



OFFICIAL REPORT  
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

# Meeting of the Parliament (Hybrid)

Wednesday 23 December 2020

Session 5



The Scottish Parliament  
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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## Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 23 December 2020

[The Deputy Presiding Officer opened the meeting at 11:00]

### Covid-19 (Loneliness and Social Isolation)

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani):** Good morning, everyone. Before we begin, I remind members that social distancing measures are in place in the chamber and across the Holyrood campus. Please take care to observe those measures during today's business.

The first item of business is a member's business debate on motion S5M-23326, in the name of Rachael Hamilton, on understanding the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on loneliness and social isolation. The debate will be concluded without any questions being put.

We are a bit pushed for time today so please stick to the timings.

#### *Motion debated,*

That the Parliament recognises what it considers the damaging impact of social isolation and loneliness throughout the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic; considers that it has had a pronounced effect on older and vulnerable people; understands that studies have shown that, in the long term, it can be as bad for human health as smoking or obesity; acknowledges the recent University of Stirling study, which found that 56% of people said social distancing had made them more lonely; notes the concerns raised in the recent British Red Cross report, *Lonely and left behind: Tackling loneliness at a time of crisis*, that 32% of UK adults agree that they worry something will happen to them and no one will notice; commends the British Red Cross's work, especially in Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire with the Coronavirus Resilience Calendar, and notes the calls on the Scottish Government to consider the report's recommendations in full in order to tackle social isolation and improve mental health and wellbeing.

11:00

**Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con):** I thank all members who signed my motion for helping me to bring the debate to the chamber today.

On the day that Parliament finishes up and we turn to Christmas, it is absolutely right that we should debate loneliness and social isolation. Loneliness has a negative impact on the mental health of one third of the adults in Scotland, which is quite astounding. At this time of year, with its long dark winter nights and cold days, it is far more pronounced than it is at any other time, and now the Covid pandemic has exacerbated the

situation. We now face a crisis that is on the precipice and is tipping in the wrong direction.

I am sure that many of us watched last Saturday's announcement in shock, sadness and disappointment as restrictions were tightened over Christmas. I cannot begin to imagine the upset and distress caused to many older and vulnerable people when they learned that Christmas is effectively cancelled, or certainly scaled back for many parts of the country.

The effect of the new restrictions will be felt acutely by care home residents and their families. When I was listening to BBC Radio Scotland this morning, I heard people who I know phoning in and talking about the distress that they felt about not seeing their families during Christmas, especially those who are in care homes. That was really hard to listen to.

According to Age Scotland, more than 150,000 over 65s in Scotland expect to feel lonely during the festive season, and I suspect that, sadly, that figure will be higher this year. We know about the devastating impact that loneliness can have on mental and physical health. As my motion mentions, it can be as bad as the effect of smoking or obesity. As we debate here today, we must ask ourselves what damage the situation is doing to our loved ones and those who are alone.

I would like to thank the charities that, throughout the pandemic, have been instrumental in tackling the rising levels of loneliness and isolation. Age Scotland, the MS Society Scotland, Glasgow's Golden Generation, the Salvation Army and many more have all worked tirelessly to help older and more vulnerable people who are experiencing social isolation.

I especially want to praise the British Red Cross, not only for the research that it has done into loneliness and its assistance with today's debate, but for the tremendous efforts that it has made during the pandemic. Its volunteers have worked selflessly to help those who are in need. We saw volunteers helping with food parcels and running a support line to help people to cope with feelings of loneliness, mild depression, isolation and grief after bereavement. It is continuing with its fantastic work by assisting St John Ambulance to roll out the new Covid-19 vaccine.

In my constituency, the local group created a coronavirus resilience calendar, which pointed people in every town and village to the right support. That was completely invaluable to me, my constituents and my parliamentary team, as it helped us to get support to people quickly. We owe that group a huge debt of gratitude.

Not only has the British Red Cross's help been invaluable during the pandemic, its research has the power to shape policy. The report "Lonely and

left behind: Tackling loneliness at a time of crisis”, which is mentioned in my motion, published findings and recommendations that are based on evidence on loneliness that it gathered throughout lockdown. The report found that 41 per cent of United Kingdom adults felt lonelier than they did before the pandemic, and 35 per cent of UK adults are concerned that their loneliness will get worse. In these winter months, with renewed stricter restrictions, that will, sadly, be the case.

The report explored the experiences of people who had recently been shielding and isolating or were continuing to do so. An overriding theme was the lack of face-to-face contact and a reluctance to admit to friends and family that they were lonely. The experiences of the people surveyed were just a snapshot of a widespread issue that exists in not only the United Kingdom but across the world. Although there can be immediate short-term fixes, such as outdoor physical exercise or social prescribing, it can be difficult for many to participate in outdoor activities; and some people do not have a garden or are not physically able to take a walk or go for a run.

A recommendation on which work has been done through Connecting Scotland, albeit at a slower pace than we would have liked, is that of promoting alternative ways to connect. A fund was announced back in 2018 to support the roll-out of digital technology to assist older people. However, it was only recently that we saw that put into action with the advent of the pandemic. I have long campaigned for better digital inclusion. What struck me most during the first lockdown was the digital divide. Many supermarkets asked older people to book slots online but, as we know, 44 per cent of over 75s do not have access to the internet. Better advice on choosing and using technology would help older people to participate in video calls and order food shopping, for example.

I hope that the Scottish Government will consider the Red Cross recommendations in full, as we need to see action now to prevent the situation worsening as we head into January and February. Undoubtedly, we all face a long haul until we all get vaccinated.

It is not just the Red Cross that has put together a Covid impact report; similarly, Age Scotland and Sight Scotland provided briefings for this debate. I thank them for sharing those with me. Age Scotland highlighted the situation in care homes, as care home residents have been particularly impacted by limited visiting opportunities. Family members have reported seeing marked declines in their loved ones’ wellbeing over the months. As we know, chronic loneliness can seriously impact on an older person’s health.

Things were moving in the right direction with rapid testing, but I suspect that the level 4 restrictions now mean that, sadly, we will go back to a limited position. Donald Macaskill said this morning on BBC Radio Scotland that we are now losing more people to the effects of isolation than we are to the virus. For me, that was chilling to hear and something that I never thought we would hear.

For those who are visually impaired or have lost their sight, the impact is even more pronounced. A Sight Scotland survey found that 70 per cent of those who participated said that their sight loss had made lockdown a worse experience and over 40 per cent said that they were still not confident about getting back into the community with social distancing measures in place. The picture is dramatic, and it is multidimensional, because we have not only the issue of loneliness but how it affects different groups and to what degree.

That is why I want the Scottish Government to provide an enhanced loneliness and social isolation strategy that pulls together the recommendations of the Red Cross and other charities and organisations. We are going to go through a tough few months, but I want to leave a message of positivity today. Age Scotland said that 94,000 over 65s in Scotland say that they would not have got through the pandemic without the kindness of strangers. As we leave here today, we must remember to look out for one another this Christmas. I urge people to check on their elderly neighbours and to help those who are less able than ourselves. Kindness and support go a long way, but we also need the Scottish Government to step up to the mark.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** We move to the open debate. I ask speakers not to take longer than four minutes, please.

11:08

**Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP):** I congratulate Rachael Hamilton on securing the debate and giving me the opportunity to talk about this important subject.

Today, as it did yesterday and will do for the days to come, Covid-19 erodes the human spirit and hard times are here for us all. The burden is physical, mental and, for many, spiritual; and the weight continues to bear down on us all. It is hard to accept—it is not rational and not chosen—and people across the planet are struggling. That is no wonder, because Covid-19 has hammered our global society, stealing the lives of family and friends, and it is direct, violent and destructive.

To slow Covid’s rampant advance, we have been forced to adopt social distancing and other necessary measures so that we may somehow

reduce or allay its destructive force. However, we are a social species, and those measures come at a cost. That cost is social isolation and loneliness. According to the British Red Cross's report "Lonely and left behind", more than half of adults say that reduced social contact has made life harder, and two thirds say that concerns about coronavirus have caused them to minimise their interactions, even when the rules permit it. What is worse is that two fifths of adults across the UK report that they have not had a meaningful conversation in the past fortnight.

Those are clear signs of a deteriorating psyche, with serious consequences. For the vulnerable, that is even more the case. Unable to see their friends and families, their lives are affected more than most, and the insidious force of loneliness penetrates, pervasive and enduring. Confidence decays, hope begins to hollow and wellbeing vanishes. We are trapped in the dark, suffering alone and under immense stress, for the simple reason that we cannot hold our loved ones or have the luxury of seeing our friends.

That comes with physical costs as well as mental costs. When someone needs support, it is in our nature to offer a hand. When others speak, we should—and mostly do—listen. We laugh together and we cry together. Our connection is obvious. We depend on each other, and that is what gives our lives meaning. The pandemic has shaken that.

There are solutions, though. We just need to innovate. Thankfully, that is happening. Vaccines are being created and new ways to connect, such as the one that we are using today, are being developed.

I join my colleague in commending the British Red Cross on its creation of a coronavirus resilience calendar. That is the kind of impressive innovation that we need, and I hope that it will be shared with others. I also agree that the calls by the Red Cross are well made. This is a far-reaching issue.

In my youth, Christmas day was a working day that was not much different from normal days, but it has become a day for family and for connection. We should all do what we can to help those who are lonely and affected by this dreadful virus and their lack of contact with other human beings.

11:12

**David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):** I, too, congratulate Rachael Hamilton on securing this important members' business debate and on the quality and depth of her speech.

Social isolation recognises no age, class or gender. As the motion describes, the British Red

Cross has rightly warned about worsening loneliness and social isolation this winter. That has been brought into even sharper focus given that many parts of my region of the Highlands and Islands will move from level 1 to level 4 restrictions later this week.

In my early 20s, I volunteered to work with the Samaritans in my home city of Inverness. Many of the calls that I answered were from desperately sad lonely people, some of whom had physical or mental health problems. They just needed someone to speak to—a shoulder to cry on. The challenging geographic and population demographic of the Highlands and Islands always increases the potential in many communities for loneliness and isolation among vulnerable groups and individuals. However, we have even greater cause for concern this year, given the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The available evidence shows that loneliness has a negative effect on health, wellbeing and resilience. There is a risk of heart disease, stroke and higher levels of alcohol consumption and smoking. Loneliness also substantially increases the chances of dementia among older people. As the research from the British Red Cross has shown, those who feel lonely find it even more difficult to cope with the pandemic than those who are supported by friends and family, which is why it so important that we do everything that we can to raise awareness in our communities of the support that is available.

That is why I highlight and praise *The Press and Journal's* excellent connect at Christmas campaign, which is supported by all party leaders. The campaign aims to ensure that as few people as possible suffer the harmful effects of loneliness this festive season.

The British Red Cross has been instrumental in supporting hundreds of people across the Highlands and Islands through doorstep deliveries of emergency food parcels and medication. In addition, it has supported NHS Highland, across the whole of the board's area, to provide care homes, independent care providers and personal carers with essential personal protective equipment to keep people safe. That has included volunteers delivering items of PPE to people who need them in every part of the region.

Excellent local examples of such work include that in Dingwall in Ross-shire, where the British Red Cross has been working in partnership with Connecting Carers to support vulnerable local families and individuals, enabling it to keep operating in a challenging environment. I mention such families and individuals in particular because research has shown that, as lockdown restrictions and the Government's guidance on shielding relaxed, many participants reported feeling left

behind as they watched others resume their social lives. The additional connectivity challenges in the Highlands and Islands, both physical and digital, have made it even harder for the most vulnerable people in our society to restart their lives and reconnect with people. We must be alive to that issue as we enter another period of tighter restrictions.

I echo members' earlier comments in welcoming the introduction of Scottish Government funding that aims to tackle loneliness and isolation. It is essential that such support for local authorities and health systems is in place, to identify those who are at most risk of loneliness and to address it through a dedicated fund and guidance.

I will end my contribution with a quote from an uncredited source:

"We sometimes think we want to disappear, but all we really want is to be found."

This winter, we must ensure that those facing loneliness and isolation receive the support to which they are entitled. I praise organisations such as the British Red Cross and all volunteers who are going above and beyond to support those who need their assistance over this most challenging of winters.

11:16

**Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP):** I am pleased to speak in this members' business debate and congratulate Rachael Hamilton on securing it. It is unusual for us to hold such a debate in the morning but, as Ms Hamilton reminded us, today is the day before Christmas eve.

For many months now, we have been discussing the fact that 2020 has been a year unlike any other. The social, physical, mental health and financial challenges that many people have faced over the past nine months have been the most difficult for everyone in our nation in recent history. However, throughout that time, many communities across Scotland have demonstrated great strength in their support for neighbours, front-line health care workers and our local producers and shops while still complying with difficult and often-changing restrictions. The community spirit and selfless attitudes that have been evidenced by complete strangers, which other members have also described, are a key way to help to tackle social isolation and loneliness. We must retain those as we emerge from the pandemic.

It is welcome that there is positive news on vaccines and that the vaccination roll-out programme is under way. As a nurse who is still registered, I have been able to join the Dumfries and Galloway vaccine team, all of whose

members have been extremely professional throughout my induction and training.

The Covid-19 pandemic has undoubtedly had an impact on the mental health of everyone, but particularly those who are at risk of social isolation and loneliness and those who have already been identified as being isolated. They include many people across Scotland's rural areas and those who have been identified as being in the shielding category, many of whom are in my South Scotland region.

The impact of the pandemic has particularly affected our farmers and agricultural workers. This year, all the agricultural shows—from those held in Dumfries and Stranraer to even the Royal Highland Show—which usually allow farmers to connect with one another, even for just a single day in the year, have been cancelled, which has obviously had its own impact.

Two local groups that I was working with before the Covid pandemic—the Dumfries and Galloway Farmers Choir and the Dumfries and Galloway retired farmers group—have been raising awareness of and tackling social isolation and loneliness. Recently, both have been keeping in touch with their members over Zoom, through email and on the phone. Indeed, the farmers choir, which last year sang in the Parliament's garden lobby, has also been supporting members of the community by helping with shopping and being a friendly voice on the other end of the phone. I was able to help the group to distribute its members newsletter by post, because it would normally be handed over face to face at its meetings.

During the pandemic, many people across the country volunteered to help in their communities. I was able to participate with Third Sector Dumfries and Galloway to join its touch base telephone programme. Volunteers were assigned to speak to people who had been identified as being isolated. Regular appointment phone calls were made to touch base with them, to ensure that essential medical supplies and food deliveries had been organised—and even just to have a blether. Third Sector D and G has asked whether a national network of volunteers could or should be created, with the necessary funding, to support and co-ordinate such volunteering in the community. Third Sector D and G and Age Scotland have called for better co-ordination and vetting of volunteering activities by the Scottish Government, and I would welcome clarity from the minister on steps in relation to volunteers and support.

Our intensive care units across Scotland have been using videoconferencing technology to connect patients with family members who are outside ICUs. We could talk about so much—I know that the Government has a winter plan and

that a lot is going on, which I am sure that the minister will expand on.

The message from me is that, over Christmas and new year, we should look out for, keep an eye on and be kind to one another.

11:20

**John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Green):** I, too, congratulate Rachael Hamilton on giving us the opportunity to discuss this important issue. The motion's title refers to understanding the impact, which is what we should all try to do. It is clear that social isolation is damaging. Covid has contributed to that and

"has had a pronounced effect on older and vulnerable people",

as the motion says. [*Inaudible.*] I commend the work of the British Red Cross on tackling social isolation and improving mental health.

In the previous parliamentary session, I was a member of the Equal Opportunities Committee when it undertook what was understood to be the first parliamentary inquiry in the world into age and social isolation. For evidence purposes, we took Professor Mima Cattan's definition, which was:

"Social isolation could be defined as an objective, measurable state of having minimal contact with other people, such as family, friends or the wider community."

It was significant that Professor Cattan considered that, although it might be possible to measure social isolation, the feelings of loneliness are personal and individual and therefore more challenging to measure objectively.

For that inquiry, we visited two very different communities—Easterhouse in Glasgow and the Isle of Islay in my region. We found that folk are folk—the issues are the same regardless of where they are and are not a matter of geography or architecture; things are personal to us all, no two people are the same and the myriads of relations that we have all differ.

We heard from committed individuals from across Scotland who highlighted social isolation and loneliness and were tackling its causes. The many briefings would confirm where we are with that. We were told that early steps for people who have been affected by loneliness to make connections are crucial. I commend the outstanding work by the many who help people to take those first steps.

In Sight Scotland's briefing for the debate, I was taken by its quote from someone who said:

"I once bumped into someone and they shouted at me that 'I shouldn't be out.'"

Covid has compounded many issues, but it has not changed them for people who already felt a bit excluded.

The pandemic has brought into sharp relief many inequalities of our society. The crisis has brought new struggles for everyone but, in most cases, it is those who are on low incomes, in insecure work or vulnerable for the other reasons that have been highlighted who have borne and continue to bear the brunt of the virus's devastation. People who work in essential services such as care or in our supermarkets have put their health at risk to ensure that the rest of us could cope with the crisis. Like others, I commend the Scottish Government's recent announcement that it will expand the eligibility criteria for the self-isolation support grant, which Scottish Greens have been very supportive of.

In many respects, the pandemic has been a microcosm of what we have already, such as the haves and the have-nots. I say gently that the UK Government's welfare reform programme does not help with that; people will be socially isolated if they cannot afford a bus fare. A person can be lonely in a crowd or content on their own. Seeing the mental health challenges as part of a more holistic approach to health is important.

I thank all who provide support, such as statutory agencies, the third sector, support groups and faith groups. There is hope because of the vaccines, and I know that all those organisations will play their part in trying to end the blight of social isolation.

11:25

**Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP):** I thank Rachael Hamilton for securing this important debate. I know from personal experience how difficult it has been for people and families who have a loved one in care. I thank care home staff, who are doing a fantastic job in these difficult times. Like others, I also thank the many organisations, both professional and voluntary, that have provided help and support during the pandemic period and will continue to do so.

I thank the Minister for Older People and Equalities, Christina McKelvie, for attending our meeting last week of the cross-party group in the Scottish Parliament on older people, age and ageing, which had many voluntary organisation representatives and other individuals present for a question-and-answer session. On behalf of the cross-party group, I thank the minister for her enthusiasm and for her succinct answers to the many questions. It was a lively discussion and I am sure that she might refer to it in her summing-up speech.

I will pick up on some issues in my constituency and refer to groups in it. Rachael Hamilton referred to the Golden Generation, which is based in the Glasgow Kelvin constituency. The organisation has worked hard to develop a fantastic digital app that is dementia friendly and easy to use for those who have no prior experience of digital technology. The app not only has set-up instructions but, crucially, shows what the organisation offers. The organisation has a team of digital champions who are trained to assist users over the phone. One of the users gave some fantastic feedback, saying:

“I’ve never had a tablet computer before. It’s all new to me, but it’s lovely to see the familiar faces of the charity staff on the screen. Having access to the app makes me feel less alone, less isolated and helps me keep in touch with the team and I enjoy the activities which are put forward on the app. It gives me something to do and keeps me active during the day. So thank you very much the Golden Generation.”

The Golden Generation has produced many other initiatives, but too many to mention in the short time that I have here. However, the organisation has made 17,000 befriending phone calls to older community members, which have been delivered by its 50 key workers.

There is also the Annexe Healthy Living Centre in my constituency, which I have mentioned, like the other community facilities there, many times previously. The centre’s stalwart staff are based in the community and are a great support to the people there. Volunteers staff the visiting centre, which opened up for meals for older people that they could book. I attended one of the meals and chatted with some users and staff, who I thank as well.

The organisation has even gone beyond doing that, though. It adapted to the restrictions that were put in place and co-ordinated what is called PATCH—the Partick and Thornwood community help scheme—which delivers thousands of care packages to older and vulnerable members of the community. The organisation’s support, through regular telephone calls and so on, has been invaluable. Others can learn from how the Annexe Healthy Living Centre has been able to change and adapt as various measures have come in.

My time is up, but that is just a snapshot of the fantastic work that is being done in my community, and I am sure that similar work is being done throughout Scotland.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I ask Christina McKelvie to respond to the debate. You have up to seven minutes, minister.

11:29

**The Minister for Older People and Equalities**

**(Christina McKelvie):** I thank Rachael Hamilton for bringing this debate to Parliament today as we approach the end of the parliamentary term in what has undoubtedly been the most difficult year. I thank all the members who have contributed to this timely debate. However, I thank Sandra White in particular for her lovely words in building up a sister. We sometimes need a bit of building up, so I am grateful for that.

In December 2019, I spent time with a great wee organisation in Edinburgh called Vintage Vibes. It was sending Christmas cards to older people who might be isolated or lonely. It was a humbling but fun experience. Hearing about the positive impact of such small acts of kindness—a wee card with a few words in it—really builds up and lightens our hearts. Christmas 2020 could not be more different, yet those small acts of kindness, many of which we have heard about in the debate, are even more important now.

A lot of statistics have been quoted this morning, including from the University of Stirling and the British Red Cross. Although none of those statistics makes good reading, it is crystal clear that we understand how damaging social isolation and loneliness can be. We treat it as a public health issue in Scotland; when we hear from David Stewart about the work that he did locally with the Samaritans, we understand why. It breaks my heart that some older people, schoolchildren, home workers, residents in care settings, furloughed employees, unpaid carers and many more feel that way.

Nonetheless, every day of the past 10 months, communities all over Scotland have demonstrated their hope and resilience, and they have done so in countless ways, many of which we have heard about this morning. We heard about the Golden Generation’s digital champions in Sandra White’s Glasgow Kelvin constituency—17,000 befriending phone calls is just amazing. We have stood in the street to clap our national health service heroes, we have knocked on neighbours’ doors to offer to get their shopping in, we have made countless Zoom calls and we have simply picked up the phone or given somebody a friendly wave.

In the examples mentioned by Rachael Hamilton, Stewart Stevenson, David Stewart, Emma Harper and John Finnie, tackling social isolation and loneliness starts at an important but simple place: kindness. We have talked a lot about that this morning. Left unchecked, loneliness can run rampant through communities. It does not have to be that way, though. I was struck by a statistic that Stewart Stevenson gave us this morning. Imagine Stewart Stevenson giving us a statistic—who would have thought it?—but he

gave us an important one, which is that two in five adults have had no meaningful connection or conversation with anyone in the past two weeks. That should stop us all in our tracks and make us think about the people who we see in our communities who we do not say hello to. Maybe we should all endeavour to say hello to them in the next couple of weeks.

It is not the job of Government alone to tackle loneliness and isolation. It is important that we come together today in our Parliament to commit that each and every one of us will be kind and remember others, whether or not we think that they are coping. A phone call or a knock on the door might be just what someone needs.

On 11 December, I announced details of nearly £1 million funding for tackling loneliness and isolation right now. That was part of a wider £6 million funding package to promote equality, tackle social isolation and loneliness, and improve an important aspect of our winter plan—digital inclusion. I will provide more details on the volunteering aspect of that to Emma Harper. It is the responsibility of another cabinet secretary, but I will get Ms Harper an update on the volunteers plan, because a lot of work is going into that.

**Rachael Hamilton:** With regard to the connected Scotland strategy, can Christina McKelvie update the chamber on how the national implementation group is looking at the changing landscape during the pandemic?

**Christina McKelvie:** Rachael Hamilton has anticipated my next page of notes. I will come to that and give her an update.

I want to give Parliament a wee insight into one of the organisations that will benefit from the funding that I have announced. Generations Working Together is Scotland's intergenerational expert and a key member of our national implementation group and older people's strategic action forum. It worked with pupils at Bertha Park high school to create a YouTube Christmas show for care home residents. Please watch the show—it is wonderful and it will make you feel better. I have watched it a couple of times. There is a poem in it called "Hope" by a young woman called LilyAnna. At the end of the poem, she says, "Embrace it, hope." That is an excellent message, especially at Christmas, but also when we have hope in our vaccine coming.

The children worked hard to learn the music, songs and jokes. They participated in the show in the knowledge that they will brighten up the day of thousands of care home residents across the country. Their talent is boundless—it is wonderful. Members have to hear Dan singing "Bridge Over Troubled Water"—it is incredibly poignant at this time. Please watch it.

I am sure that Rachael Hamilton will be pleased to hear that I was delighted to meet Maria and Kenneth from the British Red Cross on 25 November to hear about their recommendations and respond to the letter. They will continue to work with us on that. It was also a pleasure to confirm something that Emma Harper will welcome, which is what we have done to focus on loneliness with our clear your head campaign. We have targeted funding to focus on connections and to tackle isolation and loneliness throughout the pandemic. That becomes more important as we head into winter.

We have also provided additional investment to tackle digital isolation. I can respond to Rachel Hamilton's intervention by saying that we have targeted 5,000 older and disabled people with the connected Scotland programme. It has been important for people to come together digitally.

Emma Harper talked about a retired farmers group and a farmers choir and I look forward to hearing them singing here.

The digital Scotland programme will be important. We have a target to connect 5,000 older and disabled people, but we are doing much more. We are benefiting diverse groups including befriending networks, the time to live fund, the Scottish Men's Sheds Association, the Scottish ethnic minority older people forum, Generations Working Together, YouthLink Scotland and Chest Heart and Stroke's kindness calls—some of which I have taken part in. We have also worked with the ethnic minority resilience network BEMIS, Intercultural Youth Scotland, the Minority Ethnic Carers of People Project, LGBT Health and Wellbeing, Glasgow Disability Alliance, national support for learning disability, the British Deaf Association, Deafblind Scotland and families that are separated because a parent is currently in prison.

Research that came from the House of Commons library yesterday tells us that the overall cost to older people in Scotland of not having their television licence provided for free this year could be as much as £40 million. I hope that the United Kingdom Government will overturn that decision, especially when people are facing loneliness at Christmas. The ending of the free licence is doubly cruel as we ask people to stay home while we battle a global pandemic. I hope that the UK Government will do better.

Keeping connected to others is important and today's debate has shone a spotlight on that, as John Finnie said. It is a priority for me, for the Government and, I hope, for the Parliament. I am proud that we have come together on the day before Christmas eve to debate this. I wish you all a safe, happy and connected festive period.

## Covid-19 (Vaccine and Testing Programmes)

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Lewis Macdonald):** The next item of business is a statement by Jeane Freeman on an update on Covid vaccine and testing programmes. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

11:38

**The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Jeane Freeman):** I welcome this opportunity to update Parliament on our extended testing programme and our NHS Scotland Covid-19 vaccination programme.

The discovery of a new and more transmittable Covid-19 variant is a bitter blow, but we now have many more tools to fight the virus than we had in March. Vaccination and testing are critical to suppressing the virus and preventing the harms that it causes. Following the announcement last month to expand testing across a number of areas, significant progress has been made. Two of our three new national health service regional laboratory hubs went live on a phased basis last week, with the west and the north hubs now receiving samples. The east regional hub will be operational by the end of January.

Processing of the weekly tests of 42 per cent of care home staff has now moved to our NHS labs as planned, and we will complete that transition by the end of January. Testing of all admissions to hospital is under way and is to be completed by the end of the month.

Twice-weekly testing has been introduced on a phased basis for all patient-facing staff in NHS Scotland hospitals, Covid-19 assessment centre staff, the Scottish Ambulance Service and all Covid-19 vaccinators. That is on track to be fully implemented by the end of January 2021.

All care homes now have the equipment for lateral flow testing, and a rolling programme of training is under way to provide testing for care home visitors, with lateral flow testing to support professional visitors to care homes from the beginning of January.

All students at Scottish universities and colleges who are going home for the winter break were offered testing during a two-week testing window from 30 November. More than 26,000 students were tested, with 106 positive cases found, which was a very low overall positive-test rate of 0.2 per cent. Testing will be offered on a similar basis to support the staggered start of the university term next year.

In January, our pathfinder testing programmes will begin, with the aim of developing a sustainable programme of asymptomatic testing among school staff. We are working closely with a number of local authorities and volunteer schools to develop detailed plans. The first model will involve in-school testing using lateral flow devices, and the second will involve at-home PCR—polymerase chain reaction—testing using the satellite testing channel that has previously been used in the care home sector. We expect those pilots to inform the development of a scalable and sustainable approach to asymptomatic testing of school staff at the earliest opportunity.

We have completed our community testing pilots. Between 26 November and 9 December, we targeted testing resources at eight communities with stubbornly high Covid-19 prevalence levels, as part of a community testing pilot. That involved deployment of six mobile testing units and more than 4,000 home test kits, and establishment in Johnstone of the asymptomatic test site using lateral flow devices. Over the course of the pilot, 22,133 tests were completed and 850 positive cases were identified, giving an overall positive-test rate of 3.8 per cent.

We will now expand that strategic and targeted use of testing through a community testing programme in January, which will be delivered in partnership with local authorities. We hope to have in the early part of that month their proposals for communities where that approach will have the greatest impact. With local authorities, we intend to build on that intense targeted period of testing to wrap around a full public health package. That will include continued support for those who are asked to isolate, use of the self-isolation support grant, the local self-isolation assistance service and the national assistance helpline. We will ensure compliance with non-pharmaceutical interventions in vulnerable settings, including schools, care homes and employment settings, and will offer support where we need to.

Finally, I am pleased that, following work with Royal Mail, all 82 mainland postcode areas now have access to home test kits, and that we have met our commitment to have 22 local test sites by the end of this year. From January, we will have access to an additional 14 mobile testing units.

Our NHS Scotland vaccination programme began on 8 December. In the period to 20 December, 56,676 people received their first dose. They include care home residents and staff, and patient-facing NHS staff. Depending on supply delivery, during January we will complete the second-dose vaccinations to residents in care homes, older people and their carers, and to front-line health and care staff.

I have previously outlined the challenges in delivering the Pfizer vaccine, including stability in transportation, storage requirements and pack sizes. Those issues have limited our capacity to take the vaccine everywhere that it is needed. Scottish Government health officials, our health boards, and the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency have worked to mitigate those issues and to streamline our process of deploying the vaccine. Thanks to their efforts, we are now able to safely reduce pack size, which has allowed the care home programme to begin, and the transport challenges of getting the vaccine to all of our islands have been resolved.

We anticipate receiving a total of 172,575 doses of the Pfizer vaccine by the end of this week, 50 per cent of which we will retain so that we can be sure to give those who are vaccinated the second dose after the required 21-day period.

A key area that would help to streamline the process further is predictability of delivery, but that is not in our gift. Safety is a paramount concern and there is a rigorous process of safety checks between the vaccine leaving the factory in Belgium, arriving in the United Kingdom and then arriving in Scotland.

Those checks mean that, although we know when the vaccine leaves the factory, we cannot be certain of the date on which we will receive it. That is a challenge for our forward planning of vaccine appointments, but it is one that we share across all four nations of the UK. We are working together with the regulator and the distributor to resolve that challenge. I expect that we will continue to discuss and pursue the matter tomorrow, at my normal weekly meeting of the health ministers of the four nations.

The Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation's recommendation for delivery of a Covid-19 vaccine is that prioritisation should first be given to those who have the greatest clinical need. Taken together, vaccinating those on the JCVI's list will help to reduce about 99 per cent of preventable mortality from Covid-19. That is clearly a compelling rationale, and it is right that we follow that advice. People who are clinically extremely vulnerable are high on the JCVI's prioritisation list, alongside those aged 70 and over.

I understand the concern that people who are terminally ill want, if at all possible, to receive the vaccine earlier. Matt Hancock and I have now both written to the JCVI asking it for further consideration of and clarity on that group, for all the reasons that I know members will understand.

Right now, we have access to just one vaccine. We hope that we will in the near future have

access to two. Should it get approval from the MHRA, the new AstraZeneca vaccine will not need to be stored at ultra-low temperatures and will be easier to transport. That means that we will be able to deploy it in a far wider range of settings than has been the case for the Pfizer vaccine. Dependent on the JCVI's advice, we will likely use it to prioritise vaccination of over-80s who are not care home residents. That group will be vaccinated largely in general practice settings.

Should the AstraZeneca vaccine be approved before the end of this calendar year, we anticipate that we will be able to commence vaccination in primary care locations from Monday 11 January. Vaccine supplies permitting, we aim to have vaccinated all those on the JCVI's prioritisation list by the spring. Once we have completed that group—again, depending on supplies—we will commence vaccination of the rest of the population.

The dedicated officials and NHS staff who have taken forward the vaccine programme have done remarkable work at pace, for which I am grateful. On 3 December, I said that we would, depending on supply, begin vaccination on 8 December, which we did. We said that we would begin vaccination of people in care homes on 14 December, which, again, we did. All that is down to the hard work of staff. When we have more vaccines and greater numbers of doses available to us, those public servants stand ready to deliver once more.

Today, members will receive initial board maps of primary care settings and other vaccination centres in their areas to meet the scale-up, alongside use of mobile units where those are needed. We are looking at use of larger centres in heavily populated areas such as Glasgow, Edinburgh, Dundee, Aberdeen and Lanarkshire to supplement the local and mobile solutions for people in remote and rural areas, and for those who have particular requirements.

Alongside that, we are building a national scheduling tool that will support wider cohorts of the population to schedule their appointments, which is on track for delivery by the end of January.

Although limitations with vaccine supply have meant that there have been lower initial workforce requirements for the early weeks of the programme, we have nevertheless been keen to ensure that we continue to ramp up capacity. We currently have 1,729 registered vaccinators, and 4,000 people attended national training events on delivery of the Pfizer vaccine. To deliver on our intention of concluding vaccination of those who are on the priority list in the spring, our workforce modelling shows a requirement for about 1,400 vaccinators and 600 support staff. We remain

confident in our workforce supply. We are also exploring all offers of assistance from individuals and organisations, for which we are very grateful.

I know that for many people the wait to get the vaccine will be an anxious one. I hope that people will be assured that we will contact them as soon as we have the vaccine supply and can reach their eligible group. It is essential that, once people have been contacted, they attend their first vaccination appointment and return for their second dose.

A vaccination programme of such a scale is unprecedented and is a significant logistical challenge that requires a major nationwide effort. So far, we have secured the enthusiastic support of many partners across our public sector, and we continue to face that challenge with optimism and determination to succeed for Scotland.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** The cabinet secretary will now take questions on the issues raised in her statement. I intend to allow around 20 minutes for questions, after which we will move on to the next item of business.

**Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** I thank the cabinet secretary for providing advance sight of her statement. I welcome the news that more than 56,000 people have been vaccinated so far, and I pay tribute to our front-line NHS and social care staff for helping to deliver that. Following the news about the new strain of Covid-19, I am sure that any update on the impact of that new strain on the delivery of the vaccination programme would be appreciated.

The cabinet secretary mentioned that those people over the age of 80 who are not in care homes will be largely vaccinated in GP settings. However, she has previously said that GP surgeries will not be significantly involved in the vaccination programme so that they can continue to deliver other services. Therefore, will she provide clarification on the role of GPs in the vaccination programme and on how their participation will affect the on-going availability of primary care?

Secondly, I want to raise another specific matter. The cabinet secretary will be aware of the campaign by Fred Banning, who is suffering from terminal cancer, to give people who are receiving palliative care increased priority for the vaccine; indeed, she mentioned the issue in her statement. Can she provide any further update on that difficult issue?

**Jeane Freeman:** On Mr Cameron's second question, I cannot provide any more information than I have provided so far. As I said, Matt Hancock and I have written to the JCVI to ask it to give consideration to the issue and to provide any further advice that it wants to offer. As soon as we

have that, I will update members in what has become a regular weekly update to members when we have new information to impart. I expect that the four health ministers will discuss the matter when we meet tomorrow.

On the role of GPs, we have been working very closely with the Royal College of General Practitioners and the British Medical Association to ensure that the vaccination programme for the over-80s can be delivered partly in primary care physical settings and partly through primary care staff delivering the vaccine to people in that age group who live at home and for whom vaccination at home is the most appropriate way of delivering it to them. In addition, GPs who choose to do so will volunteer in our vaccination centres, and we have reached an agreement with them on the overall cost of that.

The GP practices are giving careful consideration to how they can manage to deliver the vaccination programme and to maintain their normal primary care service provision through extended hours or by other means. I am confident that the RCGP and the BMA are looking at that very closely—quite rightly, they share the concern of Mr Cameron and me on this—to ensure that standard, normal GP services are maintained while the additional work associated with vaccination is under way.

With regard to Mr Cameron's question about the new variant of Covid-19, a great deal of work is under way to ensure that the current vaccines can deal with it; the expectation is that they can. Of course, vaccine researchers and manufacturers are well accustomed to dealing with variation in infection strains—they do that almost every year with respect to the flu virus, which mutates and changes its strains as each year passes. Changes are then made in the vaccine that we deploy as part of the seasonal flu programme.

That work is under way but, at this point, there is no evidence to suggest that the current vaccines will not be effective against the new strain. Of course, the key is to get on and vaccinate as many people as quickly as we can.

**Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab):** I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of her statement and I welcome Mairi Gougeon to her new role as Minister for Public Health, Sport and Wellbeing.

The Government's target was to have daily testing capacity of up to 65,000 tests by the end of December, but daily testing numbers are still averaging only about 20,000. Are delivery plans for the cabinet secretary's intended capacity still on track? She is well aware that we have worried care-at-home staff who want to get testing soon. If

we have spare capacity, can that be used to reassure our care-at-home staff?

On a local issue, I am aware that, in NHS Lanarkshire, only half of our eligible staff who work in long-stay old-age psychiatry and learning disability wards were tested last week and that, in relation to about half of those who were not tested, the reason was that the staff declined to test. Is the cabinet secretary keeping a close eye on that? What more can be done to build staff confidence and reassure people that the testing is important to keep both staff and patients safe?

**Jeane Freeman:** I am grateful to Ms Lennon for her very important questions. The 65,000 figure was split between our expanding NHS capacity and expansion in the Lighthouse capacity. Even though we do not yet have the east hub online, largely because of building issues to do with fire safety and so on, which we need to fix, we still believe that we will be on track collectively to meet that 65,000 target.

Ms Lennon is absolutely right about the importance of extending testing to care-at-home staff. From memory, I believe that it is from the early part of January that we intend to extend regular asymptomatic testing to care-at-home staff. As I said—Ms Lennon will be well aware of this—they are a more complex group of staff to reach on a weekly basis so that we can input the data from those tests, because they are in neither hospitals nor care home settings. However, with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and our other partners, we have worked through how we might do that, and we will phase the roll-out, again starting with the areas where the virus has the highest prevalence and working our way through. We will start that from mid-January.

On that and other matters, I commit, as I always do, to ensuring that members are kept up to date. If there are changes between now and the Parliament returning after the recess, I will write to all members with those changes, but I will give an update as soon as we are all back after the recess.

Ms Lennon is also right about people declining to test. We saw a significant proportion of that when we initially rolled out weekly testing to care home staff, and we undertook with Scottish Care providers and our colleagues in the unions a programme of persistent and consistent information, including some short videos about the importance of testing, why to do it and what not to be worried about, and some surgery work to address people's concerns about it. We have seen the number drop significantly.

We see some of that reluctance to be tested on a weekly basis among our NHS staff, and I kind of understand why. It is not the easiest test to

undertake and it is intrusive. Using a similar approach, but also working closely with our unions and our boards, and led by our chief nursing officer, we are looking to see what more we need to do there to reduce that number.

My final point on that is that we must always remember that, setting aside those who decline to test, we will always have a difference between the eligible number and those who are tested. At any time, 50 staff could be eligible in a particular area, but a number of them may be off because of ill health or maternity leave, so we will never get 100 per cent. The decline-to-test figure is the one that we need to pay real attention to, and we are doing that.

**Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP):** Will the cabinet secretary advise what role the Scottish Government's new vaccine app could play in ensuring that people are fully informed about the vaccine before it is administered? For those who may not use an app, which I have to say would comprise many people in my Cowdenbeath constituency, how will the Scottish Government ensure that that vital information is equally accessible?

**Jeane Freeman:** The vaccine management tool is for staff. It is not a tool for citizens to use for either engagement or information sharing. The point of the tool is that it allows staff to easily record all the details of each vaccination: the patient's community health index number, the arm in which they were vaccinated, the type and vat number of the vaccine that was used. All that goes into the patient's record, so that when they return for their second dose, it can be checked.

The vaccine management tool is a management tool, but it is primarily a safety tool to make sure that we meet all the right clinical governance protocols. It is an additional safety measure that offers reassurance to individuals.

We have available printed and online material for patients. When people arrive to be vaccinated, they are given a patient information leaflet and time is taken to explain to them everything that they want to know and to answer all their questions, so that they can give informed consent to being vaccinated.

We will distribute a leaflet through a door drop to every household in the country from 5 January. The leaflet will explain the vaccination programme and answer safety questions and concerns that people might have. It will tell people what they should expect when they get called and give them an idea of where they are on the list. It will have a helpline number too, of course, so that people can phone up and ask for more information.

**Maurice Corry (West Scotland) (Con):** I, too, welcome Mairi Gougeon to her new ministerial role.

NHS Dumfries and Galloway says that care home staff and residents will have received their dose of the Covid-19 vaccine by Christmas eve. That is welcome news indeed, but it comes alongside one care home operator describing the programme as

“so far hugely frustrating and very disappointing”.

Can the cabinet secretary confirm when all care home staff and residents in Scotland will have received their first dose?

**Jeane Freeman:** No, I cannot give a definite date for that because, as I keep saying, it is dependent on vaccination supply. I explained that the problem that we have across the four nations of the UK is with the predictability of delivery. We know when the vaccine leaves the Pfizer factory in Belgium but we cannot say that it will be with us in Scotland four days from that date, because the date varies depending on the different safety checks that have to take place before the vaccine reaches us.

All four nations are trying to work with the MHRA and our distributors to smooth the process and make it much more predictable so that we can forward plan on a better basis, but until we do that it is not possible to be definitive about specific dates by which certain things will be done.

What I can say is what I said in my statement: significant progress is being made. We continue to work our way around all the care homes and their staff and residents and we intend to have completed the first and second doses by the end of January. Members should remember that, when I give numbers about the volume of doses that we expect to receive, that needs to be halved to give the number of people whom we can vaccinate, because the MHRA requires us to hold back 50 per cent so that we can give people the second dose.

I do not know who the provider that the member referenced is. Nobody has raised that issue with me. If the member wants to advise me of that provider’s particular concerns, I will be happy to look at them. I think that the delivery across our boards of our vaccination programme, which began on 8 December—a very short time ago—has been remarkable, given its smoothness and the coverage that has been reached. Depending on vaccine supply, we will keep scaling that up and vaccinating more and more people according to the JCVI advice.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** A number of members still want to ask questions, so I ask for succinct questions and answers.

**Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP):** I welcome the cabinet secretary’s statement. I appreciate her comments regarding the difficulties in distributing the vaccine to remote and island communities, and that they have now been resolved. Such communities, including those in Arran and Cumbrae in my constituency, often have a high percentage of older people. Is a catch-up programme being implemented to ensure that vulnerable islanders, who would have already been vaccinated if they lived on the mainland, will now receive the vaccine?

**Jeane Freeman:** Yes, there is a catch-up programme. There is a catch-up programme for precisely the situation that Mr Gibson referred to and a catch-up programme for not getting everyone at the one time, as we inevitably have with flu vaccines. It might be that every resident in a care home cannot be vaccinated. Someone might be unwell and vaccinating them might not be appropriate.

That simply demonstrates the complexity of the exercise. If people go out to vaccinate 100 people who are over 80, only 75 of them might be able to be vaccinated, so the 25 need to be remembered, and those people need to get back round to do them the second time.

The programme is complex, but there will always be catch-up programmes and mop-ups that are part of the process.

**Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab):** I give my sincere thanks to everybody who is involved in the programme, which is incredible.

How will the Scottish Government decide who gets which vaccine, given that there are slight differences in their effectiveness? Will they be rolled out in parallel? Is there a planning date next year for reaching around 70 per cent of the population, which is the figure at which immunity might be reached?

**Jeane Freeman:** No, I cannot give a planning date for that. I understand why Pauline McNeill asked that question, and I would like to be able to give that date but, as with everything else, it depends on vaccine approval and the roll-out and delivery of the vaccines. It should be remembered that the manufacturers of the vaccines will deliver and supply to the whole world. Although the UK, on behalf of all four nations, has forward purchased a significant volume of vaccines—more than is needed—delivery and production schedules are inevitably important factors.

We will not determine which vaccine will be used for which cohorts of individuals; rather, we will follow the advice of the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation and whatever caveats the MHRA may put around its authorisation to use vaccines. As we know, with

the Pfizer vaccine, there is a specific caveat in relation to pregnant women, and there is now an additional requirement for a 15-minute sit-down after a person has been vaccinated to ensure that everything is okay before they leave and go about their business. We get that. I expect that we will have comparable caveats around MHRA approval and JCVI advice for the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine when it comes forward and for the Moderna vaccine, which we expect to be the third vaccine coming through. However, we must wait for those and then apply those caveats.

**Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green):** As asymptomatic testing increases, it will inevitably result in more people needing to self-isolate. Has the Government considered making the self-isolation support grant unconditional so that more people can afford to do the right thing? The new variant of the virus appears to make people infectious for longer. Will that have an impact on the length of time for which people need to self-isolate and their need for support during that time?

**Jeane Freeman:** Both points are linked, of course, and both are important. On the last point, a number of things about the new variant are not yet confirmed. We know for sure that it is more infectious—it infects more people and it does so more quickly than we have been used to since Covid-19 first appeared. However, there are a number of other possible impacts that we do not know yet, and a great deal of work is under way by scientists to try to confirm some of those impacts, including work on whether people are infectious for longer.

The point about the self-isolation support grant is well made. Consideration is being given to what more we can do to support people to self-isolate. With clinical advice, we have, of course, reduced the period to 10 days. Nonetheless, that is still a significant ask of individuals, and it has implications for domestic circumstances in a number of different ways.

We continue to consider what more we can do in order to help people to do what we need them to do for themselves and for all of us, because that is critical in breaking the chains of transmission.

**Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD):** There have already been reports of several hundred missed appointments for the vaccine. Given the fragility of the vaccine, can the cabinet secretary confirm whether those doses are wasted or redeployed?

Secondly, can the cabinet secretary give us some detail about how, when we come to vaccinate the remainder of the population in the spring or early summer, that process will operate equitably? Everyone will want that vaccine

yesterday, and some people may not be online and may not be able to access portals to book in.

**Jeane Freeman:** On the latter question, once we have worked our way through the JCVI list—our objective is to do that in the spring of next year—we will then move to those who are under 50. At that point, we expect that, over time, the JCVI will give us further advice about any prioritisation that we will follow for that final group of the adult population. We will be able to answer that part of Mr Cole-Hamilton's question more definitively at that point. We will, of course, look to ensure that, as we roll out the vaccination, we follow the advice in an equitable manner.

On missed appointments and vaccines being wasted, I encourage everyone not to miss their appointment. If they cannot make it for some reason, they should get in touch, using the information that they will have been given, and rearrange it. We are happy to rearrange appointments, but missed appointments simply mean that somebody else who could have been vaccinated on that day at that time will not be.

However, missed appointments do not necessarily increase wastage, because each vial is made up with sodium chloride into five doses, and those doses can be kept for a limited amount of time in normal refrigerated conditions at 2°C to 8°C. If, say, I do not turn up and Mr Cole-Hamilton is next in line, the dose that I was going to receive will simply be used for him, and on we go. By the way, when my time comes, I will turn up—both times.

Essentially, X number of missed appointments does not necessarily equate to X number of wasted dosages. However, there is always a risk that, if the person who misses their appointment had the last appointment of the day, there will be no one else to receive that dose, and that will be a wasted dose. The more we can minimise wastage, the more people we can vaccinate quicker.

**Shona Robison (Dundee City East) (SNP):** I add my thanks for the incredible efforts of all those involved.

As I understand it, the initial guidance on the roll-out of the vaccine indicated that unpaid carers would be placed in the priority group. Can the cabinet secretary provide some clarity around when and how unpaid carers will receive the vaccine?

**Jeane Freeman:** Today, all members will receive what is becoming the weekly letter from us to them. In this week's one, we give the JCVI priority list and its definition of what it means by people in the priority 1 place on the list, who are residents and workers in care homes for older people. Members will see that in the number 6 place on the list are unpaid carers, including all

adult carers and young carers aged from 16 to 18. They are where we said they would be.

On the issue of how we will reach them, we are using a number of different channels to do that. Obviously, our colleagues in Social Security Scotland will ensure that those who are receiving carers allowance are advised, when we get to that stage of the programme, without giving away any confidential information. We will use third sector organisations, social media and other news channels, and, of course, our general practitioner and primary care practices will be of assistance to us. We will try to maximise the reach that we have to that group of people, including through the use of national media, in order to encourage them to get in touch and get their appointment booked.

**Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con):** Can the cabinet secretary elaborate on the large vaccination centres that were mentioned in her statement in urban and other populated areas? Where will they be, when will they come on line and who will staff them? In the interests of time, I would be happy to receive that information later in writing.

Can we offer assurance to recipients of the vaccine that they will be vaccinated against the new strain of the virus, which we are all incredibly concerned about?

**Jeane Freeman:** I will answer the last point first. A great deal of work is under way to get more confirmation around aspects of the new strain. However, there is no evidence at this point to suggest that the current vaccinations will not be effective against that new strain.

With regard to large vaccination centres other than those in the cities that I have talked about, I am happy to write to Mr Greene about the kind of centres that we are looking at and to share that information with all members. Those will be for when we start moving into the 60-year-old and younger population. For that group we will be looking at large numbers of people, and we believe that they will be more easily able to go to large centres, whether drive-through or walk-through. We are looking at a range of possibilities. As we narrow them down, we will give members much more information on that.

**Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP):** I have been contacted by constituents in the Chryston part of my constituency, which includes the small towns of Gartcosh, the Moodiesburn estates, Auchinloch and Chryston. There are worries that access to the vaccine will be difficult for vulnerable members of those communities who do not have access to a car. I am in contact with NHS Lanarkshire about the matter; we have had helpful conversations and it is working to address those concerns. However,

can the cabinet secretary give my constituents in those communities any reassurance that the vaccinations will be offered as locally as possible, and that they will be fully supported to access the vaccinations when transport is a barrier?

**Jeane Freeman:** I can give that assurance without any doubts. I am glad that NHS Lanarkshire has been helpful to Mr MacGregor. As I have said, today all members will receive, along with a letter, what is essentially the first set of board-by-board maps of where the local centres will be. Those are set up for the over-80s phase of the programme, but we will continue to add to them.

In addition, the mobile vaccination units are not just for remote and rural areas. They are also for urban areas where there are villages and citizens in the community for whom access to city or town centres remains difficult, such as people who do not have their own transport and public transport is also not readily available. There are lots of situations like that in my own constituency, so I well understand the difficulty.

We will do everything we can to ensure that vaccination is as local and as easily accessible as it possibly can be, because we need people to come forward for their first vaccination and to come back for their second dose. We want to vaccinate the largest number of the adult population in Scotland that we can reach.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** That concludes questions on the statement.

12:17

*Meeting suspended.*

12:20

*On resuming—*

## First Minister's Question Time

### **The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh):**

Before we turn to First Minister's questions, I ask the First Minister whether she would like to update the Parliament on Covid-19.

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** Thank you, Presiding Officer. I will give a short update on today's statistics before touching on some other issues.

The number of cases reported yesterday was 1,190—five per cent of all tests reported—and the total number of cases is now 115,566. There are currently 1,025 people in hospital, which is 20 fewer than yesterday, and 56 people in intensive care, which is four fewer than yesterday.

I very much regret to report that, in the past 24 hours, a further 47 deaths were registered of patients who first tested positive in the previous 28 days. The total number of people who have therefore died under that daily measurement is 4,373.

National Records of Scotland has also just published its weekly update, which includes cases in which Covid is a suspected or contributory cause of death, even if it has not been confirmed through a test. Today's update shows that, by last Sunday, the total number of registered deaths linked to Covid under that wider definition was 6,298, 203 of which were registered last week, which is 23 fewer than in the previous week. Again, I convey my deepest condolences to everyone who has been bereaved.

Before I go any further today, I take this opportunity to say how sorry I am for my breach of the rules that I ask us all to follow every single day. I took my face mask off while briefly attending a funeral purvey last week. I am sure that everyone will have seen in the media this morning a picture of me without it. I want to be clear today that, regardless of the circumstances, I was in the wrong. There are no excuses. The rules apply to me just as they do to everyone else, and the rules really matter. I am kicking myself very hard, possibly harder than my worst critic ever could. More important, I will be making sure that I do not drop my guard again.

I have three further points that I would like to update members on very quickly. The first is the situation in relation to cross-channel trade. The news that France has lifted its ban on accompanied freight vehicles is welcome, but important challenges remain to clearing the backlog. As part of that, it is important that the transport of perishable goods, including seafood,

is prioritised, and the Scottish Government is ready to help in any way that we can, including with the testing of drivers.

Secondly, Public Health Scotland has just published its weekly statistical report, which includes an update on vaccinations. It shows that, by Sunday, more than 56,000 people had received their first dose of the vaccine. That is a significant achievement in the short time that it has been available.

My third and final point is that we will shortly publish the latest estimate of the R number. We expect that it will show that the R number is still around 1 in Scotland, which is a concern, given that it is thought that the new variant of Covid could raise the R number by 0.4.

Those final two points demonstrate where we are at present. The progress with vaccinations gives us grounds for hope, but the overall state of the pandemic is a cause for concern. Our immediate priority has to be to get through these next few weeks and months as safely as possible. That will be even more difficult than expected, given that the new variant of Covid seems to transmit more easily than other strains of the virus.

That is why, unfortunately, we are imposing such tough restrictions from boxing day onwards. It is also why the safest way for indoor Christmas day celebrations is within your own household and in your own home. Please do not meet other people indoors if you can possibly avoid it.

It is also why all of us, however hard it is, need to continue to stick to the current rules and guidelines, and that includes FACTS. So, with an enormous dose of humility, I remind everyone—most importantly, myself—of FACTS: people should use face coverings; avoid crowded places; clean their hands and surfaces regularly; keep 2m distance from people in other households; and self-isolate and get tested if they have symptoms. Those actions will work against the new strain of the virus and they mean that, while the vaccination programme proceeds, we can continue to protect ourselves, our loved ones and our national health service.

I take this opportunity, Presiding Officer, to wish you, everyone in the chamber and everyone watching a healthy and peaceful Christmas and—as I think we all hope—a brighter and better 2021.

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

### Level 4 Restrictions (Non-essential Businesses)

#### 1. Ruth Davidson (Edinburgh Central) (Con):

From midnight on Saturday, all Scotland's non-essential businesses will be closed for a minimum of three weeks. Most people understand why, but the news is still devastating.

Today, we spoke to Ryan Hutchins, who runs a small sofa shop in Linwood. Here is what he told us:

"90% of my customers are outside Renfrewshire ... I had only 2 customers in the last 3 weeks. My business is bleeding money to the point I'm close to broke and have very little left to survive because of the lockdown ... his next 3 weeks lockdown will cripple me if I don't get help. I have 2 children, one that lives with me full time. I have £754 in the bank with my rent due on January 1st and other bills"

Ryan cannot survive until some unknown date in January without receiving grant support, so what can the First Minister tell him?

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** First, I want Ryan and everybody else—there are many in Ryan's position—to know how sorry I am for the situation that we find ourselves in. If I thought that there was another way to do this, I would grasp it in a heartbeat. Nobody wants to be in this position. That is true in Scotland, in the rest of the United Kingdom and in much of the rest of the world.

Businesses that are required to close by law in level 4 areas are, of course, able to apply for strategic framework business fund support. Businesses that are required to close are eligible for a grant of up to £3,000—the level depends on rateable value. A grant of £2,100—again depending on rateable value—is available for businesses that can remain open but are required to modify their operations by law. Those grants are provided to eligible businesses for every four weeks of restrictions.

I repeat what I said earlier in the week. The Cabinet Secretary for Finance is reviewing what additional support we can make available to businesses, because we know that this extra period of disruption and, for many, closure will be very difficult to bear, even with the funding that is currently in place. We will continue to do everything that we can, within the confines of the resources that are available to us, to help as far as we possibly can.

**Ruth Davidson:** I thank the First Minister for that answer, but I am not sure that it will be enough for Ryan. I am not sure that it will be enough for the Edinburgh shop owner who writes saying,

"I've already run the payroll for this month due to the Christmas holidays"

and asks what he is supposed to do now. I am not sure that it will be enough for the Borders hairdresser who says that the new shutdown will be the

"final nail in the coffin"

for her salon. She says:

"I've adhered to all the health and safety measures we were advised to do before we reopened after the last lockdown, but financially I will struggle to keep afloat this time";

I am not sure that it will be enough for the boss of the chain of women's clothes shops who is desperate to protect the 131 jobs that her shops sustain, but who is also terrified that she will not make it.

They, and thousands like them, have done everything that has been asked of them, but they have no reserves left. How long will it take for the schemes that the Scottish Government has announced to open? How long will it be before money actually hits the bank accounts of those businesses, which are teetering on the edge?

**The First Minister:** First, as I have said, I understand that; it breaks everybody's heart to hear experiences of the kind that have just been recounted to us in the chamber. I know that it does not help anybody in that position for me to say this, but it is, nevertheless, important that I say it: in doing the really difficult things that we are doing right now to suppress this virus, we are providing a more sustainable recovery for the economy in the medium-to-long term. If we allow the virus to get out of control, experience tells us that the damage to the economy will be longer lasting and much deeper than it would otherwise be. That does not take away the short-term pain and I am acutely aware of that.

The support funds that I spoke about in my original answer are already open for applications. They are administered through local authorities. We work with local authorities to get that funding to businesses as quickly as possible. As members across the chamber know, there are other funding streams that we have announced. Some of them have been in place for a while; others have been announced more recently. I know that businesses that may have been able to cope on the funding that we have made available thus far will find it much more difficult to do so the longer the disruption of this pandemic goes on. That is exactly why the finance secretary is urgently looking at what more we are able to do to help businesses in that very difficult situation.

I have been candid all along in saying that, with the best will in the world, we will never be able to compensate every individual and every business for every loss that the pandemic has foisted on them, but we will do our level best to provide as

much support as possible. The Government—ministers and civil servants; all of us—will be working throughout the Christmas break to ensure that we do everything that requires to be done on every aspect of the handling of the pandemic.

**Ruth Davidson:** Throughout the crisis, even when the Government has promised to help, it has been far too slow in getting support out the door to protect jobs. The Fraser of Allander institute told us that, for months, the Government sat on £1 billion of funding that was designed to help those who were struggling.

Figures that were released last week showed that more than 106,000 applications were received for two schemes—the small business grant scheme and the retail, hospitality and leisure scheme. However, as of 8 December, only 91,000 had been processed. Those schemes closed five months ago. Five months on, 15,000 businesses are still waiting, and fewer than 500 applications were processed in the period between September and December. Given that record, what confidence can businesses have that the schemes that have been announced in December will pay out in January?

**The First Minister:** It is right and fair for us to be challenged to get the money out as quickly as possible—we are seeking to do that, and we will continue to seek to speed up the process as much as possible. Many of those grant-funding schemes are administered through local authorities, so we are working with them in order to do that. It is an enormous burden on local authorities, and we recognise the hard work that the people who work in those authorities are doing.

I do not accept that we sit on money—we have allocated all the money that we have at our disposal. In the Scottish Government, we have to ensure that we build in contingencies because, while every penny of consequential funding is welcome, we often do not know what it is meant to cover or how long it is meant to last. We therefore have to look ahead and ensure that we are budgeting to get us through the remainder of the financial year.

It is really important that we get every penny that we can out to businesses. We are determined to do that, as far as we can, for every business across the country that is living—just as individuals are—with the horrendous implications of what the virus is doing to us.

**Ruth Davidson:** Most small businesses understand the need for the new restrictions. What they do not understand is why they, and the jobs that they support, are so often treated as an afterthought by the Government. Andrew McRae of the Federation of Small Businesses Scotland

said that moving to tier 4 so quickly was a “hammer blow” to many of his members.

We are about to enter what should be the busiest time of year for Scotland’s small businesses. Instead, small firms across the country are facing Christmas not knowing whether they can survive to new year.

On 9 December, a multimillion-pound set of schemes was announced for businesses such as photographers and taxi drivers, those in the wedding sector and travel agents and tour operators. However, people have not been told when those schemes will open, how they can apply or—crucially—when they can actually expect any money to hit their bank accounts.

When will those firms get the support that they need? What about the help that was announced on Monday for those who are affected by the next lockdown? How far into the new year will it be before applications open, never mind how many months before they are processed?

Ryan Hutchins and thousands of small business owners like him are calling on the First Minister to deliver on her promises and free up the millions of pounds that have already been passed to the Scottish Government. When will she do that?

**The First Minister:** Many of those funding schemes are open for applications; businesses are, and have been, applying, and many businesses have got money.

We are announcing new streams of funding as often as we can. Often we need to put in place guidance to allow local authorities to judge eligibility, and we will continue to work to speed up that process as much as possible.

I understand why businesses and individuals living in extreme circumstances right now may possibly think that their circumstances are an afterthought, but I assure people that that is not the case. I will ask the Cabinet Secretary for Finance to update members in writing on the different funding streams: what stage they are at, when they opened or will open and what the timescales are for getting money to people.

We announced quickly the start of level 4 from Saturday. If we had not decided to impose that quickly, we would face a situation in which businesses may end up being closed for longer because of the virus running out of control. We see similar restrictions in place across much of the rest of the United Kingdom and Europe. These are horrendously difficult circumstances. I take very seriously our responsibility to try to suppress the virus and support people as we do so, and the Government will work every single day to ensure that that is done as quickly and effectively as is humanly possible.

## Covid-19 (Care Homes)

### 2. Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab):

Back in July, the Scottish Human Rights Commission questioned whether what had happened in our care homes was a violation of the human rights of their residents: of the right to be free from inhuman and degrading treatment, of the right to non-discrimination, and even of the right to life itself.

The commission said that a public inquiry was needed, and that it should be

“independent, prompt, determine responsibility, subject to public scrutiny”.

The Government agreed with that. Why, six months later, are care home residents and their families still waiting?

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** We work every single day with those on the front line and those who are working so hard in our care homes to keep their residents as safe as possible. As it is for businesses, this continues to be an incredibly difficult time for those in care homes and for their families.

We have given a clear and unambiguous commitment to an independent public inquiry, with human rights at its heart. We will pursue the implementation plans for a public inquiry as quickly as is feasible.

I made this point yesterday, and it is a really important one. Right now, particularly in the light of what we are facing with the new strain of the virus, my principal responsibility and the principal responsibility of the Deputy First Minister, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport and every single minister in the Government is to focus on taking decisions now, on learning lessons and on changing policy where we can to ensure that we get through the next phase of the pandemic.

I referred to this yesterday: I noticed that the chief executive of Scottish Care, Donald Macaskill, when asked about this a few weeks ago, said that the organisation wanted an inquiry, but realised that

“we cannot take staff away from the front-line duties of fighting a virus”.

If that happened, it would be, to use his words,

“a dangerous distraction which will cost lives”.

There is no doubt about the commitment to a public inquiry. I may be wrong, and events may have overtaken me, but I believe that we may still be the only Government in the UK that has given that clear and unambiguous commitment to a public inquiry.

However, we must focus on saving lives now. The virus is not done with us, unfortunately; it has

just learned how to spread itself faster. The responsibility that I and my Government owe to the people of Scotland is to keep our focus on what we must do now, every single day.

**Richard Leonard:** It is not just the Scottish Human Rights Commission that is making that call. Just this week, the Equality and Human Rights Commission in Scotland also called for a public inquiry into Covid deaths in Scotland’s care homes. It said that that was urgent, and it reported:

“We were told of situations where there were reduced or no visits by GPs and community nurses ... Residents were not being transferred to acute settings and people nearing the end of their lives were not receiving palliative care.”

We know that, until mid-May, the Scottish Government guidance advised that anyone who was a long-term care home resident should not be admitted to hospital. Why on earth, 10 months into the pandemic, does the First Minister think that the EHRC still finds it necessary to recommend that Scotland’s care home residents must have

“full and equal access to ... healthcare”?

**The First Minister:** I am sorry, but I just do not accept that characterisation of the Scottish Government’s advice. We have had this exchange before. Government often puts in place policy frameworks in the shape of advice on such matters, but the issue of whether or not an individual—whether in a care home or living in their own home or anywhere else—is admitted to hospital is a decision for clinicians, as is right and proper. It should never be for politicians to second-guess that.

The guidance makes the point that, for older people, particularly those nearing the end of their life, the best place for them to receive appropriate care is often in their own homes. For many older people, a care home is their own home. However, if a clinician thinks that they should be in hospital, that is exactly where they should be.

I do not disagree with what the Equality and Human Rights Commission is saying or with any of the calls for a public inquiry. It is not a question of whether there will be a public inquiry; on behalf of the Scottish Government, I can say that there certainly will be a public inquiry. It is a question of when it will be sensible and safe to have that inquiry.

My judgment, with which people are absolutely entitled to disagree—I appreciate that some in the chamber do—is that my responsibility right now is to focus on the immediate challenge of getting us through the next phase of the pandemic. We are perhaps at the most dangerous juncture now since February or March and my focus has to be there.

There will be a full public inquiry into not just care homes but all aspects of the handling of the pandemic. That is right and proper. Right now, however, the most important thing is to keep steering us through the pandemic as carefully and as safely as possible.

**Richard Leonard:** The First Minister says that the advice is clinical and not governmental, but the letter that was issued on 13 March was from the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport, Jeane Freeman. I have the letter here—it is on Scottish Government-headed notepaper.

To go back to the situation that is affecting people in care homes, let me describe what daily life has been like in our care homes for the past ten months. Both of Angela's parents live in the same care home in Livingstone. Angela said that

“since March, they have been isolated, every day on their own, in their small rooms, almost imprisoned for being old. My mother is isolated, her health deteriorating, and she is losing the will to live because there are not enough staff to support the restrictions. For her, Covid has meant that she has lost the right to see her husband and family, to practise her chosen religion and to leave her home for even a bit of fresh air.”

We understand that the virus is highly contagious and that we must protect the most vulnerable, but care home residents deserve better than this.

In 2020, we have seen a record number of Covid-related deaths in Scotland's care homes and the violation of the human rights of care home residents. Families have been torn apart from their loved ones. Will the First Minister work with all parties across the Parliament in 2021? Will she listen to the Scottish Human Rights Commission and the EHRC? Will she set up the long-awaited public inquiry and listen to the voices of people such as Angela, so that all our older people are finally treated with the dignity and respect that they deserve?

**The First Minister:** Before I come to the really important matters, I will clear up something from Richard Leonard's question. I did not say that the guidance was clinical advice rather than Scottish Government advice, but questioned Mr Leonard's characterisation of what the advice said.

The guidance is Scottish Government advice, but I made the point that it does not countermand the decisions of clinicians, if the latter think that an older person should be in hospital. Those are important issues; let us not mischaracterise what we are each saying on the matter.

All of us understand that the pandemic has possibly affected no group in our society more, or harder, than the people who live in care homes and their families. I had occasion this past week to write, for the first time in my experience, to somebody whom I knew personally, who had lost

their husband in a care home. Thousands of families across the country will have had the experience of dealing with the pandemic in a care home setting.

Our hearts break for them every day. I will not wait until 2021 to listen to people such as Angela; I listen to those voices, views and opinions literally every single day. I cannot always find the perfect balance for everybody in that situation, because there is no perfect balance: the virus is not fair, neither for people in care homes nor for anybody else.

We have to juggle all those difficult factors every single day and come to the safest possible outcomes for people. We will try to do that as best and as well as we can every day. In 2021, I hope that we will see the start of a public inquiry, because I hope that we will then be out of the acute phase of the pandemic at least, so that we can turn our attention to the inquiry.

I come back to the point that I would not do any favours or any good at all to people in care homes, families or anybody else across the country right now if I—with my Government and all the people with whom we have to work, including the care home sector—do not focus 100 per cent on trying to deal with those issues day in and day out. That is what we will continue to do.

### **Covid-19 and Brexit (Disruption to Food Supplies)**

**3. Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green):** We are dealing with the extremely dangerous new strain of a deadly virus at the same time as Boris Johnson still seems determined to drive us off the Brexit cliff. The first of those crises is already disrupting the border, and the second threatens to do even worse.

A United Kingdom Government source told *The Times* that there were

“contingency plans in place for absolutely everything.”

I honestly doubt that that is even possible, but it is vital that Scotland is as ready as we can be. Yesterday, the First Minister told the Parliament that,

“if the situation is not resolved in the next day or so, we may start to see pressure on some fresh produce after Christmas.”—[*Official Report*, 22 December 2020; c 10.]

Will the First Minister set out what types of fresh produce are the greatest cause for concern, when she expects the issues to be seen—in relation to either Covid disruption or Brexit disruption—and what action her Government is taking to ensure that those who are in greatest need, including people on low incomes and those with young families, are not left facing additional hunger or price gouging in the days and weeks ahead?

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** My responsibility here is to deal with the Covid impacts. My views on Brexit are well known. We are getting ever closer to the cliff edge, and I still hope that we can avert the reality of going off it. We have seen some of the contingency plans that were prepared for Brexit having to be activated in the past couple of days due to the border issues associated with Covid. People themselves can judge whether the disruption that we have seen in the past couple of days suggests that, in the eventuality of a no-deal Brexit, those contingency plans would be anywhere near adequate for what we would be dealing with. My view is that they would not be, but I will leave others to deal with that.

I hope that we will see no impact on food supplies. It is positive that we are starting to see freight moving again, although it will take some time to get through the backlog of vehicles. As I said yesterday, the Scottish Government is considering the ways in which we can help. There is not much that we can do to help with the backlog that is already at Dover, but there is perhaps much we can do, through testing and other things, to prevent problems occurring in the future.

I will chair a meeting of the Government's resilience committee this afternoon to take stock of any issues relating to food supply. People will have read in the papers about the kind of fresh produce that might be affected—for example, fresh salad products and citrus fruits—if the situation is not sufficiently alleviated quickly enough. However, we hope that that can be avoided. If I think that it is necessary and appropriate to do so, I will send a note round MSPs after today's resilience meeting, to update them.

Earlier in the week, we had an update from FareShare, which said that it has no concerns about food for food banks and for those in the most vulnerable circumstances. Again, that is something that we will be monitoring closely in the days ahead.

**Patrick Harvie:** I certainly do not suggest that the Scottish Government has caused either Covid or Brexit, but the Scottish Government has a responsibility to ensure the wellbeing of those who are affected. The threat of food price hikes in the new year would come in the wake of the impact that Covid has had on inequality and wellbeing. The Scottish Government's report on that issue confirms what I think most of us already knew—that the pandemic is disproportionately impacting people in poverty, low-paid workers, children and young people, women, older people, disabled people and minority ethnic groups.

Around a quarter of adults are concerned about providing for their family, and one in five households with dependent children say that they are already in serious financial difficulty. That is the stark reality as we head into Christmas, and the situation is set to worsen in 2021 if we have to start the year with a prolonged lockdown.

What more will the First Minister and the Scottish Government do to support low-income households over that period and to support organisations that are working to tackle food poverty? Does the First Minister agree that Scottish tax policy must actively reverse the growing level of inequality by ensuring that those who have profited immensely in 2020, such as the supermarkets and online retailers, pay their fair share?

**The First Minister:** I was not suggesting that Patrick Harvie was blaming the Scottish Government, and I was certainly not suggesting that we do not have a big responsibility in dealing with the impacts of Covid and Brexit, even though Brexit is not of our making.

Over the recess period, we will continue to update members on any implications of what is happening at borders just now and on Covid and Brexit more generally.

We are already doing a significant amount to help people who are in the most vulnerable situations. As members should be aware, we recently announced a £100 million winter support package, which contains measures such as extra money that goes directly to families with children who are in receipt of free school meals, extra funding for organisations that work with the most vulnerable and funding to address food poverty. We will keep under review our ability to provide more support and the requirement for that.

In principle, I agree that we should have progressive tax policies in which those who can bear the biggest burden do so and through which we do as much as possible to help those who need the most help. Obviously, the Scottish Government's tax powers are limited in that respect. Some supermarkets have, rightly, repaid the business rates support that they received, which is extra money that has come back into the Scottish Government's coffers. We will continue to support a progressive approach to taxation as we look ahead—as I hope that we can—to a Covid recovery in 2021.

### Independence Referendum

**4. Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD):** I thank everyone for their work over the past year. In particular, I thank key workers—nurses, doctors, train and bus drivers, teachers, supermarket workers, cleaners and others. From time to time, I

have even thanked the First Minister. I also thank the amazing Parliament staff, who have worked so hard to adapt and to keep our democratic process running throughout the crisis.

In the past 48 hours, in Dover, we have had a glimpse of what happens when an economic partnership is broken. However, by this time next year, the First Minister wants to have repeated the same mistakes with her referendum. Christmas is a time for sequels. We have now seen what Brexit 1 is like, and, despite that, the First Minister still wants Brexit 2: the break-up of another economic union. Why does the First Minister want another break-up by next Christmas?

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** On a note of Christmas cheer, which I will try to maintain for as long as I can, I echo Willie Rennie in thanking many people, including the staff of the Parliament, who have done a fantastic job in difficult circumstances. We are all deeply grateful to them. I also thank the civil servants who support the Government—they do not always get thanked—who have also done a fantastic job in difficult circumstances. [*Applause.*]

The only reason that we are faced with the prospect of a no-deal Brexit in Scotland is because we are not independent—it has been foisted on us against our will. Independence is not the same as Brexit; it would see Scotland joining other independent countries in the European Union, working together where we need to, including on matters such as Covid, and charting our own future. It is the positive prospect of charting our own future, being responsible for our own mistakes and building our own success and prosperity, instead of having our future foisted on us by the likes of Boris Johnson and his band of Brexiteers, that sees a sustained majority of the Scottish population supporting Scotland's becoming a normal, equal, independent country.

**Willie Rennie:** At the weekend, the First Minister said that it would be “unconscionable” to carry on with Brexit in the middle of a global pandemic, oblivious to the irony of her planning to hold an independence referendum in the middle of that same pandemic. I want the crisis to stop, but her plans would add to it.

We should put the recovery first. We need to put first the young people who need work; the businesses that are on their knees; the climate, which is in a state of emergency; the people who are waiting ages for mental health treatment; and the pupils who deserve a better education. I know that the First Minister has supported independence for all of her political life, but holding an independence referendum now, in the middle of one of the worst health and economic crises that this country has ever seen, is not the right thing to do. Surely, the First Minister can see that?

**The First Minister:** I have worked out what Willie Rennie is up to today. He has realised that people are really missing pantomimes, so he has decided to provide one all of his own—it is actually a public service.

Where to start? First, let us not lose sight of the irony of the situation that the Liberal Democrats are now a pro-Brexit party. They have actually given up their opposition to Brexit. I still think that Brexit is a mistake.

Secondly, I am sure that it has not escaped Willie Rennie's notice that I am not planning an independence referendum right now. In fact, I put planning for an independence referendum on hold when the global pandemic struck. If only Boris Johnson had put planning for Brexit on hold when the global pandemic struck. I am not planning to have a referendum while we are in the midst of a global pandemic, because my focus is on leading the country through the pandemic.

However, as we start to recover from the pandemic and as all of us across the world start to ask ourselves what kind of countries and societies we want to live in, I want the people of Scotland to be in charge of answering that question, not the likes of Boris Johnson. Becoming an independent country is essential to building the Scotland that we know is possible as we come out of this Covid crisis.

#### **Loneliness and Isolation (Festive Period)**

**5. Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP):** To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government is doing to tackle loneliness and isolation over the festive period. (S5F-04690)

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** All of us are acutely aware of the isolation and loneliness that the pandemic has caused. As part of the winter support package that I just talked about in response to Patrick Harvie, we provided nearly £6 million to tackle isolation and loneliness, which included more than £4 million for our connecting Scotland programme to improve digital inclusion for older people and money for partners such as Age Scotland, which is tackling loneliness through its expanded helplines. In addition, £15 million of the winter funding is available to community and third sector organisations to support their work.

I encourage everyone to safely check in on those in their neighbourhoods and communities who they believe might be in need of a kind word or deed this Christmas. I also thank everyone who has been working to provide connection and comfort to those around them over the course of the past very difficult months.

**Gillian Martin:** Earlier this week, I launched a campaign asking school-age Scots and their families to help by completing five acts of kindness

over Christmas. I know that the scouts in north-east Scotland are already doing that and I am hugely grateful to them for everything that they are doing to make a difference. Acts of kindness could be anything from popping a note through the letterbox of a neighbour who lives alone to donating to a local food bank.

Will the First Minister back my campaign and join me in asking those who are able to do so to look out for others in our communities during what will be an especially tough Christmas for many Scots?

**The First Minister:** Yes, I will certainly do that. It deeply saddens all of us that this will not be a normal Christmas and I know that the change in restrictions has been a particularly bitter pill for many people to swallow. Although this will be a festive season like no other that any of us has experienced before, much compassion and kindness have been evident across all communities this year.

As, I know, everybody will, I certainly take comfort in the knowledge that so many people—such as those who Gillian Martin talked about—will be doing so much to help make Christmas a bit better for someone else. I welcome anything that encourages others to carry out acts of kindness, large or small, and I am very happy to support Gillian Martin's campaign.

### Travel Restrictions (Exemptions)

**6. Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con):** To ask the First Minister what reassurances the Scottish Government can give to communities in the Borders regarding exemptions to travel restrictions between Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom. (S5F-04694)

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** Communities in the Borders have very close social and economic connections with the rest of the United Kingdom, which are really important. The regulations that prohibit travel between Scotland and other parts of the UK without a reasonable excuse are, unfortunately, necessary and essential at this time. However, they include a range of exemptions for which travel is permitted. Those include but are not limited to: travel for work or for voluntary or charitable services that are essential; travelling to school or university; travel for essential shopping; and travel for healthcare, childcare or parental support services. Those exemptions are set out in full in our guidance on the website. However, for everyone's safety, we encourage people to keep such travel to an absolute minimum during this period.

**Rachael Hamilton:** For many people in communities along the border—such as in Paxton, Chirnside and Lamberton—Berwick-upon-Tweed

is the nearest town for essential shopping and medical appointments. Police Scotland has said that it will double its efforts along the border. When we combine that with the current coverage in the media, many of my constituents are scared to venture out for essential purposes if they take place a few miles away in England.

I am concerned that elderly people will go without food, essential supplies and medical care, because they are fearful of breaking guidance. Will the First Minister give me and my constituents assurances that the police are aware of the special circumstances in which borderers find themselves? Will she ask the Scottish Government to issue specific advice for the Borders, as well as for areas such as Dumfries and Galloway, so that my constituents and others know that they can carry out essential daily tasks without fear or hindrance?

**The First Minister:** The guidance and the laws that are in place right now have been written with the particular circumstances of the Borders already in mind. That is why I do not think that it is necessary to have specific guidance. In the example that the member used, of essential shopping being required from over the border, essential shopping that cannot be done in people's own local area is one of the specific exemptions in law. I think that it is the responsibility of all of us to point such things out to people.

Nobody should be fearful of travelling for an essential purpose. We should all be fearful—not because of the police, but because of the virus—of travelling when we do not have to travel, because that poses risks to our health. However, people should not be fearful of travelling for essential purposes. Anybody who has listened, as I am sure many of us already have, to the chief constable set out how the police will go about the enforcement of the regulations will take some assurance and comfort from that. I have confidence in how the police will do that for the travel regulations over the Christmas period and, if necessary, beyond.

### Long Covid (Support)

**7. Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the First Minister how the Scottish Government's new clinical guidelines and definition will support people with long Covid. (S5F-04692)

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** The new clinical Scottish intercollegiate guidelines network guidance provides helpful advice on how to care for people who have symptoms during, or after getting, Covid. That guidance will of course evolve as evidence on long Covid continues to emerge. The guideline will support general practitioners and clinicians in identifying on-going symptoms,

and provide a definition of best practice, investigation and treatment options to support people who are living with long Covid.

It is crucial that decisions about treatment are based on the latest available evidence, and are aligned to clinical guidance. The guidance work and our deepening understanding of the symptoms and impact of long Covid will help us continue to tailor diagnosis and treatment to each individual patient's need.

**Mark Griffin:** I have spoken to a retail worker who contracted Covid-19, was in a coma for weeks, and now has to walk with a stick and is in immense pain; I have also spoken to a social care worker who also now uses a walking stick, has never recovered her sense of taste and smell, and has been referred to a respiratory clinic. Both are women, and both contracted Covid-19 at work.

I firmly believe that Covid-19 and long Covid are industrial diseases that remain unclassified, especially since Public Health Scotland has stated that healthcare workers are three times more likely to be hospitalised from it. Industrial injuries benefit does nothing for those who catch Covid-19 at work. Will the First Minister say to those key workers who are still suffering how the newly devolved employment injury assistance will support key workers who have long Covid, particularly since they are in female-dominated workplaces, which have been largely ignored by the current industrial injuries scheme?

**The First Minister:** That is an important point. I am not able to answer it in detail right now. I undertake to take that away and look specifically, within the devolved benefits for which we are now responsible, at whether and to what extent we should and could be looking at providing support for those who may live with long Covid for some time. It is a very legitimate point to raise. Among the other work that we are doing on understanding and responding to the challenges of long Covid, I undertake today that we will consider that and come back to Mark Griffin, and to the Parliament more generally, in due course.

**The Presiding Officer:** We turn to supplementary questions.

#### Health Service (Winter Pressures)

**Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP):** The winter often brings pressures on our health service, which we are used to and which are well understood, but this year those pressures are compounded by the Covid outbreak. Will the First Minister update the Parliament and my constituents on the best ways to protect the health service and to access urgent medical care over the festive period?

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** All health boards, including NHS Lanarkshire, which covers the member's constituency, are under serious pressure right now. We continue to support health boards as much as possible. The health secretary recently launched our redesign of urgent care programme, which aims to ensure that people are seen safely during winter and can access the right care, in the right place and at the right time. We have increased funding to the health and care sector, to help it to deal with Covid.

I encourage everyone to do all the things that all of us need to do to suppress the virus, and to continue to use the health service when they need it, through the usual channels of NHS 24 and—of course only where necessary—accident and emergency and our Scottish Ambulance Service. The health service is under huge pressure right now, but it remains open for those who need it.

#### Stone of Destiny

**Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** Will the First Minister join me in congratulating all those who have been involved in the hard and successful work to persuade Her Majesty the Queen and the commissioners for the safeguarding of the regalia that the stone of destiny should return to its spiritual home in Perth, with all the economic benefits that that will bring?

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** This a phrase that in my younger days I would probably never have predicted that I would utter: as one of the commissioners for the safeguarding of the regalia, I am pleased that we were able to announce today, with the consent of Her Majesty the Queen, the relocation of the stone of destiny to—and I agree with Liz Smith's use of this term—its spiritual home, which is Perth. I think that many members were delighted years ago to see the stone of destiny return to its rightful home in Scotland; now it will return, in due course, to be the centrepiece of the redevelopment of Perth city hall. That is really good news.

I thank the people in Edinburgh who safeguarded the stone so well over the years, and I am sure that everybody will be delighted—*[Interruption.]* Well, I am sure that the Edinburgh members are as delighted as the rest of us are that, in the next few years, we will all be able to go to Perth to see the stone of destiny.

**The Presiding Officer:** We come next to Neil Findlay.

I am sorry, Mr Findlay—your microphone is muted. We will try one more time.

Mr Findlay, we will come back to you in a few minutes.

### British Transport Police

**Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP):** I thank the First Minister for making it clear that, for people who live in the eastern Borders, travel to Berwick—to Morrisons for groceries, for example—can be essential.

Given that the British Transport Police is responsible for policing the rail network, including the Borders railway, how will the BTP liaise with the Scottish Government and Police Scotland on cross-border travel?

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** I thank Christine Grahame for taking a responsible approach in standing up for her constituents to ensure that they can travel for essential purposes, while recognising the public health need to limit travel in the way that we are doing.

Christine Grahame is right to point to the role of the British Transport Police. When the chief constable joined me for one of the daily updates earlier in the week, he set out that Police Scotland is in close liaison with the British Transport Police, which is taking—in what is, of course, an operational matter for it—the same proportionate and sensitive approach on the railways as Police Scotland is taking in relation to what are operational matters for it elsewhere. I am very grateful for that.

**The Presiding Officer:** I will go to Sarah Boyack while we try to reconnect to Neil Findlay.

### Vaccination Programme

**Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab):** Last week, we had an excellent briefing from NHS Lothian. Delivery of all three waves of the vaccination programme will take a long time and full roll-out will take six to eight months. Although the first wave is under way, by the end of March only people over 65 and those who have specified conditions will have been vaccinated in phase 2. What does that mean for keeping key workers safe while they must still take safety precautions and wear personal protective equipment? What does it mean for keeping our schools open and keeping safe all the staff who support our school students?

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** I am happy to consider any specific detail that NHS Lothian provided, but I will respond in terms of the general overall programme, and about our ambitions for it and our determination to carry it out. The biggest and central constraint on our ability to be absolutely definitive about that is supply of the vaccine, which is a massive logistical exercise that health boards are working extremely hard on.

However, vaccine supplies permitting, our intention is to follow the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation priority list, which means that we will have vaccinated everybody over the age of 50 by the spring, if we can. As we go into the summer, the rest of the population will follow. That is not an easy undertaking and it involves a lot of planning and logistics but, as long as the supplies come in the timeframe that we expect, we are confident that we can achieve that.

As I said earlier, more than 50,000 people in Scotland have already had their first dose of the vaccine, which is very good progress, given the short period in which supplies have been available.

### National Tutoring Programme

**Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con):** The First Minister might be aware of warnings from Professor Lindsay Paterson that plans for blended learning might only exacerbate the attainment gap that we are all trying to close. He is not the only one; our inboxes are full of emails from parents who have genuine concerns about the further loss of face-to-face teaching and wonder why, on one hand, they are told that schools are safe but, on the other, are asked to keep their children at home.

Will the First Minister finally give serious and sensible consideration to our proposals for a national tutoring programme, which has the simple aim of helping the young people who are at the greatest risk of falling behind in their education?

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** Tutoring is available through the e-Sgoil initiative, and we can make details of that available.

I do not want young people to have blended learning if we can avoid it. We have made it a priority to have schools open full time and, in my view, that has happened safely and successfully until now. In the past week or so, what has changed is the new variant of the virus, which we are still trying to understand. As I have set out before, we know that it appears to be more transmissible but, as I said yesterday, we do not yet fully understand whether, as some scientists think might be the case, it is infecting children and young people more easily than previous strains did. In those circumstances, we have a duty to be precautionary until we have greater clarity and understanding of that.

We want to get schools back full time as quickly as we can, which we very much hope will be from 18 January. However, we have been candid with parents that, in the circumstances, we must keep that under review. In any period in which blended learning is necessary—whether that is for all schools, which I very much hope will not be the

case, or whether that is on a school-by-school basis, which might sometimes be the case, depending on local outbreaks of the virus—we will do everything that we can to make sure that those who are not in school have the support that they need.

### Care Home Visiting

**Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab):** Yesterday, care homes were advised that, under new level 4 restrictions, only essential outdoor visits—in Scotland in December—can take place and that only one visitor is allowed for outdoor visits.

This week, the Equality and Human Rights Commission produced a scathing report about human rights abuses of older people in care homes. Why has the Scottish Government ignored the commission's findings in the publication of the new care home guidance? Should effective infection control measures not facilitate rather than prevent safe family contact?

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** Yes, they should, and that is what we tried to achieve. We are not ignoring the Equality and Human Rights Commission, but we are listening to the clinical advice that we are getting. The chief nursing officer and chief medical officer have written this week to care home managers to outline what the level 4 restrictions—which will come into place on Saturday for most of Scotland—will mean for care homes.

Those decisions are not taken lightly. All that I can do is repeat that we are faced with a strain of the virus that appears to be spreading perhaps 70 per cent faster than previous strains. We do not yet know all the implications of that or why that is the case. Therefore, difficult though it is for everybody who is affected—I am under no illusions about that—again, we must act on a highly precautionary basis.

Rightly and properly, we talk here about—and, rightly and properly, the Government gets acute scrutiny on—the number of people who have died in our care homes and the conditions that people who live in our care homes have had to ensure. All of us decision makers feel the burden of that very heavily, indeed, but that also makes it more important that we are very careful about the decisions that we take.

I very much hope that we get better news about the new variant that makes us all less concerned than we are at the moment, or that, in a few weeks' time, we are more confident in our ability to suppress it and that we can quickly get back to where we were in trying to open up care homes to visitors. However, all of what we are doing at the moment—people might agree with it or disagree with it, which is understandable and legitimate—is

being done with the intention and the desire to keep people in care homes as safe as we can.

### Dementia Support

**Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP):** What is the Scottish Government doing to support people with dementia and their carers during the pandemic?

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** The dementia and Covid national action plan was published yesterday, and it has been endorsed by the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. The plan is the result of extensive engagement with stakeholders, including people with dementia and their carers. Pre-Covid, estimated annual spend on dementia by health and social care partnerships had already increased significantly, but the plan sets out work with COSLA, health and care partnerships and Alzheimer Scotland to review and assess the provision and the design of post-diagnostic services, to identify best practice and to look at the barriers that exist to further expansion of the services.

The plan also details work that we have undertaken to ensure that all carers have access to short breaks that are suitable for those who are self-isolating and physical distancing through the £3 million voluntary sector short breaks fund. Unpaid carers of loved ones with dementia will also get more support, with new funding for counselling being provided through Alzheimer Scotland.

### Planning (Flamingo Land Ltd)

**Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green):** My constituents in Balloch were, frankly, gutted to discover yesterday that the Scottish Government's enterprise agency has extended the exclusivity agreement given to Flamingo Land Ltd for the development of a private resort on what is currently publicly owned land at Loch Lomond. The fact that our community campaign against Flamingo Land's unsuccessful first proposal lodged more than 60,000 objections made that application the most unpopular application in Scottish planning history. Now, we face months and—in all likelihood—years more of a saga that should have ended this year.

Why is the First Minister's enterprise agency so unwilling to accept that Flamingo Land is the wrong developer and that its proposal is the wrong development, which would cause unacceptable damage to the local environment and community, and that it is simply utterly unwelcome within our world-famous national park?

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** As I understand it, such decisions are not really decisions for Scottish Enterprise. Scottish

Enterprise will sell the land at West Riverside to Flamingo Land only if a new planning application is consented. Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park Authority is the planning authority, and it will be the body that considers any new planning application that is submitted to it. As I understand it, a new proposal has not been lodged with the national park authority.

It is really important that the processes in question are robust, and it is probably important that I do not express views on them at this stage. Given that I was involved in not dissimilar issues in my constituency quite a few years ago, I absolutely understand the concerns of the public on such issues, but I think that it is important that the processes are followed appropriately, and they will be.

#### **Outdoor Activity (Nursery-age Children)**

**Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP):** What measures are in place to ensure that our nursery-age children can continue to enjoy learning and having fun outdoors in the winter months in the light of the current pandemic?

I would like to take a cheeky opportunity to pay tribute to the absolutely fantastic and amazing Gaelic nursery at Tollbrae primary in North Lanarkshire, which serves kids across the council area and which my youngest son attends, and to wish its staff and all early years workers a merry Christmas.

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** I join Fulton MacGregor in wishing his son's Gaelic nursery a very happy Christmas and thanking it for all that it does. Given that I have met him a few times, I also take the opportunity to wish Fulton MacGregor's son—in fact, both his sons—a very happy Christmas. *[Interruption.]* I have been challenged to do it in Gaelic, but I think that that would be a challenge too far for me to even begin to accept. I will get Kate Forbes to give me some lessons later.

Fulton MacGregor raises an important point. Playing, learning and having fun outdoors is really important for everybody's mental and physical health, but it is particularly important for that of children. Even though the new strain of the virus might be 70 per cent more transmissible, we still believe that it is less transmissible outdoors than it is indoors. That is an important principle for all of us to bear in mind. Guidance for childcare settings advises them to maximise the amount of time that is spent outdoors.

We announced a winter outdoor clothing fund to ensure that more children are able to spend time outdoors as part of their funded nursery experience, and that should help to reduce inequalities for children whose parents perhaps

cannot buy suitable winter clothing just because we are in a pandemic.

We also fund Virtual Nature School, which provides training and support to early learning and childcare practitioners. More than 1,000 practitioners and 40,000 families have benefited from that programme, and I know that a further 500 teams will take part in the winter programme to support the delivery of high-quality all-weather outdoor experiences.

#### **Mental Health Support Service (Vale of Leven Hospital)**

**Maurice Corry (West Scotland) (Con):** Presiding Officer, I have some good news for you. Yesterday, a new mental health support service was officially launched at the Vale of Leven hospital in my West Scotland region as a result of my working with the Defence Medical Welfare Service and NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde. That demonstrates the effectiveness of the armed forces community covenant in our area. The service will make the Vale of Leven hospital a rising centre of excellence in mental health support work, with several patients and the hospital staff already benefiting immensely.

Will the First Minister join me in congratulating Bob Reid, Scottish director of the Defence Medical Welfare Service; Margaret O'Rourke, operations manager at the Vale of Leven hospital; and NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde on launching that excellent new service at the Vale of Leven hospital at a time when we need mental health support more than ever?

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** Yes. I am delighted to whole-heartedly agree with that and thank all those who are involved in the new service at the Vale of Leven hospital. I am sure that it will be a shining example of that type of service.

We have had different groups of people to thank today, and I take this opportunity to thank our armed forces and everybody who serves. Many of them are used to experiencing what some will be experiencing for the first time this year: spending Christmas away from their families. I recorded a happy Christmas message to them yesterday evening, but I say that again today on behalf, I am sure, of us all. We owe them an enormous debt of gratitude and, wherever they are right now, we wish them and their families a very happy Christmas.

As this is, I think, my last answer, Presiding Officer, I end by wishing you, the Parliament and everybody across Scotland at this very difficult Christmas the happiest one possible.

**The Presiding Officer:** Thank you, First Minister. That concludes First Minister's question

time. Before we move on to portfolio questions, there will be a short pause while we change seats.

## Portfolio Question Time

### Education and Skills

13:23

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame):** Any member who wants to ask a supplementary question should press their request-to-speak button or, if they are participating remotely, indicate that in the chat box.

#### Education (Attainment Gap)

1. **Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what progress has been made on closing the attainment gap between pupils from the most and least deprived backgrounds. (S5O-04873)

**The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney):** The attainment Scotland fund year 4 evaluation reported that the attainment gap had narrowed on a number of indicators and that 91 per cent of headteachers reported improvements as a result of the Scottish attainment challenge.

The equity audit, which we will publish in the new year, will provide a further assessment of the pandemic's impact on pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. In the meantime, the international council of education advisers recognised in its report last week that

"Scottish education exhibits many strengths",

among which is the value that we place on equity as well as excellence. That is why we will continue to invest in the Scottish attainment challenge in 2021-22, including with over £127 million in pupil equity funding.

**Finlay Carson:** Can Mr Swinney be confident in his claims that the attainment gap is closing in areas such as Dumfries and Galloway when, according to Professor Lindsay Paterson, who is a professor of education policy in the school of social and political science at the University of Edinburgh, no Scottish national standardised assessment data has been collected in my constituency since the assessments were introduced, in 2018?

**John Swinney:** We decided not to collect the achievement of curriculum for excellence levels data, which should have been collected in June, because of the pandemic and the disruption to education. We will return to the collection of that data at the earliest possible opportunity, and I will aim to do that in June 2021. That will enable us to continue to build the data that demonstrates the progress that we are making. Of course, we have published data over a number of years to

demonstrate the progress that has been made, and we will return to that at the earliest possible opportunity.

**Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab):** We know that the period of remote learning earlier this year compromised progress on closing the attainment gap, and we now face a further period of remote learning, which will perhaps be short, although we do not know. A few minutes ago, the First Minister referred to a tutoring scheme through e-Sgoil that is designed specifically to address that. Can the cabinet secretary give us more details and tell us how many pupils have benefited from that scheme?

**John Swinney:** Supported study activity undertaken by e-Sgoil is available to pupils the length and breadth of the country. I do not have it in front of me, but I would be very happy to provide members of Parliament with data on the extent of the utilisation of that service.

Obviously, a range of services are provided through the e-Sgoil network, which involves supported study to reinforce the work that is going on in schools. It also includes a collection of recorded lessons, to which teachers the length and breadth of the country are contributing, and the provision of direct educational delivery where we have, for example, interruptions to education as a consequence of temporary school closure.

All of that builds on the offering that is developed in individual schools to make sure that digital learning is available in all schools around the country.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Question 2 was not lodged.

### **Covid-19 (Instrumental Music Tuition)**

**3. Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to support schools in safely facilitating instrumental music tuition during the Covid-19 pandemic. (S5O-04875)

**The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney):** Music is an important part of curriculum for excellence. Covid-19 presents an additional challenge, but I am pleased to say that schools and teachers have risen to the challenge creatively to ensure that young people continue to benefit from music education.

In addition to providing guidelines on risk mitigations that schools should have in place, Education Scotland has worked with teachers across the country to collect and share emerging practical examples of how teachers are managing music learning under Covid-19. Creative ideas

include the use of music technology apps on smartphones, running online masterclasses with professional musicians and using technological solutions to facilitate rich and rewarding physically distanced lessons.

A new version of Education Scotland's music guidelines, which was published on 18 December, set out new thinking on how to manage brass, woodwind and voice lessons effectively, following further clinical advice.

**Fulton MacGregor:** I thank the cabinet secretary for that very positive response. Music tuition has always played an important role in the secondary schools in my constituency, with St Ambrose, St Andrew's, Coatbridge and Chryston high schools all having a proud history. Of course, music offers one route out of poverty for people in our communities.

I have been contacted by pupils who have been impacted by current restrictions on their music tuition, and by their parents. One specific question that has been put to me is about the provision of bell covers for brass instruments, which help to stop the spread of the virus while allowing learning to continue. Has the Government given any consideration to that?

**John Swinney:** I can certainly corroborate Mr MacGregor's points about the quality of music tuition, having witnessed that with my own eyes and ears on my visit to St Ambrose high school, in his constituency.

Guidance on Covid and music tuition that was published by Education Scotland includes advice on brass and wind instruments and is informed by expert public health and scientific advice. At present, the advice is that young people should not engage in playing wind and brass instruments with other people, given that those activities pose a potentially higher risk of transmission.

That does not mean that those activities cannot take place at all, however, and creative approaches may be taken to the provision of those lessons. The examples that have been given include the use of technology to facilitate collective participation. Brass, woodwind and singing candidates have now been given permission by the Scottish Qualifications Authority to choose to record assessment performances at home during Covid-19 restrictions.

We will keep the guidance under close review and will give consideration to any further mitigations that might help to support the safe provision of music tuition in schools.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Mary Fee has a supplementary question, but we cannot contact her, so we will move on. I will come back to her if we manage to contact her.

Questions 4 and 5 were not lodged.

### Schools (Specialist Support Staff)

**6. Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the reported decreasing trend in specialist support staff in schools. (S5O-04878)

**The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney):** Specialist support staff and teachers play a vital role in supporting their pupils. We have continued to support the recruitment of additional teaching and support staff this year to ensure that children and young people receive the support that they need with their learning. Current figures indicate that 246 support staff have now been recruited. Our funding support includes an additional £5 million to local authorities, which is in addition to an additional £15 million every year to further enhance staffing capacity to respond effectively to the individual needs of children and young people.

**Johann Lamont:** In a submission to the Public Petitions Committee on the role of specialist support staff for young people with additional support needs, the Educational Institute of Scotland reported a pattern over 10 years of a decreasing number of staff and an increasing number of children with additional support needs.

The *Tes* newspaper recently reported that nine councils had taken on no new support staff during the pandemic and that

“in over half of Scottish councils, special schools received no additional teaching staff to help them cope with the return to school during the pandemic.”

We can see that young people with additional support needs were already being let down. That disadvantage will be magnified immeasurably by the impact of the pandemic.

What practical measures—measures that are properly resourced and focused on already hugely disadvantaged young people—will the cabinet secretary take to reverse the long-term denial of support, which is amplified by the current crisis? Regardless of the figures that he has quoted, surely it is evident that more of the same cannot be an option.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Can we have shorter supplementaries, please?

**John Swinney:** I am sure that Johann Lamont will be familiar with the fact that, as a consequence of the pandemic, the Government has announced additional funding for local authorities, which has resulted in the recruitment of more than 1,400 additional teachers and in excess of 250 additional support staff. That is added to by the previous support of £15 million

that was in place for additional support for learning staff.

The number of pupil support assistants and the number of teachers are rising. The number of teachers in Scottish schools is at its highest level since 2008, and rising numbers of staff are coming in as a consequence of the pandemic recruitment. Not all of them will show up in the recent statistics, which showed a 12-year high in teacher numbers.

I acknowledge the importance of ensuring that young people with additional support needs have those needs met by the provision of high-quality learning and teaching staff. The Government is committed to ensuring that that is the case.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I will take Kenneth Gibson's supplementary to Johann Lamont's question before Mary Fee asks her supplementary to Fulton MacGregor's question.

**Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP):** Since 2009, the number of pupils with additional support needs has rocketed from 37,000 to 208,000—to 27 per cent of primary school children and 35 per cent of secondary school children. It is no wonder that the provision of support staff cannot keep pace. Have additional support needs changed markedly over the past decade, and are they consistent across all schools and local authority areas? When does the cabinet secretary envisage that that meteoric rise in numbers will cease?

**John Swinney:** It is important that I explain that there are two main reasons for the increase in the number of children and young people who are recorded as having additional support needs since 2009. The first is that, in 2010, we changed the way in which national statistics on pupils with additional support needs are collected. Prior to then, only pupils with co-ordinated support plans or individualised educational programmes, or pupils who were attending a special school, were captured. The definition was expanded at that stage.

The second reason is that the needs of children and young people are being appropriately identified and recorded, in line with the statutory requirements set out in the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2014. That act provides a national definition of additional support for learning, supplemented by a statutory code of practice. It is important that we ensure that, in all circumstances, the needs of young people are properly recorded and then addressed as a consequence.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I will now take Mary Fee's supplementary question to question 3.

**Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab):** Early in December, a report by the Incorporated Society of

Musicians showed that Scotland has been the most negatively impacted country of the four United Kingdom nations in terms of the provision of music tuition across primary and secondary schools during the pandemic. Some teachers have highlighted concerns that local authorities are interpreting the guidance in different ways. I welcome the cabinet secretary's comment about updated guidance, but what further steps can he take to ensure that music tuition takes place safely and consistently across Scotland?

**John Swinney:** I hope that my earlier answer to Mr MacGregor reassured Mary Fee that the Government attaches the greatest importance to ensuring that music tuition is part of Scotland's curriculum and is delivered as effectively and as consistently as possible in our 2,500 schools.

It is important that music education forms part of the curriculum for young people of all ages. It is fundamental in our primary education system and, of course, as I expressed in my answer to Mr MacGregor, it can provide an important route for young people to fulfil their potential in secondary education.

Of course, there are some challenges in relation to the delivery of music education because of the need to minimise the transmission of the virus, and I very much regret that those constraints are in place. However, the guidance from Education Scotland is designed to find ways in which we can still enable, in these difficult and constrained circumstances, the delivery of effective music education. I give Mary Fee the assurance that that will be a priority for the Government in our dialogue with local authorities and schools.

#### **School Exams Cancellation (Pupils in Socially Deprived Areas)**

**7. James Kelly (Glasgow) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it will take to ensure that school pupils in areas of social deprivation will not be unfairly affected by the cancellation of exams. (S5O-04879)

**The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney):** On 8 December, in acknowledgement of Covid-related disruption to young people's education this academic year, I outlined to Parliament that national qualifications in 2020-21 will be awarded on evidence of demonstrated attainment, supported by local and national quality assurance processes. I have judged that that approach is the safest and the fairest way to ensure that individual learners' achievements are recognised. The alternative certification model offers flexibility and will help to alleviate some of the impacts on learning.

Collaboration from across the education system will ensure that the assessment and quality assurance approach for 2020-21 is clearly communicated, and that appropriate support for teaching staff and learners is in place.

**James Kelly:** In considering the alternative certification model, it is important that there is no repeat of the debacle of earlier this year, when, despite assurances from Mr Swinney on the initial awarding of grades, pupils in areas of social deprivation were unfairly affected.

What steps will the Deputy First Minister take to ensure that the alternative certification model is fair and transparent and ensures that pupils in areas of social deprivation receive fair and equitable treatment?

**John Swinney:** On transparency, the details of the model have been published by the Scottish Qualifications Authority, which has led on its development. It is crucial for Parliament to recognise that the model has been developed collaboratively with directors of education, professional associations and the college network in Scotland. Its development has been led by the Scottish Qualifications Authority, which has engaged substantively with young people and the education profession around these questions. There is a transparent explanation of the model.

The application of the model will be driven by the demonstrated attainment of young people. That will be influenced by local and national quality assurance processes, which are being established and which will engage the teaching profession in taking forward those priorities to ensure that there is fairness to all candidates.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Maureen Watt, your question will be called next but your card is not showing up. The console that you are sitting at is the console that I sit at, so I am vindicated—it must be faulty. I will call you after Jamie Greene, if you move.

**Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con):** I am glad that my card is working, Presiding Officer.

The previous question was perfectly reasonable, because those in our most-deprived communities were twice as likely to have their grades downgraded by the national moderation scheme this year.

The devil will lie in the detail: it is not just transparency that we need—it is detail. Will the cabinet secretary tell us exactly how and why the Scottish Qualifications Authority is taking that approach? Will there be national moderation, or will the cabinet secretary guarantee that individual moderation will take place in the case of every pupil?

**John Swinney:** The member asks how moderation works in the model. Support will be provided in advance of any formulation of estimated grades by the teaching profession to enable staff to understand the standards that are anticipated in all national qualifications. Schools will then be provided with materials—which are now available—that contain assessment exercises that young people can complete in their routine school activity. Teachers can assess the completed exercises against the standards that are expected. There will be moderation by SQA appointees, who will work with individual schools, and there will be local authority support for the process into the bargain. Crucially, the model relies on the whole of the education system playing its part in delivering that moderation. From all that will come estimated assessments.

It will of course be necessary to look across the system to ensure that consistency of judgment is being applied. However, there is time to do that. I remind Parliament that I took these decisions much earlier in the academic year than was the case last year, when the circumstances made that necessary. This year, there is time for that dialogue and that moderation to take place to ensure fairness for all candidates.

### **Covid-19 (Testing in Schools)**

**8. Maureen Watt (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the Covid-19 testing measures in primary and secondary schools. (S5O-04880)

**The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney):** On 25 November, we committed to undertake a number of pathfinder testing programmes upon the return of schools in January. As the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport set out in her statement earlier today, we have been working closely with a group of interested local authorities and volunteer schools to develop detailed plans. The schools involved will communicate with their staff, pupils and local communities in due course to ensure that they are informed about and comfortable with the plans.

We expect those pilots to inform the development of a scalable and sustainable approach to asymptomatic testing in schools. Those plans are in addition to the asymptomatic testing route that is available for school staff via the employer referral portal.

**Maureen Watt:** Perhaps the cabinet secretary could tell me whether schools in Aberdeen city or Aberdeenshire are taking part in those tests.

Schools will now be returning later and via staged learning. Does the cabinet secretary

believe that that will allow time to ensure that any proposed testing will be taken forward in a manner that reflects and acts on the views of teachers and parents?

**John Swinney:** I will have to return to Maureen Watt on the specific question of whether any Aberdeen city or Aberdeenshire schools are involved in the pilots. From my recollection, I do not think that any are, but I will confirm that in writing to her.

It is important that we take the greatest of care in the implementation of such a testing approach. It is crucial that the testing environment is delivered effectively and sustainably, and the phased reopening of schools in January will give us the opportunity to do some of that work.

I reiterate the importance that I attach to the commitment that the health secretary gave to the provision of an asymptomatic testing route for school staff via the employer referral portal. That is an important part of the extra provision that is available for school staff in order to provide greater reassurance.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Daniel Johnson has a brief supplementary.

**Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab):** Testing is an important precaution as we seek to reopen schools, but it would be made unnecessary by vaccine roll-out. Will the Scottish Government prioritise teachers and school staff to follow on from health and social care workers and receive the vaccine as a matter of priority?

**John Swinney:** I acknowledge the importance of ensuring that reassurance is provided for teaching and all other school staff, but the Government has accepted the clear advice of the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation on the prioritisation that should determine the delivery of the vaccine. Mr Johnson will be familiar with the prioritisation that has been put in place by the JCVI.

Obviously, some teachers will be involved in the vaccination process earlier than others, because of the degree of prioritisation that has been put in place by the JCVI. The Government will at all times carefully seek to ensure that we continue the safe delivery of education in our schools. That will be an on-going priority for the Government.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** That concludes questions on education and skills. Before we move on to questions on health and sport, I should point out that, because three education questions were not lodged, I could allow longer questions and answers. That is not the case for questions on health and sport. I am just eyeballing those members whom I can eyeball to make sure that they understand that. Oh dear! I don't feel

Christmassy at all, despite my little bit from the Christmas tree.

## Health and Sport

### Residential Drug Rehabilitation (Impacts)

1. **Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con):** Presiding Officer, I think that we are all in shock that you are giving us more time, but the season of good will seems to have reached the Parliament.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** You were not listening, Mr Briggs—I am not.

**Miles Briggs:** To ask the Scottish Government what impact any reduction in residential drug rehabilitation treatments has had on recovery rates and the level of drug-related deaths. (S5O-04881)

**The Minister for Drug Policy (Angela Constance):** Residential treatment plays an important role in supporting recovery and in preventing drug-related harm and deaths. The residential rehabilitation working group has now provided advice on how we ensure that everyone who requires residential rehab has access when they need it. We will respond to all the recommendations made by the working group and, in the new year, set out how we will substantially increase the provision of residential treatment in the short term.

**Miles Briggs:** I thank the minister for her answer, and I welcome her to her position. We all must wish her well in trying to turn this situation around.

It is now widely accepted that cuts to drug rehab beds and addiction programmes have been hugely damaging to the reduction of drug-related deaths across Scotland. Will the Scottish Government now agree to review the methadone programme and undertake a review of treatment option assessment and access to treatment across the country?

**Angela Constance:** Mr Briggs was the first parliamentarian to write to me, last Friday night at 10 o'clock, and he is the first parliamentarian to ask me a parliamentary question.

Let me be clear with him. I am committed to residential rehab, as I know the power that it has to change lives. I am also committed to offering a full range of treatment options to ensure that people get the right care, treatment and support at the right time. There is a substantial body of evidence that supports having a methadone programme.

We must stop talking about people whose lives are blighted by drugs as though they are one big, homogeneous group, because they are not.

Different treatments and different supports will work for different people at different times in their lives. However, I reassure the member that medical approaches have their place, as do rehabilitation and services in the community.

**Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab):** I, too, welcome the minister to her post and am grateful for the discussions that she and I have had so far. Will she say a bit more about how she will engage with people who have experience of residential rehab and treatment, their families and service partners?

Will the minister also say something about the festive period? Some people are worried about how they are going to cope with their addiction or dependency during this time, especially in the light of the further restrictions that are coming. A lot has been done to get people online for 12-step meetings and so on, but this is a worrying time, especially for families. What can the minister say to those people?

**Angela Constance:** My engagement has already started. The first people I have met in my role as minister have been people with lived experience, and I have also spoken to people whose families have been devastated by addiction and drug use.

The member made points about the pandemic and how increasing restrictions bring the danger of increasing isolation. It is that isolation that our services on the ground, including our emergency response, must overcome to reach people—and when we reach them, we must keep hold of them. We know that people with addiction problems have good times and bad times, and we have to work with them, put our arms around them and see them through both on their journey to a full and better life.

### Cancer Services

2. **Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government when cancer services will be fully restored. (S5O-04882)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Jeane Freeman):** With your permission, Presiding Officer, before I answer the question, I will put on record my congratulations for a number of important senior appointments that have been made today in health. I congratulate Dr Smith, who has now been confirmed as our chief medical officer, Professor Amanda Croft, our new chief nursing officer, and Caroline Lamb, the chief executive of NHS Scotland and director general for health and social care. They are an absolutely excellent team who will serve us well, I am sure.

NHS Scotland has continued to provide emergency and urgent care throughout the pandemic and will continue to do so. There have

been occasions when, as a clinical judgment, clinicians have wished to make changes to individual treatment plans in the light of the infection threat of the virus to a particular patient.

Cancer screening services have all now restarted. The services have resumed in a phased, careful and prioritised way as part of the remobilisation of our health service, with the initial focus on higher-risk screening participants. Good progress has been made in the first stages, with routine screening appointments now taking place for breast cancer and cervical cancer, and bowel screening home testing kits have been posted out since 12 October.

On 9 December, I announced and published the cancer recovery plan, which was devised with many of our very experienced cancer charities as well as with our clinical advisers. It includes planned investment of up to £114.5 million to ensure that cancer patients have equitable access to care regardless of where they live. The cancer recovery plan will improve patients' experience of care and will roll out innovative treatments to improve cancer services.

**Anas Sarwar:** I thank the cabinet secretary for that full response, and I welcome the new appointees to their roles. I look forward to working with them in the coming months.

I have been raising the issue of cancer services from the outset of the pandemic, as well as the fear about the impact that it will have on long-term cancer survival rates. Public Health Scotland's statistics show that, between July and September, there was a 24 per cent drop in the number of suspected cancer patients being referred. Cancer Research UK also estimates that 1,560 fewer patients have started their cancer treatment compared with the equivalent three-month period last year.

We will face a tsunami of cancer cases in the next year, so I ask the cabinet secretary what statistics are being produced on the excess number of cancer deaths that we are expecting. When will we be able to have confidence that we have a fully returned cancer service at pre-Covid levels of service?

**Jeane Freeman:** I am grateful to Mr Sarwar and acknowledge his long-standing interest in this area—more than that, his effective scrutiny and, at times, his challenge of what we are doing to make sure that we do not take our focus away from this really important area.

The cancer recovery plan—*[Interruption.]* I will answer the specific question that has been asked—offers a number of particular and immediate steps that will help with early diagnosis, including two new early cancer diagnostic centres that will be established within our existing

infrastructure by the spring of next year and, importantly, a single point of contact for cancer patients that supports them throughout the various stages of their journey.

Notwithstanding the member's point about statistics, our most recently published cancer waiting times, which were for quarter 3, showed that the 31-day target was being met in 98.4 per cent of cases. The member will know that the target is 95 per cent. However, our 62-day target is the key target that we are now focused on meeting in order to get people a cancer diagnosis as early as possible.

I have been very clear with health boards that, as we see increased numbers of Covid-19 cases putting pressure on particular acute settings in different parts of the country, with the trade-off often being that boards have to pause elective and planned work, the one thing that we will not pause is the cancer screening programmes. We will keep them going because they are critically important.

On the member's specific question, we have asked Public Health Scotland to look at how it can robustly gather that data so that we have as full an understanding as possible of the scale of the challenge that we now have to address and can direct our resources accordingly.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I appreciate that these answers are very important, but I ask for briefer answers so that I can get everyone in for these essential questions.

### **National Health Service (Additional Support)**

**3. Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what additional support the NHS will require over the first quarter of 2021. (S5O-04883)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Jeane Freeman):** We have, so far, provided £1.1 million of additional funding to support the NHS in its response, and, as I have said previously, further funding will be allocated in January. Work is now under way with boards and our partners in social care to identify in greater detail exactly what is required from January onwards. Once we have concluded that work, we will make that detail clear to members and it will be covered in the statement that Kate Forbes will make later in January.

**Jamie Halcro Johnston:** The attention of many in the national health service is, understandably, focused on the coronavirus pandemic and the efforts to protect communities across Scotland. However, as is usual at this time of year, the routine work of the health service will also be affected by seasonal issues, and increased pressure will be put on local services and health staff.

What concerns does the cabinet secretary have about the impact of both the pandemic and normal winter issues on locally delivered routine health services over the next three months? I am thinking, in particular, of those in remote and rural areas, of which there are many in my region. What further impact may routine services face as a result of any—very welcome—increased roll-out of new coronavirus vaccines over that period, and how can the Scottish Government provide additional support to minimise that impact?

**Jeane Freeman:** That is a detailed question that deserves a detailed answer, so I give a commitment that I will write to Mr Halcro Johnston later with more information. I would point him now to two things: our NHS winter preparedness plan and, for the first time ever, our equal plan for social care, which seeks to enable us to maintain services and deal with—as far as we can—the backlog in non-Covid health and social care support and services, both of which have additional resources attached to them.

As I have said many times, there is always a trade-off. The more that we—individually and collectively—suppress the virus, the more our NHS is able to deal with non-Covid cases. Where we are not successful in doing that, pressure is put on our services to deal with Covid cases in both primary and secondary care. That inevitably reduces the degree to which we can cope with non-Covid healthcare, which is itself vitally important. As I said, I will write to the member with more detail.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I ask members not to slip in multiple questions, because they will—quite rightly—not get a specific answer. I call Alasdair Allan to ask question 4. I hope that he has learned a lesson from that. I am sure that he has.

#### **Patient Travelling Expenses Scheme (Review)**

**4. Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP):** I would not dare do anything else, Presiding Officer.

To ask the Scottish Government what issues will be covered in its upcoming review of the patient travelling expenses scheme. (S5O-04884)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Jeane Freeman):** The review will cover the scope and arrangements that are in place across Scotland for the provision of financial support for patient travel, where such travel is necessary. It will include consideration of specific issues that have been highlighted to me by members, including Dr Allan, in relation to constituents' concerns. It will be undertaken early in the new year, and I will provide further updates in the chamber as it progresses.

**Dr Allan:** Islanders who are going through something as traumatic as a cancer diagnosis need support. In too many cases in the past, their loved ones have not been able to be present with them. Since the patient escort working group was formed last year to examine those issues, there has been a marked decrease in the number of complaints concerning the issue. Will the Scottish Government's review consider those issues, and will there be an opportunity for the working group to feed into that work?

**Jeane Freeman:** I am grateful to Dr Allan because he has ensured, over this period, that I fully understand the issues that are involved. I am pleased that there has been an improvement of the type that both he and I have sought. The review will absolutely consider the issues that members have raised, and it will include the matter of escorts. I expect the work of the Western Isles patient escort working group to be considered fully as part of the review.

#### **Grass-roots Sport (Community Health and Wellbeing)**

**5. David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how important it considers grass-roots level sport is to the health and wellbeing of communities. (S5O-04885)

**The Minister for Public Health, Sport and Wellbeing (Mairi Gougeon):** The Scottish Government fully recognises the importance of sport and physical activity in communities across Scotland. That is why the strategic framework allows sport and physical activity to take place at all levels. The Scottish Government has been working with sportscotland and sporting governing bodies to produce guidance to ensure that grass-roots sport can take place when it is deemed safe to do so. I thank the sector for its hard work and patience during these difficult times.

**David Torrance:** Lower-league football clubs are vital to our local areas. They often bring much more than just an opportunity for people to get involved in physical activity through providing communities with a hub for bringing people together. What efforts are being made to ensure that funding reaches those clubs at this critical time so as to ensure their long-term future?

**Mairi Gougeon:** I could not agree more with the point that David Torrance has made. I have seen that in my own constituency, where football clubs have played such a key role in their local communities. As David Torrance highlighted, they do much more than just provide opportunities for people to get involved in physical activities.

Football clubs are at the heart of their communities, but many of them have suffered real hardships due to the necessary Covid-19

restrictions. We absolutely recognise that. Last week, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport confirmed a £10 million grant funding package that covers the entire football pyramid, from the Scottish Professional Football League championship down to amateur and grass-roots clubs. That funding will provide a lifeline for clubs throughout Scotland.

### **Coronary Heart Disease (Mortality-rate Reduction)**

**6. Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to reduce coronary heart disease mortality rates across all national health service boards. (S5O-04886)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Jeane Freeman):** Between 2009 and 2018, the mortality rate for coronary heart disease in Scotland fell by 32.4 per cent. We have been implementing the actions from the 2014 improvement plan, and a refreshed plan will be published in spring next year. We continue to implement our heart disease improvement plan, which identifies a number of priority areas for improvement.

Progress is being made on all of that, and there is a real focus on new ways of encouraging heart disease patients to influence their treatment, with an emphasis on specialist heart disease rehabilitation, both to reduce mortality and long-term disability and to improve the provision of supported self-management, physical activity and services. As part of the wider women's health plan, we are developing pathways to raise awareness of heart disease among women and to take action to reduce the disparities surrounding diagnosis and treatment.

**Alexander Stewart:** In the current heart disease improvement plan, the Scottish Government quotes the fall in mortality rates, which I very much welcome. Can the cabinet secretary share with me the measures of success relating to atrial fibrillation and heart failure, which were two conditions that were explicitly named in the improvement plan as priorities?

**Jeane Freeman:** I apologise to the member. I do not have the specific detail to answer his question, and I would want to be certain that I was right in the information that I was giving him. Therefore, I would be happy to send him information regarding the specific reductions and improvements in those areas this afternoon.

### **Covid-19 Vaccine Roll-out**

**7. Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what progress it

is making with the roll-out of the Covid-19 vaccine across the country. (S5O-04887)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Jeane Freeman):** As I hope Alex Rowley is aware, the statistics that have been published today show that, in the period between 8 and 20 December, 56,676 individuals received their first dose of the vaccine. That is a significant achievement on the part of all those involved in 13 days.

Initial difficulties around the Pfizer vaccine involving storage, transportation and the reduction of pack sizes have been resolved, as I am sure Alex Rowley is aware, so we can introduce the vaccination programme to care homes, as we did on 14 December. We will complete that and begin the second dose.

In line with advice from the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation, our first priority groups are, of course, health and social care workers and elderly and vulnerable residents in our care homes. Should we have our hope realised that the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine will be authorised shortly, we stand ready to deliver it, with a start delivery date of 11 January, depending on authorisation and supplies. That will allow us to begin the vaccination programme for those aged 80 and over in the community, and it will involve using our primary care and other community settings for providing the vaccination programme.

**Alex Rowley:** I very much share those hopes. Perhaps we can all pray over Christmas that the vaccine can be rolled out.

On BBC Radio Scotland this morning, I heard Alison Leitch, whose mother is in a care home in Fife, say that she was advised that, even when her mother got the vaccine, the care home would still not be in a position to get visitors in.

Last week, I visited the Kinross-shire day centre, where staff are on the front line supporting more than 100 pensioners in Kinross. There seems to be a failure of information. Although I welcome the statement that was made earlier, does the cabinet secretary think that we can step up the information sharing so that care homes and centres such as the wonderful Kinross-shire day centre know what is happening?

**Jeane Freeman:** That is an important point. I remind Alex Rowley that the third issue of information directly to members is today. Previously, that was from my colleague Mr FitzPatrick; from now on, it will be directly from me. That is up-to-date information, and it will include from today the individual board plans of local vaccination centres. I know that Mr Rowley will want to share that information with his constituents, including those care homes.

Scottish Care is part of our vaccination programme planning. I will raise again with it and other colleagues the issue of communication to their members so that the latter are all aware of what is happening.

Finally, I remind everyone that there is a national helpline for anyone, including care home providers and families, to ask for information about what is happening in their specific area. They will get that to the degree that we can definitively provide it. That is, of course, always with a caveat about the supply of the vaccines.

**Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP):** What plans does the Scottish Government have in place to promote high uptake of the vaccine among hard-to-reach groups and the wider population? I remind members that I am now part of Dumfries and Galloway's vaccination team.

**Jeane Freeman:** Ms Harper is indeed part of that team, and I am very grateful to her for volunteering to do that work.

On reaching groups that do not traditionally have a long engagement with the health service, I am grateful to my colleagues Ms Campbell, who is sitting beside me, and Ms Somerville for their support in helping us to reach those groups through faith groups, cultural groups and those whom we are reaching through our social security agency. In addition, we are looking to work locally with third sector organisations that have a great deal of knowledge in their local area.

We believe that mobile vaccination units, where it makes sense to have them, will increase our chances of people coming forward to be vaccinated. They will come into their own on that. They are not just for remote and rural areas; they are for our urban settings, too, so that we can take the vaccinations to people. The AstraZeneca vaccine will, of course, greatly assist us in doing that.

I should have made the point in response to Mr Rowley's question that the vaccine's two doses are really important. The first dose does not give all the protection that one needs against the virus—the second one boosts the first. Those two doses are critical, so we need to ensure that we encourage people to go back for their second dose.

### Care Home Residents (Visits)

**8. Tom Arthur (Renfrewshire South) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to ensure that care home residents who are unable to go outside can still meet friends and family. (S5O-04888)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Jeane Freeman):** That is a really important

question. Along with many people across the country, I felt particularly gutted on Saturday when we took the decisions that we had to take in the face of the new strain of the virus. Up until that point, we had done a great deal of work to be ready to ensure that we could test visitors who were going into care homes, in order to open them, as the First Minister spoke about earlier.

It is important to point out that testing is not the only answer. It sits alongside good personal protective equipment and quality infection prevention and control, and we have taken a number of steps in partnership with care home providers and others to ensure that we can open our care homes to more visiting and support.

From 4 January, we will be testing visiting professionals as an additional precautionary and protective measure. We have guidance for adults who are under 65 to allow them to leave their residential setting and go out for the day or overnight with family and friends, as they would have done before the pandemic. Clinical advisers are considering what guidance we can offer for those in particular settings who are over 65, to enable them to do that, too.

At the moment, as we work to deal with the particularly infectious strain of coronavirus, that work is not paused, but we are not yet in a position to implement the improved position.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** That concludes questions on health and sport. Before I move on to the next group of questions, I remind all members to make sure—[*Interruption.*]

Oh, I beg your pardon, Mr Arthur. I am rushing—how rude. Please ask your supplementary question.

**Tom Arthur:** That is not a problem, Presiding Officer.

I share the cabinet secretary's sentiment of feeling gutted that the restrictions that are necessarily in place will mean further restrictions for care homes.

I welcome the roll-out of testing that will be taking place in care homes, and the opportunities that it will create with regard to the ability to relax restrictions further. The cabinet secretary spoke about partnership working with care homes. What support is the Government providing to ensure that families and loved ones have access to the advice and understand the guidance, which, by its nature, can change quite rapidly due to the circumstances that we are in?

**Jeane Freeman:** Presiding Officer, I am glad that you went back to Mr Arthur. When he thought that he was not going to get back in again, his wee face was a sad sight indeed.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Before you go any further, cabinet secretary, I will just say that Mr Briggs distracted me, and I have no idea what he was trying to ask me. My apologies to both you and Mr Arthur.

**Jeane Freeman:** Not at all, Presiding Officer. At times, Mr Briggs distracts us all, and not always in a particularly good way. [*Laughter.*] I do not mean that—I wish Mr Briggs the very best for the Christmas period.

To answer Tom Arthur, the support that we offer to care homes is significant. We have provided additional support. In particular, should care homes wish it, there is administrative support to allow care homes to administer the tests and do the additional work. Through our health and social care partnerships, our national health service stands ready to provide additional support when staff rotas may be compromised, as members have seen happen in particular situations. The Home Farm care home is probably the example at the forefront of people's minds in that regard, although it happens elsewhere.

This week, I had the opportunity to bring together our directors of public health, care home providers, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and, importantly, the care home relatives group, to discuss with me what more we need to do to remove obstacles to visiting and people going outside, and to increase the confidence of care home providers in relation to their assessment of risk.

Tomorrow, I have a cross-party meeting with members from across the chamber to look at what further work we might be able to do to ensure that, if the right steps are taken, care homes are opened up to visiting as far as is safely possible.

## Communities and Local Government

### Banffshire and Buchan Coast (Action on Poverty)

1. **Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking in the Banffshire and Buchan Coast constituency to help take families out of poverty. (S5O-04889)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government (Aileen Campbell):** We remain committed to tackling poverty, as our tackling child poverty delivery plan shows. In 2019-20, our estimated spend on low-income households increased by £554 million to £1.96 billion. The Scottish child payment, which is open to applications for eligible families with children under six, will start payments in February next year.

In response to the pandemic, we have committed more than £0.5 billion, including up to £100 million through our winter plan for social protection. That includes a £100 payment for each child in receipt of free school meals, and more than £130 million to tackle food insecurity, including the provision of free school meals over the holiday periods.

**Stewart Stevenson:** Parts of my constituency are in particular poverty. Will the cabinet secretary advise how many families in my constituency—or, if necessary, in Aberdeenshire—are expected to receive the Scottish child payment?

**Aileen Campbell:** The Scottish child payment is an investment that is unique to Scotland. It is expected to benefit families right around the country, including in the Banffshire and Buchan Coast constituency that Stewart Stevenson represents.

The Scottish Fiscal Commission forecasts that the payment could support up to 194,000 children this financial year, which is an increase of around 34,000 children since the pandemic began. Initial management information indicates that, by the end of Sunday 20 September, we had received 52,000 applications.

We are promoting the Scottish child payment via extensive communications and a marketing campaign to ensure that all those who are eligible are aware of their entitlement. I hope that that message is getting out to families in Stewart Stevenson's constituency.

I will endeavour to write to Stewart Stevenson in the new year to provide a more detailed breakdown of the number of families who are eligible and any further information that is particular to his constituency.

### Covid-19

#### (Community Organisations and Activities)

2. **Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what consideration it has given to preserving community organisations and activities during the Covid-19 pandemic and beyond. (S5O-04890)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government (Aileen Campbell):** The £40 million community and third sector recovery programme provides funding for organisations as they respond to the on-going impact of the pandemic and as they adapt and restart delivery of their community services and activities. The programme also provides business support and investment to help organisations adapt their operations and income generation to increase sustainability. So far, 376 organisations have been awarded more than £7 million in funding from the programme.

I encourage community and third sector organisations around the country to consider applying, particularly in communities where the winter months will be difficult for many people. More information on the support that is available can be found on the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations website.

**Brian Whittle:** I know that the cabinet secretary is aware of the importance of community organisations and activities such as sport, art, music and drama, and of how they can positively impact physical and mental health. We are in a pandemic at the moment, which obviously has a huge impact on the ability of such organisations to reach out. What will the Scottish Government do to ensure that they are still there at the end of the pandemic, because we will need them then more than ever?

**Aileen Campbell:** I absolutely agree. That is part of the reason why, early in the pandemic, I announced the £350 million package of support as a response to the pandemic. As the months went on, we realised that we had to gear up and support our third sector to move into a recovery phase. The adapt and thrive part of the support that we put in place provides third sector organisations with financial support, but also provides advice to help them to adapt to the circumstances around them, so that they can improve their sustainability for the future.

Knowing how critical third sector and community organisations are is also why, just a few weeks ago, the First Minister made a further announcement of financial support through the winter package support measures.

Brian Whittle has put his finger on a critical point: we must work hard to ensure that, beyond the pandemic, we have a thriving third sector, as it has been proved just how essential that is to the resilience of our communities and our country. We will continue to work with our third sector partners to ensure that the sector continues to thrive. Indeed, this morning, I had a call with many third sector organisation leaders and we will continue to work in partnership to ensure that that is the case.

### **Domestic Abuse (Housing Outcomes)**

3. **Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to improve housing outcomes for women experiencing domestic abuse. (S5O-04891)

**The Minister for Local Government, Housing and Planning (Kevin Stewart):** We must ensure that women and children who experience domestic abuse have a secure place to live and the support that they need, which includes supporting them to stay in their own home, if that is what they want.

In October, we introduced the Domestic Abuse (Protection) (Scotland) Bill, which will provide the police and courts with powers to make emergency notices and orders to protect people who are at risk of domestic abuse by enabling a suspected perpetrator of domestic abuse to be removed from a home that they share with a person at risk. The bill also provides powers for social landlords to change a tenancy to remove a perpetrator of abuse from a victim's home.

We welcome the recent report by the Chartered Institute of Housing Scotland and Scottish Women's Aid, and will work with partners on implementing the recommendations to improve women and children's housing outcomes.

**Ruth Maguire:** As well as identifying existing barriers and providing guidance, the excellent report that the minister mentioned contains a lot of examples of good practice that is already happening. How will the Scottish Government ensure that all social landlords across Scotland use the guidance and take prompt action to improve things for women and children experiencing domestic abuse?

**Kevin Stewart:** I am very keen to ensure that we export best practice across the piece, particularly in this area. Early in 2021, we will—*[Inaudible.]*—expert group to lead delivery of the recommendations and transform practice in this area. We will continue to report on progress through our annual report to Parliament on the ending homelessness together action plan. We are already taking forward some of the recommendations, some of which, crucially, we have introduced into the Domestic Abuse (Protection) (Scotland) Bill; that includes the power for social landlords to remove a perpetrator of abuse from the victim's home.

### **Covid-19 (Financial Recognition of Local Government Workers)**

4. **Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what progress it has made on giving financial recognition to people working in local government during the response to the Covid-19 pandemic, as agreed at the recent Convention of Scottish Local Authorities leaders meeting. (S5O-04892)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government (Aileen Campbell):** I, along with all Scottish ministers, am hugely grateful for the heroic efforts of all key workers across Scotland, including in local government, who have risen to the challenge of responding to the pandemic and kept our essential services available. Although councils are independent bodies, which means that it is for them to decide on any additional support for the wider local

government workforce, the Scottish Government regularly engages with local government on issues around pay and workforce. We have also taken decisive action to commit £382.2 million in additional funding to local authorities in Scotland.

**Sarah Boyack:** There was agreement across all the parties in the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities that the incredible work of tens of thousands of local government staff has kept services going—from distributing food to keeping our schools open, collecting waste, and keeping our older and vulnerable constituents safe throughout the pandemic—and that those staff should be not only acknowledged, but rewarded, for that work.

Given the massive deficit that our councils face due to Scottish Government underfunding, surely it is time for the Scottish Government to step up, support those staff and enable our councils, which have kept our communities going, to be rewarded for their heroic efforts.

**Aileen Campbell:** As I said very explicitly, I—along with the whole of this Government—recognise and am grateful for all the efforts of people across local government who have done an inordinate amount of work to help the country respond to the challenges posed by Covid-19. However, I also mentioned that councils are independent bodies and that it is for them to decide on any additional support for the wider local government workforce.

In addition, I underlined that we continue to regularly engage; indeed, my colleague the Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Kate Forbes, met COSLA yesterday to discuss issues around this, and we will continue to engage with local authorities and to support them financially. As I mentioned, we have committed £382.2 million in additional funding to local authorities in Scotland.

I do not accept the characterisation that we have underfunded local government. We have endeavoured to treat it fairly in all the funding decisions that we have taken as a Government, bearing in mind that we have also borne the brunt of austerity over a number of years. We have tried to work in partnership with local government to enable it to continue to deliver the essential services that are critical for all our communities across the country. I again put on record our enormous thanks to all of them for all that they do day in, day out.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Could we move on a bit more rapidly? I still have many questions to take.

#### Islands (Housing for Young People)

**5. Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what

consideration it is giving to the calls for young people living on Scotland's islands to be given first refusal for available housing in order to tackle depopulation. (S5O-04893)

**The Minister for Local Government, Housing and Planning (Kevin Stewart):** Ensuring that young people in island communities have access to housing of all tenures has a key role to play in the sustainability of those communities—*[Inaudible.]*—ensuring that people have access to quality, sustainable homes that are safe, warm and affordable. More than 4,800 affordable homes have been delivered in rural and island communities over the first four years of this session of Parliament.

As the statutory housing authorities, councils are responsible for assessing local housing requirements and for setting out in their housing strategies how those should be addressed. The sale of private property is, of course, the responsibility of the property owner. Deals cannot be discriminatory or violate equalities legislation.

**Rhoda Grant:** Will the Scottish Government look at setting a maximum percentage for the number of holiday homes in any one community, and at how it could set up two different housing markets, such as there are in the Channel Islands? For example, all homes that have been built with assistance from the public purse could be the first to be transferred into a local market, and other people could have the ability to transfer their own homes into that as well. That would go some way to ensuring that there was adequate housing for young people, which would allow them to remain in their communities.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I call the Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government.

**Kevin Stewart:** Presiding Officer, I am aware of growing concern about the potential negative effects—

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Mr Stewart, my apologies. I called the cabinet secretary; I should have called you.

**The Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government (Aileen Campbell):** Presiding Officer, I indicated an offer to answer only because Kevin Stewart's reception was breaking up. However, Mr Stewart's reception seems perfectly fine now.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Mr Stewart's reception is always perfectly fine. I call Mr Stewart to answer, please.

**Kevin Stewart:** Thank you, Presiding Officer. I may have to tell my father to switch off Netflix, in order to get better reception.

I am well aware of growing concerns about the potential negative effects of the concentration of second homes. We changed council tax legislation to enable councils to either grant or remove a discount in all or part of their council areas. We also operate schemes for first-time buyers, such as the open market shared equity scheme, to help young folk across Scotland. Those schemes are not being utilised on the islands as much as they could and should be, and I have asked that we do more to market them there.

I have had discussions with Ben Macpherson, in his previous role as Minister for Public Finance and Migration, to see what else we can do when it comes to taxation. We will continue to explore those situations.

### **South Ayrshire Council (Meetings)**

6. **John Scott (Ayr) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government when it last met representatives of South Ayrshire Council and what was discussed. (S5O-04894)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government (Aileen Campbell):** Ministers and officials regularly meet representatives of all Scottish local authorities, including South Ayrshire Council, to discuss a wide range of issues as part of our commitment to working in partnership with local government to improve outcomes for the people of Scotland.

We continue to work closely with local government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities on our strategic approach to suppressing Covid-19 outbreaks, including through regular engagement with all local authorities about levels of restrictions and protective measures that apply.

**John Scott:** The cabinet secretary will know that high streets across Scotland have been struggling for years—nowhere more than in Ayr—and that Covid has made the problem worse. Businesses large and small need help in both the short and the longer term. Will the Scottish Government therefore now support Conservatives' calls for an extension of 100 per cent rates relief for hospitality, tourism and retail businesses, in order to protect jobs in 2021 and beyond?

**Aileen Campbell:** I know that my colleague Kate Forbes regularly tries to work through what more she can do to help to support businesses that are so vital to our economy.

On a point that relates more to my portfolio, I acutely know and understand how much pressure high streets in our town centres are facing, which is why I asked Professor Leigh Sparks to revisit our town centre action plan. He will be reporting back to me fairly shortly about actions that we can take to further support our town centres and high

streets. That is also why we put some investment into the Scotland loves local campaign, to encourage more people to shop locally.

During the pandemic, people have reconnected with what is on their doorsteps. We must try to harness that reconnection, to ensure that we can continue to support our high streets beyond the pandemic restrictions.

I am happy to engage further with the member on Ayr's town centre, which I know is experiencing particular challenges. We are committed to doing all that we can to support our towns and high streets, which are so critical to our economic recovery.

### **Drug Addiction (Dundee)**

7. **Jenny Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what recent discussions it has had with third sector organisations in Dundee working in the field of drug addiction. (S5O-04895)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government (Aileen Campbell):** During the pandemic, Scottish Government officials have continued to engage with alcohol and drug partnership co-ordinators and national commissioned organisations. Scottish Government officials met alcohol and drug partnerships on a quarterly basis; meetings took place in May, September and December.

Officials have also met representatives from Scottish Recovery Consortium, Scottish Families Affected by Alcohol and Drugs, Crew 2000, Scottish Drugs Forum, Alcohol Focus Scotland, We Are With You and Scottish Health Actions on Alcohol Problems fortnightly since April 2020.

**Jenny Marra:** Last week, we learned that Dundee lost more of its citizens to drugs than any other place in Europe or indeed the world. Officials on the Dundee drugs commission told me that we desperately need more community drugs workers, to support families, reduce harm and prevent deaths. What plans does the cabinet secretary have to invest in more community drugs workers through the third sector in Dundee?

**Aileen Campbell:** On a more general point about communities, over the past 10 months we have seen how important it is to have community-based support in place. We have seen that when people receive community-based support, they show more resilience; they also feel that that support is far less stigmatising than the support that is offered by some statutory services. Therefore, I understand entirely the broader principle that community support is necessary. We continue to support the third sector through the £350 million fund that I announced in March and our continued funding of the adapt and thrive

programme, which ensures that third sector organisations can reconfigure their work so that they can be in a sustainable position.

On the particular point about drug and alcohol addiction services, I will ensure that Angela Constance, in her new role, and I work together to support, as best we can, third sector partners that deliver addiction services. Such services are critical to the resilience and recovery of many people, particularly in Dundee, which has a particular issue, on which we need to work hard and tirelessly.

### **Local Authority Service Changes (Duty to Consult)**

**8. Dean Lockhart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what guidance it provides to local authorities regarding their duty to consult before important changes to services are made. (S5O-04896)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government (Aileen Campbell):** The Scottish Government recognises the importance of consulting communities and giving local people a voice and an opportunity to influence important decisions by their councils.

There is no universal guidance, as local authorities are independent corporate bodies. However, where councils have a statutory requirement to consult their residents, on issues such as planning, we will provide support and advice, to ensure that they follow the necessary legal requirements.

If Mr Lockhart would like to advise what policy change he is concerned about, I will ask officials to investigate and share the necessary guidance, if it exists.

**Dean Lockhart:** Scottish National Party-led Stirling Council recently made significant changes to waste collection services, which included cuts in bin collections and the introduction of charges. In a report that was submitted to a recent council meeting, it was confirmed that no prior public consultation had been undertaken on those significant changes to a fundamental service. The failure to consult has seriously damaged the council's standing with residents.

Does the cabinet secretary agree that local authorities must carry out meaningful public consultation where major service changes such as that one are proposed? Is it her view that it would be useful if the Scottish Government provided clear guidance to local authorities and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities on public consultation?

**Aileen Campbell:** As I said in my first response to the member, we recognise the importance of

consulting and engaging with communities. On the whole, I think that that is the case for local authorities, too: because they are accountable to the communities that they represent, they want to make sure that they deliver services that reflect the needs and the context of their particular areas.

I do not know the details of what happened in Stirling to give Mr Lockhart such concern, but I am happy to engage with Stirling Council on that. Changes have been a necessity for councils adapting to the Covid situation around them, and I believe that local authorities do what they can to best meet the needs of the people who live in their areas.

If there is more that we can do around the engagement with communities to make sure that they feel that they have a voice, we will continue to work with COSLA on that. Participatory budgeting and community wealth building approaches show that we want to make sure that communities' voices are heard in all the decisions that we take, whether at national Government or local government level. I am happy to engage further with Mr Lockhart on that point.

## Brexit

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani):** I remind members—those who are leaving and those who are coming into the chamber—that social distancing measures are in place and that they should take care.

The next item of business is a statement by Michael Russell on Brexit. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of his statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:37

**The Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, Europe and External Affairs (Michael Russell):** When I last addressed the chamber on our readiness for this stage of the transition period, I found it scarcely believable that, with only 23 days to go, we knew nothing about how the United Kingdom would trade with the European Union. Now, with a mere eight days to go and still no outcome, my reaction—and that of almost everybody else—is that we are now in the realm of the unbelievable.

Even if a deal is being done as we speak—I have no information that that is the case—time has run out for Westminster to approve the legislation before Christmas and for this chamber to consider the necessary legislative consent to aspects of the deal. Because we do not know what would be in any deal, it is also not clear where our consent would be required. The UK Government will have to formally ask us for that consent and this chamber will be asked to agree or disagree. Practically, the earliest that that can happen is next Wednesday; the Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans will keep the Presiding Officer and the Parliamentary Bureau closely informed and will notify them the moment that the Scottish Government receives a request for legislative consent—if it does. That also means that, if Westminster has to be recalled, it will be under stringent tier 4 lockdown regulations, and the same will be true here and across Scotland.

The evidence of the past few days tells us not only that the pressure of the pandemic is increasing again, but that the UK Government's refusal—despite all the pleas—to extend transition was utterly foolish, reckless, arrogant and damaging. In addition, the past 48 hours remind us of the dependence of our supply chains and way of life on the closest of trading links with the EU and show that any action that disrupts those links has severe consequences.

If no deal is reached, disruption will resume. That is one of the many reasons why a no-deal scenario is a lunatic prospect, and anyone who asserts that any part of these islands will “prosper

mightily” in such circumstances is woefully ignorant or deliberately deceiving; for a Prime Minister to do so beggars belief.

However, even with a deal—the lowest of deals, which, given the UK red lines throughout the past year, has been all that could be achieved—there will be disruption to trade and a major dislocating change in our status and relationship with other countries.

There will be—whether we have no deal or a low deal—a diminution in our safety and protection with regard to law and order, given the withdrawal from us of the Schengen information system, which means that Police Scotland will be less able to combat criminality at speed. We will also lose access to the European arrest warrant, which means that it will be harder to ensure that foreign criminals face justice in Scotland.

There will be—whether we have no deal or a low deal—a growing threat to the standards that we apply to and expect of food, the environment and a range of other issues. We will be able to mitigate some of that as a result of the passage last night, by a massive majority, of the UK Withdrawal from the European Union (Continuity) (Scotland) Bill, which I hope that the UK Government will not again try to destroy by means of changing UK law.

Food prices will rise—whether we have no deal or a low deal—as the UK Government admits, and the range and availability of food might be affected, particularly in the early days after 31 December. That will be felt most keenly at the end of supply chains, which means in Scotland.

It will be harder for Scots to live and work in the European Union, and visas are now required for prolonged stays overseas. Even a simple holiday—something that we have taken for granted for so long—will mean longer queues at borders and paying more for health insurance.

There will be a shortage of labour in some key Scottish sectors, and those shortages will get worse as the growing season starts.

There will also be—whether we have no deal or a low deal—an inevitable fall in our gross domestic product. Even in the very-best-case scenario of a basic trade agreement outcome, our modelling shows that it is estimated that Scottish GDP will be 6.1 per cent lower by 2030 than it would have been if we had continued to be a member of the EU. That equates to a cost to each person in Scotland of an equivalent of £1,600.

A catastrophic exit on World Trade Organization terms only could lead to a loss of up to 8.5 per cent of GDP in Scotland by 2030 compared with continued EU membership. That would be equivalent to a cost of £2,300 per person. My

definition of “prospering mightily” does not include losing £2,300 for every man, woman and child in Scotland.

Some impacts will be felt almost immediately. On 8 December, I set out what the Scottish Government is doing, as far as it is able to do, to mitigate the worst effects of the end of transition, which—whether we have a low deal or no deal—will produce immediate changes.

I can report that the Scottish Government resilience room arrangements for EU exit and concurrent risks are now fully established, and that the stand-up of the national co-ordination centre and a single Scotland-wide multi-agency co-ordination centre is well under way. Those arrangements put us in the best possible position to deal in a co-ordinated way with the impacts of EU exit and the concurrent risks of Covid-19 and winter weather. We have already made use of the arrangements this week when considering the possible effects of the short straits situation.

We are now fully focused on protecting people, protecting imports and exports of essential goods, minimising the economic impact and ensuring that the necessary legislative changes are in place, in so far as we are able to do so.

We continue to do everything that we can to protect vulnerable people, our communities and the third sector through a £100 million package of support measures. We are—as we said that we would—providing £5 million-worth of support to Scottish wholesale food and drink businesses to help to support food supplies across the country. We will now need to do more, particularly for the shellfish and fishing sectors, which have been badly affected this week.

We are doing all that we can to ensure that patients will continue to receive the medicines that they need over the difficult months ahead, and we have confidence in those measures. We are also confident that the flow of vaccines will be protected.

We have implemented a wide range of measures to support businesses across all sectors of the Scottish economy. Our enterprise agencies are providing targeted advice and guidance to companies that are likely to encounter operational and financial challenges as a result of EU exit and Covid-19. Our multi-agency prepare for Brexit website, which is hosted by Scottish Enterprise, continues to provide advice, sources of financial support and online self-assessment toolkits.

Throughout the entire Brexit process, the Scottish Government has sought to engage constructively with the UK Government on preparedness issues. We will continue to advocate, as we have always done, for the interests of Scottish businesses and of the

Scottish people, whenever possible. However, I must be entirely straight with Parliament and with the people of Scotland: regardless of whether we exit the transition period with a low deal or with no deal, jobs and living standards will be hit hard.

There are many things that we simply do not know, although they will change in eight days. For example, we still do not know any detail on complex issues such as rules of origin requirements. If a deal is agreed, rules of origin will be essential in gaining preferential market access.

We still do not know what the rules will be for importing and exporting industrial goods between Scotland and the EU, or whether there will be an agreement on mutual recognition of conformity or specific provisions for individual sectors.

We do not yet know whether there will be a data adequacy decision or when that would be in place. Even if there is one, there will now be a gap. We do not know how long that will last for or whether there will be bridging mechanisms in place that cover data flows to the business sector in Scotland.

What is certain, however, is that red tape and the costs of doing business will increase massively; it is estimated that the number of UK-wide customs declarations will go up by a staggering 215 million. Scottish food and drink businesses will face damaging and expensive new paperwork requirements, including the need for export health certificates, because goods will be subject to separate regulation in the UK and the EU.

The Scottish Government understands how difficult and damaging EU exit will be for Scottish businesses. That is why we will continue to engage closely with them and to implement the wide range of measures that I outlined in detail in this and my previous statement. As soon as information becomes available from the UK Government, we will ensure that refreshed advice and guidance is available through our prepare for Brexit website.

We have been engaging with the UK Government to advocate specific Scottish needs whether we have no deal or a low deal, particularly in border planning, but this week we have had to remind the UK Government that we had already been assured that fresh seafood exports would be prioritised in the event of traffic delays at the short straits crossing. Therefore, the UK Government must urgently set out further details on how those arrangements will operate and put them into effect, even though the business highlight and absolute necessity of the Christmas trade has been lost by so many.

We are also working with partners to develop traffic management contingency plans for south-west Scotland, including plans for heavy goods vehicles, should capacity at the Cairnryan and Loch Ryan ports be exceeded. The plan is owned by the Dumfries and Galloway local resilience partnership, and we will provide further details in due course.

Scotland did not vote for any of this, and it is with profound and deep regret that we find ourselves in this position today of all days, and at this difficult time of all times. The solution for Scotland, of course, is to choose its own future as an independent nation within the EU, and we can decide on making that choice in less than five months at the Holyrood election.

In the meantime, we will do everything that we can to support and help all who live in Scotland at this difficult time. We will continue to keep the chamber updated, and we will redouble our efforts to make sure that all our neighbours—all our neighbours—understand that we aspire to a better future and are working to achieve it.

This is not over. There are still difficult times ahead, but we believe that we are as best prepared for them as we can be and that, despite the present darkness, we should look forward with anticipation and confidence to our future.

**Dean Lockhart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):**

I thank the cabinet secretary for an advance copy of his statement.

The cabinet secretary continues to suggest that the disruption at Dover is a precursor to Brexit. The disruption has nothing to do with Brexit—it is the result of a unilateral decision taken by French authorities, without notice, to close France's borders because of Covid. Thankfully, that situation has now been resolved.

If we reach a trade agreement with the EU—which I hope that we do before the end of the month; EU trade negotiations always go down to the wire—we will have full access to the single market. The question today is whether the Scottish National Party will support such a trade deal, because in recent weeks we have heard conflicting answers from the First Minister, the cabinet secretary and others on whether they will support a free trade deal with the EU. That is not surprising, because we know that, deep down, the SNP is against free trade; it has failed to support every single trade deal in the past 15 years, including UK trade deals with Canada, Japan and Singapore—

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** That is not appropriate, Mr Lockhart.

**Dean Lockhart:** —all of which are important markets for Scottish exports. I have two questions

for the cabinet secretary. First, will the SNP support a free trade deal with the EU? Yes, or no? Secondly, why has the SNP failed to support every single trade deal during the past 15 years?

**Michael Russell:** Oh dear—those are the questions that Mr Lockhart asked me the last time that I made a statement on this topic. Since then, we have seen the spectacle of Scottish goods not being able to get out of the country—I have constituents who have lost tens of thousands of pounds as a result of that. Since then, there has been no movement in the trade talks whatsoever, yet the dismal questioning continues.

I want to say three things to Dean Lockhart. This is the season of good will, so I will say them less forcefully than I might otherwise have. [*Interruption.*] There are noises off coming from a member who has strong connections with Orkney. He should remember the damage that is being done to the Orkney trade by what is happening, and when he returns to Orkney I am sure that there will be people who wish to remind him of that.

First, I cannot imagine that the current situation would have arisen had the UK been in good standing with, and been a full member of, the EU. The reality is that the UK is now a third country in a transition arrangement, so it is not true to say that there is no connection between what we have seen and what is taking place. Even if there was no connection, the situation still illustrates what could happen as a result of no deal. Even the firmest Brexiteer who sees no connection at all should read a lesson from that.

Secondly, apparently the UK Government will bring back an agreement on full access to the single market to the House of Commons, which would also come to this Parliament. It would be remarkable for that to happen, given that that is not being negotiated for and has already been ruled out. However, according to Dean Lockhart—who is in apparent daily contact with David Frost—that will take place.

I will be generous today as it is Christmas. Even if there is a proposal for us to be in the single market but not in the customs union, I would encourage my Westminster colleagues to support membership of the single market. However, I do not think that that is what we will be brought.

Finally, I support free trade, as does the SNP, this Government and the Parliament. We all know that that is the case. What we saw today and yesterday from Mr Lockhart is a rather unpleasant way of peddling half-truths, partially quoting things and trying to attack others. I wish him the compliments of the season; I also wish him a better approach in 2021.

**Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab):** We are eight days from the end of the transition period and there is still no remorse from the Scottish Conservatives. That is an unforgivable disgrace. Their behaviour would be unacceptable at any time, but is even worse in the midst of a global pandemic when thousands of our fellow citizens have lost their lives and hundreds of thousands risk losing their livelihoods. It is unforgivable.

I agree with the cabinet secretary and the Scottish Government that this is a shambles of the Tories and Boris Johnson's making. I agree that the situation will cost jobs, damage living standards and diminish our place in the world. However, I seek consensus with the cabinet secretary on more than that. We must collectively put the national interest first. We must not compound chaos and division with more of the same. We must instead work together in the national interest to protect jobs, bring our country together and focus on our Covid recovery, not on another divisive referendum. I will work with the cabinet secretary on that. Will he commit to that today?

**Michael Russell:** As ever, Mr Sarwar's contribution was good in parts. I agree with him about the Conservative Party. It is astonishing that the Conservatives do not heed former Labour leader Clement Atlee's remark to a departing cabinet member:

"A period of silence would be in order."

That is what we should have heard. It might be too much to expect the Tories to apologise, although there are good Conservatives—well, I can see two out of the four—who, I am sure, feel embarrassed by the people who they sit among. A period of apology or of silence would be welcome.

On the question of a referendum, I am sorry to disappoint not only Mr Sarwar, but the leader of the Liberal Democrats, who was enthusiastically clapping Mr Sarwar. Willie Rennie is on a bit of a roll on that issue today. He clearly woke up and decided that independence would be his theme for today. I look forward to his question.

The reality of the situation is that Brexit and the pandemic present us with a choice about how we move forward. Should we do so by having decisions and choices made for us by the UK Tories as we currently do, and by a UK system that has failed us, that has not told us the truth and that did not tell us the truth during the 2014 referendum? Will we instead trust the talent in this Parliament—including Mr Sarwar and Mr Rennie—and choose for ourselves to make those decisions and how to move forward? If we make those decisions wisely among ourselves, we can have a prosperous future.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** We move to open questions. There are quite a few and I doubt that I will get through them all. Please ask succinct questions and give succinct answers.

**Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP):** The Culture, Tourism, Europe and External Affairs Committee recently published a report pointing out that businesses will be outside the customs union and will face significant regulatory and bureaucratic burdens even if the UK manages to secure an 11th hour, bare-bones deal with the EU. For example, businesses do not yet even know which rules of origin requirements they must comply with. That does not mean membership of the single market, no matter what Mr Lockhart is trying to say. However, it does mean that queues of lorries could become a permanent feature at our borders. Does the cabinet secretary agree with the committee's recommendation that the very least that business deserves is for the UK Government to request a period of grace—in effect, an extension of the transition period—to avoid such a calamity?

**Michael Russell:** I do agree.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Well, that was useful—thank you, Mr Russell.

**Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** Scotland's important fishing industry is looking forward to the United Kingdom becoming an independent coastal state and regaining control of our waters. However, although the cabinet secretary's party's former leader, Alex Salmond, used to believe that it was

"imperative that we remove the dead hand of Brussels mismanagement as soon as possible"

from our fishing sector, is it not true that Mr Russell and his SNP colleagues would take Scotland's fishermen straight back into the hated common fisheries policy just as soon as they could?

**Michael Russell:** The SNP Government would take the produce from Scottish producers straight into the European market—something that the Tories have prevented from happening.

The reality of the situation is that that was a fatuous question, because even the Tories now realise that they are going to sell out the Scottish fishing industry, as they have sold out everyone else. The object lesson is that, this week, we have seen people and companies suffering enormously, and they include fishing companies in my constituency, which I represent. [*Interruption.*]

If Mr Halcro Johnston could stop shouting for a moment, perhaps I will be able to get something through to him. Those fishing companies are on the brink of bankruptcy because of the Tories. A period of silence would be in order.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I call Annabelle Ewing, to be followed by Pauline McNeill.

**Jamie Halcro Johnston:** That is misleading and the cabinet secretary knows it.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Mr Halcro Johnston, please.

**Jamie Halcro Johnston:** That is misleading—

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Mr Halcro Johnston, you are seated, so you should not be chuntering away and disrupting everyone.

**Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP):** Leaving to one side the wrongs of forcing EU citizens who live here to apply for rights that they already have, will the cabinet secretary take this opportunity to urge those who have not yet done so, both in my Cowdenbeath constituency and across Scotland, to apply to the settlement scheme? What message does the Scottish Government have for EU citizens who have chosen to make Scotland their home?

**Michael Russell:** I entirely agree that anyone who has not applied should do so within the timescale. What has taken place is immensely regrettable and very upsetting for people. Again, unfortunately, that lies at the door of the Tories.

I encourage people to apply to the scheme. My message to them is that they are welcome, they are contributing wonderfully well, we are delighted that they have made this place their home and we want them to stay here. We hope that, before too long, we will all be back in the EU and some sense will have returned to the situation.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I remind members of the meaning of “succinct questions”. I call Pauline McNeill, to be followed by Stuart McMillan.

Ms McNeill, we cannot hear you. There appears to be a problem. We will move on to Stuart McMillan’s question and come back to you.

**Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP):** With a no-deal situation now looking likely, how many Scottish manufacturing jobs is it estimated will be lost? What is the estimated overall impact of that on the Scottish economy?

**Michael Russell:** The sheer complexity of the supply chains for components makes the full impact of EU exit extremely difficult for companies to estimate. Undoubtedly, though, having no deal will make the calculation more difficult and the situation even worse.

On 5 November, Paul Sheerin, the chief executive officer of Scottish Engineering, said in evidence to the Parliament’s Culture, Tourism, Europe and External Affairs Committee that there will be a “substantial impact”, but even he could

not say precisely what it will be. With the manufacturing sector in Scotland accounting for about 169,000 jobs, it is vital that we do everything that we can to protect it, but there will be job losses.

**Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD):** The cabinet secretary’s statement was just a long list of reasons why we should not follow independence after Brexit. That would be not to learn the lessons.

On a point of consensus, however, I am a particular supporter of the European arrest warrant, which has helped to track down criminals across Europe and return them to justice. What efforts is the Scottish Government making to maintain good relationships with criminal justice authorities and police forces across Europe so that criminals have nowhere to hide?

**Michael Russell:** On the member’s second point, he is absolutely right to say that we need to ensure that the relationships between the police forces, the prosecutors and the legal systems continue to be maintained. Fortunately, we have a chief constable who wishes to do that, a Lord Advocate who wishes to do that and a Government that wishes to do that, so a lot of effort is going into making sure that it happens and that the disadvantages are mitigated to whatever degree is possible. However, the member will recognise that, in a legal system, it is not possible to mitigate everything, because a structure exists and the law is the law.

On the member’s first point, we must agree to differ. It is the difference between a glass being half full and half empty. Willie Rennie looks at the list that I gave and thinks that there is a problem with it; I look at the list and it convinces me that we must do something about the problem. The solution to the problem lies in the hands of the people of Scotland, thank goodness. What Mr Rennie must do is to support their right to say so.

**Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green):** The Erasmus+ scheme has been of immense benefit to young people in Scotland, and particularly those who attend colleges and youth groups in some of our most deprived communities. However, the UK Government apparently does not want to continue with full participation. Could the Scottish Government use some of the good will that has been generated for Scotland in the capitals of Europe and Brussels and make a direct request for full Scottish participation in the scheme if the UK Government is not willing to negotiate for that on our behalf?

**Michael Russell:** The member is right to say that the UK Government has refused to negotiate even a partial deal that involves Scotland and Wales, for example, although the Welsh

Government and the Scottish Government have been at one on that, and Northern Ireland is keen on it, too.

The member makes a good point. Alas, it will not be possible for us to do that until the UK decides what it is going to do. We believe that that decision is being made, but we do not yet know the final outcome. I agree with the member that, if there is a negative decision, we—along with Wales and possibly Northern Ireland—should make a direct approach to Erasmus. That will not be easy to do, but I think that the member is proposing something that is sensible, and I will be happy to work with him and like-minded people in the Parliament to see whether we can do something.

**Maureen Watt (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP):** James Withers, the chief executive officer of Scotland Food & Drink, has warned that a no-deal Brexit would be an

“act of huge economic negligence”,

and the Andersons Centre’s analysis of Brexit impacts on Scottish agricultural sectors shows that the challenges for Scottish agriculture will be huge no matter what kind of exit from the EU we have. Will the cabinet secretary give his response to the findings of that report and talk about the impact that any kind of Brexit will have on this vital part of the Scottish economy?

**Michael Russell:** I agree with James Withers, who has also been making some important points this week about the difficulties around the short straits, and I very much support him.

The Andersons Centre’s report is thoughtful. It sets out the challenges and risks that are faced by the agriculture sector and it points out that a no-deal Brexit would be hugely damaging and that there would be substantial and lasting impacts to overall Scottish agricultural output. The risks and potential impacts of a no-deal Brexit beyond the end of the transition period are well documented and are well backed up by the report, but I would contend that a low deal would also be damaging.

**Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab):** Does the cabinet secretary agree that it is a mistake for the Scottish Tories to support the negotiations going down to the wire, which Dean Lockhart attempted to justify earlier, given that we are close to having a disastrous no-deal Brexit, with food prices and living standards being impacted?

Can the cabinet secretary also say more about the £100 million fund for vulnerable communities and say how that might help ordinary families if there are rising food costs, which it looks like there will be?

**Michael Russell:** I think that the remark that EU talks always go down to the wire was highly

irresponsible. The talks going down to the wire means that, eight days before the deadline, people do not know what is going to happen to their businesses. In my view, that is a nonsense.

On the £100 million fund, I would be happy to get Aileen Campbell, the Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government, to write to the member, but I know that there is a long list of allocations from the fund and applications to the fund. It is designed to get as close as possible to communities and individuals, and particularly those individuals who will be most disadvantaged.

The member knows well, because she is very knowledgeable in these areas, that the people who will be worst affected are those who are furthest from society. It is a difficult position for them, and we will do our best to help them.

**Peter Chapman (North East Scotland) (Con):** In his statement, the cabinet secretary made much of the fact that, with days to go until the end of the transition period, no deal has been done. I am likewise anxious that we still have no deal. However, unlike Mr Russell, I do not blame our negotiating team for that state of affairs, and even he must realise that it always takes two to do a deal.

Will the cabinet secretary join me in condemning the completely unrealistic demands that the EU has made for continued unfair access to our fishing waters, and its expectation that the UK would sign a deal that would mean that we would be the only independent country in the world that did not control its own fishing waters?

**Michael Russell:** Mr Chapman cannot know what the proposals are unless he has been told by the negotiators, and without being unkind to him, I doubt that that is the case, to be honest.

I say to him that I want the best possible deal for everyone who is involved so that we get the best deal for Scotland. Therefore, I will join him if, at any stage, he argues that what we want is a deal that is fair to the people of Scotland, that produces long-term results and that does not create an enormous amount of bad feeling.

However, if he is trying to say that it is all the fault of somebody else and not the fault of the party of which he is a representative, he is utterly wrong. Brexit is a disaster that is owned by the Conservatives—I am glad to see him nodding—and they must take responsibility for it, including the member.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I can squeeze in a short question from Kenny Gibson.

**Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP):** The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Kate Forbes, wrote to the Chancellor of the Exchequer to request more funding from the UK Government

following the announcement of a £400 million post-Brexit support package for Northern Ireland, which has already been given a comprehensive advantage over Scotland in Brexit deliberations. Pro rata, Scotland should receive £1.4 billion. What has been the UK Government's response?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Can we have a short answer, please, Mr Russell?

**Michael Russell:** There has not been a response. I think that that is very negligible of them—I mean negligent, of course, but they are negligible, too.

As that was the final question, I wish everybody a happy Christmas—even the Conservatives, despite the fact that they have done their best to ruin it.

## Scottish General Election (Coronavirus) Bill: Stage 3

15:08

**The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh):** Our next item of business is stage 3 proceedings on the Scottish General Election (Coronavirus) Bill. In dealing with the amendments—of which there are only four—members should have the bill as amended at stage 2, the marshalled list and the groupings of amendments. I remind members that the division bell will sound and there will be a five-minute suspension before the first division, should there be one this afternoon. Each division will last one minute.

### Section 4—Report on uptake of postal voting at closing date

**The Presiding Officer:** Group 1 is on postal voting arrangements for the 2021 election. Amendment 2, in the name of Graeme Dey, is grouped with amendments 3 and 4.

**The Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans (Graeme Dey):** Section 4 sets out the requirements for a report that the Scottish ministers are obliged to publish after the new deadline for postal vote applications. As amended at stage 2, the bill provides that the report will set out the number of persons who are registered to vote at the 2021 election, the number of persons who have been granted a postal vote for the election, and the number of applications still pending.

Amendment 2 seeks to add a requirement to section 4 that the report must contain information on the funding provided by the Scottish ministers to ensure that electoral registration officers have adequate resources to deal with any increase in applications for a postal vote for the 2021 election, which is any increase arising as a result of the coronavirus. That responds to Anas Sarwar's stage 2 amendment 19, which was on a similar theme. I asked Anas Sarwar not to move that amendment on the understanding that I would prepare a similar amendment for stage 3, and amendment 2 delivers on that undertaking. It also permits the report to include such further information relating to postal voting as ministers consider to be appropriate.

Amendment 3 is consequential on amendment 2 and simply applies the usual definition of an electoral registration officer.

Amendment 4, lodged by Anas Sarwar, seeks to oblige the Electoral Commission to include postal vote application forms in its communications to voters. It seems that the intention is to include

them in the information booklet that the Electoral Commission will issue to every household in March. The amendment also seeks to ensure that the application form can be returned at no cost to the voter.

I appreciate that the member wants to encourage people who would benefit from a postal vote to make an application. That is a laudable aim, and we are indeed preparing for a massive increase in the amount of postal voting, from around 18 per cent of the electorate to around 40 per cent or even 50 per cent. However, we are not seeking to promote postal ballots ahead of all other forms of voting.

Arrangements will be made in polling places to allow people to vote safely. Indeed, such measures have already been applied in by-elections this autumn. I know that this is not his intention, but there is a risk that the member's approach would send a signal to electors that voting in person is perceived to be unsafe. It would also result in a large number of people who already have a postal vote receiving a new application form. That could cause confusion and result in duplicate applications, which registration officers cite as a significant problem in processing applications.

A further problem is that around 60 per cent of households in Scotland are comprised of two or more adults, so there would inevitably be problems if only one copy of the form arrived at the household. Because the Electoral Commission booklet is to go to all households, there will be cases in which the application form will be sent to households that have no registered occupants. Finally, applications will have to be returned to a centralised return address, then distributed to local registration officers, adding a further layer of bureaucracy and wasting valuable processing time.

I agree that people need to be made aware of their options, and we are doing that. That is why the chief medical officer will write to those who are shielding in January to highlight the postal vote process. It is also why the Government has agreed to cover the cost of registration officers writing to 2.5 million households in February to highlight their voting options. That correspondence will note who is registered to vote at an address, and who already has a postal vote or a proxy vote. It will provide details of how to register or apply for postal or proxy votes, and it will promote online and telephone options for doing that, so that there are no postage costs to the applicant.

Members have pointed out that there can be a cost in a relatively small number of cases when people apply for a postal vote. The measures will proactively direct voters to the local registration

office for postal vote applications to ensure that they do not incur any such costs.

In conclusion, given what I have just said, I do not agree that it is necessary to indiscriminately distribute thousands of postal vote application forms to people who do not need them or who do not want them. Also, given the timing of the Electoral Commission's booklet, there would be a risk of creating a surge at the very point in the process at which people would not want that. I therefore invite Mr Sarwar not to move his amendment and if he does, I urge members not to support it.

I move amendment 2.

**Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab):** I thank the minister for amendment 2, which we will support. It is a welcome intervention that will make sure that EROs and the process of the election will be fully resourced.

15:15

Given what the minister has set out today, and the briefing that we have had from the Electoral Commission, I will not push amendment 4 to a vote. However, I want to make what I think is an important point on the principle. To be frank, we have, as a collective, shown a lack of ambition in the bill. What I mean is that I fully accept that we need to make the electorate more aware of their rights and of how they can vote in the election, but we also need to make it easier for them to exercise those rights.

When the minister and I had discussions, including at stage 2, we both had a desire for the booklet to go out as early as possible. My preference was for it to be towards the end of January and his was for some point in February. I would have compromised on the beginning of February, but the booklet will not now go out until 22 March. There will be a very short timeframe from when the booklet goes out until the new deadline, because the deadline is being made two weeks earlier, as well.

Also, as opposed to making people aware of how they can vote and making it easier for them to do so, we have added layers of process for the electorate. We are hoping, first, that they will be aware of a public information campaign. It is claimed that a public information campaign started in October. I would like to think that I am slightly politically aware, and that the minister is too, but I have not seen any campaign about how people can vote by post in the election, so I am surprised to hear the claim that there has been such a campaign. I—we—need that campaign to start as soon as possible.

However, we are also relying on the electorate to receive a booklet or mailing, to open that, read it and get to the relevant page—there will be 32 local authorities and local electoral registration officers listed—to identify their ERO. Then, we hope that they will phone the ERO, that the ERO answers the call—if not, we hope that the ERO will phone them back—that they will stay on the call for what may be a long time, given that everyone will be directed to those ERO offices, and that the ERO posts out an application form with a freepost return. They must then wait for the form to come and we hope that they will open that mailing and post it back. Otherwise, they have to email the ERO and hope to get a response or print out an application form and go out from their homes to buy a stamp for an envelope to post it back in. That does not sound like an easy process.

If we are going to give the resources to the EROs to write to every local household and they are going to say in that mailing whether the person has a postal vote, why not include the application form with that and a freepost return for the person to send it back in, if we are actively trying to encourage more people to use their vote? That is what I am hoping that the minister will see some sense on. He called me paranoid at stage 1 and he is probably going to call me cynical at stage 3, but what I would hate to see—if the EROs and Electoral Commission do not send out application forms with a freepost return—is political parties doing that instead, so that they are the people who are filtering the forms and sending them on to the EROs. That would be really unfortunate and go against the vital principle of what we want for the election, which is for it to be accessible and fair. I hoped that we could work together on that, and I hope that the minister will see sense on it in these final moments.

In saying that, we will support Graeme Dey's amendments 2 and 3 and I will not move amendment 4.

**The Presiding Officer:** Patrick Harvie joins us remotely.

**Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green):** I am pleased that Anas Sarwar raised these issues, both at stage 2 and now at stage 3, even if, for reasons that we all discussed, the precise amendment that he lodged at stage 2 was not quite right. I think that the minister has brought the right solution, both in his amendment and in the commitments that he has given verbally in the chamber. We all want the same thing. We want people to be able to register for a postal vote and we want that to be easy and free of cost.

Anas Sarwar slightly overstates the complexity and difficulty involved in registering. The range of options that exist will make it easy and cost free for people to register for, and then exercise, a

postal vote, and that is what we should all be seeking to do.

The bill is not simply the result of Government work—it has been shaped by cross-party discussion. I think that, on balance, it reflects all the issues that were brought to that discussion, including by Anas Sarwar's colleagues in the Labour Party. I hope that we can unite around the fact that we have a bill that addresses the concerns that many of us have raised during the process.

**Graeme Dey:** I welcome Mr Sarwar's announcement that he will not move his amendment, but I want to cover a few points.

I do not in any way accept that there is a lack of ambition in the bill. If anything, the actions that I have outlined today make it easier—and free—for voters to register for a postal vote if they wish. I share Mr Sarwar's desire regarding the Electoral Commission's post-out date for the booklet but, as he well knows, neither he nor I can instruct the commission.

However, the booklet from the Electoral Commission is not pivotal to the postal vote. We will have already, through the EROs, written to households at a local level, as I said, to make them aware of whether all household occupants are registered and whether they have a postal or proxy vote. It will contain clear instructions as to how to address any situation that requires to be addressed at a local level, not via a third party or by going through the Electoral Commission.

It is very simple. There will be a telephone number so that people can phone the local ERO and a form will be sent out free of charge. Alternatively, they can go online and request the form. I am not sure whether Mr Sarwar is sighted on this but, because of changes that we made earlier this year, people can take a photograph of their completed form and send it back to the ERO, and it will be accepted.

We have come a long way this year in making it easier for people to vote, which was our intention. For the reasons that I have outlined, I do not accept that freepost is necessary, so I welcome Mr Sarwar's decision not to move amendment 4. I invite members to support the amendments in my name.

*Amendment 2 agreed to.*

*Amendment 3 moved—[Graeme Dey]—and agreed to.*

#### **After section 4**

*Amendment 4 not moved.*

### Section 8—Power to provide for polling on additional days

**The Presiding Officer:** Group 2 is on the power to provide for polling on additional days. Amendment 1, in the name of the minister, is the only amendment in the group.

**Graeme Dey:** The question of whether and how additional days of polling should be arranged is a difficult one, and that is reflected in the amendments to which the committee agreed at stage 2. As I said then, we are not yet at the time when we have to take a decision. I hope that we do not need to use the power, but I am keeping the situation under review with the convener of the Electoral Management Board for Scotland. The bill now provides that any additional days of polling will depend on the convener recommending that those days are needed. I remind members that the current advice from the convener is that one day will be sufficient.

On that and much else, it is important that we are guided by those who have the relevant expertise in running elections. The bill now provides for the use of the power to be subject to the affirmative procedure and to be accompanied by a statement of reasons. In the stage 2 discussion, I gave Adam Tomkins an undertaking that I would lodge a further amendment to restrict the use of section 8 to circumstances in which the Scottish ministers considered it necessary for reasons relating to the coronavirus. Amendment 1 delivers on that commitment, and I invite members to support it.

To avoid any doubt, I repeat that, at present, neither I nor the electoral administrators expect to need to use the power, but the bill provides for worst-case scenarios.

I move amendment 1.

*Amendment 1 agreed to.*

**The Presiding Officer:** That ends consideration of amendments. As members will be aware, at this stage in proceedings, I am required under standing orders to decide whether, in my view, any provision of the bill relates to a protected subject matter—that is, whether it modifies the electoral system or the franchise for Scottish Parliament elections. The bill, despite the fact that it is called the Scottish General Election (Coronavirus) Bill, does not relate to a protected subject matter, and therefore it does not require a supermajority to be passed at stage 3.

## Scottish General Election (Coronavirus) Bill

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Lewis Macdonald):** The next item of business is a debate on motion S5M-23768, in the name of Graeme Dey, on the Scottish General Election (Coronavirus) Bill.

15:25

**The Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans (Graeme Dey):** The events of the past few days have underlined the uncertainty that is involved in responding to the virus and the merits of contingency planning. In that time, discussion on the election has quickly moved from debating whether vaccines will reduce the number of people applying to vote by post to talk of postponing the election entirely. I think that such talk is extremely premature at best, not least because the content of the bill renders us well placed to respond to any further problems that are raised by the pandemic.

On the development of the bill, I particularly recognise the work of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee in scrutinising it and that of the many electoral professionals who shared their expertise throughout the process. I also thank MSPs from all parties for their helpful contributions in the development and passage of the bill. Patrick Harvie was right: the bill is a creature of the Parliament; it is not purely a Government production. Just as important, I note the work of the bill team, for whom this was the third significant piece of proposed legislation in little over a year.

Before discussing the bill's provisions, I will mention a vital feature of our discussions: keeping voters fully informed. As we know, the Electoral Commission will launch its main public awareness campaign for the election in March 2021. The campaign will run across television, digital and radio—it will not simply involve the booklet, albeit that that will be delivered to every household in Scotland. The booklet will contain much more than references to postal and proxy voting; it will be the standard booklet that goes out from the commission for an election.

I know that some members would rather that the booklet was being sent at an earlier point. As I said earlier, I agree with Anas Sarwar on that. I entirely agree that communication on the election before March is essential. However, as I have indicated, the commission's booklet covers a range of matters. It will help to direct people for physical voting, which will be an important part of the election, and its going out will coincide with the issuing of polling cards. The Electoral Commission

considers that March remains the best time for its booklet to be deployed, and it is not budging on that.

I can reassure members, however, that a range of other actions are also being taken. Electoral registration officers are already taking steps to raise awareness locally, and they are exploring having a national television advert. The chief medical officer will write to all those on the shielding list in January on their options for voting. That will be done in consultation with the Electoral Commission and will reach 169,000 people.

As I noted earlier, the Government will fund a letter to be sent by electoral registration officers to all households in early February, advising voters on registration, the postal vote process and the deadline for applications.

Returning officers also have a part to play in encouraging participation in their local areas. They employ a variety of methods, disseminating information through social media, radio and print advertising, as well as via networks such as community councils. Government funding is in place to underpin all that work.

Turning to the provisions of the bill, I am pleased that members from all parties agree that the Parliament must be able to resume at any point before the election in order to legislate for a postponement, if that is necessary. Modifying the dissolution period is a sensible and pragmatic step, which will enable Parliament to sit and legislate for a new polling date. I remind members that that change means that we will all retain our status as MSPs until the day before the election. I again thank Scottish Parliament officials for their work on new guidance to cover conduct issues.

The bill includes a further contingency measure in the event that the Parliament cannot itself legislate for a postponement, despite the delay to dissolution under the bill. That power is based on, and is an expansion of, the existing power of the Presiding Officer to seek to postpone the election by one month. For the 2021 poll, we have replaced that power with a power to delay for up to six months.

Section 3 brings forward the deadline for application for a postal vote to 6 April, which is a change that electoral professionals specifically requested. Indeed, it is an essential change in the bill from their perspective, given that electoral registration officers might have to process an increase in postal voting from the current 18 per cent of the electorate to 40 per cent or possibly 50 per cent.

It is clear that, as well as giving electoral professionals additional time to process the increase in postal votes, they must be properly resourced, so I am pleased that the amendment

that sought to provide clearer information on the resourcing that is provided to electoral professionals, which I discussed with Anas Sarwar, has been agreed today.

Section 5 provides a power for an all-postal vote. As I said during the stage 1 debate, the Government does not want, nor expect, to hold an all-postal election, but we are putting in place a contingency measure in case the public health situation significantly deteriorates. It is also agreed that the election would have to be postponed to be made all postal. I listened carefully to the concerns that were raised about the breadth of that power. As a result, I lodged amendments at stage 2 to make the use of the power subject to the affirmative procedure, and to require ministers to lay a statement of reasons, which further increases transparency and accountability to Parliament were that power ever to be used.

Members raised concerns in similar terms about the power in section 8 for ministers to provide for polling to occur over more than one day—potentially over a period of up to nine days. I recognised the concerns that were raised about polling over multiple days and sought at stage 2 to make any use of the power subject to the convener of the Electoral Management Board for Scotland's recommendation that polling should take place over additional days. That power was also made subject to the affirmative procedure at stage 2 and I agreed with Adam Tomkins that it should be exercised only for a reason that relates to coronavirus. I am pleased that an amendment to that effect has been agreed today.

The bill reflects our collective duty to ensure that the people of Scotland are able to exercise their democratic rights. I am confident that it provides us with the flexibility to ensure safe delivery of the 2021 Scottish parliamentary election.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees that the Scottish General Election (Coronavirus) Bill be passed.

15:32

**Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con):** I am pleased to take part in the stage 3 debate. I thank all those organisations that have provided useful briefings for today's debate and earlier stages of the bill's consideration. I also commend all those who have worked on, and contributed to, the bill, including members of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee and the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee, during what has been a truncated parliamentary process.

As it is the season of good will, I take the opportunity also to thank the minister, who has constructively engaged with all parties on the bill. We got everything on our Christmas wish list for

the bill and I welcome the fact that that positive engagement has paid off.

I am pleased that we have largely been able to achieve significant cross-party consensus on the bill as it has advanced its way through the Parliament. As the minister stated, this debate is just a few days after the news that a new variant of Covid-19 has emerged—there is already talk today of a second variant in South Africa. That news has understandably raised further questions about May's election and emphasised the critical need for the bill and its provisions and contingencies, so that we can protect our democracy and ensure that we can hold a safe election.

From the outset, local authorities and returning officers have expressed concerns at the pressures that an election, and an expected increase in postal votes applications, will present to them. We continue to deal with the fast-evolving public health crisis and it is important—indeed, it is common sense—that the Parliament has the powers and options that are available in the bill in relation to an expected election in May of next year.

We welcome the major change that the appropriate opportunity to scrutinise and approve a number of key decisions in relation to any changes to an upcoming election, should the Covid situation deteriorate any further, will be given to the Parliament as a whole, rather than the decision being down solely to Scottish National Party ministers.

When dealing with the subject, it is right that the Parliament, rather than solely ministers, is involved in decision making and it is appropriate that the bill now ensures that any changes to postal votes and polling over additional days are now subject to the affirmative procedure of the Parliament.

We look forward to ministers working with local authorities and election teams to make the public aware that the deadline for postal vote applications for the election will be brought forward to 6 April, in anticipation of the extra volume of applications. Ministers also need to ensure that our councils and election units have all the support and resources that are required to process the expected increase in the number of those applications.

I welcome the information that the minister outlined about the public information campaign, particularly about television advertising and the additional communications that people will receive and hopefully engage with early on.

We all know the incredible pressures that local authorities in all areas are under, as we speak. In the weeks and months ahead, they are likely to be

under even more pressure as we enter higher protection levels. I take the opportunity to pay tribute to all those who are working over the Christmas period, especially those in local government, for the work that they will be doing on behalf of us all.

All members in the chamber hope that the election in May will go ahead on the scheduled date, that we can ensure that we run a safe election and count, and that the next Parliament can safely sit as soon as possible afterwards. The fact that, during the pandemic, several major national elections have taken place internationally, and several council by-elections have taken place across the country, should reassure us that elections can take place during a public health emergency. Given the situation that we are now seeing in relation to the virus, I hope that, as a Parliament, we will have a discussion early in the new year about whether a delay is needed, and work to provide clarity to allow local authorities to plan for any delay as soon as possible.

I welcome the debate. The Scottish Conservatives will support the bill at decision time.

15:36

**Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab):** I, too, thank everyone who was involved in pulling the bill together, and I am grateful for all the cross-party engagement that took place throughout its progress. I should give a special thank you to my colleagues Alex Rowley and Neil Findlay, who did most of the leg work on the bill. As with the UK Withdrawal from the European Union (Continuity) (Scotland) Bill yesterday, I just came in at the latter stages for some of the glory at the end—the hard work was done by others, and I thank them for that.

The key point of the bill is to make sure that people feel confident to go out and vote in May, that it is safe for them to do so, and that it is safe for those who are conducting the election. I hope that we can deliver on those aims.

**Graeme Dey:** At stage 2, Anas Sarwar raised issues around the practicalities of polling stations. I hope that he finds it useful that I have reached agreement with the electoral professionals to provide all members with a briefing and update on the progress around awareness raising regarding the postal vote, social distancing measures and how they are addressing the challenges that Anas Sarwar raised at stage 2.

**Anas Sarwar:** I thank the minister for his intervention. I was going to raise the issue of polling places. I gave the minister the example of the First Minister's constituency, in which, although there is one polling box per 800 people to allow social distancing, there are polling places

that have more than 2,000 electors, which will be a challenge on any single day. It depends on how many people take up the postal votes. There is a concern that if there are far fewer postal vote applications than predicted, there might be added footfall on the day, so I welcome the minister's reassurance.

Another issue is the number of polling days. I welcome where we have got to in the bill, in that the power to determine that is now subject to the affirmative procedure. However, I caveat that by saying that we may have a situation in which the Electoral Management Board for Scotland does not recommend either having or not having multiple polling days, but, as a public health measure, the Parliament decides that we need more than one day. I hope that the matter could be addressed through consultation with the Electoral Management Board for Scotland if that situation did arise. There is a wider debate to be had about the number of polling days that we have, outwith our Covid response, but that is for another time.

On the public information campaign, I know that the minister shares my frustration about how late the booklets will go out. I accept that it is not only the booklets that will be part of the campaign, which needs to have television, radio, mail and social media elements. I urge him and all members, collectively, to say to the Electoral Commission that the campaign must start as early as possible and be as well resourced and simple as possible if we are to get the message out to people.

Apart from that, we are in a good place with the bill. Obviously, as the Covid response continues and we see where we are come January, February and March, that might mean different considerations for us. Just as we have had good cross-party discussions during the bill process, I hope that that will continue as we get closer to the election.

I thank the minister for his interventions and positive engagement throughout the process. I also thank him for his commitment to there being no impediment to EROs getting the resources that they need, as there should be no price on ensuring that we have a free and fair democracy.

15:41

**Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green):** Once again, I note my appreciation of the cross-party dialogue that there has been in the production of the bill. I will not go quite as far as Miles Briggs did—perhaps my Christmas wish list is a bit more imaginative than being confined to the measures in the bill—but if he is happy, I am happy for him.

The committee benefited from a great deal of expert evidence, as did the MSPs who discussed

the bill with the Government before the bill's introduction. The one exception to that is the written submission in which the main complaint was that general elections in Scotland should not be called "general elections", because the United Kingdom also has general elections. I will spare the blushes of the member who submitted that. I am glad that we have reached a bill that, on balance, has broad support.

There is still a huge lack of clarity on what the uptake of postal voting is likely to be and what we need to plan for. That was never going to be a specified target in the bill—it does not work that way—but we need to be conscious that the demand for and uptake of postal voting will be determined not only by its availability or by the objective safety of voting, but by the perceived safety of voting. If more people feel anxious about voting in person, the uptake of postal voting may go beyond the current expectations.

In many ways, there is even less clarity now than there was when we debated the bill at stages 1 and 2, which was a very short time ago. During the stage 1 debate, we all recognised that the situation had been pretty dodgy a few months before, but we felt that, now that the vaccine was coming, we were turning a corner and there was a light at the end of tunnel. Now, in the final days of December, we are again all deeply worried about the virus taking another turn for the worse. We simply do not know where we will be and what the conditions will be by the end of April or the beginning of May. I regret that it is necessary to maintain the provision for an option to postpone the election. It is clear that, at this stage, that would not be welcomed by anyone, but the option must be in the bill.

I have a wider concern about participation in elections, which could never have been addressed by the bill, but which needs airing. Elections depend on lively, engaged democratic participation by not just voters, but political parties and, in the current circumstance, no one would welcome door-to-door canvassing, as they would not feel that that was safe. In the next few months, will we get to the point at which that could return? I simply do not know. Again, that is not something to be addressed in the bill.

There have been discussions about innovation and whether the coronavirus should be seen as an opportunity to innovate for the longer term. As I have said before, I am open to the idea of multiple polling days, just as I am open to the growth of postal voting. Not so long ago, people expected to need an excuse to have a postal vote; now, it is an expected right for everyone without having to justify themselves.

I have also supported extensions to the franchise and I would support consideration of

where we put polling places. However, taking the opportunity to innovate in a pandemic might, in fact, harm the longer-term objective of having positive innovations that will last. When these immediate circumstances are gone, people will ask why we should maintain them, if the pandemic was the reason for the change in the first place.

We all want the same thing. We want our elections to take place and to be safe and secure, with no barriers of cost. We want voter trust, confidence in the outcome and high levels of participation. Although I do not know how well we will achieve those things in 2021, the bill gives us the opportunity to do our best.

15:45

**Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD):** I, too, thank the minister, members, clerks and officials, who have worked so hard to bring us to this point, at breakneck speed.

Like others, I note that when the bill was first proposed, we could all have been forgiven for thinking that the end was in sight for the pandemic and that we were considering only contingencies. However, as we gather here at stage 3, the landscape has changed dramatically. With the very real prospect of serious lockdowns running to uncertain points into the spring, we can perhaps appreciate rather more how important these precautionary steps are.

At stage 1, I, like others, was concerned about the amount of power that was in the hands of ministers—who are, in this case, in a minority Government—to trigger changes to elections in which they have skin in the game. The sentiment that I expressed was against the backdrop of the US election, which exemplified the need for robust systems of scrutiny. If nothing else, it showed that scrutiny is essential to combat false accusations about the conduct of elections and restore public confidence in them.

I am pleased to see the progress that has been made at stage 2 and today, with amendments having been agreed to that place a limit on the exercise of that ministerial power and make changes that—as others have observed—have had cross-party support. There will now be stronger conditions for additional polling days to be called and a limit to the power to switch the election to be postal only. The bill therefore now gives us the best chance to run a safe and secure election, which is its underlying principle. As I said at stage 1, by May, we will have had our five-year session. It is therefore important that we do everything possible to make the election happen.

I again express my sincere thanks to all the members who have worked diligently and at pace to get the bill to this point. As Patrick Harvie rightly

said earlier, and as others have acknowledged, this has been—as it needed to be—a genuinely cross-party effort. I confirm that Scottish Liberal Democrats will be happy to support the bill at decision time.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Maureen Watt will be the only speaker in the open debate.

15:48

**Maureen Watt (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP):** I am pleased that there has been consensus around the necessity of this fast-tracked bill. When I spoke in the stage 1 debate a few short weeks ago, we had just heard about the availability of a vaccine against Covid-19 and we hoped that some of the measures proposed in the bill would not be required. However, as the minister said, and as others know, because of the new strains that are emerging and our facing harder tiers of lockdown, we see why the contingencies in the bill are necessary and why it is important to give powers to ministers and the Presiding Officer to act quickly and decisively.

Throughout the drafting and progression of the bill, those most closely involved in ensuring free and fair elections—the Electoral Management Board, the Electoral Commission, the Scottish Parliament and political parties—have been consulted and closely involved, and they all know about the complexities of running elections.

I am pleased that the minister is today ensuring that electoral registration officers will have the resources necessary to cope with an increase in the number of postal ballots, and that those applying for a postal ballot will not need to incur any cost in doing so. Anas Sarwar is trying to make heavy weather of this and he shows little or no confidence in the resourcefulness of electors who want a postal vote or the abilities of the electoral registration officers to deal with applications, which we hope will increase if people prefer to vote in that way in the election.

It is really important that we stress that turning up to vote in person at a polling station will be safe and secure, and that additional measures will be in place to ensure social distancing and the safety of voters. I am pleased that the minister has announced that members will be updated on the measures that are being taken on that.

I sincerely hope that the vote does not have to be postponed or taken over more than one day. As Patrick Harvie said, it is important to review the way in which elections are run, and, over the lifetime of this Parliament, we have already made changes to Scottish Parliament elections. However, the bill is not the way in which to take forward further changes. It is important that we all

work for maximum turnout, which might mean increasing the number of postal ballots.

I, too, thank the bill team for its work in drafting the bill so quickly, and the clerks and the Scottish Parliament information centre team who have helped take SPPA Committee members such as myself through the bill and its complexities.

Presiding Officer, I could take up my full four minutes, but I am sure that members have other things to do before they leave the building tonight. I hope that all will support the bill at decision time. Happy Christmas to all. [*Applause.*]

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** That was a popular contribution. We move to closing speeches.

15:51

**Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):** From the outset of our discussions with the Government, I have always been very clear that Labour's position was that the election must go ahead. The only person who has ever raised the possibility of postponing the election—while seeking to know what other parties were thinking—was Graeme Dey. I am not sure where talk of postponement came from, but we have certainly been clear from day 1 that democracy must go ahead.

However, the election will take place under unique circumstances, and we must seek to take an ambitious approach to ensuring the safety of voters and poll workers, and maximum voter turnout. That has always been our objective, and is why we have said—for example in the point that Anas Sarwar made when he moved his amendment—that there has to be a strong public information campaign that makes it clear that if people have any concerns whatsoever about voting next year, they should apply for a postal vote.

Last week, who would have thought that we would be looking at a virtual close-down for next week? That is what has happened. Looking ahead to May next year, we do not know what position we will be in; that is why we have supported the bringing forward of the legislation. We are absolutely clear that the poll has to take place and has to be safe. Certainly, that is why I have put forward from day 1 the argument that if the election needs to take place over not just one day but two or three, or if measures are needed to ensure the safety of not only voters but the staff who work in election centres, those steps need to be taken.

More than anything, I emphasise that, throughout the discussions, the Government gave a commitment to running a campaign that would

support and encourage people, if they felt unsafe, to get a postal vote. That requires the dedication of sufficient resources to meet the possible demand for postal voting. Again, the Government needs to make it clear to the Electoral Commission and to the electoral registration officers that resources will be made available where they are needed.

**Graeme Dey:** The member has had my assurance on that and, what is more, he has seen that demonstrated. I know that he is a very reasonable man, and I hope that he will accept that committing additional resources in order to fund a letter to 2.5 million households in early February is a clear demonstration of our commitments in that area.

**Alex Rowley:** That is welcome—it was a demand that I had been putting forward.

Democracy needs to prevail. People need to be able to go and vote, and to be able to do so safely. Let us look forward to the election and to ensuring that democracy in Scotland is not halted and people have their democratic right, regardless of where we are with the virus.

15:55

**Adam Tomkins (Glasgow) (Con):** When I first saw the bill, I had only two concerns about it. I thought that it was, by and large, a sensible and prudent measure. My concerns were simply that the flexibility about the date and timing and the circumstances of the next election to this place should not lie solely or even mainly in the hands of ministers. As was pointed out forcefully in the stage 1 debate, ministers cannot be the umpires of elections, because they are participants in it. I am grateful for the way in which Graeme Dey has listened to, engaged with and acted on those concerns.

The bill provides that the next election to this Parliament could be held under an all-postal ballot. Were that to prove necessary, it would require a delay to the election of several months. It is a big step. The bill as introduced would have allowed ministers to take that step. As amended, the bill places that power squarely in the hands of Parliament.

Likewise, the bill provides that the next election to this Parliament could be held on more than one polling day. Again, as introduced, the bill would have conferred that power on ministers. Again, we have amended the bill so that that, too, will be for Parliament to decide. Moreover, any such decision will be able to be taken only on the recommendation of the convener of the Electoral Management Board for Scotland.

Finally, the bill as amended makes it clear that those powers may be exercised only if it is necessary to do so by reason of the coronavirus pandemic.

As this is the last-but-one speech in the Parliament before the Christmas recess, I wanted to say a few words, reflecting not just on the bill but more broadly on the year that we have had. My colleagues and I on the Tory benches were elected four and a half years ago to be a strong Opposition. To my mind, that means that our job is to be an effective Opposition. In a Parliament of minorities, we are more likely to be effective—whether in government or in opposition—if we act and behave constructively. Just shouting “No” from the rooftops might appeal to the #SNPbad brigade on Twitter, but it is never likely to be effective, and ineffective opposition is not strong at all—indeed, it is pathetic.

This bill is a good example of effective opposition. By working with other Opposition parties, and indeed by working with the Government, we turned a problematic bill into one that we will happily support at decision time tonight.

This has been a difficult year for Oppositions, as it has been for a lot of people. Public emergencies push Governments centre stage. Not only do they occupy more of the limelight but they wield new, extraordinary and sometimes draconian powers. Holding the exercise of those powers to account is our job, and it has not been easy.

I want to close by paying tribute to all those who helped MSPs, not only in my party but across the chamber, to do that job—to the broadcasting and information technology staff who have worked tirelessly to ensure that our committees can function pretty much as effectively online as they can in Holyrood’s meeting rooms, and to you and your team, Presiding Officer, for the efforts that you have all made to enable this: a member addressing the Scottish Parliament not from the chamber but from his kitchen at home.

This has been a year that none of us will ever forget. As it draws to a close, I wish all my friends and colleagues in the Scottish Parliament, in all parties and in none, a merry—little—Christmas and a happy new year.

15:59

**Graeme Dey:** The bill on which we will vote in a few minutes’ time is, as Miles Briggs and other members have said, the result of constructive and collaborative working. There is no doubt about that. From its conception, when all the parties of the Parliament gathered to discuss the contingencies that we might need to put in place for the 2021 election, through to the engagement

of the Electoral Management Board, the Electoral Commission, the EROs and the Parliament, it has been—to use a worn cliché—a team effort. That was an absolute necessity, because this piece of legislation needed to be one that everyone concerned in the electoral process could sign up to.

I hope that many aspects of the legislation will not require to be deployed, but the developments of the past few days, as well as the reports that we hear this afternoon, have demonstrated the need to have contingency measures at our disposal.

Between substantial additional resources being put into encouraging postal vote uptake and the planning of social distancing measures to facilitate in-person voting on the day, I believe that we can deliver an election in which those who wish to do so can take part safely and securely. Although campaigning might be different and counting will take longer, I am confident that we will have an election of a kind that we still recognise and a result in whose robustness we can be confident.

I will digress a little for a few moments, because it is fitting that—almost—the last act of this Parliament in 2020 is not just a response to a pandemic that has dominated our work and the lives of all of us for much of the year but a piece of primary legislation. As we all know, this has been a year like no other and, whatever else it has done, it has set the Parliament substantial practical challenges that required commitment and innovation to overcome. The Scottish General Election (Coronavirus) Bill is not just the second piece of primary legislation to occupy us here this week; all being well, it will be the 21st to be passed since the year began.

I look around the chamber and see Liz Smith, a former colleague on the Parliamentary Bureau; she will recall the discussions in the bureau about the advisability—in a relatively early stage of the pandemic—of the Parliament processing non-coronavirus legislation. However, collectively, we came to the view that the Parliament had to be seen to function and do its day job as well as respond to the many challenges that the pandemic was setting us. The bureau’s decisions have been vindicated and I pay tribute to Liz Smith and Willie Rennie for the constructive role that they played in that.

A total of 19 Scottish Government bills—covering topics as diverse as social security, agriculture, children, female genital mutilation, civil partnerships, animals and wildlife protections and, of course, Covid-19—have completed their parliamentary passage, alongside a member’s bill and a private bill.

We have also seen the introduction of Government bills covering heat networks, hate

crime, redress for survivors of historical child abuse in care, incorporation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, University of St Andrews degrees in medicine and dentistry, and domestic protection orders, alongside 10 more members' bills and three from committees. Cumulatively, that demonstrated how the Parliament has found a way to get on with the day job.

Presiding Officer, with your indulgence, I will recognise, as Adam Tomkins began to do, some of the people whose dedication and hard work have made that possible. Politicians praising themselves is never a good look, but the conveners of our committees, backed by their clerks, have done incredible work to keep the show on the road. Hybrid or virtual sessions are never easy to put together and run, especially when the subject matter involves gathering evidence on legislation, but our committees have found ways and means, as you know, Presiding Officer.

We have also established hybrid plenary sessions and virtual voting and, although we all recognise how, at times, the latter has tested the patience of members, its deployment has nevertheless been an achievement that we would have struggled without. A year ago, who would have imagined us conducting stage 3 proceedings here, with Patrick Harvie and Liam McArthur contributing remotely?

That brings me to the army of people behind the scenes here and in Government. The MSPs could not have functioned within this place without the Parliament staff—the clerks, the information technology team and the official report, security and catering staff—who have all played their part in this institution overcoming the challenges that I noted earlier.

The same goes for the Scottish Government civil servants, who have gone above and beyond in responding to the pandemic and ensuring that the Administration could deliver Covid and non-Covid-related legislation on that scale. As Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans, on a daily basis, I have seen at first hand the extent to which those officials have adapted their working practices, often involving extended days and weeks, to keep the show on the road. As with the Parliament staff, theirs has been a fantastic effort, and we should each thank them for that.

There will be no let-up when we return from the festive break. Brexit impacts will need to be faced, the pandemic, as we know, is not relenting, and there is a stockpile of legislation to be completed ahead of the election, but that is for another day.

I wish all members and staff as peaceful and relaxing a festive break as it is possible to have

but, before we rise for the recess, I would appreciate it if colleagues could see their way to passing the Scottish General Election (Coronavirus) Bill.

## Environmental Standards Scotland (Appointments)

16:06

**The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh):** The next item of business is consideration of motion S5M-23771, in the name of Roseanna Cunningham, on environmental standards Scotland. I invite Roseanna Cunningham to move the motion.

*Motion moved,*

That the Parliament endorses the Scottish Government's plans to establish Environmental Standards Scotland on a non-statutory basis, to provide for continuity of environmental governance; notes the evidence given to the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee on 8 December 2020 by the Scottish Government's nominees as members of Environmental Standards Scotland, and approves the Scottish Government's nominations to Environmental Standards Scotland.—[*Roseanna Cunningham*]

**The Presiding Officer:** The question on the motion will be put at decision time.

## Business Motions

16:06

**The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh):** The next item of business is consideration of business motion S5M-23787, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme. I invite Graeme Dey to move the motion.

*Motion moved,*

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

Tuesday 12 January 2021

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

*followed by* Parliamentary Bureau Motions

*followed by* Topical Questions

*followed by* Ministerial Statement: COVID-19

*followed by* Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee Debate: Green Recovery

*followed by* Scottish Government Business

*followed by* Committee Announcements

*followed by* Business Motions

*followed by* Parliamentary Bureau Motions

6.20 pm Decision Time

*followed by* Members' Business

Wednesday 13 January 2021

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:  
Social Security and Older People;  
Finance

*followed by* Scottish Labour Party Business

*followed by* Business Motions

*followed by* Parliamentary Bureau Motions

*followed by* Approval of SSIs (if required)

5.10 pm Decision Time

*followed by* Members' Business

Thursday 14 January 2021

12.20 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

12.20 pm First Minister's Questions

2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.30 pm Portfolio Questions:  
Environment, Climate Change and Land  
Reform

*followed by* Stage 1 Debate: Liability for NHS  
Charges (Treatment of Industrial  
Disease) (Scotland) Bill

*followed by* Stage 1 Debate: Post-mortem  
Examinations (Defence Time Limit)

(Scotland) Bill

*followed by* Business Motions  
*followed by* Parliamentary Bureau Motions  
 4.55 pm Decision Time  
 Tuesday 19 January 2021  
 2.00 pm Time for Reflection  
*followed by* Parliamentary Bureau Motions  
*followed by* Topical Questions  
*followed by* Ministerial Statement: COVID-19  
*followed by* Stage 1 Debate: Dogs (Protection of Livestock) (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill  
*followed by* Stage 3 Proceedings: Protection of Workers (Retail and Age-restricted Goods and Services) (Scotland) Bill  
*followed by* Committee Announcements  
*followed by* Business Motions  
*followed by* Parliamentary Bureau Motions  
 6.00 pm Decision Time  
*followed by* Members' Business

Wednesday 20 January 2021

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions  
 2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:  
 Rural Economy and Tourism;  
 Transport, Infrastructure and  
 Connectivity  
*followed by* Scottish Government Business  
*followed by* Stage 1 Debate: Culpable Homicide  
 (Scotland) Bill  
*followed by* Business Motions  
*followed by* Parliamentary Bureau Motions  
*followed by* Approval of SSIs (if required)  
 6.00 pm Decision Time  
*followed by* Members' Business

Thursday 21 January 2021

12.20 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions  
 12.20 pm First Minister's Questions  
 2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions  
 2.30 pm Portfolio Questions:  
 Justice and the Law Officers  
*followed by* Stage 1 Debate: United Nations  
 Convention on the Rights of the Child  
 (Incorporation) (Scotland) Bill  
*followed by* Business Motions  
*followed by* Parliamentary Bureau Motions  
 5.05 pm Decision Time

(b) that, for the purposes of Portfolio Questions in the week beginning 11 January 2021, in rule 13.7.3, after the word "except" the words "to the extent to which the Presiding Officer considers that the questions are on the same or similar subject matter or" are inserted.—[*Graeme Dey*]

*Motion agreed to.*

**The Presiding Officer:** The next item is consideration of business motion S5M-23788, on the stage 1 timetable for a bill, and motions S5M-23789 and S5M-23790, on the stage 2 timetable for two bills. I invite Graeme Dey to move the motions.

*Motions moved,*

That the Parliament agrees that consideration of the Dogs (Protection of Livestock) (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill at stage 1 be completed by 22 January 2021.

That the Parliament agrees that consideration of the Heat Networks (Scotland) Bill at stage 2 be completed by 12 February 2021.

That the Parliament agrees that consideration of the Tied Pubs (Scotland) Bill at stage 2 be completed by 26 February 2021.—[*Graeme Dey*]

*Motions agreed to.*

## Parliamentary Bureau Motions

**The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh):** The next item of business is consideration of four Parliamentary Bureau motions. I ask Graeme Dey, on behalf of the bureau, to move and speak to motions S5M-23791, S5M-23792, S5M-23793 and S5M-23804, on approval of Scottish statutory instruments.

### *Motions moved,*

That the Parliament agrees that the Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Restrictions and Requirements) (Local Levels) (Scotland) Amendment (No. 6) Regulations 2020 (SSI 2020/415) be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Restrictions and Requirements) (Local Levels) (Scotland) Amendment (No. 5) Regulations 2020 (SSI 2020/400) be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Restrictions and Requirements) (Local Levels) (Scotland) Amendment (No. 7) Regulations 2020 (SSI 2020/427) be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Restrictions and Requirements) (Local Levels) (Scotland) Amendment (No. 8) Regulations 2020 (SSI 2020/452) be approved.—[*Graeme Dey*]

16:07

**The Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans (Graeme Dey):** Let me provide a little background to the motions. The regulations in motion S5M-23791 modify some of the restrictions and requirements, specifically during the period from 23 to 27 December 2020. They give effect to the First Minister's announcement of 1 December and came into force on 4 December.

The regulations in motion S5M-23792 modify some of the restrictions and requirements relating to students returning home at the end of term for Christmas. They give effect to the First Minister's announcement of 24 November and came into force on 27 November.

The regulations in motion S5M-23793 modify some of the restrictions and requirements for the different levels and set out changes to the levels that apply to some areas of Scotland. They give effect to the First Minister's announcement of 8 December and came into force on 11 December.

The regulations in motion S5M-23804 make adjustments to the provisions on festive gatherings and the levels to which local authorities are allocated. They give effect to the First Minister's announcement of 19 December and came into force on 21 December, save for the adjustments to levels that take effect from 26 December.

**The Presiding Officer:** The question on those motions will be put at decision time.

The next item is consideration of eight Parliamentary Bureau motions. I invite Graeme Dey to move motions S5M-23794 to S5M-23799, on approval of SSIs, motion S5M-23800, on committee meeting times, and motion S5M-23801, on committee membership.

### *Motions moved,*

That the Parliament agrees that the Health Protection (Coronavirus) (International Travel) (Scotland) Amendment (No. 24) Regulations 2020 (SSI 2020/404) be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Cross-border Health Care (EU Exit) (Scotland) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the First-tier Tribunal for Scotland Social Security Chamber and Upper Tribunal for Scotland (Allocation of Functions, Procedure and Composition) (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2020 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Carer's Allowance Supplement and Young Carer Grants (Residence Requirements and Procedural Provisions) (EU Exit) (Scotland) Regulations 2020 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Rural Development (EU Exit) (Scotland) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Scottish Child Payment Amendment Regulations 2021 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that, under Rule 12.3.3B of Standing Orders, the Committee on the Scottish Government Handling of Harassment Complaints can meet, if necessary, at the same time as a meeting of the Parliament on Tuesday 12 January 2021 from approximately 3.30pm to Decision Time and during Members' Business.

That the Parliament agrees that—

Jamie Halcro Johnston be appointed to replace Oliver Mundell as a member of the Culture, Tourism, Europe and External Affairs Committee; and

Oliver Mundell be appointed to replace Jamie Halcro Johnston as a member of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee.—[*Graeme Dey*]

## Decision Time

16:09

**The Presiding Officer:** The next item of business is decision time. The first question is, that motion S5M-23768, in the name of Graeme Dey, on the Scottish General Election (Coronavirus) Bill, be agreed to. The motion is on a bill, so I will suspend the meeting to allow members to access the voting app.

16:09

*Meeting suspended.*

16:12

*On resuming—*

**The Presiding Officer:** Welcome back. We will go straight to the division. The question is, that motion S5M-23768, in the name of Graeme Dey, on the Scottish General Election (Coronavirus) Bill be agreed to. This will be a one-minute division.

The vote is now closed.

**Alex Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP):** On a point of order, Presiding Officer. The voting app is not working for me. I would have voted yes, had I been able to vote.

**The Presiding Officer:** Thank you, Mr Neil. We will record you as having voted for the motion.

### For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)  
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)  
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)  
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)  
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)  
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)  
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)  
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)  
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Bowman, Bill (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)  
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)  
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)  
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)  
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)  
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)  
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)  
 Chapman, Peter (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)  
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)  
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)  
 Corry, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)  
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)  
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)  
 Davidson, Ruth (Edinburgh Central) (Con)  
 Denham, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)  
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)  
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)

Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)  
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)  
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)  
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)  
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)  
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Green)  
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)  
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)  
 Freeman, Jeane (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)  
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)  
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)  
 Golden, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)  
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)  
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)  
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)  
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)  
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)  
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)  
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)  
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)  
 Harris, Alison (Central Scotland) (Con)  
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)  
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)  
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)  
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)  
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)  
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Kelly, James (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)  
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 Lindhurst, Gordon (Lothian) (Con)  
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)  
 Lockhart, Dean (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Lyle, Richard (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)  
 MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)  
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)  
 Macdonald, Lewis (North East Scotland) (Lab)  
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)  
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)  
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)  
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)  
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)  
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)  
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)  
 Mason, Tom (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)  
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)  
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)  
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)  
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)  
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)  
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)  
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)  
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)  
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)  
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)  
 Ross, Gail (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)  
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)  
 Rumbles, Mike (North East Scotland) (LD)  
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)  
 Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)  
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)

Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)  
 Smith, Elaine (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)  
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)  
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)  
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)  
 Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)  
 Tomkins, Adam (Glasgow) (Con)  
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)  
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)  
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)  
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)  
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)  
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)  
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)  
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

**The Presiding Officer:** The result of the division is: For 117, Against 0, Abstentions 0.

*Motion agreed to,*

That the Parliament agrees that the Scottish General Election (Coronavirus) Bill be passed.

**The Presiding Officer:** The motion is agreed to, and therefore the Scottish General Election (Coronavirus) Bill is passed. [*Applause.*]

**The Presiding Officer:** The next question is, that motion S5M-23771, in the name of Roseanna Cunningham, on environmental standards Scotland, be agreed to.

*Motion agreed to,*

That the Parliament endorses the Scottish Government's plans to establish Environmental Standards Scotland on a non-statutory basis, to provide for continuity of environmental governance; notes the evidence given to the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee on 8 December 2020 by the Scottish Government's nominees as members of Environmental Standards Scotland, and approves the Scottish Government's nominations to Environmental Standards Scotland.

**The Presiding Officer:** If no member objects, I propose to ask a single question on the 12 Parliamentary Bureau motions.

The question is, that motions S5M-23791 to S5M-23793, motion S5M-23804 and motions S5M-23794 to S5M-23801, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, be agreed to.

*Motions agreed to,*

That the Parliament agrees that the Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Restrictions and Requirements) (Local Levels) (Scotland) Amendment (No. 6) Regulations 2020 (SSI 2020/415) be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Restrictions and Requirements) (Local Levels) (Scotland) Amendment (No. 5) Regulations 2020 (SSI 2020/400) be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Restrictions and Requirements) (Local Levels) (Scotland) Amendment (No. 7) Regulations 2020 (SSI 2020/427) be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Restrictions and Requirements) (Local Levels) (Scotland) Amendment (No. 8) Regulations 2020 (SSI 2020/452) be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Health Protection (Coronavirus) (International Travel) (Scotland) Amendment (No. 24) Regulations 2020 (SSI 2020/404) be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Cross-border Health Care (EU Exit) (Scotland) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the First-tier Tribunal for Scotland Social Security Chamber and Upper Tribunal for Scotland (Allocation of Functions, Procedure and Composition) (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2020 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Carer's Allowance Supplement and Young Carer Grants (Residence Requirements and Procedural Provisions) (EU Exit) (Scotland) Regulations 2020 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Rural Development (EU Exit) (Scotland) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Scottish Child Payment Amendment Regulations 2021 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that, under Rule 12.3.3B of Standing Orders, the Committee on the Scottish Government Handling of Harassment Complaints can meet, if necessary, at the same time as a meeting of the Parliament on Tuesday 12 January 2021 from approximately 3.30pm to Decision Time and during Members' Business.

That the Parliament agrees that—

Jamie Halcro Johnston be appointed to replace Oliver Mundell as a member of the Culture, Tourism, Europe and External Affairs Committee; and

Oliver Mundell be appointed to replace Jamie Halcro Johnston as a member of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee.

**The Presiding Officer:** Thank you for your attendance. I wish you, your families and your constituents a very merry Christmas.

*Meeting closed at 16:15.*



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

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

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