our national task force for human rights leadership is considering as part of its recommendations incorporation of the United Nations convention on racial discrimination.

My colleague the Minister for Older People and Equalities spoke in the chamber in June about our race equality action plan and the progress that we are making and still need to make to achieve its goals. She spoke about the £2.6 million of funding that we have allocated over the past financial year and noted that, in 2021, we will publish our final report on the current race equality action plan. That report, along with the actions that I have touched on today and the work that is progressing across the Scottish Government and its partners, will help to shape our focus and direction as we move forward.

I end by saying again that the Government cannot do this alone. All of us, in every sector of

society, must shoulder our share of the responsibility to tackle racism and injustice and to move towards the fairer society that we all deserve and want to see. I am committed to doing my part, and this Government is committed to doing its part. I hope that this Parliament can come together and join in with that commitment.

I move,

That the Parliament believes that promoting equality and human rights for minority ethnic communities should be a priority; reiterates the deep belief that there is a responsibility on everyone in society to tackle racism, prejudice and discrimination and take specific action to remove the barriers and injustices still faced by minority ethnic communities; acknowledges the work and advice of the independent Expert Reference Group on COVID-19 and Ethnicity; believes that its recommendations will be invaluable in responding to the inequalities that have been further exposed by COVID-19, and notes that the Scottish Government will present to Parliament the actions it plans to take as soon as practicably possible on the high incidence of COVID-19 among the BAME population and will continue to advance race equality across all spheres of society.

15:40

**Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con):** I am pleased to open the debate on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives. I thank the Scottish Government for bringing the debate to the chamber and allowing us, as a Parliament, to discuss this important issue.

Last week, I spoke in a members' business debate on a motion that Stuart McMillan lodged, on how we can better recognise and present a more accurate portrayal of Scotland's colonial and slavery history, which is an action in this year's programme for government. All the speakers agreed that, if we want to build a more equitable future here in Scotland, we must not forget Scots' participation in slavery.

Nor should we assume that, simply because we live in the modern era, everything is much better. Recent events have shown that that is clearly not the case. I hope that we all share the deep concern that so many feel about continued racial injustice across the world and in this country, and that we all stand in solidarity with those who are calling for change.

We must also recognise that we all have a responsibility to identify and remove the barriers of structural racism that still exist in our society. We must make that a priority. No one should be marginalised or discriminated against because of their race or background, yet, sadly, there is evidence that many black and ethnic minority people in Scotland continue to experience discrimination, despite political action to address the issue.

The last census, carried out in 2011, showed that the size of the black and minority ethnic population in Scotland had doubled since 2001, accounting for just over 200,000 people or 4 per cent of the total population of Scotland. Despite that increase in the population, critical issues of concern continue to be revealed and it is to our shame that many minority ethnic communities continue to experience racism and greater inequality than the rest of society experiences.

In the 2019 Scottish household survey, 19 per cent of ethnic minorities reported experiencing discrimination. In 2019, the employment rate for members of the minority ethnic community aged 16 to 64 was 59.3 per cent, lower than for the white population, which had an employment rate of 75.7 per cent. The minority ethnic employment gap is much higher for women than for men and people from minority ethnic groups are more likely to be in poverty.

The Covid-19 pandemic has delivered a profound shock that has affected everyone, but evidence suggests that the UK's minority ethnic groups are being disproportionately affected by the virus. A number of reviews, including by the Office for National Statistics and Public Health England, have confirmed that that is the case, suggesting reasons that include existing health inequalities, poor housing conditions, public-facing occupations and structural racism.

Minority ethnic people are disproportionately employed in the NHS and other key-worker industries and in some cases have a higher likelihood of living in multigenerational families. Both factors might increase the risk of Covid-19 transmission and infection. Minority ethnic people also have higher rates of certain underlying health conditions, such as diabetes and heart disease, which can increase the risk of severe health effects for those who get the virus.

Data has been slow to emerge on the risks for minority ethnic groups in Scotland, but analysis is beginning to appear. I welcome the Scottish Government's decision to establish an expert reference group on ethnicity and Covid-19. Since the ERG was established, more recent analyses by Public Health Scotland and National Records of Scotland have confirmed increased risks associated with Covid-19 in south Asians. However, the robust analyses that we need are still not available for minority ethnic groups.

I welcome that the membership of the ERG includes academics and expert advisers. We have to learn from lived experience too, so it is important that we listen to those who have experience and to their suggestions for what we do next and the practical changes that can make things better. I hope that the creation of the ERG and the other actions that the Scottish

Government is taking forward in response to the virus will help those with difficulties to understand why they have been affected more than other groups.

The Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights is clear that Scotland's public bodies and Government have ethical and legal imperatives to manage how we come through these difficult times. It is therefore vital that all bodies with a role in gathering and sending out data are able to monitor that.

There is no time to waste. We heard in the First Minister's statement earlier that virus cases are increasing and that, sadly, that is likely to continue for the next few months. CRER is concerned that the proposals outlined in the Scottish Government programme for government are not enough to tackle racism and warns that good intentions are not enough. There needs to be a sense of urgency. CRER suggests a number of practical steps, including commencing immediate engagement with stakeholders. That is why we lodged our amendment, and I welcome the Government's acceptance of it.

We need to hear from those who live with the issues day in, day out. This chamber does not reflect ethnic minorities. Like disability, race is an issue that has been left behind over the years by those of us in the political class. We need to hear from the grass roots as well as from academics. We stand with the ethnic minority population in Scotland and we recognise that more needs to be done to uphold their rights and fight for equality.

I move amendment S5M-22770.2, to insert at end:

“, and that, before reporting any recommendations back, it commences immediate engagement with stakeholders on the review of the Scottish-specific sector equality duties.”

15:47

**Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab):** We risk this being yet another debate about equality and rights for the BME community while not enough changes. We must help to lay the foundations now, in the final stages of this parliamentary session, to ensure that we are on track to tackle the underrepresentation of BME communities everywhere and to get in place the systems of data that will pinpoint where the biggest failings are, so that we know where we must act immediately.

We also need to give urgent priority to the work that needs to be done to improve the lives of BME women in employment and education, and protect them in law. In particular, we need to take a radical approach to tackling the underrepresentation of BME people in the Scottish Parliament and in our society.

We could have included many action points in Labour's amendment, but we chose to focus on the work of the independent expert reference group on ethnicity and Covid-19—mentioned by Jeremy Balfour and the cabinet secretary—because we are in the midst of a pandemic. I am glad that the Government has accepted our amendment. The Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights called for the Scottish Government to undertake an equality impact assessment on the programme for government, believing that the Government has not done so for a number of years. CRER also suggested that an independent expert advisory group be appointed to work alongside the Government's race equality programme board. We call on the Government to respond in full to the group's recommendations as soon as possible.

A year ago, in September 2019, CRER wrote an open letter to MSPs criticising the lack of focus on race in the Scottish Parliament over the past 20 years. It is therefore incumbent on us to ensure that we make the appropriate progress. The impacts of Covid-19 and the Black Lives Matter movement have served to highlight pre-existing inequalities.

In a recent Scottish Labour race equality group meeting, a local organisation expressed alarm when it was suggested during its consultation that Black Lives Matter is a phenomenon that will pass. None of us in the Parliament believes that. It will not pass. It has awoken the younger generation, who are campaigning for action and change, which we must back.

The pandemic has had a devastating impact on many people in the BME community. Data in England and Wales suggest that BME people are disproportionately dying with coronavirus. However, due to a lack of data, it cannot conclusively be said that the situation is the same in Scotland. There has been a lack of disaggregated data covering the BME community in Scotland for some time, and Covid has really brought into sharp relief what a problem that is.

More needs to be done to work out why Covid-19 is affecting the BME community. One thing that we know is that the socioeconomic factors at play in the lives of many black and minority ethnic people make them more at risk of dying from coronavirus. It is truly shameful that we do not yet know why.

In its report, the expert reference group on Covid-19 and ethnicity stressed

“the lack of adequate data to monitor the needs of different minority ethnic groups, particularly in relation to the health consequences of the pandemic”.

It went on to say:

“a lack of ongoing monitoring of ethnic inequalities in health within Scotland has been longstanding.”

Professor Shaun Treweek, from the University of Aberdeen, said:

“Within Covid studies, it’s often the case that not only is there no special attempt to make it easier for black, Asian and minority ethnic groups to take part but there’s no record of the ethnicity of any participants.

We clearly need to have high proportions of individuals from across the spectrum of ethnic communities—often we don’t.”

International studies suggest that BME people have an increased risk of an acute reaction to Covid and, indeed, dying from the disease, so we need to take steps now. Risk assessments should be developed as standard working practice for black, Asian and minority ethnic workers in roles in which they are exposed to a large section of the general public or people who are infected with the virus.

This evening, we will support the amendments in the name of Jeremy Balfour and John Finnie.

The experiences of asylum seekers during Covid have been particularly tough. In Glasgow, the city that I represent, asylum seekers were moved out of their accommodation into hotels and their allowances were taken away. The charity Positive Action in Housing has described asylum seekers in Glasgow as being left

“malnourished with food not fit for human consumption”.

We must address the tragedy of the deaths in Glasgow, including the recent death of Mercy Baguma and the awful events in Glasgow city centre in May. Reports suggest that asylum seekers might be housed in hotels until the end of the year. We need to address urgently how people who are already living with trauma are living their lives. Therefore, it is appropriate to hold a fatal accident inquiry into those deaths.

Scottish Labour stands against prejudice and injustice in all its forms. In Scotland, we have an obligation to recognise and oppose racism. The Black Lives Matter movement has shone a light on the systemic racism that has existed for centuries in Scotland and in the UK, and which still impacts the life chances, life experiences and life outcomes of BME groups.

We must not be content to see racism as something that others perpetrate. We also need to recognise that all of us have unconscious bias and be alert to the possibility that, at times, we might inadvertently be part of the problem.

I move amendment S5M-22770.3, to insert after “Expert Reference Group on COVID-19 and Ethnicity;”:

“calls on the Scottish Government to respond in full to the Group’s recommendations, giving a clear rationale for what aspects it has and has not accepted;”.

15:53

**John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Green):** [*Inaudible.*]—on both amendments at decision time. The motion mentions the independent expert reference group on Covid-19 and ethnicity. It is rightly considered that

“its recommendations will be invaluable”.

That being the case, I would hope that the Scottish Government will give a clear rationale for not progressing any recommendations, were that to be the case.

Of course, that is not the only review on the topic. The Scottish Parliament’s Equalities and Human Rights Committee has an on-going inquiry to

“identify what the Scottish Government and other public bodies, including regulatory and oversight bodies, need to do to ensure that measures taken in relation to the pandemic minimise negative effects on equality and human rights”.

I am involved with the cross-party group on multiple sclerosis, and we—and other cross-party groups—would encourage participation in that consultation.

The motion speaks of

“promoting equality and human rights for minority ethnic communities”,

which it says

“should be a priority”.

One would have thought that a global pandemic would be an opportunity for a worldwide focus both on that priority and on the laudable goal of promoting equality and human rights for all. However, it will have come as no surprise to anyone that the pandemic has delivered a disproportionately negative impact on many already embattled minority communities.

Sadly, the 75th session of the United Nations General Assembly opened last Tuesday, with scheduled speeches from Presidents Bolsonaro, Trump and Erdogan, and President Xi Jinping of China. As the executive director of Human Rights Watch said,

“Hardly a stellar group of human rights defenders. It’ll be up to other governments to provide the counterweight.”

Only last week, in her first state of the union address, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen denounced Poland’s LGBT-free zones as “humanity-free zones”, which have no place in the union. It is welcome that the Commission will soon propose a strategy to strengthen LGBT rights in Europe.

We should be under no illusion that, around the world, forces driven by the same ideology that attacks minorities and welfare, and demonises non-compliance with its narrow, pernicious outlook on humanity and society, are hard at work and have developed gentler ways to portray their bile. What they say is not the blunt statement, “We hate immigrants”; rather, they say, “Isn’t it a shame that poppies won’t be sold in some areas so as not to offend immigrants?” It is important that we challenge such behaviour. Vigilance and consistency are required. That follows for all of us.

It is disappointing that the UK Government’s disregard for the rule of law, even when that would have implications for an international peace treaty, sets such a bad example. It is consistent with its dismissive approach to judicial rulings that go against its hostile environment outlook. It is also continuing its callous attack on our welfare state—and we all know who suffers as a result of that.

Human rights are everyone’s responsibility, but we will look for leadership on them. The Scottish Government has acted more progressively and compassionately than the others that I have mentioned. The incorporation into Scots law of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is a positive step, but I am sure that, as we heard from the minister, there is no complacency about that—nor should there be, as we have a long way to go. For example, the Gypsy Traveller community has welcomed the progress that has been made, not least on the question of engagement. However, we still have a long way to go to address the ever-pervasive toxic masculinity that has an impact on our domestic abuse figures. The legislation was a welcome step forward, but we can still see the disgrace of sexual crime victims awaiting access to—[*Inaudible.*]

However, the responsibility that I have mentioned does not fall only on parliamentarians. I am delighted that the trade union movement continues to be at the forefront of diversity training—for example, last week I noticed that the Fire Brigades Union was advertising courses. Further, there is no hierarchy of special groups.

We must recognise that we need to continue to talk—that is important. We need to “take specific action”, as the Scottish Government’s motion says, but arguably more important is the need to improve lives and alter the narrative so that it leads to a more inclusive, just and welcoming Scotland.

15:58

**Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD):** The motion, together with all the amendments, will command the support of Scottish Liberal Democrats at decision time.

I welcome the part of the motion that says that we all have responsibility for tackling racism in Scottish society—whether we call it out in the institutions in which we work, online or in person. We will not see anything close to an end to racial discrimination without everyone playing their part. Therefore we absolutely need to tie every one of the excellent contributions in the debate into action. We need a plan with more concrete action points, such as the one that we have seen from the Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights, to which I will come later. We cannot carve out a route towards breaking down prejudice and racism without such action.

The initial recommendations of the expert reference group on Covid-19 and ethnicity have now been published. It seems that there have been problems with obtaining conclusive data, but the group has given helpful suggestions on how to improve that aspect, on which I look forward to hearing the Government’s response.

Any one of us might legitimately feel frightened or vulnerable at this time of national crisis, while we are in the teeth of the coronavirus. However, for anyone who is black or from an ethnic minority background, the knowledge that they are more at risk because of that must be absolutely terrifying. They are greeted by that reality in the shocking news that we are all seeing, every day and every week, as the crisis unfolds.

As we work to understand the virus, the more we can learn—and the faster we can do it—the better.

Just last week, we took evidence at the Equalities and Human Rights Committee on the efforts to improve diversity in public bodies. Her Majesty’s chief inspector of constabulary Gill Imery’s report was sobering reading in terms of its review of Police Scotland’s lack of diversity and leadership training. Gill Imery found that there was a general lack of leadership training in diversity skills for senior officers that required particularly urgent attention.

During the committee’s evidence session last Thursday, I asked about the wellbeing survey that is conducted right across the force for all staff at all levels. The most recent survey was undertaken in 2015; that is so long ago. How are we to understand how officers and staff from black and minority ethnic backgrounds feel if the last time we asked them how they felt was some five years ago? Although a survey was due this year, it was delayed because of the virus. Five years is definitely far too long to wait between surveys so I was glad to hear that Police Scotland intends to move to more regular surveys and I will wait to see the outputs of those surveys, because how can we possibly begin to understand unless we capture that lived experience?

Currently, around 1 per cent of police officers are from a minority ethnic background so there is a long way to go before our police force looks like the country that it seeks to serve, but we would all seek to make that happen because I think that it would make it a more responsive force. I welcome the proactive recruitment initiatives that we were told about in the committee meeting last Thursday and we will monitor those. I hope that the initiatives translate into better recruitment statistics and I hope that there is internal promotion as well, so that we see more minority background police officers in leadership roles.

I am pleased to see black history month in October grow each year, particularly in our schools. Making sure that young people have a good understanding of black history is important, but so too is society-wide education. There is certainly a huge gap in knowledge about Scotland's role in the slave trade. That is why I fully support the creation of a museum of empire to look at the chequered history of Britain and Scotland in relation to the slave trade. I hope that the work that the Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights has already undertaken, which has so far produced an online museum, will result in an actual museum that is a permanent reminder for visitors for years to come. The museum could be the centre of a more accurate portrayal of Scotland's colonial and slavery history.

We need to recognise that all too many figures that are memorialised and revered—

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame):** Please conclude.

**Alex Cole-Hamilton:** It is my great pleasure to support the Government's motion today.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I could listen to you forever, but you do not have forever, Mr Cole-Hamilton.

16:02

**Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP):** I share the Scottish Government's belief that promoting equality and human rights for minority ethnic communities should be a priority and reaffirm my belief that there is a responsibility on everyone in society to tackle racism, prejudice and discrimination. While I stand here, saying that, I am acutely aware that our Parliament is not yet representative of all the communities we serve and, in acknowledging that, I state again that it is incumbent on all political parties to take action to address that.

The cabinet secretary outlined in her opening speech that equality for minority ethnic people and communities is a key part of the Scottish Government's commitment to a fairer Scotland.

The mainstreaming approach that the Government is taking by weaving race equality throughout the programme for government is the right one and it has been welcomed by the Scottish Trades Union Congress black workers committee for its broad focus on supporting BME workers and communities across different policy areas, including employment, education, health and housing. The committee also commented positively on the announcements covering BME young people, older people and parents.

I am not speaking on behalf of the Equalities and Human Rights Committee this afternoon. However, I will briefly mention our inquiry into race equality, employment and skills. The committee is currently taking evidence as part of that inquiry and will report in October.

The themes emerging from our inquiry are not unfamiliar; there have been few surprises. The key test for our committee will be how to make meaningful progress rather than just once again flagging up issues. We are very focused on that, and the work of the expert reference group on Covid-19 and ethnicity provides an opportunity to do just that—to move forward. Although the group's recommendations are specifically in relation to Covid-19, they address other known issues and themes that would assist greatly in making progress towards equality more generally—data, accountability and participation.

Recommendation 9, which is an urgent recommendation, is on participation by minority ethnic people and communities. It states:

“people and communities must be at the heart of any initiatives to improve ethnicity recording and closely involved in driving forward such initiatives. Minority ethnic communities racialised by the data process need to be involved to make sure it is worthwhile and not just another tick box exercise. This will help ensure the work meets the needs of Scotland's diverse communities and also facilitate success.”

Interestingly, the report states:

“not being willing to provide ethnicity information is rare when the reason for its collection is appropriately explained.”

That principle of participation is crucial. I echo Sikh Sanjog's request that there must be wide representation of lived experiences when considering and informing the Scottish Government's approach to Covid-19 on BME communities.

The expert reference group also recommended that

“Consideration should be given to reporting related characteristics in addition, whenever possible. Ethno-religious communities, such as Jewish and Sikh communities, should be better identified and responded to by enabling a religious indicator in data collation.”

That is a really important point, so I would welcome the thoughts of the Minister for Older People and Equalities on that when she closes the debate.

We all agree that action is required, so let us make sure that we take that action. As CRER said recently, we cannot find ourselves in 10 years' time having the same discussions and making the same recommendations.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I remind members that speeches should be of four minutes.

16:06

**Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** I am pleased to have the opportunity to participate in this debate on the incredibly important issue of promoting equality and human rights for minority ethnic people and communities across Scotland. We all share the desire to uphold the rights of people from ethnic minority backgrounds, to fight for equalities and to tackle discrimination and racism wherever it takes place.

Although significant progress has been made in recent years to address the discrimination and marginalisation of those from BME backgrounds, there is still much work to be done in the area. To tackle the issues, we need to ensure that we properly understand the challenges that individuals face. Only last year, nearly one in five ethnic minority individuals said that they had experienced discrimination. That has to change, and it has to be challenged at every opportunity. It has to stop. In addition, those from BME backgrounds face significant employment issues. The in-work rate is 16.4 per cent lower for the ethnic minority population than for the white population. As we have heard, the employment gap is much wider for ethnic minority women than it is for men.

The UK and Scottish Governments are tackling the issue. The Prime Minister has established a commission on race and ethnic disparities. The 10 commissioners on the group, who have experience in a variety of sectors, will consider inequalities in many different policy areas, including health, education, criminal justice and employment.

The Scottish Government has made further progress in the area. It is extremely welcome that the Governments are working together to see what can be achieved. I am particularly pleased to see a comprehensive approach to data collection. The analysis of data is important, so we must try to achieve that. The progress on the race equality action plan is another real step forward.

The pandemic has shone a light on issues for individuals who are in the minority and the

majority. It has been found that minority ethnic individuals and communities are much more susceptible to coronavirus. That has been recognised by the Scottish Government, the UK Government and organisations around the world. Those disparities seem to have resulted in a fixed risk factor. Economic factors also have a role, because people from some groups disproportionately work in public-facing jobs or as key workers, and individuals in those jobs might find themselves exposed.

We have also heard that individuals from the Bangladeshi community are much more susceptible and that Chinese, Indian, Pakistani and other Asian people are between 10 and 50 per cent more likely to die from coronavirus disease because of their ethnicity. That has to be recognised. Getting the information on health and ethnic minorities on record and making sure that we tackle the disparities is vitally important.

Like many others in the chamber, the Scottish Conservatives will do all that we can to promote, protect and enhance the rights of people from minority ethnic backgrounds, which are vitally important. By working together we can ensure that further progress is made in rooting out discrimination and marginalisation to ensure that everybody in Scotland has equal opportunities, no matter what their background.

16:10

**Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP):** I emphasise my sincere thanks to the members of the expert reference group on Covid-19 and ethnicity. We are able to participate in an informed and targeted parliamentary debate because it is centred on a report of high quality that was created by people with care for its outcome.

This should be not a box-ticking exercise but a means by which effective change can be made. The ERG has engaged with various complex factors surrounding Covid-19's distinct impact on ethnic minority people and communities and done so in an honest and professional way. It is not a simple or easy task and I highlight my thanks for the time and thoughtful consideration that the group has put into it over recent months.

Following the publication of the group's recommendations relating to systemic issues and risks for minority ethnic people as a background to Covid-19, the group's comprehensive recommendations show a number of routes that could be pursued by the Scottish Government and public bodies.

The recommendations would allow serious engagement with the larger issues at hand and I echo the ERG's emphasis on the importance of ensuring that any action taken in response is

measurable and accountable. As the recommendations point out, it is no good continually highlighting similar or the same issues without real change being achieved. We need to build on existing research, rather than duplicate it.

Recommendation 9 relates to the Scottish Government's race equality action plan, which is due to be renewed in 2021. It points to that as an opportunity to ensure that there are

"clear actions, outputs and measurable outcomes",

which is an extremely positive and sensible suggestion.

The focus on accountability within the Scottish Government's departments on the micro and macro levels is also important in pushing forward real movement in the underpinning issues of racial inequalities and Covid-19. We have an opportunity to lead by example. The sooner we discern concrete and deliverable next steps, the better.

I also urge the Scottish Government to consider recommendation 2, on the support that can be offered to people without recourse to public funds and to discern what steps can be taken to help asylum seekers and victims of human trafficking. They may be living in plain sight in Scotland, working in modern slavery without any awareness of what rights they have to health support. The pandemic heightens vulnerabilities, and those groups are no exception.

The backdrop of racial inequalities to the distinct health issues faced by minority ethnic people and communities during the on-going Covid-19 pandemic is incredibly important. It may be stating the obvious, but I highlight that we will only be able to tackle systemic racism and racial inequalities through an approach to change that is both systemic and systematic.

The ERG's recommendations lay out clearly the complex and distinct issues facing minority ethnic people and the link to racial disparities that are underpinned by racism. Wider recognition of the persistence of racism has risen during lockdown with the Black Lives Matter movement, and it gives me hope that policy measures will be met on the ground with energised action and real motivation to tackle the issues head on.

16:14

**Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab):** Yesterday, I was asked a question: "Aren't you bored by and tired of debates about racism?" I am kind of bored by and tired of the debates. Politicians are brilliant at saying the right things but, when it comes to challenging prejudice and hatred, are we brave enough to do the right things?

There have been two significant issues in the past six months; one is Covid and the other is Black Lives Matter. They are connected; I will come to that in a moment.

I hear a lot of people saying that Black Lives Matter is a defining moment, that things will fundamentally change and never go back to the way that they were. We have said that many times before; we said it after the murder of Stephen Lawrence and the inquiry that followed. It is on this generation of politicians and political leadership to make it a defining moment.

We went out to applaud key workers during the peak of the pandemic. BME communities are more likely to be the victims of Covid-19 for specific reasons, including the fact that they are also disproportionately likely to be the ones that keep the country going. People from a BME background are disproportionately more likely to work in the national health service, food production, transportation, a retail setting, a corner shop, a supermarket or any other front-line service. If we are going to applaud and champion BME communities for helping to keep our country going through a pandemic, we also have to stand by them by making them a central part of the future of our country. Are we brave enough to do the right things and not just say the right things at the right time, when a movement or hashtag is trending around the world?

One way that we will learn to do the right thing is by knowing what our baseline is. How bad a situation are we in right now? Data is so important to that. Why have we not had, and why are we not having, a full race disparity audit in Scotland? I welcome more disaggregated data, but we can be bolder than that. How do we get proper, full data around hate crime? How do we also recognise that the vast majority of racism is not criminal; it is not something that we can report to the police or that someone can be prosecuted for. We need full data around what is happening in public, third or private sector workplaces, public sector bodies, the civil service, the Government and education settings, so that we know what our baseline is, in order to set ourselves a target of where we think our ambition should be for Scotland in five, 10 and 20 years' time. I want us to commit to a race disparity audit and I hope that we can get that commitment from the minister.

We defeat prejudice through education. Why have we whitewashed our history and why are we teaching that whitewashed history in our schools? Why do I have to tell my children about the role of the British Indian Army in defence of our country in two world wars and in defeating fascism? Why are they not taught that at school? Why are our children not taught that our diverse and rich history makes Scotland and the United Kingdom what

they are today? That is the perfect answer to the far right that seeks to divide rather than pull us together.

I am short of time, so I will close. Let us challenge not just systematic discrimination but everyday racism. Let us not have a hierarchy of prejudice; let us not pick and choose or see the issue as party political. Instead, let us come together with the ambition to change, not just to say the right words.

16:18

**Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP):**  
Presiding Officer,

“In a racist society, it is not enough to be non-racist, we must be anti-racist.”

That comment was made by Angela Davis several decades ago, and it is still relevant today. Anti-racism is the active process of identifying and eliminating racism by changing systems, organisational structures, policies, practices and attitudes. As parliamentarians, we have a responsibility to deliver that across all policy areas. However, given the short time that we have today, I will confine my comments to the issues around health and tackling what causes the high mortality rate from Covid in people from ethnic minority backgrounds.

The Scottish Government’s decision in June to set up the expert reference group on Covid-19 and ethnicity was very welcome. Its report of 18 September highlights the overlapping issues that help to explain that worrying heightened mortality. They include occupational exposure—Anas Sarwar touched on healthcare and transportation workers—income and housing issues that are faced particularly, although not exclusively, by those seeking asylum, and vulnerabilities as a result of higher rates of diabetes and cardiovascular disease. I share the disgust of members such as Pauline McNeill and Bill Kidd, who spoke about the UK’s deplorable treatment of asylum seekers. The expert group mentioned the treatment of asylum seekers and migrants under the UK’s no-recourse-to-public-funds policy as being a significant factor affecting health outcomes.

I was struck by the section of the report entitled “Differential access to treatment and other forms of support”. It says:

“Research shows a greater risk of adverse outcomes”

for ethnic minority people

“even after hospitalisation”

with Covid. There is, I am very sad to say, hard evidence of those poorer outcomes. The expert group also says:

“In three Scottish surveys of minority ethnic experiences of discrimination from 2015 to 2019, 18 - 20% of respondents reported experiencing discrimination in using health services.”

That is particularly worrying and sad, and that is why the expert group makes a number of recommendations on tackling racism, which is the root cause of so much of that inequality. I support the recommendation of

“a baseline audit of past and current”

anti-racism

“initiatives”,

to judge their effectiveness. Given that the Government’s existing race action equality plan, which was launched in 2017, runs until 2021, a systematic audit would seem both appropriate and timely.

Such an audit would also address the point that was made by some members and by the Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights, which points out in its briefing that a lot of excellent work has already been done, particularly in the area of cultural education, that has been shaped by black people themselves. It is very important that we acknowledge and build on that, instead of reinventing the wheel.

The group’s report also recommends

“An Observatory which brings together quantitative and qualitative data on ethnic and racial inequalities in Scotland.”

As others have said, and as the report emphasises, improved data is essential if we are to be anti-racist and change those systems, organisational structures, policies, practices and attitudes that I mentioned at the outset. The importance of accurate data was also flagged up in today’s Amnesty briefing.

I will conclude by flagging up the importance of the census in gathering excellent data. Scotland is the only part of the UK to postpone the 2021 census. National Records of Scotland argues that there are very good reasons for doing that, and there may well be. However, after taking evidence from it last week, the Culture, Tourism, Europe and External Affairs Committee remained concerned about the ability to deliver. I would ask that attention is paid, right across Government, to ensure that we have a census in 2022 that is accurate and that helps us to tackle the scourge of inequality, particularly the racism that we all want to eliminate.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** It is very hard when you are remote, but I am afraid that you must conclude there.

16:23

**Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP):** I, too, welcome today's debate. We know that the Scottish Government has allocated more than £2.6 million in 2019-20 to fund organisations working to advance race equality, but at the heart of this debate is the message that it is the job of all of us to tackle inequality. That is one of the benefits of this type of debate.

We can see from the number of briefings that we have received from stakeholders how important this issue is. As members have said when they have drawn to a close, four minutes for each speaker is not really enough time to cover all the main issues. We could be speaking about museum collections or about the work of Intercultural Youth Scotland—an organisation that I know Mr Sarwar and the minister know very well—to increase diversity in our teaching profession and ensure that our education system gives a true account of slavery and imperialism in Scotland and the UK.

I will focus my remarks on the impact of Covid-19 on ethnic minorities. I welcome the motion, noting that the expert reference group's recommendations

“will be invaluable in responding to the inequalities that have been further exposed by COVID-19”—

How important they are following the First Minister's announcement today of further restrictions!

As convener of the cross-party group on racial equality, I take the opportunity to elaborate on our last meeting, which was held virtually during the summer recess, at which we heard from Professor Raj Bhopal on the issue of Covid-19. At the time, evidence was emerging—or had already emerged, in the early stages of the pandemic—that there was a disproportionate effect on ethnic minority communities. As Ruth Maguire touched on earlier, we also found that in evidence to the Equalities and Human Rights Committee, of which I am a member.

Professor Bhopal's contribution was very interesting and hard hitting. I can make available the transcript, or even a link to the video, to ministers and their teams, should they wish. His overview included an explanation that viruses—and respiratory diseases, in particular—tend to be more common in ethnic minority and migrant groups. On that basis, he stated that he had provided advice to the Scottish Government to expect something similar from Covid-19.

The main points that Professor Bhopal made at that meeting about minority and ethnic migrant groups in Scotland having been affected by Covid-19 included the fact that mortality rates in south Asian populations are about twice as high as in

the white Scottish population; that mortality rates in Chinese-origin populations are somewhere between those of the south Asian and white Scottish populations; that people with recent ancestry from Africa are about three or four times more likely to get the disease and to have serious complications; that people from a south Asian background are two or three times more likely to get the disease; and that it varies greatly in the different groups. For example, Indian populations are less likely to get it than Pakistani populations and, based on data from England, Bangladeshi populations are also less likely to get it than Pakistani populations.

Professor Bhopal also commented that there were not enough numbers, at the moment, to produce accurate statistics about other populations, and not enough information about what is going on with refugees or asylum seekers. He said that some of that was to do with low numbers in Scotland of those groups.

The members of the cross-party group had a wide array of questions on that presentation, which I will relay now. Perhaps the minister will refer to them in summing up, if she has time, or even in a written response—I think that a letter from the cross-party group is coming to the Government.

At the meeting, the members of the group wanted an understanding of how poverty affects the likely—

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Will the member wind up, please?

**Fulton MacGregor:** That was only two minutes.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** The clock had stopped. You had not talked for only one minute and 52 seconds. [*Laughter.*] Members must not be unkind. It has been very interesting.

I ask Mr MacGregor to conclude.

**Fulton MacGregor:** I had so much more to say, Presiding Officer. As I do not have the time to go through all the questions, I will conclude by saying that, as convener of the cross-party group, I will write to the minister with the questions that were asked at the group's last meeting.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Thank you. I am sorry about that.

I warn members that I do not know whether the clock is working again. We will have a look. It has been a bit funny.

16:28

**Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP):** I am very pleased to speak in such an important debate, which is achieving consensus

among members. The debate is about humanity and about treating others as we would have them treat us.

As a starting point, we should look at the subject of the debate, which is about promoting equality and human rights for minority ethnic people and communities. The fact is that we are all equal. There is no hierarchy in equality. Why, therefore, in 2020 should we need to promote equality and human rights? It is because we live in a society that is not framed around diversity and inclusiveness; nor can it honour those rights for all people in society, regardless of race, gender or creed.

A shocking immigration system has been imposed on us, which we in Scotland would not choose, if we had the power to change it. We have a society in which asylum seekers who are fleeing the most appalling circumstances in their homeland are not allowed to work, when—or if—they finally manage to enter Britain. Their human rights are denied from the outset by their not being allowed to work and to contribute to the society that they have fought to be a part of. That makes no sense.

Several of my colleagues at Westminster have this week called for an inquiry into the recent tragic deaths of three asylum seekers in Glasgow.

It does not have to be like that. As the Government motion says, it is incumbent on us all to do our part to make sure that minorities' rights are promoted and protected in our communities.

I was struck when, in an episode of BBC Four's excellent series on Africa, a participant said that, globally, people of colour are not in the minority—they are the majority. Some intolerant people would do well to remember that.

The village of Twechar in my constituency provides a fantastic example of how to promote equality and inclusiveness. It has an impressive record of welcoming refugees into its small community. I have attended social events that have been organised to promote different cultures through cooking exhibitions or musical displays, for example. Community leader Sandra Sutton, who runs the healthy living and enterprise centre, makes sure that no one goes short of the basic essentials and that every family is looked after. She is the point of contact for anything that is needed to make those families feel welcome and comfortable. It is probably easier to do that in small rural communities, but you need someone with the will and humanity to do it. In our cities and towns, it is logistically different, but fantastic third sector organisations are on hand to provide help and support.

We need a political solution with humanity at its heart. I agree with all the points that have been

made about the importance of data. The excellent organisation Close the Gap tells us that BME women face an intertwined set of gendered and racial barriers that affect their ability to enter, progress and stay in good-quality employment. Indeed, Covid-19 has highlighted and exacerbated BME women's pre-existing inequalities in the labour market. Brexit is likely to further exacerbate that inequality.

In that respect, the work of the independent expert reference group on Covid-19 and ethnicity is crucial in assisting the Scottish Government to present to the Parliament with the actions that it needs to take to address the high incidence of Covid-19 among the BME population.

It is our collective responsibility to do what we can, however small or seemingly insignificant, because that will make all the difference to those who we welcome in an inclusive, integrated Scotland, and it will help us to embrace what unites us as human beings.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Before I call Ms Hamilton, I say that this area of the Parliament has been placed on alert pending investigation of a potential fire. Everyone who is present in the chamber and the gallery—although there is no one in the gallery—should remain where they are until further directions are provided. As all our speakers for this item of business are present, I propose to continue with business and issue an update when further information becomes available.

What a cue for Ms Hamilton to come in on.  
[Laughter.]

16:32

**Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con):** I am definitely on fire.[Laughter.]

First, I would like to thank the Scottish Government for bringing the debate to the chamber and the Presiding Officer for allowing me to step out of the chamber.

We continue to live with the effects of Covid-19. The First Minister's statement today on the rising number of infections is a wake-up call: the virus is out there and is spreading. Sadly, we know that people from BAME backgrounds are worst affected by the pandemic, with a high proportion of that population experiencing the devastating consequences of the disease.

We are all too aware of that concerning trend. The UK Government's "Disparities in the risk and outcomes of COVID-19" report on the impact of the pandemic on the BAME population highlighted that

"people of Bangladeshi ethnicity had around twice the risk of death than people of White British ethnicity. People of

Chinese, Indian, Pakistani, Other Asian, Caribbean and Other Black ethnicity had between 10 and 50% higher risk of death when compared to White British”,

which was mentioned by Alexander Stewart.

The impact of Covid-19 and associated lockdown has been far more pronounced for BAME women, in particular. Women are more likely to be unemployed as a result of the pandemic. The Institute For Fiscal Studies and University College London’s institute of education found that mothers were 47 per cent more likely to have permanently lost their jobs or quit and that 14 per cent were more likely to have been furloughed since the start of the crisis.

The employment rate for ethnic minorities is lower than that for white Scots—there is an employment rate gap of 16.4 per cent, which means that ethnic minorities are disproportionately affected by the economic impact of Covid-19. We know that two sectors that are expected to be hardest hit in the post-Covid world are hospitality and retail, both of which employ significant numbers of BAME female workers.

We must remember that Covid-19 has not created health and structural inequalities: it has highlighted and exacerbated existing structural and institutional inequalities, and barriers that exist across healthcare and wider society. Those have been laid bare during the course of the pandemic. I know that I speak about it a lot, but I repeat that the pandemic is acting, and has acted, as a catalyst for exposing those entrenched inequalities.

The UK Conservative Government has acknowledged that the massive inequalities that exist must be examined. In July, the Prime Minister announced the commission on race and ethnic disparities. It has been tasked with investigating how inequalities in the UK manifest in areas including health, education, criminal justice and employment, and its findings are to be reported on by the end of the year.

I am very proud that my party has acted not only at Government level but at party level. Scottish Conservatives Friends of BAME was recently launched as an umbrella organisation that works directly with the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party to support the BAME communities of Scotland.

I am glad that the Scottish Government has also recognised the need to take affirmative action to ensure that promoting the equality and human rights of minority ethnic communities is a priority. We are happy to support the Government motion and the amendment from Pauline McNeill.

I also welcome calls from the Royal College of Nursing that echo the data collection recommendations of the Scottish Government’s

independent expert reference group on Covid-19 and ethnicity. As was stated by Pauline McNeill, we need the Government to get in-depth detailed data on the impact of BAME backgrounds if we are to establish where best to target support. The Government must take on board the recommendations from that group immediately.

I will stop there, Presiding Officer.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** The excitement has died down—it was a false alarm. I call Annabelle Ewing as the last speaker in the open debate.

16:36

**Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP):** The lights have come up—I do not think that I am rising to the occasion with my speech, but I will try. Thank you for calling me to speak in what is an important debate.

I have said many times, but it has to be said again, that there can be no more important mark of whether a society is civilised than how it treats its minorities. It is clear from speeches from across the chamber that everybody here firmly believes that.

I listened to the cabinet secretary’s opening remarks and am very pleased to note that the Scottish Government, too, is determined, as a priority, to play its part in eradicating racism, inequality and injustice, and to tackle the scars that they bring. When reading for this speech, I was interested to note that the Scottish Government is intent on proceeding with mainstreaming those issues right across Government portfolios. Things can often get lost in silos in Government, so it is really important that there is a cross-portfolio approach. I also note that there was a funding allocation of £2.6 million in 2019-20 to support organisations that work to advance race equality. That work on the ground is hugely important.

I noted, too, that Parliament had strongly indicated its determination to establish a museum of slavery and its impact in Scotland. I appreciate, further to emails that we have received, that the importance of that project requires that it proceed with maximum input from all those who wish to have their voices heard, and that it proceed with great sensitivity. I welcome the Scottish Government’s sponsoring of an expert group to progress that work.

A key development has been the report of the expert reference group on Covid-19 and ethnicity. I think that I am hearing that the Scottish Government is going to take up all the group’s recommendations, but we must wait to hear the detail of how it plans to do that.

The Government has already taken forward the group's important recommendation on making ethnicity a mandatory field in health databases, which would link to data in the census and ensure that ethnicity data collection is embedded in the NHS. That was a key request by the group; rightly so, for without reliable data, we are not proceeding as best we should in terms of looking at what needs to be done. If there are gaps in the evidence, the task is made that much more difficult.

Another key area on which more disaggregated data is needed is the labour markets. There is a need to hear directly from minority ethnic workers, particularly women, of their experiences in the labour market, as was highlighted by Close the Gap.

In that regard, it is concerning to note that the expert reference group found that people who work in health and social care settings have experienced discrimination. That is truly unacceptable—especially when we take into account the heroic efforts that they have made in contributing to tackling coronavirus. That must be addressed.

On the wider human rights agenda, there have been calls from Amnesty International and other organisations for the incorporation into Scots law of the United Nations' International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, which I know is being considered.

I also wish to commend the Scottish Trades Union Congress's black workers committee for all its hard work, and to intimate my support for its "Break the race ceiling" campaign, which intends to create a level playing field for minority ethnic workers in the private, public and third sectors. I also welcome the efforts of the Fife Centre for Equalities and its work on inclusion across the kingdom of Fife.

It is evident that a lot of good work is going on, but, as has rightly been said, it is not just the responsibility of Government; it is a responsibility for each of us. It is all very well to continue to talk, and talking is good, but actions are much more important. We need to get on with it. I am conscious of my responsibility as the MSP for Cowdenbeath, so I pledge to do what I can to help to make a difference.

16:41

**Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab):** This has been an excellent debate with an unusual level of cross-party agreement on the need for action across society. It is about leadership, monitoring and implementation to give people real opportunities. As several colleagues have said, we need to

tackle the deep-seated inequalities that have been reinforced by the pandemic.

I want to refer to the life of one of my former constituents—Saroj Lal, who passed away in the spring. When she started teaching at South Morningside primary school in 1970, she was not just the first BAME teacher at South Morningside; she was among the first in Scotland. Her training as a teacher was instrumental in preparing her for her work in multiculturalism and anti-racist education. So many of the teaching materials that she had to use presented a skewed and prejudiced view of the world. She went on to challenge perceptions and stereotypes throughout her career, and she fought for more equal and balanced representation of minority ethnic communities at the point at which it really matters—in children's education. The point that Anas Sarwar made today about the change that is still needed was incredibly powerful. Saroj Lal worked with key organisations in Edinburgh—namely, Nari Kallyan Shangho, Milan and Edinburgh and Lothians Regional Equality Council, which continue to work in my community and to strive for equality.

Although groups such as racial equality councils are vital in driving a change in attitudes and in supporting people from BME backgrounds to stand up, we need Government leadership and action to bring the transformational change that is needed.

A survey by Business in the Community found that one in three black people—compared with 1 per cent of white people—felt that ethnicity would be a barrier to their progressing in their workplace. As many members have said today, the pandemic has starkly highlighted the concentration of BME workers in low-paid jobs, and it has disproportionately affected their safety through poor access to personal protective equipment and variable implementation of safety measures.

We want to thank trade union representatives from across the country who have put in the hard slog of negotiating with the employers, and have worked hard to raise the issues. Those people include Ian Mullen, who is one of Edinburgh's Unison representatives. Whether in councils, integration joint boards or the care sector, some fundamental changes need to be made now.

One of the key recommendations in the UK Government's 2017 McGregor-Smith report was that it should be ensured that the public sector uses its purchasing power to drive change by setting and publishing targets to ensure that it does not entrench inequalities. That needs to be done at Scotland level, as well as in our local authorities.

Community wealth building has been talked about recently. We need to make sure that we also link that to ethnic minority communities. We need a fine-grained analysis of how money is being spent and its actual impact.

Finally, I will focus on the overrepresentation of black and ethnic minority workers in low-paid jobs, because that links to other inequalities in what is called intersectionality or multiple discrimination, particularly in relation to the gender pay gap. In Scotland, women still earn 15 per cent less than men, and still see obstacles to progression in the workplace. As Close the Gap has highlighted, we must fix now the lack of data on the experiences of black and ethnic minority women in the workforce, because we still do not know exactly how challenging the situation is and we are still not focusing on the solutions.

In her opening remarks, Pauline McNeill mentioned that she has not included a requirement that the Scottish Government carry out an equality impact assessment on its programme for government. I am sure that that means that her amendment to the motion will be accepted today. However, it is an important point, because an EqIA enables policy to be truly inclusive, by assessing how it will impact on different groups of people and enabling adjustments to be made before a policy is enacted. An EQIA on the programme for government would not be merely symbolic; it would help to drive real practical changes.

Anas Sarwar summed up very well the need for data and evidence. In the chamber today, there is cross-party agreement on the need to make the changes that we have all argued for, and to advance human rights and equality for minority ethnic people and the wider community.

It has been a really good debate. I do not think that it has been boring—it has focused on changes that need to be made. Let us make sure that we push the Government hard, and that Government ministers know that they have our support.

The pandemic has pushed back progress on equalities. That is what prompted our amendment; I am sure that it also prompted the Conservative amendment. If both amendments are agreed to, let us say that we need urgent action, that we need to make progress, and that we need accountability. People from our black and ethnic minority communities need to know that we will all push for that—not only in a debate, but in committees, as others have talked about. Let us make it happen and make the change that we need.

16:46

**Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con):** I am pleased to close for my party and contribute to a thoughtful debate that has involved many excellent contributions from across the chamber.

This is an emotive subject to discuss. Although, as a country, we pride ourselves on being open and welcoming, it is clear that we are not all the way there yet. It is right to aspire to an equal society while recognising that more action needs to be taken to achieve it. We must aspire to be an equal society: not only is it our responsibility to do so, but it will help to unlock the potential of people and communities who contribute so much to our national life.

Despite a lot of work, there is still progress to be made. I recognise that just by looking at the city that I am proud to represent. Today, Glasgow is one of our most diverse and multicultural cities—welcoming to all, regardless of background. However, sadly, it is not always welcoming. Only a few years ago, racially motivated attacks in Glasgow schools were on the rise, and only a few months ago, there was a coronavirus-related racial hate crime incident in the west end. When it comes to demonstrating the prejudice and discrimination that are faced by minority communities to this day, the experiences of parliamentary colleagues—Anas Sarwar and Humza Yousaf, in particular—have given us a chilling insight into real life for many minority ethnic people, whether such incidents are in person or online. It is profoundly difficult to hear about those examples, especially when most of us do not see or hear such sentiments as part of our daily lives. That makes it all the more important that we take every opportunity to eradicate such behaviour whenever it appears. In that regard, I appreciate the unity of purpose that has been expressed by members across the chamber.

The debate today has focused on the effect of structural inequalities on the increased danger that coronavirus poses to our BAME communities. The early evidence appears to support the conclusion that people from minority backgrounds—particularly those who work in healthcare—face a higher risk from Covid, and we need to work out why. Therefore, I welcome many of the actions that have been discussed during the debate. The expert reference group on Covid-19 and ethnicity will, I hope, prove to be a valuable resource when it presents its recommendations in the coming months.

As the Royal College of Nursing has said, although Covid did not create the structural inequalities in health that are faced by minority communities, it exacerbated them. Research from the expert reference group will go a long way towards establishing the extent of the problem that

is being faced, and can only be a useful resource as the Scottish Government shapes its response.

Other recommendations from the group have been taken forward already, such as the publication of workplace assessments to help minority ethnic staff who work in healthcare settings and direct engagement with minority ethnic communities to address their concerns as quickly as possible. Those are welcome steps and I hope that that work will continue in the weeks and months ahead. I welcome the minister's continued commitment.

However, there are other ways in which Covid has exposed areas where we need to do better, such as in relation to the labour market and the effect of prolonged shutdowns on the availability of secure work, particularly for BME women. As we have heard, research from Close the Gap shows that BME women are more likely to be in insecure work—putting them at increased risk of significant loss of earnings—and that those insecure jobs are more susceptible to redundancies.

Close the Gap indicated that almost a quarter of BME mothers have been struggling to feed their family during the pandemic. As much as we might think that a global pandemic affects us all in the same way, the evidence tells us a different, and increasingly disproportionate, story.

That said, there is another side to this. We face one of the most difficult periods in our recent history, which has exposed structural disparities that put minority ethnic communities at heightened risk, but which also gives us opportunities to fundamentally correct those problems. It gives us a chance to make sure that minority communities are protected throughout the pandemic but also to ensure that they have the opportunities to thrive afterwards.

Think of the benefits across society if we pulled down the barriers to success that have thwarted people for years. Think of the difference that it will make to kids growing up today, no matter where they live, to know that they have just as much of a chance of achieving greatness as anyone else.

The action that we take as a consequence of the pandemic can ensure that we protect people from the disproportionately adverse effects that their communities are experiencing. Public health rightly remains the priority. However, our action can also challenge inequalities that are not new and which for years have held people back from achieving their potential.

If we can use the collective will that has been demonstrated today, I am confident that the right solutions can be found to protect, uphold and further the rights of our minority communities and support their fight for equality.

16:52

**The Minister for Older People and Equalities (Christina McKelvie):** I thank all members for the way in which they have conducted the debate today. It has been incredibly informative. I hope to answer everyone's questions, although that may be a challenge given the number of questions that have been raised. I thank the organisations that have provided us with briefings; there has been some amazing work in those briefings, with lots of challenges and questions—we have to take responsibility for responding to them.

We all know that there is more to be done if we want to see the truly equal society that we have spoken about. I hope that it is also clear today that, in our words and actions, we are sincerely committed to achieving that goal for minority ethnic communities, along with everyone in Scotland.

When the expert reference group on Covid and ethnicity sent us its recommendations, I wrote to our Cabinet colleagues, asking them to consider what they could do within their own portfolios to contribute to that work. Fulton MacGregor mentioned Raj Bhopal, who was a member of our expert reference group. I commend his presentation to all members. I will also look out for Fulton MacGregor's cross-party group letter with all his questions.

I am delighted to say that, in their responses, my Cabinet colleagues and ministers across all portfolios have taken up the challenge set by the expert reference group. We will have a full response to the group's recommendations as soon as we possibly can. I am sure that that will be music to the ears of Annabelle Ewing and others who asked us about how we are mainstreaming and working across Government to make that difference. I hope that I have given members an example of how we are doing that. We will publish all those responses for people to see.

I want to pick up on Annie Wells's comment in relation to hate crime and some of the issues that we have all faced, not only during the past few months, but over many years. I appeal to members, now that we have made some progress on the hate crime legislation, to work together, because there are many individuals, organisations and communities that really need a modern piece of legislation on hate crime that works for them.

In the programme for government, we can see that equality and human rights are approached not as a standalone subject but as a golden thread that weaves together all our ambitions for Scotland. That is the process that the mainstreaming team has been taking in its work across all portfolios. It is providing support with

EqlAs and progressing equality and human rights in all its work.

I am very proud that the programme for government includes specific initiatives, some of which the cabinet secretary noted in her opening speech, that are designed to promote equality for minority ethnic communities. I am equally proud of the underpinning commitments to an equality-focused approach to all our work across all portfolios and responsibilities. That will help with the mainstreaming that Annabelle Ewing and others have called for. It also relates to intersectionality—someone with a minority ethnic background might also be an older person, have a disability or be a woman. All those issues are being taken very seriously by the Government.

However, we know that we cannot stop there. We need everyone in every corner of society to follow the lead that all of us in the chamber are setting, and to think about what we need to do and why we need to live up to our responsibilities by enacting real and lasting change for minority ethnic communities.

Annie Wells and Jeremy Balfour said that it is our responsibility to set an example and to challenge racism wherever we find it. We agree completely.

I, too, commend the work of the STUC black workers committee, whose members I met last week, and its break the race ceiling campaign. The members gave a great presentation—I am hoping to see it again, because there was so much in it.

Sarah Boyack mentioned trade unions. Every Friday, I meet the STUC to discuss my work on safer workplaces. The impact of that work is incredibly important to its member-led organisations.

I, too, pay tribute to Saroj Lal, who was a real inspiration through the work that she did. I am sure that she is a huge loss to Sarah Boyack's community and to all of Scotland.

I have heard at first hand about the incredible work that is being done by organisations of all sizes across Scotland in the face of the Covid-19 crisis. There are too many to mention, but there is one big group that I can mention. If members have not seen the work that is being done by the ethnic minority national resilience network, doing so will give them much hope and inspiration. The network has done amazing work. I have been so impressed by its resilience and innovation and by how communities have worked and come together to ensure that, for example, older minority ethnic people have access to culturally appropriate food, which is incredibly important. The network has ensured that younger people have access to support and counselling sessions in a way that

suits them, and online workshops have been provided to help them to navigate these really difficult times.

I am very pleased to be able to support organisations throughout the Covid pandemic with funding over and above the £2.6 million of funding for 2019-20. The funding will support all the work that organisations are doing to advance race equality.

As the cabinet secretary said in her opening speech, instead of returning to how things were, we have an opportunity to learn the lessons that have been taught to us by Covid-19 and, of course, by the Black Lives Matter movement.

John Finnie mentioned our work with Gypsy Travellers, and I have spoken about the action plan a lot in the chamber. We set up a Gypsy Traveller group to respond to Covid. If people want to see inspirational work in how a community can pull together and use tiny bits of money to ensure that people are supported properly, they should have a look at that work.

A number of issues were raised during the debate on the recommendations about what we need to do around data. We face challenges in relation to people working in environments where they might be more at risk. We have created guidance that includes a simple risk-assessment tool to support individual decision making not only for employers but for employees. The risk-assessment tool is based on clinical and scientific evidence that takes into account personal characteristics. I am sure that such a tool is of interest to everybody, whether in relation to ethnicity, age, gender, body mass index or health conditions. The tool assesses an individual's overall vulnerability to Covid-19, and I know that Jeremy Balfour, Anas Sarwar, Rachael Hamilton and Fulton MacGregor were all interested in that.

On data and data collection, NRS has been part of the expert reference group, and it managed to do a piece of work that linked to the census. Members will know that one of the group's recommendations is to link the data that we currently collect to the census, but the group also has also recommended collecting more data that is appropriate.

We will look very closely at those recommendations and how we can take them forward. I know that members had a number of concerns about that area and how we link to the census. NRS is happy to take part in that work and to respond. Joan McAlpine was very interested in that.

I will make a couple of quick remarks on asylum. I agree with Rona Mackay that the right to work should be an absolute, and while it is not we still have work to do on people who have no recourse

to public funds. My Cabinet colleague Aileen Campbell has written to the UK Government on a number of occasions to seek solutions to some of the challenges in that regard. Pauline McNeill, Bill Kidd, Ruth Maguire and many others were interested in that.

On the public sector equality duty review, the mainstreaming team has been working with all my Cabinet colleagues to ensure that EqlAs are embedded in the work that we are doing. We will pivot back to looking at the public sector equality duty review work that we need to do in the coming months. I will be able to update Parliament on that very soon.

The Scottish Government is also looking to review all its initiatives, whether or not there is a race disparity audit. We are looking at how we can do better and are seeking some understanding of how the UK Government is also taking such work forward.

Anas Sarwar said that we need to be brave and asked whether we are brave enough; I hope and think that we are. I really want us to take up this opportunity, because I am absolutely committed to this work. We can be bold, we can take meaningful action and we can move forward together. We just want a fairer, stronger and more equal society for everyone, and I hope that today's debate has taken us further down the path to those positive steps.

## Decision Time

17:01

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame):** There are three questions to be put as a result of today's business.

The first question is, that amendment S5M-22770.2, in the name of Jeremy Balfour, which seeks to amend motion S5M-22770, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on advancing equality and human rights for minority ethnic people and communities, be agreed to.

*Amendment agreed to.*

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** The second question is, that amendment S5M-22770.3, in the name of Pauline McNeill, which seeks to amend motion S5M-22770, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on advancing equality and human rights for minority ethnic people and communities, be agreed to.

*Amendment agreed to.*

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** The final question is, that motion S5M-22770, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on advancing equality and human rights for minority ethnic people and communities, as amended, be agreed to.

*Motion, as amended, agreed to.*

That the Parliament believes that promoting equality and human rights for minority ethnic communities should be a priority; reiterates the deep belief that there is a responsibility on everyone in society to tackle racism, prejudice and discrimination and take specific action to remove the barriers and injustices still faced by minority ethnic communities; acknowledges the work and advice of the independent Expert Reference Group on COVID-19 and Ethnicity; calls on the Scottish Government to respond in full to the Group's recommendations, giving a clear rationale for what aspects it has and has not accepted; believes that its recommendations will be invaluable in responding to the inequalities that have been further exposed by COVID-19, and notes that the Scottish Government will present to Parliament the actions it plans to take as soon as practicably possible on the high incidence of COVID-19 among the BAME population and will continue to advance race equality across all spheres of society, and that, before reporting any recommendations back, it commences immediate engagement with stakeholders on the review of the Scottish-specific sector equality duties.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** What a relief that I do not have to do remote voting—that is all I can tell you. [*Laughter.*]

That concludes decision time. There will be a short pause before we move on to the next item of business.

## Residential Outdoor Centres

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani):** The final item of business today is a members' business debate on motion S5M-22652, in the name of Liz Smith, on residential outdoor centres. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

### *Motion debated,*

That the Parliament is concerned by the financial plight of Scotland's outdoor centres and the threats of closure; considers that school residential trips enrich the lives of children and young people and that such experiences have been a feature of Scottish education for 80 years; welcomes the current public petition to save Scottish residential outdoor centres, and encourages support for this.

17:05

**Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** I thank all the members who signed the motion and all those who will contribute to this evening's debate.

I open the debate with two personal experiences in mind. First, during my teaching days in the 1980s and 1990s I was privileged to take charge of several outdoor education projects in Scotland. Secondly, over my 13 years as a member of the Scottish Parliament, I have been privileged to receive many emails that have told me just how much constituents have valued the opportunities that outdoor education has given to their families.

The value to families is surely exemplified by the fact that around 19,000 people have signed the "Save Scottish Outdoor Centres" petition, by the fact that when the Scout Association advertised on Facebook on 15 September that 144 places were available in outdoor activities, the places were gone within just a few minutes, by the fact that the Outward Bound Trust offer in August of 800 adventure days at Loch Eil and Ullswater was also taken up within a few hours, and by the considerable media interest in the issue over the past few days from the BBC, STV and Channel 5.

The popular appeal of outdoor education comes as no surprise to me. Before my first residential trip, when I was 15, I remember being anxious about being away from home for the first time, about not really knowing many people in the group, including the two members of staff who would be looking after us, and about not knowing what to expect in a remote environment, far removed from anything with which I was familiar.

When I returned, the anxieties with which I had started out had been completely defeated and replaced with a new mood of confidence and self-discipline and a much deeper understanding of who I was. I could cook, put up a tent, build a

campfire, fish, and walk and climb the hills for hours on end. More important, I had learned what it means to be part of a team, I had learned about leadership and I had learned the value of friendship.

I did not know it at the time, but those two weeks are responsible for my lifetime of enjoyment of and commitment to the outdoors. In bringing this debate to the Parliament, I want to ensure that the opportunities that I was afforded will still be there for generations to come.

The evidence of the benefits of outdoor education is widespread and compelling. I pay tribute to all individuals in the outdoor education sector who have enriched the lives of our young people, providing them with a knowledge and appreciation of environments and communities that are very different from those with which they are familiar, building their confidence and self-esteem and developing in them an understanding of responsible behaviour and how to deal with new challenges and manage risk.

In an age—particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic—when there is growing concern about young people's health and lifestyles, concern that many young people from deprived areas, in particular, do not get the same opportunities as their counterparts elsewhere, and concern that in some local authorities the feeling is that there is a need to cut back on such activity because of stringent financial circumstances, it is time to treasure our outdoor education centres in the same way as we treasure our schools.

As the circumstances stand just now, it is predicted that half—I repeat, half—of our 36 outdoor centres are likely to close by autumn 2021. If they do, they will likely not return. We simply cannot allow that to happen. Every single outdoor group to whom I have spoken over the past two weeks—I am grateful to them all—has told me that we must act now if we are to save our outdoor education centres.

That is an extremely blunt warning, but when we see the details of the financial situation that faces many centres, in local authorities of every political hue, we realise just how desperate the situation is.

The situation is especially bad in some of the most rural and remote locations, which in many cases have not been able to benefit from single days of outdoor education.

Nor is it just land-based outdoor education centres that are at risk. Ocean Youth Trust Scotland, which provides a floating outdoor education centre and which has, in the past 20 years, looked after 14,000 young people, many of them with specific challenges, has not been able to sail any boats at all this year. We know that schools are finding it particularly difficult to afford

the necessary coach hire or the fees that are required for specialist assistance, whether that be for activities such as canoeing, rock-climbing or abseiling.

In August, the Scottish Government advised local authorities that residential school trips should not take place, and that that decision will not be reviewed until December at the earliest. That is a hammer blow. It will mean £2.3 million of lost income for the Scouts alone. At the Scottish Outdoor Education Centres charity, 50 jobs are at stake, despite the fact that its centres have received enquiries for 2021 bookings that make up almost £0.5 million of income.

With the current growth in Covid-19 and the on-going uncertainty, the SOEC can see that schools and local authorities will be unlikely to send youngsters to outdoor education centres for the rest of this term and possibly for the spring term. This is a desperate plea from all of them for the collective will of Government, of Parliament and other institutions to help them to find the necessary funds to tide them over until next summer to prevent any closures because, I repeat, if those centres close, they will not open again.

In its 2007 Scottish Parliament election manifesto, the Scottish National Party said:

“Scotland has one of the most spectacular and challenging outdoor environments in the world and all of our youngsters should have the opportunity to experience it. We will work towards a guarantee of 5 days outdoor education for every school pupil. To start this process, we will provide an additional £250,000 each year to support the expansion of 5 days subsidised outdoor education targeted at children from our most deprived communities.”

I agreed with that, and I also agreed with John Swinney when said recently that he was

“keen to ensure that residential outdoor learning experiences continue to be part of the Curriculum for Excellence.”

I remind the Scottish Government that, as part of the 2009-10 Scottish budget negotiations, a £1 million commitment to outdoor education was made; it is there in the budget lines. It was supported by several Scottish sports stars at the time, led by Gavin Hastings, who wanted to see combined support from Government, business and philanthropy via the Trusts (Scotland) Act 1961, to ensure that all pupils had access to at least one week of residential outdoor education by the time they are 15. In 2008, the SOEC advised that that would probably cost around £160 per pupil, so I expect it will now be nearer £250. At the time, however, the outdoor centres told me that they never saw that money, so it is now surely time to refocus all our minds. This is not a party-political issue; this is for us all. We must urgently find the financial assistance to allow the outdoor education

centres to remain. That is the purpose of the debate.

There is the additional Covid context to all this. If outdoor education is a priceless asset in normal circumstances, it was never more needed than now. We are all too aware of how many young people have struggled through this crisis, missing several months of school, feeling lonely and isolated in many cases, and generally feeling less sure about themselves and their abilities, with all the impact that that has for their mental health.

Parliament, whether in the chamber or in committee, is all too accustomed to debating the progress of education in numbers—the number of teachers, the number of Scottish Qualification Authority passes, the percentage increase in literacy and numeracy skills, class sizes—when, more often, we should be turning our attention to the qualitative aspects of education that cannot be reduced to numbers but which, I argue, are intrinsic to what can be defined as good quality education. I have no doubt whatsoever that education in an outdoor environment provides one of the most valuable and rewarding learning experiences for a wide range of pupils, no matter what their backgrounds or abilities. To lose that precious asset is an unconscionable thought, and I hope the Scottish Government hears the loud message that is coming from the sector: if we do not get action, the outdoor education centres will no longer exist. I urge the Scottish Government to work with us all to find the necessary funding and ensure that they remain.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** We move to the open debate. We have lots of speakers so I ask members to stick to speeches of no more than four minutes. Bruce Crawford will be followed by Jamie Greene.

If you can hear me, Mr Crawford, just hold on a wee minute; we cannot hear you. You are silent.

17:15

**Bruce Crawford (Stirling) (SNP):** I am not now—for once I am not silent.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I am pleased to hear it. Would you like to start again?

**Bruce Crawford:** Thank you. I welcome the debate, and thank Liz Smith for bringing it to the chamber. The outdoor facilities under discussion have formed a small but important part of the life of my family. That is because I am father to three boys—now grown men—who benefited from the unique experience of outdoor residential centres.

I probably deserve some sort of medal for taking each of my sons, separately, to Fordell Firs in Fife for the father-and-son cub camp weekend. For those not familiar with it, Fordell Firs is an

excellent cub and scout adventure centre. I have to admit that, no matter how many times I was there, the rope ladders and vertical climbing challenges were just as scary.

I am a big believer in those types of activities for young people. They help to build confidence, interpersonal skills and general resilience. They also support an appreciation of the natural world, often giving young people a chance to learn about different plant species and wild animals. They take young people away from video games, which is not a criticism of video games—they too serve an important purpose—but it is good to find a balance in our great outdoors. I think that we all agree that that can so easily be lost. The range of activities on offer is often mapped to the outcomes sought through the curriculum for excellence, demonstrating pretty effectively that learning can be fun.

In my constituency, we have the spectacular Aberfoyle setting that is home to Dounans outdoor education centre at the heart of the Loch Lomond and Trossachs national park area. I have visited the site a number of times, most recently last year for an update on some of the developments that they have been working on. The centre can now accommodate more than 150 people in three excellent cedarwood chalets.

The groups of young people who are lucky enough to visit such an outdoor education centre get a very wide range of outdoor experiences to enjoy and learn from. It is a truly exciting and memorable place, and one that I hope will continue to offer such a unique experience for many generations to come. That will be particularly true post Covid, when as a nation we seek to help heal any wounds in our young people.

Before the debate, I was contacted by a number of organisations including the #SaveYourOutdoorCentres campaign, who pointed to the financial difficulties that residential centres have. I also received a detailed briefing from Scouts Scotland, who have put a fair amount of work into advising on the guidance for reopening such facilities. I, too, am disappointed that it is not yet deemed safe to open such residential facilities. However, I accept the role of scientific advisers in that process, with the absolute priority being to protect public health.

The motion that we are debating points to a petition that is looking to the Scottish ministers to provide financial support for outdoor residential centres and I know that the Scottish Government will do what it can in that regard. Beyond party politics, I do not generally find a lot to disagree with Liz Smith about—she is a member of this place for whom I have a lot of respect. However, like others, Liz Smith is well aware that the Covid

crisis has meant that unprecedented amounts of funding have had to be pumped into our national health service and the economy.

Much of the money that has been committed has come from United Kingdom state borrowing—a power that, unfortunately, Holyrood does not yet have. I hope that Liz Smith and other members will recognise that the reality of the devolved financial restrictions means that, in all likelihood, any additional support may also require to flow from the Treasury. I am fully on board with finding solutions to support these important centres, but we need to be serious and realistic about what the solutions are to be.

17:19

**Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con):** I thank Liz Smith for bringing the debate to the chamber. When she said that she had secured a members' business debate, I was proactively pleased about participating in it, not least because of my education brief, but also because residential outdoor centres are important in my region. We will hear about the important role that those centres play in young people's lives and I hope that they will continue to play that role in the future, but that is seriously at risk.

Outdoor learning goes far beyond what can be taught in a physical classroom. Residential outdoor centres take children away from their Instagram accounts and their PlayStations and stick them in environments in which they have to reconnect with nature and the great outdoors and—more important—in which they reconnect with each other. Friendships are made, new skills are acquired, self-confidence is boosted and lessons are learned that may last a lifetime. There is no end to the benefits.

If and when we come out of lockdown and life becomes normal, education centres will have a massive role to play in young people's lives—but only if they exist. We know that, as Bruce Crawford said, coronavirus has had an impact on things, but its physical impact is nothing like the mental impact that it is having on young people who, in my view, have been disproportionately affected. The vast majority of young people have seen their mental health challenged by feelings of social isolation and loneliness. It is okay to sit in front of a computer game, but there needs to be interaction with other human beings, not least at that age. The great outdoors provides much-needed clarity of mind, fresh air and good, old-fashioned exposure to the elements, and that is not always achievable on a day trip. That highlights the importance of residential stays.

I accept that the unavoidable restrictions of late have, for obvious reasons, rendered many of

those places of learning out of bounds, but that is financially insufferable for them.

I am privileged to have a number of excellent outdoor education centres in my region. Those centres give children—particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds on the mainland—valuable experiences. There are two outdoor centres on the Isle of Arran alone: the Lochranza outdoor education and activity centre, which has been around for over 45 years, and the Arran outdoor centre in Lamlash. In Dalry, on the mainland, there is the Blair activity centre, which is a Girlguiding centre in the heart of Ayrshire that has made an immeasurable contribution to the lives of many thousands of young girls. Just north of Helensburgh is the Blairvadach outdoor education centre, which is nearly 50 years old.

Let us not beat about the bush: the centres are in dire straits. They are heavily reliant on residential visits for a huge proportion of their income, and they are stuck between a rock and a hard place. They are being told on the one hand that residential trips cannot resume until at least spring next year; on the other hand, they are being denied the full financial support that they need to guarantee their existence. Without support, wherever it comes from—we can debate that—those fantastic centres will be lost for ever. As Liz Smith said, we have heard from the industry that as many as half of the centres could close. That is not just a warning; it is a prediction.

The issue is not as simple as just extending one measure of support, such as the job retention scheme. As important as such schemes are, the costs of keeping a centre running go far beyond such support. As is the case with any business, running costs are about more than just people costs.

As we know, beyond outdoor learning centres, the scouts and Girlguiding services are under threat. They face the most serious challenge in their history. We have already seen the first casualties of that; I hope that they are not a sign of things to come. We cannot in good conscience let that happen.

I urge the Scottish Government to listen. We are not talking about a hobby or fringe or extra-curricular activity; we are talking about mainstream education. It is a vital cog in the wheel of attainment, health and broadening the mind. Once the centres are gone, they are gone. That would be a terrible shame on us all. Let us not make that happen.

17:24

**Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab):** I echo the thanks to Liz Smith for securing the debate. The issue is a crucial one that will affect

our ability to educate our young people in a fundamental sense.

At the start of the previous century, there was a transformation in thinking about the outdoors as it relates to education. Kurt Hahn and others led the way in arguing that the outdoors should not be something extra to education but should be core; that, by learning about the outdoors, one learns about resilience; and that—this is important—by learning about how to live in the outdoors, one gains a more holistic sense of learning than one does by merely learning in the classroom.

A hundred years later, it was a bold and important move to include those understandings in the curriculum for excellence, as Bruce Crawford stated. We may use different language from the words and phrases that were used by people 100 years ago, but the ideas of breadth and holistic learning are very much embedded in curriculum for excellence.

Outdoor learning should no longer be regarded as extracurricular but should be seen as core to the curriculum. The irony, given that we have only recently made that step forward and embedded the understandings that outdoor education is essential to learning and not peripheral to it, is that we now find that outdoor education and outdoor education centres are under threat.

The benefits of residential outdoor education are important to emphasise, and Liz Smith brought those to life in her remarks. We have all experienced the richness of learning through camping trips and hiking in the hills. It is through the application of knowledge of the outdoors that we learn a much broader set of skills—true life skills. Indeed, we now know the important role that being outdoors and learning about the outdoors have in mental health.

Critically, the curriculum for excellence says that there should be mixed provision and that outdoor education should not simply be provided by schools. That is why the crisis that the organisations face, with the potential loss of outdoor centres, is such a serious issue in terms of our ability to deliver outdoor education as a whole.

Let us be clear: this crisis is pronounced and it is serious. Some of the organisations are saying that facing another six months, let alone another 12 months of restrictions will cause them to be in crisis, leading to the loss of assets that have taken decades to build up.

The consequences are stark. We will lose skills. Staff are already being consulted about redundancy. Organisations are looking at closing centres in order to meet the costs that they have been unable to avoid through the months of lockdown.

Let us also be clear that the Scottish Government's interventions have fallen short. I understand what Bruce Crawford said in his remarks—limitless finances are not available. However, let us also be clear that the third sector resilience fund fell short when it came to outdoor education organisations. When they made their applications, they were told that they did not qualify. We need the Scottish Government urgently either to look again at extending the schemes, or to come up with new schemes to provide the support that the organisations need, because, as Liz Smith put it, if we lose them, we will lose them for ever.

17:28

**Maurice Corry (West Scotland) (Con):** I, too, thank my colleague Liz Smith for leading the debate and for bringing it to the chamber. I join her in recognising the urgent challenges facing the sector, which have been well highlighted so far, particularly by the on-going public campaign. Residential outdoor activity centres have long been a vibrant feature of Scotland's education system and an important jewel in the crown, but the pressures of the pandemic have reduced many of the centres to a precarious and fast-diminishing existence.

The rich experiences and skills gained through outdoor learning go far beyond the classroom. Young people learn to harness emotional, social and employability skills that they can use for a lifetime.

I am speaking as a former student of the Outward Bound Trust in Moray, an area that is known well to my colleague on my right, Edward Mountain. When I was a young lad, I was a general apprentice for J & P Coats and worked at its mills in Paisley. During that time, I spent four weeks at the Outward Bound school. Part of that organisation's programme was to build our character. Every one of us—all 50 apprentices—were sent to the various schools around the United Kingdom. I drew the short straw. I was due to attend in May, but I was asked if I would go in January. If anyone knows what it is like in Burghead in January, they know exactly what one has to put up with. Nevertheless, I had a wonderful time.

I have memories of arriving at Elgin station, where I was met by the lorry from the Outward Bound Trust; of the last pint of beer being consumed before we left the station; and of the last cigarette going out the back of the truck. I was then confronted by a bunch of my team, who were police cadets, building site apprentices, young people in care, Royal Air Force cadets and more. Many members have already spoken about the life-changing opportunities that outdoor education

provides, and, for me, it was a vital spark that helped to light my love of the environment, which continues now with my own children and their experiences. The value of such an offering in outdoor education cannot be overstated, but nor can the scale of the threat that the organisations that provide those services face.

The activities that we had were sailing in the Moray Firth, after breaking the ice in Hopeman harbour. There was running from Burghead to Hopeman, followed by diving into the pool at Gordonstoun to do our personal survival activities. There was rock climbing and abseiling, and we had debates and discussions in the evenings. That experience has stood me in extremely good stead throughout my career. I still think back to those days and the friends I made.

Ten years later, as a factory manager in Glasgow at our family's drinks company, I sent one of our young managers on that very course. In those days, it was in Loch Eil. He went out a boy and came back a man—it was tremendous. There is a lot to be gained from such experiences.

The sea cadets, the army cadets and the air force cadets are close to my heart. We incorporate in our training two week-long camps per year. Those residential camps are crucial to the cadets' development. We are lucky that we manage to fund that through our other means.

Under the current guidelines, the outdoor centres, which stand independently, can provide only day trips, but the lack of cost provision from schools and parents, coupled with the practicalities that are involved in organising travel to rural spots, has limited the uptake considerably. In any case, most centres are heavily dependent on residential visits for their income, which day trips alone are unable to provide.

Like Jamie Greene, I represent the region of West Scotland, which is home to quite a few of Scotland's residential activity centres. One of them is Ocean Youth Trust Scotland, based in Greenock, which Liz Smith mentioned. It is a fantastic operation, and its voyages are really worth while going on. In the past, I considered sending one of my daughters on one of those to serve before the mast—seriously, she would have had a good time.

Ardmay House near Arrochar has provided residential activities for up to 2,500 children each year since it opened in 2003. However, like many other activity centres, Ardmay House has experienced the catastrophic impact on its business of the current situation. Unfortunately, it is not a rare case. The charity Children 1st drew my attention to another centre at Ardroy, which helps young people who are affected by mental health challenges, and their families, and supports

children in their recovery from traumatic experiences.

Covid-19 has called for staff to be innovative and creative in how they deliver their services. The best alternative to keeping the sector running is to redeploy staff to work directly with schools and local authorities to deliver outdoor learning and to equip teachers to do the same, but that can be done only with financial assistance. The provision of such support is necessary to enable the sector not just to survive the current crisis, but to actively thrive.

Jamie Greene mentioned the outstanding Blairvadach outdoor centre, which is close to my home in Helensburgh. Fortunately, we managed to save it from closure by Glasgow City Council. I am glad that there was cross-party support for allowing it to continue its work. The team at Blairvadach worked to deliver outdoor learning to hub schools in Glasgow and has gone on to develop residential provision. Another prime example is the scouts centre at Lochgoilhead.

Efforts are being made to stop the closure of such outdoor residential centres by seeking help from the Government. I am being reminded to conclude. It is clear that financial support from the Scottish Government would be life-saving for the sector. I speak from personal experience when I say that we must not throw out the jewel in the crown. I have the experience of the Outward Bound Trust to my name.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Thank you, Mr Corry. I am glad that it was only four weeks that you were there for; otherwise we might have been here a lot longer.

17:33

**Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green):** I warmly welcome the debate and thank Liz Smith for securing it. Perhaps it represents a timely bridge between her previous portfolio responsibility for education and her new role as environment spokesperson, to which I welcome her.

The huge outpouring of support for Scotland's outdoor education centres and their staff in recent weeks should not surprise any of us. The permanent closure of the Ardeonaig centre near Killin came as a huge blow to schools that were planning to take their pupils there this year. Other centres such as the Belmont centre in Strathmore valley or the Dounans centre near Aberfoyle have not yet reached that point of crisis, but they and many others are struggling, and people are genuinely worried about the future.

At the moment, many centres are working hard to move to alternative, non-residential models, to

ensure that some form of nature-based education can continue during the Covid crisis. That work will need the strongest level of support from both Government and councils to keep the outdoor education workforce working together over the next year. However, from speaking to many people in the sector, it is also clear that, without funding to effectively mothball centres in the short term, there is a serious risk that operators may be forced to offload buildings, centres and other facilities. Members will be aware that many of those buildings have long histories—they were often donated, and their resources built up through decades of fundraising and sweat equity. The cost of setting up those centres from scratch in 2020 would be absolutely astronomical, and run to millions and millions of pounds. Therefore, as well as providing support to deliver alternative models of education in the short term, funds must be put in place to mothball our outdoor centres for that period. That would ensure that providers are not forced into a position in which they need to sell their assets, they can maintain facilities for outdoor education to resume once the pandemic has passed, and residential visits can be confidently resumed again in full. I am talking about the need for thousands of pounds for staffing support, utilities and minor repairs, rather than the millions of pounds that would be needed to start from scratch and rebuild centres that have closed or been sold off.

It is clear that the centres cannot be lost—if that happened, outdoor education would be devastated. Each centre is as integral a part of the education estate as a school building. We do not take decisions to close schools lightly; therefore, we should not allow these centres to close by an unforeseen circumstance.

As part of a green, education-led recovery out of the Covid crisis, the opportunity for young people to discover the outdoors, and themselves again, could not be more important and vital for their future. If we do not act now, that opportunity will be lost to the generations who absolutely need it most. We need to act and save our outdoor centres.

17:37

**Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD):** I thank Liz Smith for allowing the debate to take place. From our time together on the Education and Skills Committee, I know that she has been a long-time and passionate advocate for the outdoor education sector. I thank her for giving Parliament the opportunity to highlight—as many members have done already, and as the motion does—the significant contribution that outdoor centres make to enriching the lives and educational experience of children and young people across Scotland. It is

also an opportunity to underscore the serious and legitimate public concern over the future of such centres, many of which face the prospect of closure in the absence of further Government support and an ability to operate. We simply cannot afford to let that happen.

On a personal level, I declare an interest: I benefited hugely from access to outdoor education, as did both my sons, although maybe not to the same extent as Maurice Corry, given the more temperate climate. Growing up in Orkney, some might see that as inevitable, but doing so would be to underestimate the part that is played by teachers, youth workers, volunteers and others working in the sector. Bringing outdoor education alive to inform, engage and enthuse takes skill, understanding and commitment.

In my constituency, the outdoor centre in Hoy has come a long way since I stayed in its rather more basic predecessor hostel back in the 1980s. However, unchanged is the impact that trips to such centres can and do have on a child or young person's sense of themselves, their self-confidence, and their ability to work as part of a team or on their own initiative.

We underestimate at our cost the life lessons and skills that can be gained from kayaking, bouldering, rock climbing or sitting round the camp fire, telling stories. Those benefits are tangible, they can be measured, and, as Daniel Johnson, Liz Smith and others have said, they fit effortlessly with the principles of curriculum for excellence, as well as other key objectives that ministers claim are important to the Government.

As a guiding ambassador, I fully endorse the arguments that Girlguiding Scotland made in its briefing on the role of outdoor learning in addressing gaps in attainment and helping to improve mental health and wellbeing at a time when Covid restrictions are taking their toll. Girlguiding Scotland argues that

"having access to nature and green spaces, the chance to try something new and make life long memories with their peers help to rebuild children and young people's confidence and resilience".

A few minutes talking to those who are fortunate enough to have attended the guide cottage in Orphir in my constituency will be left in no doubt about that. Children 1st also picks up on that theme in its briefing, which is informed by its work with some of the most vulnerable children and young people in our country.

Outdoor education has faced challenges for a number of years. The fact that we have now reached crisis point at precisely the moment when outdoor centres should be coming into their own is the cruellest of ironies. The asks from the sector are clear, specific and reasonable. We need direct

support to outdoor centres to help with fixed costs and staff salaries, an increase in third sector resilience funding and a review of the blanket ban on residential trips. We also need to promote outdoor education sessions and day trips to teachers and schools. At a time when pre-school and nursery children are being encouraged down that route, we risk creating a cliff edge once they reach primary school as outdoor centres are forced to close their doors.

Ultimately, we need our outdoor centres and outdoor education. I thank Liz Smith for giving Parliament an opportunity to spell out that message and I urge the Government to respond positively and with urgency to the plight faced by this vital sector.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Quite a few more members would like to speak in the debate, so I am happy to accept a motion, under rule 8.14.3, that the debate be extended by up to 30 minutes.

*Motion moved,*

That, under Rule 8.14.3, the debate be extended by up to 30 minutes.—[Liz Smith]

*Motion agreed to.*

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I call Jeremy Balfour.

17:41

**Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con):** Thank you, Presiding Officer. I will not take up the full 30 minutes that you have just given us as an extension. [Laughter.]

As other members have done, I declare an interest because, as a child growing up, I benefited from going on school trips and from going to outdoor centres in the summer holidays. I learned to do lots of things that I perhaps would not have been able to do if I had stayed in Edinburgh. I want the same for future generations, including for my daughters. They are meant to be going in the spring for their first outdoor week with the school, but I suspect that that will be cancelled. However, we have to secure that for future generations.

The crux of the debate is the legacy that we will be left with after the virus. There is a real danger that we will end up with many fewer outdoor centres than we have at the moment, which will ultimately mean that fewer schoolchildren will be able to visit them, when we get back to some kind of normality. Inevitably, the children who come from more difficult backgrounds would probably be left behind, again. Therefore, we need to ensure that the legacy that we secure is that outdoor centres remain open and functioning in the decades ahead.

One danger that has not yet been picked up by other members is the short-term danger of losing the expertise of many of the staff who work in the centres. I am grateful to have had a number of conversations with centres over the past few days, and that subject was how they started; it was not about buildings or structures, but about what to do with the people who have the expertise in mountaineering, sailing, canoeing, skiing and so on. That expertise can go very quickly.

**Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** The expertise is not just in taking people rock climbing, canoeing and things such as Jeremy Balfour mentioned; it is also about dealing with children. That comes from years of experience of seeing people in certain situations. Is the member worried, as I am, that that expertise will be lost as well?

**Jeremy Balfour:** Mr Mountain has made a fair and good point. That expertise could disappear; staff might decide to go off and find jobs in other areas, so when centres reopen, as we hope they will, their expertise will no longer be available. We can debate what should happen and who should pay for it, but we must ensure that when centres reopen, staff are there to look after children and give them the experience that Mr Mountain described.

I have a second ask of the Government. I understand that it is difficult, if not impossible, to resume residential activity at the moment. However, many centres can offer day trips and activities to schools and young people. The Scottish Government has issued guidelines for local authorities, but I understand from conversations with the sector that local authorities are simply ignoring the guidelines or are making it too difficult for schools to arrange outdoor activities.

When the minister reflects on tonight's debate, will he consider the guidance and his conversations with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and local authorities, with a view to keeping centres going, even if they can offer only day trips at the moment? That would protect the sector. Yes—it would cost money. The minister and other members of the Government say that Opposition members are always asking for more money. However, in this case, we need to find the money in order to save centres' legacy for future generations.

17:46

**Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab):** I thank Liz Smith MSP for bringing the debate to Parliament and for her inspiring call to save our outdoor centres.

Scotland's residential outdoor centres have been a key feature of Scottish education for well over 50 years, as we have heard from many members. They provide extremely valuable learning experiences for children and young people. The residential learning experience provides opportunities and benefits that simply cannot be secured in any other educational context or setting. Indeed, the experience can be life changing.

Concern has been expressed to the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland about long-term loss of outdoor educational opportunities for children, and the commissioner's office has highlighted that outdoor education is an important part of a child's right to education, as set out in articles 28 and 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Given the backdrop of wider job losses and rising inequality, it is disappointing that Parliament is having to talk about outdoor residential centre staff being under threat of redundancy by mid-2021, and 50 per cent of centres closing permanently if they do not get urgent support.

The Scottish Government's guidance says that no residential trips can take place. With no overnight trips allowed, the main income stream of most outdoor centres has been cut off. Outdoor centres must be closed until March 2020 and will have little or no income, and I understand that there are no plans to review the position until January. That leaves the sector perilously underfunded.

In a normal year, 105,000 children in Scotland get the chance to experience a residential trip, through their schools. It is often said in Parliament that we want Scotland to be the best place to grow up, but the poverty-related attainment gap will have increased during lockdown. Outdoor education should be a vital tool in supporting people back into education.

I am a former teacher; I accompanied pupils on many trips. It is clear to me that such trips should form part of every pupil's education. Children from both rural and urban areas can benefit greatly. For many, it is their first opportunity to experience staying away from home. That can be a scary prospect but, as we heard, children often come back at the end of the week reinvigorated and full of confidence.

For some children from urban areas, such trips are their only opportunity to visit the countryside, and children who have additional needs are able to build confidence and independence outwith their normal school environment. Scottish Outdoor Education Centres reports that children develop a wide range of qualities and skills that can be

applied in different settings and which enhance their future employability.

Outdoor centres such as Whithaugh Park in South Scotland, which I visited in 2014, provides children with an appreciation of the world around them. They learn skills that can be gained from the natural world.

I highlight the precious opportunity that outdoor centres provide for challenged groups. For several years, I joined the Scottish young carers festival at the Broomlee centre, near West Linton, where young carers were able to chill and share experiences with each other while having a lot of fun—they even created their own radio station.

Centres need support through the winter until they are able to open again. That would enable staff to be retained and to go into schools to support outdoor activities through the winter period. There are already bookings for next year, which means that centres can become self-sustaining again. I ask the Scottish Government to consider the possibility of working in partnership with schools and teachers in the meantime, and to provide greater guidance to local authorities on considering use of accommodation and assets through the winter.

Scottish Labour and I will continue to support outdoor education. I ask the Scottish Government to listen to the real concerns of the sector before it is too late. Many families have benefited from outdoor education through the years, so I encourage the whole country to get behind the #SaveYourOutdoorCentres campaign, as many have already, to show the strength of feeling that exists.

Our young people have faced many challenges as Scotland gets to grips with the global pandemic. We must be sure that, through the crisis, we do not risk the loss of children's future outdoor education. The Scottish Government should step in to provide financial support through the winter for the outdoor education sector in Scotland.

17:51

**Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP):** I thank Liz Smith for lodging the motion for debate. I disagree with very little of what she said, and I welcome the consensual and non-party-political manner in which she approached the subject.

The debate is very important. Although these are challenging times for everyone, and it is no surprise that residential outdoor centres are struggling, we need to look at the issue in the round. I know that the Government is committed to

outdoor education; that was the case even before the pandemic hit.

Liz Smith made the point that Covid-19 has taught us that being outdoors has many benefits in relation to the virus and more generally. It is for the minister and the Government to look at what action to take, but it would be really good if we could find a way to support centres to ensure that they are still there when we come out the other side of the pandemic.

I thank Scouts Scotland for its briefing. I had a chat with Callum Holt, who, as well as being a director on its board, is a constituent of mine. He made clear the dire situation in which scouts and outdoor residential centres find themselves, and he was able to explain where they are. Having heard him, I know that there is a need for some form of support. We all understand the risks of young people going to residential gatherings just now, particularly in the light of the restrictions that have been set today, but other support might be required to ensure that outdoor centres are still there when we come out the other side, as I said earlier.

As other members are, I am a big supporter of outdoor residential education. During my childhood, I was in the Boys Brigade and had some great experiences. Although the Boys Brigade did not own any centres, it would hire them. One of my first visits was to Lanark. Coatbridge to Lanark is only, I think, 17 miles, but it seemed like such a big deal—it was amazing. I was lucky to have such experiences. My family also went camping. However, I know that a lot of young people, particularly in deprived areas, do not get such experiences, so it is important that we keep providing such opportunities.

I want to speak about my time as a social worker, particularly in relation to justice social work. Nothing impacted kids and young people more than when they were accepted on to outdoor programmes, such as those that are provided by the Outward Bound Trust. The programmes are absolutely fantastic. Young men, particularly those who have become involved in low-level offending behaviour, do the preparatory work to go away, and the trips can be life changing for them. I was a social worker who often had such casework, and it was always a real win if we were successful in getting a kid to go on one of the trips, because we knew about the impact that it could have. That is just one more reason why such resources are so valuable.

I will finish by mentioning Kilbowie outdoor centre—as members might expect from a North Lanarkshire MSP. Kilbowie benefited every kid in North Lanarkshire for a long time. Along with thousands of other people, I was bitterly disappointed in the recent decision to close it. That

decision was taken before the pandemic. I had hoped that the early stages of the pandemic might have changed the council's mind. Alas, the decision was made and, despite my having written to John Swinney, the centre is on a path of no return, which is a real shame. The council has said that it will set up something locally at Strathclyde park. As a local representative, I will hold the council to that promise. I pay tribute to my colleague Councillor Kirsten Larson, who fought against the decision. I just want to say to anybody who is watching out there that the Kilbowie building is still open to interested community bids for a set period. I really hope that something will come up.

I see that the Presiding Officer is asking me to stop, so I will close there.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** You are all going a bit over the four minutes. I am worried that we are going to run out of time again.

17:56

**Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con):** I add my congratulations to my colleague Liz Smith on securing time in the chamber for us to debate an incredibly important issue.

Glaisnock House, 1981, will forever remain tattooed on the inside of my head. It was a two-day O-level geology field trip that had us examining the igneous intrusion that is the Lugar sill, traipsing through the lead mines under the Lugar Hills while trying to scare the living daylights out of our teachers and classmates, surviving on about 10 minutes' sleep in two nights, and being present in a classroom when the class was asked what the first living thing on earth was. A certain classmate, who shall remain nameless, stood up and declared that the first living thing on earth was a brontosaurus. Of course, the way my mind works, I just envisaged this empty world with nothing in it and then all of a sudden a 50-tonne brontosaurus appearing from thin air. That would have been something to behold.

Members might think that that story is a good reason not to allow pupils anywhere near a residential outdoor trip, but nearly 40 years later, one of the first topics that an old friend who I had not seen for many years and I spoke about was exactly that trip with much hilarity.

I have used the phrase "shared experiences" often in this place. Of course, we learned an awful lot in an environment that cannot be replicated in the classroom. That, of course, is the point. We need to afford our pupils as many learning opportunities as possible, including that experiential learning. We all learn and are inspired in different ways. Some can get it from a book and some can get it from listening to others but,

without a doubt, the best way to learn is by experience.

The pandemic is understandably sucking the oxygen out of the room, and it is difficult to consider anything other than the next restrictions might be or how we can remain as safe as possible. However, we must recognise that there will be a time after Covid. In all the turmoil that we are working through, we must consider what we want our community to look like then.

Outdoor learning, especially in outdoor centres that are specifically set up to enhance the educational experience of our pupils, must be part of that, especially for those from less-well-off communities. Those are the pupils who are less likely to have such opportunities.

I managed to take my youngest away for a few days to one of those outdoor centres at Crieff, where we went swinging through the trees in the pouring rain and quad biking. The only downside for me was that the first person I bumped into there was Anas Sarwar.

My fear is that we are on a path that will lead to hugely reducing learning opportunities and that that will exacerbate inequalities. We must retain our residential outdoor centres as a matter of priority, because if we lose them, they will be next to impossible to replace, as others have said. In fact, I would go so far as to say that allowing pupils to look forward to a residential outdoor course could go a long way to tackle the anxiety that they will be feeling at the moment. It was a huge disappointment to my youngest and her classmates when they had to cancel their primary 7 trip to Lockerbie before the summer holidays. That is an experience that they will now never have had. My eldest had a hugely rewarding experience by going to work in Camp America and teaching Americans how to horseride.

I have spoken many times in the chamber about the attainment fund and using it to access the transport to outdoor learning centres. Covid has cost us so much, but we should ensure that there are opportunities for our children after the Covid crisis subsides that are similar to those personal experiences that most of us have talked about. It is important that outdoor centres are maintained for future generations.

18:01

**Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab):** I echo the thanks to Liz Smith for bringing this incredibly important issue to the chamber.

The announcement today that the easing of lockdown has in many ways gone into reverse is a sobering reminder that Covid-19 has not gone away. Talk of eradication has been replaced by

talk of suppressing the virus to the lowest possible level and keeping it there. I get the fact that there need to be restrictions on our everyday lives and that many of those restrictions will be with us for some time to come. Much is said about those restrictions being based on the science, and I do not dispute that the First Minister and others will be conscious of the scientific advice that they receive when it comes to the incredibly difficult choices that they have to make.

However, ultimately, we know that every decision is a political one. As the number of cases of Covid-19 initially began to fall, the Government had an element of headroom and ministers were able to make decisions on which areas to prioritise when it came to easing that lockdown. There is no list for the perfect order that the easing should be carried out in, but there is a list of choices. When it comes to outdoor education, I genuinely have difficulty in understanding the choices that the Government continues to make. For example, I have difficulty in understanding that a choice was made that a group of 10, 20 or more older adults who might never have met each other before could all go on a weekend shooting trip together, but a class of schoolchildren who might well spend the week together in the classroom are not allowed to spend more of that precious time benefiting from outdoor education.

I could describe exactly what the benefits to those children are, but I am not going to; instead, I am going to let them do the talking. Pupils at Belmont primary school in Stranraer recently wrote to the Deputy First Minister to tell him just what Abernethy Barcaple outdoor centre, located in the beautiful secluded hills near Castle Douglas in Kirkcudbright, means to them. Emma from primary 7 said:

“I built up my confidence and overcame challenges while staying away from my parents ... I am very shy so I find it hard to make friends, but staying in a room with different girls I didn't know so well boosted my confidence and helped me to make new friends.”

In another letter, Declan said:

“I had the best experience of my life at Barcaple. My memories will last forever ... Going to outdoor centres helps children develop so many new skills. It's also very good for your mental health because of all the fresh air and freedom you get from being outside.”

The pupils also produced a wonderful video on YouTube, which I recommend to members.

We have only to listen to those young people to appreciate what outdoor education means for them and to recognise what they are missing out on. If the Government has made a choice—no doubt because it believes that it is the right choice to make when it comes to the priorities for easing lockdown—and providing that residential experience does not fit with those priorities, it

needs to deal with the impact of those choices. If the Government allows the sector to collapse, it will be denying not just today's pupils from Belmont primary the benefits of outdoor education but future generations, and it will be depriving them of the opportunity to gain lifelong skills and benefit from the unique experience that outdoor education equips them with.

The sector desperately needs support now. As Daniel Johnson highlighted, many in the sector have not been able to access any of the financial support available to businesses and other third sector organisations—it is very much the forgotten sector.

Scouts Scotland has warned that it is set to lose £2.3 million this year alone. A collapse of income is happening across the sector. Outward Bound has warned that, once centres close, they will close for ever. That would be a tragedy at any time but, as Liz Smith highlighted, at a time when children face spending part of their childhood in the shadow of this pandemic and when the benefits of outdoor education on mental and physical health are arguably needed more than ever before, it would be a travesty if the Government did not recognise the urgency of this crisis and did not do more to provide the sector with the support that it badly needs to save our outdoor centres, not only for today's children but for generations to come.

18:05

**Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green):** I, too, thank Liz Smith for giving us the opportunity to discuss the threat that faces Scotland's fantastic residential outdoor centres and the threat to the experienced, well-qualified staff who help to make them so special.

From our world-famous Highlands and our brilliant beaches to the Pentland Hills here in Lothian, Scotland is blessed with some of the most spectacular outdoor space in the world. The pandemic has led more of us to get out into the outdoors. However, it has also highlighted how vital it is that we ensure that everyone knows how to behave in a safe and sustainable way when they are in those forests, mountains, beaches, seas and waterways.

Outdoor education plays an important role in that. Scotland was an early pioneer of outdoor education; it was one of the first countries in the world to formalise it as part of children's learning. Now, every year, some 105,000 young people and children go on outdoor residential trips and day outings. The City of Edinburgh Council's three outdoor centres—Benmore outdoor centre, near Dunoon, Lagganlia centre for outdoor education, near Aviemore, which I should say I am a friend of;

and the Bangholm centre, right here in Edinburgh—provide outstanding access to walking, mountain biking, water sports and other activities. Although the Bridge 8 Hub, which is on the canal at the Calders, is not a residential centre, it provides canoeing and kayaking to school groups and people of all ages who might not otherwise have such an experience.

It is quite right that curriculum for excellence recognises that learning in the outdoors can make significant contributions to literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing. If a curriculum does not include outdoor learning, it is not excellent. Research from Learning Away shows that residential outdoor learning provides opportunities and benefits that cannot be achieved in another educational setting. In its briefing, Scouts Scotland told us that outdoor learning is

“particularly beneficial to those who struggle to engage with more formal education”.

Outdoor education can help close the attainment gap and, if anyone is still not convinced—and I know that colleagues across the chamber are—a social return on investment analysis shows that every £1 spent by the Scottish Environmental and Education Centres Association generates over £11 of environmental and social benefits for young people.

The latest Scottish health survey shows no improvement in the sedentary time spent by children since 2015—that is five years—so we need to ensure that each and every child and young person can access outdoor educational opportunities. That requires us to preserve our outdoor centres for this and future generations. Sadly, we have already lost Girlguiding Scotland’s Netherurd centre in West Linton. Many other centres have reached out to MSPs in advance of this debate to warn that some are not getting any financial help beyond the job retention scheme and that they need urgent assistance.

Outdoor learning should be much more than a one-off residential stay; Scouts Scotland is right to point that out in its briefing. Who would disagree that it is a hugely underused resource? School residential weeks are a highlight of our education system. For some young people—often those from families on low incomes—it might be a journey to another world in which they discover strengths that they did not know they had and they are challenged in ways that build resilience.

Establishing and running outdoor centres is a complex operation that requires investment, and if we lose some centres, I am afraid that some will be gone for ever. Therefore, I join colleagues who are calling on the Scottish Government to do whatever it can to provide financial and any other

necessary support to our fantastic outdoor centres.

I know that the Government appreciates input on where that cash might come from. Just a few weeks ago, research by my colleague Andy Wightman revealed that nine out of 10 of Scotland’s shooting properties, including some owned by billionaires, receive non-domestic rates relief worth £10.5 million. I suggest that, if we can afford that, there is money to support outdoor centres to get our young people cycling, kayaking, hillwalking and much more.

Of course, we need to keep our children, young people and their teachers safe, but we need to look at whether the guidelines that have been issued to schools are unnecessarily restricting access to outdoor education at a time when access to exercise and learning outside classrooms could not be more important.

Right now, organisations such as the Water of Leith Conservation Trust and the Green Team at Tynecastle in Edinburgh are keen to offer outdoor learning to schools. Schools are enthusiastic to take up that offer, but they are currently unable to do so. With social distancing even more important as a result of today’s announcement by the First Minister, it is time to consider what greater role outdoor education can play in the lives of our children and young people. It is surely easier to maintain safe distances when learning outdoors than in the classroom.

Scotland has a long and proud history of supporting children and young people’s access to the great outdoors. We need to build on that, not abandon it. I ask colleagues whether they would be interested in forming an informal cross-party working group to ensure that we take forward the work that has begun as a result of Liz Smith’s debate. I pledge the full support of the Scottish Greens to the #SaveYourOutdoorCentres campaign.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I call Richard Lochhead to respond to the debate for as long as he likes.

18:11

**The Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science (Richard Lochhead):** Thank you for that prompt, Presiding Officer.

The Covid-19 pandemic has led to a very significant challenge for the entire education system in Scotland, but it is right that the issues faced by outdoor education centres are given appropriate consideration. I add my thanks to Liz Smith for bringing forward this important debate.

The benefits of outdoor centres have been articulated eloquently by members across the

chamber. The number of members who have participated in the debate illustrates the strength of support for Scotland's outdoor centres. I could not agree more with virtually all their sentiments. Outdoor education experiences make a vital contribution towards a rich and impactful education for our young people.

I listened closely to the points that members made. Maurice Corry summed up very well many of the skills that people can acquire from participating in residential courses. He spoke about social and communication skills and how such participation can help the self-confidence and self-esteem of our young people. I listened closely to his story about his visit to my constituency in Moray and will forgive him for discarding a cigarette butt from the train at Elgin railway station. I am sure that it will have biodegraded over the 50 years since he was there.

Maurice Corry made important points about the benefit of outdoor centres in Moray, and many members referred to outdoor centres across the country. Liam McArthur mentioned the important role that outdoor education plays in helping more vulnerable young people in Scotland, Fulton MacGregor spoke from the perspective of his experience as a social worker in the justice sector about how outdoor education can help the people he worked with, and Alison Johnstone spoke about how it can help people who find it difficult to engage in more formal education settings. We all agree on the many benefits of outdoor education.

Like Bruce Crawford's children, my children have taken part in residential courses—at Alltnacriche in Aviemore in their case—and I saw the benefits that they gained from that experience. I also have personal experience of such courses. When I was 18 and had secured my first full-time job, my employer had the foresight to send me on a residential outward bound course. I recall meeting people from different backgrounds to my own and the group discussions in which we had to open up about ourselves. I was pushed out of my comfort zone, both mentally and physically, and had an unparalleled introduction to the spectacular Scottish outdoors, which included hiking, traversing one of Scotland's great lochs in a Canadian canoe and abseiling for the first time. Although it seems a lifetime ago, I still recall those amazing few days and the profound impact that they had on my young self.

**Liz Smith:** I could not agree with the minister more. He is echoing exactly what every member said. Given the cross-party agreement on this, is the minister minded to accept Alison Johnstone's suggestion to set up a working group urgently to see whether we can address the problem?

**Richard Lochhead:** I will take that on board, and I am coming to some of the steps that we could take.

There is no doubt that outdoor centres support learners' health and wellbeing, as well as their attainment. They provide learners with valuable opportunities to spend time outdoors and be physically active at the same time.

That is why the Scottish Government has supported the work of the Scottish Advisory Panel for Outdoor Education over a number of years. It is why we have promoted the role of residential centres to all our schools, as part of the broad and rich education that is offered by curriculum for excellence.

It is fair to say that no MSP, no minister, no education authority and, certainly, no outdoor education centre would wish to face the dilemmas that are posed by Covid-19. The Scottish Government has continued to work closely with representatives of outdoor education centres throughout the crisis to look at how we can navigate through the current difficulties. The positive contributions of outdoor learning and outdoor centres feature throughout our Covid-19 recovery guidance. Earlier this year, the Scottish Government provided additional funding to the advisory group to develop fresh guidance on the positive role of outdoor education centres; as others have noted, that guidance was published in August.

Our officials have also facilitated engagement between the sector, COSLA and the Association of Directors of Education, as it is the role of individual education authorities to decide the approach in their local area and to fund that approach appropriately. In addition, just last week, Education Scotland published a new professional learning resource on outdoor learning.

The question of funding goes to the heart of the debate. It has been raised in the media and in many of the speeches today. A range of funding sources has been made available to complement the funding that comes from local authorities and schools. Third sector organisations that run outdoor education were able to apply for support through our £25 million third sector resilience fund. We alerted outdoor education centres to the up to £5 million that is available in fully flexible, zero per cent interest loans, starting at £50,000, from Social Investment Scotland. The newly created £3 million youth work education recovery fund, which was announced in mid-September, contains an objective to support outdoor education. Funding through the Scottish attainment challenge and pupil equity funding, as others have mentioned, also continues to play its role in helping to fund outdoor education visits by schools across the country. A number of third sector outdoor centres

might be eligible to apply for funding under the forthcoming community and third sector recovery programme, too. Finally, as others have mentioned, outdoor education centres have been able to access financial support through the UK Government's coronavirus job retention scheme. Today's debate reinforces, yet again, the case for that scheme to be extended.

The centres are campaigning to access additional dedicated support funding, which is an entirely reasonable campaign for them to mount. I do not need to tell anyone here about the very significant pressures on Scottish budgets, to which Bruce Crawford referred, at a time when we are facing unprecedented challenges. There are huge demands on the public purse at the moment. In the past 48 hours, my inbox has had messages from three different sectors looking for support packages, and we receive representations on a regular basis because of what people and organisations are going through due to the Covid-19 crisis.

**Jamie Greene** *rose*—

**Andy Wightman (Lothian) (Green)** *rose*—

**Jamie Greene:** Apologies to Mr Wightman—I believe it was a race to stand up there.

Notwithstanding the financial pressures that all Governments are facing and the funds that the minister has said are available, it remains the case that up to half of outdoor learning centres might close as a result of their financial pressures. Just before the debate, the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland issued a notice—other members might not have seen it. It asks whether a children's rights impact assessment has taken place. We would not close primary schools without undertaking such an assessment. We must do the same for outdoor centres. Can the minister confirm that the Government will fully investigate any potential outdoor centre closure before allowing it to happen?

**Richard Lochhead:** As the member is aware, outdoor centres operate under a number of different models. Some are run by local authorities, some are third sector, some are private and so forth. We do not have the influence that the member perhaps thinks we have on which institutions close. However, I have not seen the children's commissioner's communication, and I will certainly look at it and take it on board.

The Scottish Government absolutely recognises the very difficult position in which many of our outdoor centres find themselves. The Scottish Advisory Panel for Outdoor Education has asked whether a review date can be identified for a further examination of the Covid-19 guidance in relation to overnight residential stays; other

members have referred to that. I am sure that members will recognise the difficulties for the Government in setting a review date at a point in time when Covid-19 cases are on the rise in Scotland, and as we are beginning to come to terms with the First Minister's profound announcement this afternoon. However, we will continue to monitor the situation closely.

An area of policy where we can take further action is the apparent inconsistency in application of the current guidelines. Very good practice in some areas could, and should, be shared more widely among local authorities, as members mentioned. Some authorities and schools might not be taking full advantage of the opportunities for day visits. Some are ruling out all residential overnight stays for the entire school year. In recognition of the compelling case that has been made by the sector, I make a commitment that Scottish ministers will engage further with the advisory group and local authority partners as soon as possible to address the issues that were raised today and during debate on the issue in the past few weeks. We can also do more to highlight, clearly and prominently, what can be done under current regulations and we can see what can be done to develop a more consistent and positive application of the current guidance across Scotland's local authorities.

We are listening closely to the points that have been made in this debate. We are listening very closely to outdoor education centres in Scotland. I pay tribute to all their efforts and to their resilience in the current difficult times, to the support that they are giving to our young people, and to their professional commitment and dedication to outdoor education. It is an important part of Scotland's education landscape, as has been highlighted by many members.

We will look in detail at the different funding mechanisms that are available at national and local level, and we will explore how those funding streams can be deployed more effectively.

Today's debate has been an important opportunity to highlight the role that our outdoor education centres play in Scotland. We must recognise the urgent challenges that they face and explore what more can be done. The Scottish Government remains a powerful supporter of the role that outdoor education centres play. I finish by paying tribute to the sector and thanking all members for their contributions. I assure members that we are listening very closely to representations.

*Meeting closed at 18:22.*

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