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Scottish Parliament

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): Good afternoon, colleagues. The first item of business is time for reflection. Our time for reflection leader is the Rev Fiona Bennett, honorary chaplain and minister of Augustine United Reformed Church, George IV Bridge.

The Rev Fiona Bennett (Augustine United Reformed Church): Good afternoon; it is good to be with you.

I have just come, literally moments ago, from the final mental health drop-in meeting to be held at Augustine church. We do those drop-ins in partnership with the national health service chaplains from the Royal Edinburgh hospital. At the end of the drop-in—because it was the last one that will be held for some time, as you will be discussing later today—we discussed with the group how they are going to cope with isolation and be resilient through the coming time.

A lot of the people in the group have had long-term mental ill health. Because they have had to learn to cope with all sorts of stuff, the wisdom that they shared was astounding. It was a real reminder to me that in vulnerability there can be incredible strength. There is great wisdom in the midst of struggle, and perhaps, in the struggles that we experience today throughout society, there will be gifts.

I would like to share with you a short reflection. It says that it is by an Irish monk, but I do not think that that is true. It was sent to me from the Metropolitan Community Church in the United States, and it is called “Lockdown”:

“Yes there is fear.
 Yes there is isolation.
 Yes there is panic buying.
 Yes there is sickness.
 Yes there is even death.
 But,
 They say that in Wuhan after so many years of noise
 You can hear the birds again.
 They say that after just a few weeks of quiet
 The sky is no longer thick with fumes
 But blue and grey and clear.
 They say that in the streets of Assisi
 People are singing to each other
 across the empty squares,
 keeping their windows open
 so that those who are alone
 may hear the sounds of family around them.
 They say that a hotel in the West of Ireland

Is offering free meals and delivery to the housebound.
 Today a young woman I know
 is busy spreading fliers with her number
 through the neighbourhood
 So that the older folk may have someone to call on.
 Today Churches, Synagogues, Mosques and Temples
 are preparing to welcome
 and shelter the homeless, the sick, the weary
 All over the world people are slowing down and reflecting
 All over the world people are looking at their neighbours
 in a new way
 All over the world people are waking up to a new reality
 To how big we really are.
 To how little control we really have.
 To what really matters.
 To Love.
 So we pray and we remember that
 Yes there is fear.
 But there does not have to be hate.
 Yes there is isolation.
 But there does not have to be loneliness.
 Yes there is panic buying.
 But there does not have to be meanness.
 Yes there is sickness.
 But there does not have to be disease of the soul
 Yes there is even death.
 But there can always be a rebirth of love.
 Wake to the choices you make as to how to live now.
 Today, breathe.
 Listen, behind the factory noises of your panic
 The birds are singing again
 The sky is clearing,
 Spring is coming,
 And we are always encompassed by Love.
 Open the windows of your soul
 And though you may not be able
 to touch across the empty square,
 Sing”.

Covid-19 (Update)

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The next item of business is a statement on novel coronavirus Covid-19 update. The First Minister will make a brief statement, followed by the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport. The whole Cabinet will take questions at the end of the statement.

14:05

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I will shortly hand over to the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport, Jeane Freeman. Following her statement, the whole Cabinet is available for questions. First, I want to make a brief statement.

Scotland today, like countries across the world, faces an unprecedented challenge. Addressing it will involve the biggest peacetime mission that our nation has undertaken in our lifetimes.

The scientific advice that all four Governments in the United Kingdom received yesterday shows that we are now on the cusp of a rapid escalation in the spread of Covid-19. That means that we must take far more stringent steps to suppress—as far as we can—the spread of the virus, to protect and scale up the capacity of the national health service as best we can, and, by doing those things, save lives.

The steps that we recommended yesterday represent a major change for all of us—a change from life as we know it. However, they are essential to give us the best chance of achieving those aims.

Let me summarise the three new recommendations that apply to Scotland, as of yesterday. We had already made it clear that if somebody has symptoms of Covid 19—a persistent cough or a fever—they should isolate themselves for seven days. That means that, as far as is possible, they should not leave the house, and they should reduce contact with other people in the house as much as possible. In addition—and this was the new element in yesterday's advice—anyone else in a household where someone has symptoms should isolate for 14 days. That covers the seven days for which the first person is infectious, and a further seven days to see if they, or anyone else, gets the virus. Those measures are essential to reduce the chance of spreading the virus to others.

The second measure—which applies to everyone, not just to people with symptoms—is that we should minimise social contact as much as possible. That is vital to reduce the risk, for all of us, of getting infected or, if we do, of passing it on to others—especially those who are most

vulnerable. People should, as far as possible, avoid crowded areas and gatherings. That includes bars, restaurants and cinemas. We also want people to use public transport as little as possible, and to work from home if they can.

That advice is important for everyone, but it applies especially strongly to three groups: first, people who are over 70; secondly, people with underlying health conditions—for which they get the flu vaccine—and thirdly, women who are pregnant. We are strongly advising them to stay at home as much as possible, and to significantly reduce unnecessary social contact.

We are not, so far, proposing the blanket closure of schools. At present, our judgment is that the negative consequences of that for the overall wellbeing of children, and the impact on the health service workforce, outweigh the benefits. However, I assure the public that that is under daily review, and that the protection of children will always be our priority.

The third and final step is to shield the most vulnerable, by which I mean specifically people with compromised immune systems. General practitioners and other healthcare professionals will be contacting those patients to ensure that they are fully supported.

As well as trying to reduce the peak of the virus, we are increasing the capacity of our health service. The cabinet secretary will speak in detail about that in a few moments. However, I want to restate my heartfelt thanks to everyone who works in our health and social care services. They are dealing with pressures that are already great, and which will soon become immense. We will do everything possible to support them.

I am also acutely aware of how serious the impact of yesterday's recommendations will be for businesses and households. The actions that we require to take to mitigate a health emergency will, for many businesses and individuals, cause an economic emergency. We have already announced some support for business, and we are urgently considering what more we can do. We are also speaking to the UK Government about what more it will do for business, and we will set out further actions as soon as possible. We will also be making more information available in coming days on support for individuals who are in financial difficulty.

There is a fundamental principle here, which in many ways goes to the heart of the contract between Government and people. We as a Government are asking people to take unprecedented actions. We recognise—I recognise—that the response from the Government must also be unprecedented.

The next weeks, and possibly months, will be immensely difficult. I know that, for everyone, this is a deeply anxious time. People want to do the right thing to protect their own health, and they also want to do the right thing for their loved ones and for the wider community. The advice that we issued yesterday is intended to help all of us do that. All the steps that we are recommending— isolating yourself if you or people you live with show symptoms, minimising social contact, washing hands for 20 seconds and not touching your face—really matter. By following them, we will all be helping to save lives.

We face a shared national challenge, and we will need a collective national endeavour to meet it. We all have a part to play. We must all show solidarity, compassion and kindness for each other—not simply in person but in our phone calls and text messages, though our social media presence, even in our waves across the street to each other and, of course, in our offers to help where we can. By doing that—by looking after ourselves, our loved ones and our communities—we can, and we will, get through this. I thank everyone across our country in advance for their help and support in the months ahead in doing just that.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, First Minister. I call the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport, Jeane Freeman.

14:11

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Jeane Freeman): I take this opportunity to apologise to my colleagues, the other parties' spokespeople on health, for the very late arrival of this statement. I am sure that they understand that we are working at pace, but that is not normal practice and I am sorry that they have not had sufficient time to consider the statement in detail. I will, of course, be very happy to answer questions either today or on a future occasion.

Our nation faces a challenge to our way of life and to public health in a manner that has never been seen before in our lifetimes. As the First Minister has said, the scale of the challenge is, quite simply, without precedent. The First Minister and I cannot express how grateful we are to the women and men of our health service, care services and emergency services for all the work that they have done so far in addressing this challenge and for the work that they are prepared to do in the weeks ahead. They truly are the best of us, and I know that the whole Parliament will want to join me in recognising them as we confront the impact of Covid-19 on Scotland. *[Applause.]* Those workers are our front line, and they face a heroic and difficult task, but we can all play our part in helping them.

As of 9 o'clock this morning, 195 positive cases had been recorded in Scotland, but we know that the true number of infections will be substantially higher. I also regretfully advise Parliament that, to date, there have been two reported deaths of patients who have tested positive for Covid-19 in Scotland. Our thoughts are with their families and loved ones at what is a painful time for them.

As the First Minister has just set out, we are asking our society to take some truly unprecedented steps to suppress the spread of the infection and to minimise its impact. Our goal is simple: to protect and save lives. We need everyone's help to achieve that. I know that we have asked a lot of the people of Scotland, but, in the weeks and months to come, we might have to ask for far more.

Responding to Covid-19 requires a swift and radical change in the way in which our NHS does its work. It is nothing short of the most rapid reconfiguration of our health service in its 71-year history. That is why, today, under sections 1 and 78 of the National Health Service (Scotland) Act 1978, I am formally placing our national health service on an emergency footing for at least the next three months. I am giving my instructions to NHS Scotland and individual health boards to do all that is necessary to be ready to face a substantial and sustained increase in the number of cases of Covid-19. Should I require to lay new regulations to enable our boards to achieve that, I will bring them before Parliament swiftly.

Our first goal is to double the intensive care unit capacity in Scotland. Boards are working towards that by providing the necessary training for staff and by repurposing facilities. Our contingency planning for the supply of oxygen in hospitals and in the community is in place, and we have ordered an additional 450 new standard concentrators for use in the community, as well as additional contingency that can be called on if necessary.

Our current bed capacity in NHS Scotland is about 13,000, and our boards are taking all necessary steps to increase that by at least 3,000. To achieve that, our normal programme of non-urgent elective operations will be suspended. I want to be very clear that vital cancer treatments and emergency, maternity and urgent care will continue.

NHS boards are aware that they must take a structured approach to the postponing of non-urgent elective procedures, with a view that patients will remain on the waiting lists until it is clinically appropriate to have their procedure undertaken. All boards are developing local mobilisation plans to achieve that.

Additionally, we have established a national cancer treatment response group, which will

provide on-going advice and support around cancer treatments. The impact of Covid-19 on cancer patients has been a priority in all our planning, and we will ensure that all appropriate measures are undertaken in the present situation to protect those living with cancer.

We are also working closely with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, health and social care partnerships and chief officers to get a rapid reduction in delayed discharges. I have set a goal of reducing those by at least 400 by the end of this month. We are also engaged with the independent healthcare sector in Scotland—which is relatively small—so that we can utilise it to maximise available bed capacity, to help the NHS.

All those steps will necessitate some redeployment of staff in our health service. We have issued guidance to health boards and staff on planning and deployment, and we will keep that under regular review, with updates and advice as the situation evolves.

We are also seeking support to backfill posts, including by working with regulators to enable returners to the healthcare profession and by looking to deploy senior students into settings that are appropriate to their skills. In addition, NHS Education for Scotland will be providing a range of induction and training materials on Covid-19 to meet the needs of employers, which can be accessed via the “Turas Learn” NHS website, which goes live today.

As we work to suppress the infection, we will continue a strong testing regime that will ensure that key workers such as front-line NHS staff will be tested, so that they do not self-isolate unnecessarily. As the First Minister said earlier this week, we are scaling up Covid-19 surveillance testing, which will give us a more accurate picture of how the infection is spreading in certain areas. That will help to direct where we can best place resources to try to save lives. Surveillance will be increased fivefold to give an accurate overview of an area with a population of about 1.2 million.

Monitoring will also continue through our laboratories. It will be targeted on the following additional groups: admissions to hospital; admissions to intensive care; and community testing that is dependent on circumstances—for example, specific situations such as a nursing-home outbreak.

The safety and wellbeing of our hard-working NHS staff are a huge priority, and I expect all boards to ensure that staff who are dealing with Covid-19 cases have the appropriate training and personal protective equipment to ensure their safety.

It is not just in acute settings that support is required. Health Protection Scotland’s Covid-19

guidance on PPE for primary care states that, for all consultations for acute respiratory infection or influenza-like illness, GPs need to wear face masks, aprons, gloves and eye protection. Last week, we issued additional supplies of all those items to health boards for onward distribution to GP practices in Scotland. Should practices require further equipment that is in keeping with the guidance, we will work to have it delivered swiftly by boards. I have asked boards to ensure that it is distributed by 20 March.

To cope with a rapid increase in the number of people who are presenting with respiratory symptoms in the current phase of the infection, a new Covid-19 community pathway model is being implemented, with patients being asked to make contact via NHS 24 on the 111 phone number, rather than through their GPs.

We are ready to support local authorities and care providers with supply issues relating to PPE for the social care sector, in order to safeguard vulnerable people in our communities. Extensive work is already under way with our social care partners to put in place arrangements to increase the social care workforce capacity.

One group of people who could be profoundly hurt by a Covid-19 infection are those who are immunosuppressed. Next week, the NHS will directly contact people in that category to advise them of the stringent measures that they need to take to keep themselves and others safe. NHS Scotland will make direct contact next week and will work closely with other social services to ensure that support is provided.

For those in long-term care facilities—people who are often frail with complex needs—HPS has published specific guidance for infection prevention and control in social or community care and residential settings. In addition, the chief medical officer has published specific advice about visitors and admissions to care homes. We are discussing with Scottish Care and COSLA what more can be done to ensure the overall wellbeing of residents in long-term care homes.

We are engaging with third sector partners that have contact with and that already support those who are clinically vulnerable, to ensure that people receive the right advice on what precautions to take and that those supporting them have the best information available on how to keep people safe.

In years to come, when people look back, there will be the time before the infection outbreak and the time after—it is a watershed moment for our nation, our world and, most certainly, our NHS.

We are doing, and we will continue to do, everything that we can to protect and save lives, but it will take everyone. We all have a responsibility and we need everyone’s help.

The Presiding Officer: The whole Cabinet is here to take questions, depending on the nature of the subject that is raised. The First Minister will co-ordinate with her colleagues. We will start and see how we get on.

Jackson Carlaw (Eastwood) (Con): Just a fortnight ago, I made it clear that the Scottish Conservatives would offer our full support to the First Minister and her Government as they respond to the coronavirus emergency. I did not do that lightly. Ten years ago, I shadowed Nicola Sturgeon when she led, as health minister, the national response to a previous epidemic, so whatever political differences we might otherwise have—God knows that they are many—I have every confidence in her leading the country's response to the crisis, at this time.

It is not the time for Opposition parties to exploit our situation or to use partisan and pejorative rhetoric against the efforts that are being made. To those who are venting against the United Kingdom Government or directly to me about “Sturgeon’s Government”, let me be clear: for now, the Scottish Government is a Government for us all, just as the Government in Westminster is a Government for us all.

Will mistakes be made? Possibly. Will our response at times be slower than we would wish? Probably. After this is all over, we can learn from our experience and prepare ourselves for any future event.

For now, I am clear that the Scottish Conservatives will stand with the First Minister. I assure her that the questions that we will ask will be measured and entirely designed to inform and not to hinder the national effort that she is leading, and that we all place our trust in the advice that is received from qualified professionals.

As both the Prime Minister and the First Minister have said, we are all in this together. This Conservative Party, in this Parliament, will stand together with the Scottish Government. *[Applause.]*

I have a question for the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport regarding people who are in receipt of home care support. As other MSPs did, I imagine, I received calls yesterday not from emergency or support services wondering whether they might infect somebody who was receiving support, but from somebody who was receiving support who thought that they might have symptoms and whose entire care package has been removed as a consequence. Obviously, many such people absolutely depend on services being sustained, and are in urgent need of advice about what they should do, as might well be people who are directing the teams that would normally support them.

The First Minister: I will hand over to the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport on the specific question, but first I take the opportunity to thank Jackson Carlaw for his comments. Like many members, I am a politician to my fingertips, but I have never been less interested in party politics than I am right now. *[Applause.]* In the battle against the virus and what we will face in the months to come, we are all on the same side, and we should never forget that.

I accept and understand the importance of robust scrutiny, which is as important now as it is at all times. We are in a common endeavour, and it is important that we recognise that. We have never faced a situation like this, so I will do something else that is perhaps not normal for a politician. I say candidly that we will make mistakes: we will not always get it right, but we will strive at every turn to do the right thing, for the best reasons and in good faith.

I genuinely appreciate the sentiments of support that Jackson Carlaw has articulated today. I will hand over to the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport to answer the specific question.

Jeane Freeman: I am grateful to Jackson Carlaw. The situation that he has described is a disturbing one, so I would be grateful to know the detail of it. Home care support should not be removed in circumstances in which people feel that they have coronavirus symptoms—a dry cough or fever—or any other illness for which they want to receive clinical care. I will, if I can have the details from Jackson Carlaw, absolutely follow up on that as soon as we have finished in the chamber today.

Tomorrow, I will meet my counterpart in political leadership, Councillor Currie from the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. I will speak to him later today and ensure that the message is delivered loud and clear through our local authorities that either provide home care support or which contract home care support. We must ensure that people who need support receive it, that those who need additional support receive it and that, where clinical or medical attention is needed, people get it as quickly as possible.

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): I also thank the First Minister and the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport not only for their statements, but for their cross-party co-operative approach to the huge challenge that we face. This is a fight for us all, regardless of party. We can do it only if we work together, stand as one, and stand together with humility in the face of this great challenge.

A few days ago, the head of the World Health Organization said that is not possible to “fight a fire blindfolded”, and that social distancing and hand

washing alone will not “extinguish this ...epidemic”. He also said:

“We have a simple message for all countries: test test test. Test every suspected ... case.”

He said that the most effective way to prevent infections, and so save lives, was by

“breaking the chains of ... transmission.”

We should find and test every suspected coronavirus case, not just those in hospital. We need to track and trace on the ground that we cannot fight a virus if we do not know where it is.

We welcome the Scottish Government’s announcement of expansion of surveillance testing for Covid-19 in order to monitor the spread of the virus in the community. However, the inference is that it is clear that not everyone will be tested. What assurance can the First Minister and her Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport give to patients who suspect that they have the virus, and will be anxious about the news that they might not be tested?

Can we also be given more information about the proposed expansion? When will it begin and where will be the 200 testing practices be?

The First Minister: I thank Richard Leonard for his offer of support, which is genuinely appreciated.

I will address the point about testing. First, and this was a lesson that I learned during the swine flu pandemic, we must listen to the WHO and the experts, and we must be guided and informed by their views. I take that very seriously.

On testing, right now we are asking everyone across our country who displays symptoms of coronavirus—a fever or a persistent cough—to stay at home and self-isolate. As we move into the next phase, testing absolutely everyone would require significant resources—which I think should be spent caring for people—for tests and for getting test results back to people, when the advice that we would give them, if they were to test positive, would be exactly the same advice as we are giving them, which is to stay at home.

We are not dealing with the situation blindfolded. We have to understand, much better than we have done to date, how the virus is spreading and how it is behaving. That is why the community testing that we have outlined is so important.

In summary, we are expanding our GP sentinel testing. In normal years, when we publish figures from that during the flu season, for the purposes of monitoring flu, most people do not pay much attention to it. Right now, 41 practices across the country, covering about a quarter of a million people, are involved in the programme. We are in

the process of expanding it to 200 practices, as a representative sample of the country, which collectively cover a population of 1.2 million. That will allow us to get much better information about how the virus is behaving and spreading than we get from the figures that we currently publish. It is a counterintuitive point, but the figures right now are an underestimate, and do not allow us to get that level of detail.

We will also continue to test everybody in hospital who has symptoms of respiratory illness, or flu-like symptoms, or symptoms of coronavirus. Crucially, in Scotland, we are going to continue to test key workers, because we do not want front-line health staff to be self-isolating unnecessarily.

That is what we are planning to do. It will involve a significant expansion of our testing capacity, and we do not rule out expanding it further, if that can help us in the fight against the virus. I hope that that information is helpful, and I am happy to continue to provide further information, if we build on that in the times ahead.

Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green): I thank the First Minister for her statement, and the Cabinet Secretary for hers. The Scottish Green Party whole-heartedly associates itself with colleagues’ comments. We will work together, cross-party.

As I said last week, it is essential that no one loses their home at this time. I would like to understand better what steps the Scottish Government is taking to deliver an amnesty from arrears in rent or mortgage payments, in order to ensure that no person or family loses their home as a result of being unable to work. Can the Government confirm that a “no evictions” policy will be applied, and that steps to implement such a policy will be supported?

The First Minister: I thank Alison Johnstone for her supportive comments. What she has outlined is absolutely what we seek to deliver. There will be more announcements on the subject in the days to come. I ask Aileen Campbell to give a brief summary of the work that we are involved in.

The Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government (Aileen Campbell): I will be able to give more detail in the statement on Thursday.

Alison Johnstone has made a good point. This is not just about the medical response, driven by the science; it is also about the need for us to tackle other vulnerabilities. Finances, including people’s ability to pay their rent, will be one of those. The Minister for Local Government, Housing and Planning is already actively engaged in work on that.

We are looking to ensure that we can protect people who potentially face rent arrears, if they have no income, in order to make sure that they can keep their homes, and to make sure that everyone—registered social landlords and local authorities—understands that we must not compound the situation and make it worse. We are working with partners to ensure resilience on broader social matters such as Alison Johnstone has outlined. We will be able to furnish her with more information when we make the statement on Thursday.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): To be frank, we are all afraid. However, I am comforted by the fact that the First Minister has taken such a professional approach. That gives members confidence that all that can be done is being done. That is why I say to everyone, even to those who have doubts, that they need to listen to the First Minister and her excellent advisers. That is the best thing that they can do for themselves and their loved ones.

I spoke to many businesses and people yesterday. They are afraid about getting food on the table, about having a roof over their heads, and about whether their businesses will continue through this. We need a massive programme of investment, and I hope that the chancellor will set that out this afternoon. What steps does the Government think will be necessary to make sure that those businesses continue, that mortgages and rents continue to be paid, and, most important, that people have food on the table?

The First Minister: I thank Willie Rennie for his comments. I also take the opportunity to record my gratitude—I know that I also speak for the health secretary—to our advisers, particularly the chief medical officer, the deputy chief medical officer, and all the officials and experts who are advising us. They, too, are facing an incredibly challenging situation. Although I am grateful every day for the advice and expertise of experts and officials, I have never been more grateful for it than I have been in the past few days.

I will ask Fiona Hyslop to answer the questions about businesses. Aileen Campbell has already addressed the point about individuals, and there will be more information on that later this week.

The Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Fair Work and Culture (Fiona Hyslop): Although this is primarily a health issue, the impact on the economy will be significant. Therefore, how we respond and how we work with the UK Government will be important. This afternoon, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Kate Forbes, will speak to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, and I will speak to the UK Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. We will encourage and urge them to use every lever that

they have to ensure that businesses stay in business, that employment continues where at all possible, and that we keep productive capacity so that there are jobs for people to return to. Obviously, there are issues about making sure that—as has been announced—there is enough payment for statutory sick pay and so on from day one.

I have already met representatives from the business organisations and the Scottish Trades Union Congress; indeed, many of the issues that were addressed can be supported by the Scottish Government. However, the economic impact that the situation will have needs a UK-wide and global response. We will encourage the UK Government to use every lever that it can to do that.

Part of that is about making sure that the banks deliver support. The banks are already dealing with loan repayment deferrals in a number of areas, and a variety of different steps are being taken. I make the point that the country supported the banks in recent times, and that it is now time for the banks to support the country.

The Presiding Officer: Members will not be surprised to hear that there is an unprecedented level of interest in asking questions today. We will try to get through as many as possible.

I ask members to begin by indicating to which cabinet secretary or minister they are addressing their question. Although the First Minister will be able to respond to many, if you know which minister or department you are addressing, please say so.

Angela Constance (Almond Valley) (SNP): The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport will be aware that there is much discussion in our communities and in the media about the scientific advice at home and abroad, and how it informs the restrictions that are placed upon our daily lives. I would be grateful if the cabinet secretary would provide her assurances that the steps that the Government is taking to protect us all are based on the best possible scientific advice, and explain how that advice is tested and scrutinised.

Jeane Freeman: The scientific advice comes to us in a number of ways, primarily through the scientific advisory group for emergencies, which has another group working alongside and feeding into it. The individuals on those groups are drawn from a range of particular specialisms from across the UK, including Scotland. They look at the data from elsewhere in the world and constantly model what it tells us about the nature of the virus, the biology of how we expect it to affect individuals, the way in which it is spreading, and the efficacy of the different sets of measures that need to be introduced to delay its spread, manage it, and suppress the peak so that we can treat those who

will be most impacted. Of course, the scientific and clinical advice that comes to us also identifies the groups of people who are most likely to be seriously impacted by the virus.

My other point is that we have our own advisers—our chief medical officer, deputy chief medical officer and the others who have been mentioned by the First Minister—who are engaged in scrutinising all that work. Neither the First Minister, nor I, nor to the best of my knowledge any of my Cabinet colleagues, are clinicians. We are not scientists, so our scrutiny of and challenge to what is being proposed to us is critical so that we have the confidence to take decisions, including those that we took yesterday, so that we can get to the situation that we want to get to, in which we protect the most vulnerable and save as many lives as we can.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): My question is for the health secretary, but it also goes beyond the health service. It is about clarity with regard to the rapid testing system. NHS and social care staff are clearly keen to get back to work if they can possibly be tested to see whether they can do so. Our oil and gas workers are also concerned about going out to the rigs and the destabilisation of the energy industry. What steps are being taken to plan and extend rapid testing across Scotland?

Jeane Freeman: That work is under way with a number of critical front-line workers in our emergency services more broadly, not simply the health service. We need to be careful and considered in who we identify in those areas, which stretch to some of our other critical infrastructure sectors.

The work is under way to ensure that we can rapidly test, produce the results and allow people to safely return to work, if they do not have the virus. My colleagues across the Cabinet will feed in to me who else they believe from their respective sectors qualifies as a critical front-line worker so that we can ensure that steps are taken to include them.

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): I welcome the health secretary's update that health boards have received additional supplies of personal protective equipment. I have no doubt that that will continue, but an immediate challenge has been raised on behalf of Scottish Ambulance Service staff by the Scottish Joint Industry Board, which I know wrote to the First Minister on Friday. The board is concerned about the lack of PPE among crews. It wrote on Friday because a paramedic who had been sent to a suspected Covid-19 patient without PPE was later confirmed as having the virus, as was the patient. Staff are naturally very concerned and worried. What immediate steps have been taken to reassure

Scottish Ambulance Service staff about the vital PPE that they need?

Jeane Freeman: The ambulance service has already distributed supplies to about a third of those in its workforce who require the equipment and training. It is working to ensure that all relevant ambulance personnel receive the face-fit mask and the other protective equipment that they need, and that it has covered rapidly all relevant paramedic and ambulance staff. The service is about a third of the way through the exercise, which is continuing.

The ambulance service is also looking at different ways by which it can achieve its aim. For example, at Ninewells hospital, it has deployed a member on the basis that most of the crews will eventually get to them at the accident and emergency department. As the crews come in with the relevant patient and hand over, they can very quickly get their face masks fitted. They are then ready for training, and it can be moved along as quickly as possible. I assure Ms Lennon that the ambulance service is taking the issue very seriously indeed. It already has its plans in place and is working through them, and we are monitoring the situation closely to make sure that it meets the necessary timescales.

Bruce Crawford (Stirling) (SNP): My question is for John Swinney, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills. I have received representations from a number of constituents—I guess that he will have done, too—about the potential closure of schools. Although schools are not to close at this stage, I am also being asked what is being done to provide guidance to education authorities, schools and concerned parents about whether children with significant respiratory conditions should be removed from school to protect them from potential harm.

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): I acknowledge the concerns that Mr Crawford has raised. I have heard many of them from members of the public around the country, as has the First Minister, and she addressed many of those issues in her remarks.

The situation is clearly evolving. The recommendations for social distancing that were set out yesterday, particularly for those with challenging health circumstances, apply to school pupils as much as to any other members of society. The guidance is clear: a young person in those circumstances should not be expected to attend school. Schools should understand and support young people in that.

On the wider question of the availability of schools, we are in active discussion with our local authority partners and with professional

associations. As the First Minister said yesterday and earlier today, those issues are kept under active and daily review. We will have further discussions on those questions later today.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): I will carry on in that vein with my questions for the education secretary. I appreciate that he is striking a difficult balance between local autonomy in decision making and mandatory, nationwide advice to schools.

I have some specific questions. Are parents currently being advised to take children out of school if a whole household has to self-isolate for 14 days? Should those children return to school thereafter? What conversations is the Government having with local authorities about how and when those who are in charge of educational settings may take individual decisions to close institutions if they deem that appropriate?

There is also some confusion about whether any teachers who fall into a vulnerable group must still attend their place of work. That applies especially to pregnant teachers and those who have existing health conditions or who may present with symptoms.

John Swinney: I will link Mr Greene's first and third points together, as my response to them is the same. If a pupil is part of a household, the 14-day requirement applies to that pupil as it does to that household. That is based on the population-wide general advice that has been made available. The same applies to members of the teaching profession. If an individual member of the teaching profession experiences symptoms of Covid-19, they should stay at home for seven days, and, if they are part of a household, that would invoke the 14-day rule for that household. The situation for teachers and pupils is no different from the situation for any other person in the country. That is based on the advice that was issued yesterday.

On the question of individual decisions about school closures, the statutory power to run and to deliver education at local level is exercised by local authorities under the Education (Scotland) Act 1980. We are in discussion with local authorities about the question of school closures. There was a further discussion this morning between my officials, COSLA and the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland, and we will have further discussions on such matters later today.

Individual local authorities have had to take school-by-school decisions. A lot of those have been made in Beatrice Wishart's constituency of Shetland, although other schools have also closed: Dunblane high school, Perth high school, Hazlehead academy, Montrose primary school in Angus and Lanark grammar school. A range of

schools have had to take those decisions because of their individual circumstances.

I want to take any system-wide decisions collaboratively, and we are having those discussions. I place on the record that I had a very helpful conversation this morning with Gavin Williamson, the United Kingdom Secretary of State for Education, who is wrestling with many of the same questions.

David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): My question is for the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport. The chief medical officer for England predicted that nearly all the Covid-19 cases will hit in a heavily concentrated burst—50 per cent in a three-week period and 90 per cent over nine weeks. Does the cabinet secretary recognise those estimates for Scotland, and does she share that pandemic modelling?

Jeane Freeman: I recognise those numbers, but I remind David Stewart that the measures that were announced yesterday aim to bring down those numbers as low as we possibly can over a long period—it is not a short-term exercise—in a way that will allow our national health service to manage those who require treatment. We have done that modelling across the UK so that our modelling on how we can scale up the NHS in Scotland matches what it is anticipated can be done south of the border and elsewhere. We have now taken those particular steps partly to enable the increased capacity to meet the demand.

I remind the member that we said that those measures are in the mix but that we must take them at the right time in order to secure maximum impact. On the basis of scientific and clinical evidence, we have judged that now is the right time to take those steps, as we begin to see an increase in case numbers.

Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): My question is for Fiona Hyslop, the Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Fair Work and Culture. Like many colleagues, I have had calls from business owners who are concerned that their insurers will not cover them if they are required to close for a period as a result of Covid-19. That could result in businesses being forced to close permanently and staff being unnecessarily laid off and left without income. Can the cabinet secretary advise what steps have been taken to support businesses and their employees who are facing this worrying situation? I welcome her comments about the banks, but what is her response to the information that I have just given about insurers?

Fiona Hyslop: As it stands, the Scottish Government has no powers to close pubs, restaurants and other businesses. However, the emergency legislation that is currently being prepared and presented to the UK Government—

although it is UK legislation, there is a role for this Parliament in that—will provide those powers. That will help to resolve issues for some companies and businesses that have insurance policies that would depend on the Government instructing businesses to close.

I am acutely aware of the immediate issues that many tourism and hospitality businesses, including pubs and restaurants, face. We are quite clear that those powers are needed soon—perhaps the UK Government could consider shortening its timescale, but I will leave it to my colleague, the Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, Europe and External Affairs, to liaise with the UK Government on that. That might require that this Parliament take action as well, but those powers are needed before any such action can be taken. We are very aware of that and will urgently bring that to the attention of the UK Government.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): My question is for the Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government. Individuals who are self-isolating on statutory sick pay or who have just lost their jobs are experiencing huge pressures on their household incomes. What little they have to live on is being prioritised to feed their families and to heat their homes. What advice is the Scottish Government giving to local authorities to help residents who cannot pay their council tax bills or who may, indeed, need further financial help?

Aileen Campbell: We are working very closely with our partners in local government to work through our local resilience plans. I am acutely aware of the scenarios that Rachael Hamilton speaks about and the financial vulnerability that is being caused by the response to Covid-19.

We are currently working on a number of measures to support those who are financially vulnerable. That includes looking at an increase to the Scottish welfare fund, providing support for renters, as I outlined in my response to Alison Johnstone, and working with energy companies to look at ways in which we can support people who are fuel poor or are unable to keep their homes warm.

We are also looking to respond to food insecurity issues. We have already worked quite closely with FareShare in preparation for Brexit, so we have existing good contacts and networks. In addition to that, we are not ruling out the need for us to purchase food.

We are working through a number of areas because of the financial vulnerability that people are experiencing, to ensure that they do not face hardship. At the most basic level, we want to ensure that people are kept safe, warm and fed,

and that is guiding our actions and our approach, which will be outlined in more detail on Thursday.

Elaine Smith (Central Scotland) (Lab): I have been asked by a number of student nurses to clarify some issues, so my question is for the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport. What guarantees will be given to final-year nurses who will be needed to work on the front line—will they be offered early registration through crediting the hours worked as placement hours, which are needed by their course?

What pay band will they be on? Will they receive the normal two-to-four week induction period, with the necessary extra support, before entering a ward? Will they be professionally insured? Who should provide the PPE? Some hospitals are saying that it should be the university, and the university is saying that it should be the placement provider, so there is a great deal of worry.

Jeane Freeman: I will be grateful to all the final-year nursing and midwifery students within six months of qualifying who will step forward and assist us in that way. There are about 3,000 such individuals, whose engagement will be voluntary. We have been in discussions yesterday and today, and we hope today to finalise a four-nation agreement with the Nursing and Midwifery Council that will allow that to happen with no detriment to those final-year nursing and midwifery students, so that they will be credited for that work and will not be held up in finally qualifying. I do not have directly to hand which nursing band they will be on, but I will be happy to advise Elaine Smith on that.

On PPE, I have little time for squabbles like that, so I will sort out exactly who will be providing the PPE. It will be the health service, and if we think that it should have been the university, we will have that argument another day. However, we will ensure that the students have PPE and the necessary induction.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): This is for the Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government. I had a meeting this morning with Glasgow North West Citizens Advice Bureau and partners, including housing associations and the Trussell Trust, and we are mapping out the provision and co-ordination of matters such as emergency food need and supply, welfare and benefits, and energy, which is particularly relevant for those on prepayment meters. How does the Scottish Government intend to assist such a community-level response, not just in practical terms but financially? How will it support trusted community stakeholders who know their communities well and are prepared to do all that they can on the ground to assist at this hugely challenging time?

Aileen Campbell: There is a lot that is incredibly negative about this situation, but one of the things that has given us a lot of heart has been the incredible response that we have seen in many of our communities. The desire to help those who are most vulnerable in our communities is exactly the kind of work that we want to support financially. As Jeane Freeman said, this is an unprecedented situation, and it requires an unprecedented response. It will require us to move at scale and pace to help those who are most vulnerable. That includes financial support for community endeavours, and giving community activists the guidance necessary to keep them safe and healthy, too.

In response to Rachael Hamilton I outlined some of the areas in which we are looking to do further work. That includes fuel poverty, food security and working to support people to keep their homes. That will require us all to work together. It is not just about national and local government; it includes the community endeavours that will be absolutely necessary to ensure that we will emerge from this situation. We will outline more of the detail of the finances and the numbers on Thursday. However, if there are community organisations that members want us to know about, this would be the best time to tell us, so that we can direct the resources in the most appropriate way.

Gordon Lindhurst (Lothian) (Con): This is a question for the Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Fair Work and Culture. Self-employed people are facing particular difficulties at the moment, and possibly loss of their livelihoods. Can the cabinet secretary provide detail of what help and financial assistance is available to self-employed people in Scotland, and how they can quickly and easily access that help and assistance?

Fiona Hyslop: The Scottish Government will do what we can. On Saturday, my colleague Kate Forbes set out a number of ways to help companies, particularly using the rates system. She has circulated that to members.

There are particular issues around the ability of the self-employed to claim and get support. I understand that the employment assistance system can be in place but, again, those are Department for Work and Pensions and jobcentre issues.

I happened to be in my local jobcentre on Monday having a discussion on what was available to the self-employed and businesses in particular. Some of the measures that the UK Government can bring in—and indeed, has brought in to an extent—around availability of support, particularly if people are not eligible for statutory sick pay but can get employment and support allowance, are an opportunity to help the

self-employed. We will make sure that we communicate what we have and what is available to the self-employed and we will support people where we can, but we will need to do that together with the UK Government.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I know that the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport recognises the important work of social care providers. Will she work with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to ensure that social care providers are paid for the services that they are commissioned to deliver, irrespective of the impact of Covid-19? As part of that, the cabinet secretary will be aware that social care providers base their financial modelling on a 4 per cent sickness absence rate. If they hit absence levels of 20 per cent or more, which is projected, the impact on providers will be significant. Will the cabinet secretary turn her attention to that urgently, given the need to sustain social care services?

Jeane Freeman: I assure Ms Baillie that my attention is already on that matter. COSLA and I are working very closely together on a range of social care matters. Social care provision is vital at the best of times and absolutely critical in these times—not least because there will be increased demand on social care. We are looking at how we ensure the sustainability and resilience of that workforce and how we make provision to cope with a greater-than-normal absence level so that there is no dip in the care that people receive and the packages that they require. Some of that will involve having some of the individuals that we talked about earlier—perhaps final-year nursing students, AHPs and others—working to the level of their competence, but not beyond, and being supervised appropriately.

We will look at all those matters and, as I said to Jackson Carlaw, if any member has any specific instances of concern where someone's package has been altered in some way or they feel that they are not receiving the care that they require, I need to know that in detail, and I will act on it as soon as I receive it.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): The Scottish Government has had a fair work agenda for a good number of years. Despite the sincere efforts that have been made, there are still vast numbers of people in Scotland who endure poverty wages, precarious incomes and many forms of workplace exploitation. This crisis is exposing their vulnerability like nothing before. I am sure that many of us are aware of individuals who are losing pay or losing their jobs altogether already and of many who are reporting that they are being given no choice by their employers but to turn up to work despite having symptoms.

Does the Scottish Government recognise that whatever level of support is provided to businesses, it needs to filter through to individuals and fair work conditions need to be attached? Is the Government aware that a number of countries are responding to this emergency with policies akin to a universal basic income and that the case for that direct financial provision to individuals will only grow stronger the longer this situation lasts?

Fiona Hyslop: There are a number of issues there. Fair work is very important to the Scottish Government and has been and will continue to be. The statement that Kate Forbes made on Saturday in relation to business rates specifically referred to the fair work agenda and its importance. Last Wednesday, I met business leaders and the STUC and fair work was central to that discussion, because if we ask people to take tough decisions about their businesses and put front-line workers in jeopardy in any way, we have to make sure that they are supported.

We should make it absolutely clear that everyone—businesses and employees—should respond to the health advice on what is acceptable in relation to how people work. People who are symptomatic should not be in work. Part of that responsibility lies with businesses. That is the discussion that we had with the business organisations, who I will continue to speak to. As of now, we are trying to make sure that businesses stay as businesses, and that means making sure that there are jobs for people to go to. We will absolutely pursue the fair work agenda and I will meet the STUC again tomorrow on the issue. We have to be realistic about where businesses currently find themselves. Keeping people in jobs in the first place is important.

In relation to Mr Harvie's point about a wage subsidy or a universal basic income, that is a wider, longer-term issue. However, some countries, such as Denmark, are putting a wage subsidy at the heart of their response. That is important because many businesses are facing crisis because demand has fallen. Those are profitable and well-run good businesses, that in other circumstances would not need support. Cash flow is an issue, and the responsibility for addressing it should be shouldered not only by the banks, as I said, but by Governments. We have seen Governments in other countries take action on that, and we can discuss the matter with the UK Government.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): This is an islands-specific question for the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport.

Shetland does not have an intensive care unit at the only hospital on the island. Can the cabinet secretary provide reassurance that, when patients with Covid-19 require to be evacuated from

Shetland or other island groups to ICUs on the mainland, those medical evacuations will be carried out safely and efficiently?

Jeane Freeman: That is a very important question for our island communities. I am pleased to say that I can confirm that the Scottish Ambulance Service will ensure that any patient who has a clinical need to be transferred from any of our islands will be transferred in that way. An issue that had been causing concern was to do with the use of fixed-wing aircraft and the PPE that was required for those who would pilot the aircraft and those who would work with the patient, but that has now been resolved.

On Friday, the Scottish Ambulance Service held a conference call with all the chief executives of our Highlands and Islands NHS boards and produced its specific plan for the retrieval of patients in such circumstances. It has also held discussions about and set in place a plan for the use of a ferry, if that is appropriate. That includes arrangements for road transfer thereafter, once the ferry has docked.

The Presiding Officer: I am conscious that the hour that we allocated for the statement and questions has been used up. If members are agreeable, I will let the session run on, perhaps up until half past 3. We will probably still not get through all the questions that members have, but there will be other opportunities this week to ask questions.

Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): I have a question for the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport.

Given the unprecedented position that we are all now in, can the cabinet secretary advise how the people of Scotland can best access advice on everyday healthcare concerns without putting unnecessary pressures on our front-line services?

Jeane Freeman: The best way not only to alleviate pressure on our GP services but to obtain accurate, reliable and up-to-date information is to use the NHS inform website. I encourage everyone, including members of the Scottish Parliament, to use that website and to keep up to date in that way.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): Could the Cabinet Secretary for Justice update Parliament on what consideration has been given to any measures that are required in prisons to ensure that prison staff are sufficiently protected, that prisons operate with sufficient staff and that prisoners receive adequate healthcare?

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Humza Yousaf): The Scottish Prison Service has a national coronavirus response group, which has implemented the service's pandemic plan. Local

governors will oversee those plans in local establishments.

We have a multitude of concerns, which are primarily for our staff and those in our care. With regard to staff, we have ensured that the SPS has secured sufficient levels of PPE for the next 10 weeks, but those levels will be kept under review and increased when necessary. With regard to prisoners, we have clinical protocols and guidelines for the testing of prisoners. We also want to ensure that we allow the regime to continue to operate on a business-as-usual basis, as far as that is possible, because we have seen what has happened in other countries. In Italy, unfortunately, there were riots that led to deaths in prisons, not because there were cases of infection, but because visits and leisure activities were stopped, with prisoners being confined to their cells for up to 24 hours at a time.

Of course, when it is necessary, when people in our care are displaying symptoms, they will be isolated, but as far as it is possible within the guidelines, we will continue to ensure that visits can take place and that other activities can continue. We are working hand in glove with the NHS to provide healthcare in our prisons. A number of our prisoners—the majority of them, in fact—require medication. As things stand, medication stocks are plentiful, but we continue to keep that under review.

I give Liam Kerr an absolute assurance that the safety of our staff, who do an immense job in our Prison Service, and of those in our care is, of course, our number 1 priority.

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): Will the First Minister explain the testing a bit further? The World Health Organization's advice is clear: it is to

"Find, isolate"

and

"test ... every case".

That does not appear to be the position that the First Minister set out. Given that the World Health Organization has all the institutional and practical knowledge of dealing with the pandemic and that it knows what works and what does not work, will the First Minister explain why we are maybe not following its guidance to the letter?

The First Minister: Before I do that, I should explain that Fiona Hyslop has just left the chamber because she has a call with the UK Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy that is due to take place at 3.15 and which she mentioned earlier. If there are further questions for her, Kate Forbes or I will pick them up.

I have taken great care to understand the advice that has come to me, and I will continue to do so,

because I understand the importance of having an approach that is informed by the best possible advice. My advice in Scotland is that, if we tested every single person who displayed symptoms, that would, because we are asking them to stay at home, involve such a magnitude of resource that we would take resource away from other parts of the health service in which people need it. Crucially, if somebody was self-isolating and tested positive, the advice that they would get would not change in any way from the advice that they are getting right now.

I will continue to interrogate that position. I do not know what is happening in other countries, but I consider what would be required here to test every single person who has any symptoms of coronavirus, and I simply have a doubt in my mind about whether that is happening in other countries in exactly that way.

However, I know how important it is that we have much better information than we have from the figures that we have published so far in order to know how the virus is progressing. That is why the surveillance testing is so important. We must ensure that we do everything that we can to protect the resilience of our key workers in the national health service and social care in particular, and in critical infrastructure. That is why we are intent on testing people in those categories.

We have to continue to consider whether there should be further expansion beyond that. There has been discussion about how we can develop much quicker testing—almost testing that could be used by individuals themselves—to give individuals clarity about whether they have had the illness and perhaps enable them to go back to work.

I treat all those things really seriously, and I understand people's concern about an apparent discrepancy between the strictness of what the WHO is saying and what we are doing in practice. I reassure Neil Findlay and other members that a great deal of care and thought is going into what we are doing to ensure that it meets all our needs. My mind is certainly open, and I will continue to interrogate what we might do beyond the systems that we have put in place.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): My question is to the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism, Fergus Ewing.

Today, I have been contacted by concerned residents of Cumbrae. Some 30 per cent of the island's 1,400 residents are over 75, and there is only one small store on it. Mainland supermarkets do not deliver to Cumbrae, and CalMac Ferries is likely to reduce its services in the weeks ahead. How will vulnerable people in Cumbrae and other

island communities be supplied with food and other essentials at this difficult time?

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism (Fergus Ewing): It is essential that the more remote areas, such as the Isle of Cumbrae, which is in Mr Gibson's constituency, receive equity of supply. In other words, shops and general stores should continue to receive the supply of food that is received and taken for granted in the cities.

I have had two conference calls with major retailers in the past week. They are doing a fantastic job in keeping the shelves replenished in the face of huge demand, and I pay tribute to all those in the workforce in those shops, who are making a sterling effort to serve their customers in difficult circumstances. I have received assurances from each of the national retailers that there will continue to be equity of supply across Scotland, including in the more remote areas.

We have also been working over the past week to ensure that deliveries of goods to shops can be made more flexibly. The chief planner wrote early last week to each local authority, urging them to allow restrictions on the hours within which goods are permitted to be delivered to stores to be lifted. I am very pleased to say that there has been a terrific response from local authorities to enable that to happen.

Finally, I suspect that drivers' hours will increasingly become an issue, as there are—quite appropriately—restrictions. I have had discussions with the UK Government on the extent to which and when drivers hours should be looked at. That will be done precisely to address the question that Mr Gibson raised—which applies to many islands and many remote communities in Scotland—and ensure that communities can continue to receive basic supplies of food during the coming difficult weeks ahead.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): Irvine & Troon Cancer Care has been in touch with me to point out that it is still taking patients to and from the hospital for treatment, as I am sure is happening across the country. That organisation is now restricting each transport to one patient per car, whereas it has usually been three per car; therefore, its running costs are going to triple to around £10,000 per month. I ask the cabinet secretary whether the Scottish Government is able to commit anything to help meet those additional costs.

Jeane Freeman: I am grateful to Mr Whittle for that question. Other vital cancer-related third sector organisations across the country are doing the same excellent job that the one in our constituency is doing. I am happy to have discussions with organisations that are taking the

precautions that we advise them to take but which come with an additional cost.

I am happy to pick that up with that particular organisation, but the Scottish Cancer Coalition network is another group whose views, as well as any additional asks or concerns, I would want to ensure that we have, so that we can address them.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): My question was for the fair work secretary, but as she has left, I will address it to the Cabinet Secretary for Finance.

I have just been made aware of a staff member of a major retailer being sent home because she was wearing a scarf to shield her mouth. She has a child at school and her partner has chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, so she is concerned about infections. She has been sent home without pay.

Can the cabinet secretary speak to employers, in particular retailers, so that we can urgently ensure that people have the right protective equipment? That way, where possible we can have business as usual, with both staff and customers being protected. I imagine that such issues will be raised in a number of industries.

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Kate Forbes): I would be grateful if Sarah Boyack would supply me with more detail on the specific case that she mentioned, so that we can look into it further.

We are working very closely with businesses, not just on supporting them but on ensuring that they protect their workers and that appropriate guidance is given to workers. Ultimately, what we really care about is protection of workers, just as we care about protecting the rest of the population.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): There has been a massive amount of social-media traffic from volunteers who wish to help. My question is perhaps best aimed at Aileen Campbell. Will the Scottish Government issue guidance to local authorities on optimal co-ordination of support, including for volunteers, to help vulnerable groups and people who are self-isolating?

Aileen Campbell: We are currently working with our local authority partners in COSLA and in the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers, in particular around their local resilience plans, but we are also taking on board the clear need for us to provide guidance on some parts of the community response in order to keep communities safe and to ensure that we harness community endeavour and the volunteers who are so eager to play their part in response to the situation in which we find ourselves.

We are working closely with a number of other third sector partners, including the National Emergencies Trust and the British Red Cross, to ensure that that guidance can be worked out, and that we can provide leadership to enable people to do what they need to do in our communities, and in the large-scale resilience effort that is required.

Ruth Davidson (Edinburgh Central) (Con): According to the most recent data, 59,640 people in Scotland receive home care services such as help with getting in and out of bed, washing, dressing, feeding and toileting. That is almost 60,000 of our most vulnerable people, who are often entirely dependent on visiting care workers. I ask the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport what specific contingency plans have been put in place to ensure that nobody is left untended when members of care teams have to start self-isolating or stop work due to their own care responsibilities?

Jeane Freeman: We have already covered that, but I will go back over it again.

The work that we are doing directly, and joint work with COSLA, which either provides the services directly through local authorities or commissions them through contract with private providers, is looking in detail at workforce planning in order to ensure resilience in that workforce. That work is two-fold: it considers the anticipated level of absences for reasons that Ruth Davidson outlined, and it anticipates the increase in demand for social care as a consequence of other measures that we have introduced.

The workforce planning is looking at what provision can be made available, in part through our local authority chief executives considering what services they could pause and how they might redeploy staff. That will require the Government to provide specific training, and COSLA to ensure that redeployed staff have whatever PPE they need. It will also consider how else we could bring healthcare assistance workers from some of the additional workforce that I spoke about earlier—including those final-year nursing students and year 5 medics.

Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): I join others in thanking all our front-line staff and the thousands of volunteers across the country. I also want to thank all the expert advisors and officials who are working round the clock.

There will be times when the evidence and the advice conflict, and politicians will have to make judgement calls. We might question the advice, and we might question the judgement calls, but what we should never question is that advice is always given, and judgement calls are always made, with the best intentions.

Last week, I raised an issue about GP supplies with the First Minister and the Cabinet Secretary

for Health and Sport. I am grateful for their immediate action and for the supplies that have now been provided to GPs across the west of Scotland in Glasgow, Renfrewshire and Lanarkshire.

However, GPs have since contacted me to say that, despite receiving those supplies, they have concerns about them. Many practices have received fluid-resistant masks on which a label has been placed over the expiry date. The label shows that the expiry date is August 2021. However, when GPs have peeled off the expiry-date sticker, the true expiry date is actually April 2016—four years ago. The manufacturer's published advice says that those supplies can work for only three years after production, which means that they are four-year-old supplies with a false expiry date. That has, obviously, raised serious concerns among those GPs. What actions can the First Minister and the cabinet secretary take, what reassurance can they give those GPs, and what immediate action are they taking to acquire fresh supplies and ensure that they are adequately distributed around the country?

Jeane Freeman: I am grateful to Mr Sarwar for his comments, and also for that particular question.

I am aware of that issue. To be clear, the supplies that have been issued to GPs have been issued according to Health Protection Scotland guidance that is based on the nature of the supplies, which include masks, goggles, aprons and so on. However, we are aware of the particular circumstance that Anas Sarwar described. We are taking steps with the health boards to ensure resupply and that the situation is not repeated. GPs have been contacted so that they know that that is under way and so that they can be reassured.

As I said, my requirement is that all our general practices receive the supplies that they need, and that those supplies are fit for purpose. That requirement also relates to the timescale for receipt of the supplies: they should be received by Friday and I should be advised by Monday that it has happened and that there are no gaps.

Shona Robison (Dundee City East) (SNP): Can the Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government say what action she can take to support households with prepayment meters who, in the event of self-isolation, might be unable to front-load their meters. What more should the big six energies companies be doing to help their vulnerable customers in this situation?

Aileen Campbell: We are working to ensure that households can keep their heating on. Shona Robison is absolutely right that the energy companies will have to play their part, which

includes prepayment meters being provided with credit. Licence conditions require all suppliers to be sympathetic to the individual circumstances of people who are in financial difficulties, and to the need to prioritise maintaining their supply. We are working on methods through which we can keep the heating on for people, but we will also be engaging with the energy suppliers, because they have an enormous role to play in ensuring that that can happen.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): I have an education question. Are any plans in place to allow final-year university students and, indeed, school pupils to sit their exams?

John Swinney: Mr Simpson has raised a significant issue. At university level, each institution will have to determine how exactly it will handle accreditation of learning by its students. The Government will have no locus in that.

Some weeks ago, I asked the Scottish Qualifications Authority to provide me with options on what would happen should the exam diet be unable to proceed. Three options are available to us in the foreseeable future. First, the exam diet could proceed. Currently, that is the intention and it is the SQA's position. Secondly, the exam diet could be delayed until later in the year. That would cause significant disruption, but we are facing significant disruption. Thirdly, the SQA could undertake some form of accreditation of learning, based on available evidence, which would include a collection of course work, prelim results and estimations based on teacher judgment that are routinely submitted to the SQA.

I know that that is not a definitive answer to Graham Simpson's question, but I assure him that contingency planning has been done. We are considering the circumstances that we face. The current intention is that the SQA exam diet will continue as planned and will commence on 27 April.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): The health secretary will be aware that, yesterday, the Government's figures showed that the first case in Dumfries and Galloway had been confirmed. Today, I understand that there are, in fact, no confirmed cases, because that test was inconclusive, but nobody believes that nobody in the region is suffering from coronavirus. Many people are self-isolating either because they have symptoms or because family members have symptoms, but most of those people will not be tested.

However, the health secretary has said that key workers will be tested. Given what she has said about the need to redeploy people, for example, from one local government job to another in social care, will she ensure that the definition of "key

worker" includes not only people who carry out the tasks at the moment but people who could be redeployed from other departments to carry out such tasks, so that we can keep the workforce as strong and as large as possible?

Jeane Freeman: I will make two points in response to that question. Colin Smyth mentioned the false positive test in Dumfries and Galloway and how the community feels about that. That underlines why it is right for us to move to community surveillance and to upscale it, notwithstanding the First Minister's comments about continuing to press on with other areas of testing. Scaling up community surveillance will give us much more robust data—greater than that which we currently get through individual testing—about the level of infection in communities.

Colin Smyth asked about key workers. We will ensure that the definition takes into account tasks that have to be completed, and not just the individuals who do them. People who are redeployed to key areas of work—whether they are a final-year nursing student or a local authority worker—will fit under the definition of key workers.

Of course, the other area that needs to be assured—we are taking steps to make sure that it is—is work in social care and elsewhere that requires protection of vulnerable groups scheme testing. All those steps will be taken, and we will ensure that the tasks that are undertaken guide us in defining key-worker status.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): I have a question for the health secretary. A constituent whose son has type 1 diabetes has contacted me. They are worried about availability of insulin as the virus outbreak continues. Apparently, there has been rationing of insulin in Norway. Does the Government have that issue on its radar? If the matter is on its radar, are there plans in place to deal with the situation?

Jeane Freeman: Yes, the matter is on our radar. We are paying particular attention to availability and supply of medicines. I am very grateful to our chief pharmaceutical officer, Rose Marie Parr, who has postponed her retirement in order to continue to lead that work with us and her colleagues. That is very helpful.

There are significant connections between our pharmacy work in the Scottish Government, the community pharmacies around our country and the suppliers of medicines. That includes supply into the UK network, and the close working that we have with the UK Government on supply is really important.

We continue to observe the supply of medicines, to speak with the pharmaceutical companies when that is required, and to ensure that our community pharmacists and our

prescribers are aware of alternative steps that they can take while we look to resolve any dips in supply of critical medicines.

The Presiding Officer: I draw the item to a close. I thank members and ministers for their understanding. I am conscious that I have eaten into everybody's time. Just under a dozen members still want to ask questions. We will have an opportunity to return to the topic tomorrow and the next day, when there will be more Government statements, and at First Minister's questions.

Curriculum for Excellence (Review)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): The next item of business is a debate on motion S5M-21263, in the name of John Swinney, on the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development review of curriculum for excellence.

15:33

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): I welcome the opportunity to debate the approach to the review of curriculum for excellence that has been commissioned from the OECD and to give members the opportunity to set out their views on the issues that are relevant to the conduct of the review; the OECD will be able to reflect on those views.

Before I talk in detail about that, although we touched on some education issues in the statement on Covid-19—from what I have heard, I think that we might be returning to the matter tomorrow; perhaps I have been misinformed today—I want to set out some additional issues on Covid-19 that are relevant to educational perspectives.

First, we recognise the importance of ensuring that schools, early learning and childcare settings, and further and higher education institutions have clear guidance to help them to deal with the impacts of Covid-19 on their learners and on their staff. That advice is available from Health Protection Scotland and will be updated continually to ensure that yesterday's events are fully reflected in the advice for every given circumstance to support delivery of education in our communities.

As I indicated in my responses to Jamie Greene and Bruce Crawford a few moments ago, school closures are actively under discussion and consideration. We are involved in those discussions, which are taking place today, and I will engage on that later this afternoon.

To inform our decision making, we are monitoring the situation on the ground with the active participation of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland and local authorities around the country. Local authorities are having to make a number of practical decisions about pupil and staff absences, and about school estates being cleaned when a case of coronavirus is detected.

There is also the question of resilience and business continuity. We are working closely with our local authority partners in the Scottish

resilience partnership to ensure that contingency measures are in place to deal with all aspects of coronavirus and the potential impacts of localised school closures. We are fortunate in that we were able to reach agreement with the Scottish Negotiating Committee for Teachers about variations in arrangements for employment of teachers to ensure that we have adequate flexibility to deal with what will be a changing position at local level.

Local authorities have been asked how best to manage the impact of any school closures on key workers and low income families, including in respect of free school meals, which is a significant issue for many of the young people in our society for whom school represents a place where they can rely on high-quality nutrition being available to them. Those are some of the practical issues with which we are wrestling.

As I indicated in my response to Graham Simpson, the national qualifications timetable and exam diet remain on track, although I have asked the Scottish Qualifications Authority to consider contingency arrangements. A national qualifications contingency planning group now exists to draw together the Government, the SQA and related stakeholders. The group met today and will provide me with further advice in that respect.

As I said, I am happy to keep members updated on all aspects relating to Covid-19, and I do not for a moment suggest that what I just said will not need to be updated in short order. I hope that members will appreciate that we are dealing with a fast moving and challenging situation.

I turn to the OECD review. I listened carefully to the conclusions of the Education and Skills Committee inquiry and to the parliamentary request for us to undertake a review of broad general education and the senior phase. In coming to the conclusion to commission the review, I have taken into account the representations that were made by members of Opposition parties and the output of the committee's deliberations. Today's debate is an opportunity for members, having had sight of the remit of the review, which was published on 26 February, to place on the record issues that they believe that the OECD inquiry should consider. Obviously, the coronavirus effect will have an impact on the timetable for the review that will be undertaken.

As we embark on what I hope will be a positive and constructive debate, I hope that we focus on the central question: what do we want the curriculum for excellence to achieve for young people in Scotland over the next 10 years? To ensure that the debate is as broad and inclusive as possible, we must ensure that everybody who has a contribution to make to the discussion is

able to make it. I am particularly keen to ensure that members of the teaching profession have the opportunity to make their contribution based on their experience without any constraint from their employment relationship with local authorities.

I hope that teachers have something to say about their experience, because they have lived experience of delivering curriculum for excellence, and I want to make sure that curriculum for excellence represents the aspirations, hopes and driving direction of our teaching profession. Fundamentally, our education system will be enhanced if the review hears a strong voice from the teaching profession.

First, as we embark on the exercise, it is important to reflect on the foundations of curriculum for excellence. Scotland's curriculum emerged from a national debate about education that started about 20 years ago. It engaged the education committees of Parliament, Parliament, and many stakeholders. The curriculum was designed to be anchored in the four values that are engraved on the Parliament mace that sits in front of the Presiding Officer's chair—the values that we aspire to as a country. We wanted to ensure that the values of wisdom, compassion, justice and integrity were reflected in every single one of our schools around the country. There is a really powerful sentiment in having the values that are epitomised by the symbol of our democracy reflected in all our schools.

Secondly, Scotland's curriculum was designed to ensure that we create young people who have command of the four capacities—as confident individuals, responsible citizens, successful learners and effective contributors. Although we do not have an empirical measure for the four capacities, I see them increasingly in the young people of Scotland. I particularly see confidence in young people much more easily than I see it in my generation. The aspiration of curriculum for excellence to ensure that young people can acquire those capacities and then go on to deploy them is an essential element of the purpose of our curriculum.

Thirdly, in the updated narrative on the curriculum, which was published last September, we reaffirmed our determination that Scotland's curriculum will help our children and young people to gain the knowledge, skills and attributes that are needed for life in the 21st century. To me, that encapsulates the sense of hope and purpose that should lie at the heart of our curriculum. We want to make sure that every young person, whichever pathway they choose as a consequence of their school education, has been equipped with the knowledge, skills and attributes that are needed for life in the 21st century, which we all recognise to be a changing environment that will place many

demands on young people and their ability to adapt to prevailing circumstances.

As I discuss the matter with stakeholders and listen to parliamentary debates, I sense that the fundamental core of curriculum for excellence still commands broad political support. As we consider some of the tactical and operational aspects of the review of the curriculum, I hope that we have a positive discussion about how the aspirations of curriculum for excellence can be most effectively deployed for young people around the country. The remit of the review is designed to give the OECD the opportunity to consider such questions across a number of themes.

The themes that we have identified in the review are “curriculum design”,

“considering how the curriculum is being designed locally and used flexibly to meet the needs of all learners”,

and

“how well the curriculum design principles are being used to support learning and achievement, including collaboration with colleges and other partners.”

That approach will allow the OECD to explore the concerns that have been raised by the Parliament about numbers of subjects, as part of a broader look at how the curriculum is being used to meet the needs of all learners.

There will be an important debate to be had about the second question of the review, which concerns the debate about local flexibility against increased prescription. That discussion is never going to be absolute. However, if we decide that there is an argument for more prescription than is currently within the system, then let us have that open discussion about what is involved.

For my part, I place on record my belief that the young people of Scotland will be better served by greater flexibility being available to meet local needs, as envisaged by curriculum for excellence, so that educators can listen carefully to the aspirations of young people and put in place the educational approaches that will enable them to be successful. I accept that there is a debate to be had about whether there should be more prescription or more flexibility, but I am keen to make sure that we have an open discussion about the question, and that the advantages that I believe are evident in local flexibility are clearly understood as part of the review.

The third area is about the depth and breadth of learning in the senior phase, which relates directly to the balance between a broad general education and the transition to the senior phase. What was envisaged in curriculum for excellence was a three-year broad general secondary education that created the platform for greater specialisation in the senior phase.

I listen carefully to the thoughts and the points that are put forward. I recognise that the transition from the broad general education to the senior phase is a significant issue, which came through clearly in the Education and Skills Committee review.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):

Does the cabinet secretary agree that, within the OECD review’s remit, flexibility will be a point of debate in relation to the broad general education and the senior phase? There are issues about where that flexibility is more important and the debate might be about whether there should be more statutory recommendations for the senior phase.

John Swinney: The question of flexibility runs through secondary education in its entirety. I am listening carefully to educators, who say to me that they increasingly configure their educational approaches to meet the aspirations of learners. To me, that is the demonstration of flexibility.

I readily understand that there is an alternative point of view, which says that every young person should be doing a prescribed amount of learning. The boundaries of my definition of that prescription are around literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing, but I accept that others will think that prescription should stretch further than that.

Those are some of the issues that we will have to tease out. I simply express my view, which is informed by a lot of dialogue and discussion about the system. I appreciate that there are people who take a different view. I know that Liz Smith has a long track record of having a view of the need for—I think I set it out correctly—a greater degree of prescription. That is what we will have to discuss as part of the review.

We also have to make sure that we are meeting the needs of all learners. The Government will commission some work on data collection from Scottish schools, on the number of subjects that are offered in the senior phase, with a view to understanding any correlation with social deprivation. That will enable us to understand whether any inadvertent pattern is emerging of young people in areas of deprivation having less educational opportunity. I happen to take the view that they have much more opportunity through creating good pathways, but we will do the work to assess that issue.

That also relates directly to the notion of whether everything in our educational system needs to be judged by national qualifications, or whether vocational and other awards should be considered as part of the outcomes that have been achieved by young people. I recognise those as very significant advantages and attributes for young people in our educational system.

I know that the Scottish Green Party submitted an amendment on questions of homework that was not selected. I confirm that there is every opportunity for the review to look at those particular questions.

I stand here as an education secretary who has confidence in Scotland's curriculum, is confident that the right judgments were made 20 years ago and that we were designing an approach that would enable young people to gain the knowledge, skills, and attributes that are needed for life in the 21st century. However, I am not standing here as an education secretary who is saying that everything is perfect and that nothing needs to be done to improve the situation. I hope that, as part of the review, we can have an open and constructive discussion about how that can best be advanced. The Government will listen very carefully to the views of members today. I am sure that those who are undertaking the review will do likewise, and that we can have a broad and engaged discussion about how we can make Scotland's curriculum work for every one of the children and young people in Scotland today.

I move,

That the Parliament confirms its support for the establishment of an independently-led review of curriculum for excellence; notes the publication of the remit for the OECD-led review; further notes that the remit covers curriculum design, the depth and breadth of learning in the Senior Phase, local flexibility versus increased prescription, the transition from the Broad General Education into the Senior Phase, vocational and academic learning and awards, and roles and responsibilities in relation to the curriculum; recognises that this remit has been informed by the work of the Education and Skills Committee, including its report, *Subject choices in schools*; agrees that this review must form part of a wider drive to tackle key weaknesses in aspects of Scotland's school education and the qualifications structure, and further agrees that benefits that can be derived from all participants in the education system working together as part of a shared national endeavour to ensure Scotland's curriculum helps support Scotland's young people achieving the best possible outcomes.

15:50

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): The Government's motion is duly moved, and I note at the outset that it will be duly supported.

We find ourselves debating education in extremely unusual circumstances and against the backdrop of what are undoubtedly very difficult times for the industry, teachers, parents and pupils themselves. I also know that these are personally very difficult times for many of us, including those of us in the chamber—even the Deputy First Minister himself. Conservative members would like to pass our very best thoughts and regards to him personally.

However, when it comes to a frank and honest debate about curriculum for excellence, let us also be clear that we are having today's debate because of sustained pressure from Conservative members and many others in the chamber. Whether on primary 1 testing, international rankings, the attainment gap, subject choice, the exam diet, prescription versus flexibility, or multilevel teaching, Parliament has been consistent in holding the Government to account. It has used its Opposition time to bring such matters to the fore and to the eyes of the public—and rightly so.

The debate is very welcome, but it is very overdue. I will approach the subject constructively, as will all members who have an interest. Nonetheless, there might be areas where—as uncomfortable as it feels in the current climate—we will disagree.

On several occasions, Parliament has expressed discomfort about the direction of travel of curriculum for excellence. The OECD review that we are talking about today is only one step in restoring full confidence and faith in that curriculum. That is the key, because restoring faith—the faith of teachers, of parents and of those who sit in the classrooms—should be at the heart of this. Sometimes, perception is as important as the statistics and figures that we politicians often bandy around. Outcomes are important, but so, too, are the anecdotes of those to whom this matters so much.

Neither should the review be seen as a stand-alone solution to any perceived weaknesses in the system. It should not be an opportunity to kick issues into the long grass or to hide behind the protective cloak of an independent review and the timetable—which might now be extended—that comes with it. I am clear that, if there are issues that can be addressed now, there is a duty on us and on the education secretary to address them.

Fundamentally, one has to ask why we are having a review at all. Triggers have led to where we are. We have had debates in Parliament, and the Education and Skills Committee has done a lot of work. Whether in relation to the attainment gap, subject choice or declining results in certain higher, there are—no matter how you look at it—not blips or variations, but trends. They must be looked at, and we must analyse the gap in outcomes between the richest and the poorest in society. We should be looking at why schools are turning to multilevel teaching despite widespread disapproval of it within the system itself. Those are questions that we must get to the bottom of.

Why is this important? Well, a teacher whom I met at an event last week—probably one of the last such events that we will have for a while—said to me over a glass of wine that he had a class of

30 students and no teaching assistants, and that he was trying to teach more with less. He has a number of students with very difficult additional support needs, which take up a lot of his time, and an ever-expanding list of non-core subjects to pack into an already packed curriculum. He said this, which he gave me permission to quote:

“If I am being asked to teach things outside of my subject competence and remit, how can I guarantee parents that I am also teaching the basics?”

This debate is important because we must get the basics right, too. That is why the review needs an inclusive approach. I want to hear from teachers and others in education what they think. What are their lived experiences of what has changed? Has it changed for the better or not?

When we spoke previously about a review of this nature, the cabinet secretary said that

“a review of the broad general education, at this stage in implementing the previous review of it, is not necessarily a priority.”—[*Official Report*, 15 January 2020; c 81.]

What has changed since then? Why is a general review of the broad general education possible now if we are still implementing previous recommendations of a previous review of it? The OECD warnings about that go as far back as 2015, when its report said:

“Judgements must be informed by trustworthy evidence of student progress and learning ... It is important to have a coherent and carefully designed framework in order to maximise the quality of the information”

and minimise consequences

“such as reducing rather than promoting teachers’ assessment capacities.”

It is right, therefore, that the OECD has its place in this discussion, but that should not be against the backdrop of stopping any good work that was already happening before this review was announced.

John Swinney: My view, which is on the record, is that I would not have been having a review of the broad general education at this stage, because we are still implementing the 2015 conclusions. I have respected the view of Parliament in enabling it to happen. One reason why I did not think that the timing was appropriate is that many of the reforms that we have introduced, particularly on assessment, moderation and benchmarking, all of which were called for by the OECD, have not found all their effects in our education system. We are having the review, but I put on the record, for completeness, where it has come from.

Jamie Greene: I thank the cabinet secretary for clarifying that point. I know that there was disagreement at the time—I sat in the debate and heard the arguments. Parliament has collectively

decided that the issues are important, because they are all interlinked, and I will come on to why a broad approach is necessary.

When curriculum for excellence was originally suggested, it enjoyed cross-party support, and that is recognised. The major reason for that was the way in which it was sold to parents and the teaching profession. Its focus on mapping a child’s learning journey from nursery right through to the end of secondary school seemed to be sensible—to an extent, it still does. To look at learning holistically and not solely through the prism of results has a place. However, if those results paint a picture of change or trends, they are warning signs. Some things are easier to measure than others, but some things must be measured.

I was surprised that the original proposals sought to review only the senior phase, but Parliament decided otherwise. During that debate, Conservative members argued vociferously for an expansion of the remit, which was resisted for the reasons that have been mentioned. Because we are seeing weaknesses in some areas of the senior phase, the problem can be found to be rooted much earlier in the curricular cycle, which is why the inclusion of the BGE is a must.

I agree with the cabinet secretary that, to ensure that we have the workforce of the future, we need graduates with the right science, technology, engineering and mathematics skills in the vital roles that we need for a modern economy, whatever economy that will be tomorrow—and tomorrow can seem far away sometimes, these days. I welcome the debates that we have had on that subject, such as on funding, but unless we get the basics right in engaging people with numeracy, science, literacy and technology at an early stage and, crucially, in the BGE phase, we will not be able to provide the workforce that we need for the 21st century.

For many learners, S3 is the vital transition into parts of the senior phase and the culmination of a learner’s academic journey in the BGE. Those years are formative: core skills must be attained and students can assess their options. At that point, they are making key decisions about subject choices that will play a vital role in their future careers, especially when they choose their options for further and higher education or apprenticeships. We cannot isolate any perceived decline in results at higher level as just a senior phase issue. It is right that the entire CFE is broadly reviewed.

I want to be clear from the outset that the Scottish Conservatives support the principles of curriculum for excellence; our concerns lie with its delivery and some of the outcomes that we have seen. We need only look at the evidence to understand that there may be systemic problems.

The breadth of subject choice is reducing. We know that because Reform Scotland told us last year that the majority of Scottish schools were offering just six subjects at S4, which is far from the eight or even nine that we enjoyed when we were at school.

Many classes are increasing in size—that is what teachers tell us. That might be why, when there are teacher shortages, we see increased multilevel teaching, which has a detrimental effect on the learning environment.

Higher examination pass rates have dropped for a number of years and in a number of subjects, including, crucially, in history, English and psychology. We know that the figures are true. The latest international programme for international student assessment rankings found that maths and science levels had dropped to record lows, and in some areas there is a widening attainment gap. The Education and Skills Committee has consistently raised concerns about the governance structures and lack of clarity within Education Scotland and the impact of those on the curriculum, which the OECD acknowledged when it set its remit.

There has always been broad backing for curriculum for excellence, but it is clear to everyone in the chamber and in the education sector that, despite the hard work of teachers and educators across Scotland, we have a system that does not fully deliver what it says on the tin.

It is easy to dismiss such things as “cyclical”, but it is incumbent on all members to remember that any weaknesses in our education system will be felt for generations to come. That is why it is important that we get it right.

There should not be a need for the review, but we asked for one and we asked for its remit to be as comprehensive as it could be. That is how it shall be and that is welcome.

The Conservatives will support the Scottish Government—especially in the current climate—in delivering curriculum for excellence and improving outcomes for Scotland’s young people. We will do that where we can, because we want the review to succeed. I hope that the tone of my comments illustrates that. However, ministers must recognise that it cannot be business as usual in the meantime. My predecessor, Liz Smith, waited some years for a Government debate such as this. Patience will not be so forthcoming in the future.

16:02

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): It is almost two and a half years since the Government chose to lead a debate on schools in the chamber, so to

say that it is welcome is a bit of an understatement.

What is not welcome is the context. It is happening in circumstances none of us could have foreseen even a few weeks ago, never mind two years ago. The immediate questions about our schools loom large and they are about for how long we can, or should, keep them open at all. As the Deputy First Minister rightly did, we should take a moment to understand what a difficult decision that is and to acknowledge that the Government is following expert advice, which at the moment is that schools should remain open.

We should take the chance to thank teachers and other staff who are doing that while trying to manage the entirely understandable concerns and even fears of parents, children and colleagues. I see that the Educational Institute for Scotland has written to the Deputy First Minister to ask whether he will, in the interests of transparency, publish the scientific advice on which the decisions have been based. I hope that he will consider doing so.

In spite of the overwhelming urgency of the pandemic impact, our topic remains relevant, because it is about the medium to long-term future of secondary school education rather than the most immediate challenges.

Scottish education has a narrative spanning many decades, and the review, as outlined in the Government motion, is a significant milestone in that narrative.

Since the revolution of comprehensive education more than 50 years ago, changes to our schools, pedagogy and qualifications have been evolutionary. The most effective changes have built on the best of what we have rather than tearing it all up. That was true of five to 14, awards for all and indeed, curriculum for excellence, which, of course, has its own story, as the cabinet secretary has said. It began and grew from a very genuine and wide national conversation in which all sectors of Scottish society participated and that is exactly why its core values and principles were accepted across the political spectrum, as the cabinet secretary often reminds us, and why they still are. I gently say to Jamie Greene that it is about a lot more than how the principles of curriculum for excellence were sold; it is about the principles themselves, which were, and I hope still are, accepted across the political spectrum.

The implementation of CFE has proved difficult. There are now some serious consequences; some unforeseen and some perhaps unwise. First, the implementation of CFE happened in another time of crisis following the financial crash. Budgets were squeezed, teacher numbers fell and class sizes increased. We can argue about which Government’s fault that was and to what degree,

but the fact is that it was the worst possible context for curricular change.

Looking back, we see that elements of CFE emerged very late and not really from the consensus—most importantly, the three-plus-three structure, with three years of broad general education. Finally, during the implementation of CFE, there were changes to the exam structure, which, as Larry Flanagan of the EIS told the Education and Skills Committee, were never a necessary consequence of CFE and which seem to have proved a poor and difficult fit.

The review has to be broad enough to examine all those issues and it must engage parents, teachers, educationists and politicians to ensure that its findings carry the same broad support as the founding principles of CFE.

The review has its own story and narrative, too. Jamie Greene was quite right about that, because the Government long denied the need for a review at all, before it conceded to an examination of the senior phase. It took significant pressure from the Parliament to see that the examination was extended to cover secondary 1 to 3 and the transition from broad general education to the senior phase. It took even more pressure to ensure that the review would cover qualifications and attainment as well. However, we have arrived at the remit for a review and a Government motion that commits to all those points and to very broad engagement. At times, it might have been an uncomfortable process, but we have arrived at the right place, which is why the Labour Party has not sought to amend what is, to my mind, a perfectly commendable Government motion, and we will support it.

It is, of course, critical that, having accepted the need for the review—not necessarily, as he said, of his own volition—and having conceded the breadth of the review, the education secretary now makes a virtue of it and does everything to ensure that there is deep consideration of where we are. Much of what he said in his opening remarks was quite positive in that sense.

In a wholly different context, there is, of course, a debate about what constitutes a generation. In Scottish education, 15 years is pretty much a curricular generation. Lots of us think of CFE as new, but it has been in place as long as many curricular changes. I am not sure that five to 14 lasted as long as 15 years, for all the impact that it had. There is an argument that there is a need for a review just by dint of time, but the need was signalled, as Jamie Greene alluded to, by a series of warnings—canaries in the coal mine, as it were. The measure of the review's effectiveness will be the degree to which it examines those issues and recommends how we should respond.

Those issues are, first, the narrowing of the curriculum—senior phase pupils being able to choose fewer subjects to study to SQA exam level. A further consequence of that has been the impact on specific subjects such as modern languages, in which participation has dropped. The three-plus-three model is related to that, as it has squeezed curricular choice on entering at least the senior phase. There is little evidence that the idea that the three-year senior phase would allow for more exams to be attempted over several years has worked.

Then there is what teachers themselves described to the committee as systematic and routine teaching of pupils at two, three or even four different exam levels in the same class. National and higher exams are in no way designed to be taught like that. It is true that, in the past, standard grades, for example, were produced in order to be delivered in that way, but that is not true of our current exam system, and the committee could find no evidence that multilevel teaching, as it has come to be called, was happening for any educational reason. None of the witnesses could give an educational reason for pursuing that method. All the evidence is that it is driven by teacher shortages, curricular structure and, in some cases, the convenience of senior management, because it made it easier to timetable subjects.

None of those things necessarily flows from the principles of curriculum for excellence, but they all risk compromising or even undermining those principles. It is critical then that the review addresses them, fully and frankly, and that we then respond, to ensure that the next chapter that we write in the story of Scottish education is the tale of success that I sincerely believe we all want to see.

16:11

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): To say that it feels surreal to be standing here having this debate would be an understatement. The business of Parliament is about to change quite radically and for a number of months, but for now we are here, and the review whose remit we will agree today will have consequences for our schools and young people for many years to come.

Despite the circumstances, I am grateful to finally have the opportunity to discuss a Government motion on education. It has been a while. Relying on Opposition time to debate the Government's defining mission just has not been good enough. It was June 2018 when the Government announced that its proposed education governance bill would not be going ahead. That feels like a long time ago. Shelving it may not have been what the Government wanted,

but that decision was certainly welcomed by teachers and their unions, parents, education experts and Opposition parties. The Government was told that governance reform is not what is needed. Instead, teachers highlighted workload and bureaucracy as creating barriers to learning.

Before turning to the education system itself, I want to make a wider point about the attainment gap between pupils from the most and least privileged backgrounds. That gap might manifest in the classroom and in course results, but it does not begin there. Poverty is not created in schools, and an attainment gap that is rooted in poverty and inequality will not be closed only through measures that we take in the education system. As child poverty once again increases because of decisions knowingly taken by the United Kingdom Government, we should be clear that that situation is not naturally occurring or inevitable. The UK is the fifth-richest nation on the planet—nothing is inevitable about one in four children here living in poverty, nor is it inevitable that poverty is more highly concentrated among single-parent families, communities of colour and households in which someone has a disability.

Cuts to welfare support and a regime of sanctions that is designed to punish rather than help people on low incomes make life so much harder, and their impact on children and young people leads straight to the classroom. Pupils struggle to learn when they are hungry, when they cannot afford to go on the same school trips as their wealthier peers and when they get excluded because their uniforms are not up to standard. Good work is being done in schools to tackle and mitigate that, including the expansion of free school meals—as has just been announced in West Dunbartonshire—and income-maximisation projects. However—and this is one of the key lessons that I took from the Education and Skills Committee's visit to Finland—if we are to really achieve excellence and equity in our education system, it must exist in a society that is far more equitable in the first place than ours currently is. Otherwise, instead of reducing teachers' workload to improve the quality of teaching and learning, yet more responsibility will be heaped on overworked staff to solve problems that are simply outwith their control.

Turning back to the education system, I note that, according to evidence that was recently taken during the Education and Skills Committee inquiry, there appear to be issues of both subject choice and subject availability that correlate with the level of deprivation in a school community. Put simply, it looks like senior phase pupils in deprived communities, for example, will have fewer highers to choose between than their counterparts in our least deprived communities will. I take the cabinet secretary's point about a wider range of subjects

and qualification opportunities overall but, if we look at highers specifically, that is what the limited data seems to show us. The number of subjects that an S4 pupil can take in one sitting also seems to correlate with the level of deprivation.

Before coming to any judgment about the strengths and weaknesses of the system, we first need to confirm exactly what is happening, which is why I was glad to come to an agreement with the education secretary whereby the Government has committed to conduct a data collection and review exercise, in tandem with the OECD review, to look at the issue of senior phase subject availability and its relationship to social deprivation.

The data that we have been working from until now has been blunt and imperfect, and has largely been the result of freedom of information trawling by journalists. A quality-assured collection exercise conducted by the Government will be very useful—though of course it must be only the start of that piece of work. What we do with that data, particularly if an iniquity is identified, is what matters. The impact of community deprivation is felt in other areas of provision as well—for example, the committee's recent STEM inquiry received evidence of schools in deprived areas struggling to access science fairs or to get STEM role models in to give demonstrations.

To take an example beyond deprivation but relevant to the remit of the review and to the debate, there are issues with the design of the national 5 qualification that need to be looked at. As I have raised during previous Opposition debates, the requirement of 160 hours for national 5s is not compatible with the number of hours that are available in the year. By the standard definition of 160 teaching hours in a year, it is simply impossible to timetable. Given that, there is a lack of clarity as to what 160 hours means here: is it purely teaching hours, or does it include an expectation of a number of hours of independent revision or homework? Does the 160 hours start in third year? Would that not call into question the change away from the two-plus-two-plus-two model to the three-year senior phase that Iain Gray mentioned?

There are also issues with the way in which teachers are moderated under the curriculum for excellence. CFE was meant to empower teachers to be responsive to the needs of their pupils, to have the freedom to teach and not be locked into prescriptive requirements. Instead, there is evidence that teachers are being closely monitored through CFE experiences and outcomes, benchmarks, standardised assessments, self-evaluation and inspection indicators. All those combine to create a substantial bureaucracy. We need to consider how

workload and teacher moderation impacts on learning under the curriculum for excellence, and whether the principles and aims of CFE are still being met.

Part of the workload issue is the role of homework. There is now a significant amount of evidence that suggests that a lot of homework is not beneficial to learning. That is particularly the case at primary level, but the evidence points to a similar problem at secondary level when the volume of homework is high and the quality is low—when it is handed out almost as ritual, particularly due to the expectations of some parents, carers and teachers that, because they had to do it, so must their children. When it is handed out not as reinforcement but to cover areas of learning for which there is not enough timetabled class time, it acts as a sticking plaster for structural problems, such as those that I have just raised about national 5s.

Most important of all for this review, teachers must be able to speak freely and openly about the issues that they face. Their input cannot be mediated or filtered through their employers. They must not fear repercussions for identifying the issues that they face in their roles; only then can the review really identify the problems in Scottish education. I am grateful to have received the cabinet secretary's assurances in that regard. The Scottish Greens are therefore content to approve the remit of the review. We look forward to working with the Government and colleagues across Parliament to consider its outputs and what improvements are to be made as a result.

16:17

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): The debate is very welcome. As others have noted, a debate on education in the Government's own time is long overdue. There is much to be proud of in Scottish education, but it has been clear for some time that parts of the system are struggling.

As the coming weeks present unparalleled challenges to our society as a whole, teachers will no doubt go above and beyond the call of duty once again. In many ways, that is a habit that they are already very much accustomed to, because teachers' workloads have been stretched for a long time. There has been a failure to provide the structure, time and support that they need to do their jobs and to thrive. Concerns about the trajectory of the system are no reflection on the work and efforts of teachers, pupils and parents.

However, Scotland's recent feedback from international rankings has thrown the situation into sharp focus. The PISA results made clear what many teachers have long suspected—that something is going wrong in Scottish education.

That is why my party voted for the review. It provides an opportunity to take a step back and properly reflect on what can be done to reverse those downward trajectories. The original inspiration for the review was the Education and Skills Committee's investigation into the narrowing of subject choices. I am deeply concerned about the evidence that suggests that that may have a particular impact on rural areas. Since then, there have been more reports showing a divergence between what is happening in urban Scotland and what is happening in rural Scotland. Indeed, Scottish Liberal Democrats' research found that in some places, students were making round trips of up to 40 miles for subjects as basic as physics.

Beyond narrowing subject choices, there is plenty more that could be of interest to the OECD. There has been continuing confusion about the responsibilities of Education Scotland. Abolishing the Scottish survey of literacy and numeracy when the results declined and replacing it with new national testing has made it harder to see what is really going on. When it comes to the standardised assessments, the OECD's recommendations might have been misinterpreted. As a result, thousands of primary 1s are about to take those tests again, regardless of whether they are compatible with play-based learning, for a purpose that is not clear.

There is also the decimation of our additional support needs and support staff workforce. In the past 10 years, the number of additional support needs teachers has been reduced, while the number of pupils who require ASN support has increased markedly—31 per cent of pupils are now identified as having an additional support need.

There is growing evidence that the workforce is straining under immense pressure. A survey that was commissioned by the Educational Institute of Scotland found that six out of 10 full-time teachers worked more than eight hours above their contractual working hours each week. Another survey found that 76 per cent of respondents reported that they felt stressed "frequently" or "all of the time" in their jobs. There are many things that concern Opposition members.

That said, I accept that the review will not be a magic bullet for Scottish education. There is a limit to what can practically be considered—that was the case even without the inevitable complications that the next few months will bring as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic—but there is a need to reflect on the fundamental design of the curriculum. The breadth of concern demonstrates the need for a reliable system of accountability and reflection. There needs to be continuous evaluation in Scotland and a circle of constructive feedback—I emphasise the word "constructive"—

that strengthens the learning system for our young people. At the moment, that does not seem possible, because of a fundamental conflict of interests within Education Scotland. As it sets policy and carries out inspections, it is tasked with marking its own homework. As evidence of deterioration accumulates, that must be called into question.

In my letter to the cabinet secretary, I asked whether representatives from the OECD would be allowed to engage directly with Opposition spokespeople. More important, those on the front line must be allowed to have their voices heard. Teachers need to be heard, and they need to be seen to be heard. Direct, unfiltered evidence from practitioners needs to be given a platform, and the review presents an opportunity for that. The full breadth of curriculum for excellence experiences and concerns must be heard.

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

16:22

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I thank the Government for holding this important debate, and I associate myself with the cabinet secretary's comments about the importance—in the very worrying period that we find ourselves in—of our schools and their role as places of safety for young people where they can be sure of support, warm food and a nurturing environment.

If we learn any lessons from the Covid-19 crisis, we should learn that we must re-evaluate who the key workers in our society are—they are the ones whom we rely on to look after our children and our elderly, and those who provide food, stock our shops and work in warehouses, all of whom are likely to be working in the most precarious conditions in the gig economy. Once we have got through the current crisis, I hope that we can re-evaluate and look at our society through that lens.

I welcome the review and agree with what the Government's motion says. It is extremely important that the review forms

“part of a wider drive to tackle key weaknesses in aspects of Scotland's school education and the qualifications structure”.

I also agree with the Government's view that benefits

“can be derived from all participants in the education system working together as part of a shared national endeavour to ensure Scotland's curriculum helps support Scotland's young people achieving the best possible outcomes.”

I have heard that that is of most concern to members across the chamber who have taken

part in the debate so far, and I welcome the consensual approach to using that as a springboard to improving outcomes.

I thank the many members who have mentioned the committee's work. To put my convener's hat on, it is obvious that that work has been welcomed across the chamber and by the Government. I thank members and the Government for recognising the important work that we have undertaken.

The committee has written to the OECD to offer any expertise that we might be able to give to the process. We are willing to take part in the process should the OECD think that that is an appropriate way forward. I look forward to seeing the review progress over the coming months, albeit that it might be stalled because of the current global crisis.

It is really important that we examine the scope of the review in respect of its consideration of the broad general education part of the curriculum, which has changed from older days. Jamie Greene talked about having enjoyed the choice of eight or nine subjects in third year. I think that I am considerably older than him, and the situation was the same for me. However, Scottish education has changed. I left school in fifth year, as most pupils did—when I went through the system, a pupil who stayed on for sixth year was an exception. We have to recognise that society has changed and that keeping as many of our young people in the education system until sixth year is the expectation now. That means that we have had to adapt to what was happening. Previously, we always heard about the two-term dash to highers, and it was really important that the senior phase was fulfilling for people right the way through from fourth year to sixth year to allow them to get the best results.

Jamie Greene: Does Clare Adamson think that increased subject choice or decreased subject choice improves outcomes when it comes to opportunities for careers? From my point of view, the more subjects that are available to a person and that they have access to, the more chance they have to choose what is right for them.

Clare Adamson: It is really wrong to look at the curriculum in terms of what happens in a single year. It has to be about the outcome for the person at the end of sixth year and the opportunities that they have throughout the senior phase. They may well have studied eight or nine subjects by the time that they have left sixth year, but they may not have done that in one year. That is the really important part of what we are trying to do.

We also have to recognise the success of the developing the young workforce programme and that many pupils choose not to have an SQA

subject choice, but might do a foundation apprenticeship, go to college, choose a voluntary subject, such as a Duke of Edinburgh award, or do something else that is all about building the capacity and skills of our young people but does not appear as a single subject choice in a single year.

The committee's report made some observations about our needing more data. I thank Ross Greer for bringing that issue to the table. We did not identify that there was inequality just because there were fewer subject choices in areas of deprivation. We did not have the data to show that one way or the other, and that was one of the reasons why we asked the Government to consider a review of the final stage.

We quite often hear that there is a crisis and that we are letting down a generation. In January this year, Liz Smith talked about access to university education in *The Sunday Times*. She said:

"The current system is discriminatory (with) many well-qualified domiciled Scots squeezed out."

I understand her concerns about that particular issue, but at a time when we have more Scotland-domiciled students at university than ever before, we have many highly qualified young people competing for those places. To me, that does not fit a narrative of failing a generation.

Liz Smith: Will the member take an intervention?

Clare Adamson: I am afraid that I am out of time. I am sorry.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): Have you concluded?

Clare Adamson: Yes, Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: All right. I thought that you were going to take an intervention.

16:29

Michelle Ballantyne (South Scotland) (Con): Education is the most important universal right that we have embedded in our society, because it provides social mobility. If we get education right, we know that it has a positive impact on health, poverty and our economy. It should be our number 1 priority, because it is the area that underpins everything else, and a good education, once imparted, is ours for life.

The cabinet secretary's motion today is carefully crafted to enable all sides of the chamber to support it. What it does not do is acknowledge that the Scottish National Party resisted undertaking the review at every turn. At no stage has the cabinet secretary agreed, or even acknowledged,

that curriculum for excellence is in danger of becoming—and I have heard some say that it already is—an oxymoron.

As a parent, I have had children in the Scottish education system for 30 years, and I continue to do so. I have witnessed the weaknesses in the system growing. However, the issue is not parental perception; the discussion that we are going to have is about evidence—that is what the review needs to look at.

Some of the evidence that was heard when the curriculum was first being developed and implemented was that it promised a more holistic approach to education that built up pupils' soft skills, as well as their academic skills. It promised that teachers would have more flexibility in how they approached teaching and would be able to create a programme for learning that could dispense with potentially outmoded practices.

Those promises were warmly received by education experts and teachers alike, and they were heralded by politicians and industry leaders as a new way of ensuring that Scotland produces world-leading workers and citizens. Despite my own concerns about the introduction of curriculum for excellence, it would be disingenuous to suggest that it was not seen as a positive proposal for Scottish education. The 2004 curriculum review group report, which gave the curriculum its name, enjoyed support from all five main political parties.

However, as the years have rolled on, concerns about implementation and impact have tarnished the policy. Jamie Greene's point about restoring trust is, I believe, quite right. One need look only at subject choice to see changes that parents are not happy about. Prior to the abolition of standard grades in 2013 and the introduction of the national 4 and 5 qualifications, it was normal for schools to require pupils to sit eight subjects. Twenty years ago, 93 per cent of schools in Scotland allowed eight subjects at secondary 4 level, and three quarters of young people exercised that choice and actually sat eight subjects.

Clare Adamson: As someone who became a computer scientist and was interested only in science, I did eight subjects. I had to do two languages—French and German—at my school. That was not a choice that I would have made had I had an option to do something that was more interesting to me or relevant to where I wanted to go.

Michelle Ballantyne: Yes, but if I let my daughter choose, she would probably do only two subjects. This is about ensuring that people have a broad education.

I find it worrying that only 10 per cent of local authority schools offer eight subjects, while, in contrast, almost the entire independent sector still

allows eight subjects. That is driving parents to consider private education—even when they probably cannot afford it—simply to give the choice that the state system no longer affords. In fact, we have to go back to the 1970s to find a time when such a low proportion of young people had access to a broad curriculum.

Curriculum for excellence sought to change the way we taught our children by providing a multidisciplinary approach to learning: it would provide an education that would develop skills and critical thinking. In themselves, those were positive ambitions and not without merit.

However, my long-held concern—as a parent and as a professional who worked with children in education, particularly school refusers—is that curriculum for excellence is not knowledge based. In fact, if one reads through the whole curriculum for excellence, very little mention is made of knowledge. We need to understand that the development of skills and the manipulation of information to facilitate higher thinking requires that a core knowledge base is embedded in the long-term memory.

John Swinney: I am listening with interest to Michelle Ballantyne's speech. She needs to be reminded that the core narrative of curriculum for excellence says:

“Scotland's curriculum ... helps our children and young people gain the knowledge, skills and attributes needed for life in the 21st Century”.

I acknowledge the importance of knowledge being part of the curriculum and of young people's experience. Does Michelle Ballantyne accept the point that that is built into the concept of curriculum for excellence?

Michelle Ballantyne: I accept that the word is built into the descriptor at the front edge. However, going through each section, one sees no provision for ensuring that children have a foundation of knowledge embedded in their long-term memory that allows them to manipulate data, information and understanding. That is why we are seeing some decline in performance. If we do not address that—if we do not consider it as an issue—we will miss the fundamentals that are causing a decline in our education.

I am going to have to move on quite fast now.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: No—you took some interventions, so I will let you make up your time.

Michelle Ballantyne: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

One of the problems that we need to consider, and which is critical to the review, is that the Scottish Government's withdrawal from all but one

of the international education comparator studies and the scrapping of the valuable—or what I consider valuable—Scottish survey of literacy and numeracy, mean that the evidence on how our systems and schools are performing is based on annual school reports, which are based on teacher judgment. Although I have absolute respect for our teachers, I believe that that inevitably introduces the bias that humans are naturally inclined to.

For the OECD review to have any potency, it must be able to explore in detail the relationship between CFE and education performance. I am concerned that the OECD will struggle to do that, and to accurately chart that relationship while it is wandering in what was described by Lindsay Paterson, professor of education policy, as a “data desert”.

The Scottish Government needs to seriously consider—I hope that the review will point to this—the quality and quantity of its education data gathering, to ensure that any future challenges that arise in education can be identified by bodies such as the OECD and then acted on quickly by the Government. The Government should not have allowed us to drift to the stage that we have got to.

For the review to be meaningful, it must be independent and draw evidence from across educational thinking and experience. It must allow freedom of speech for all contributors, whatever their position on curriculum for excellence, so that we can explore it thoroughly. The role of Education Scotland, which has responsibility for both curriculum development and inspection, needs and warrants review.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That is where you must conclude. I have given you extra time.

16:38

Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to participate in this debate. Like many others, I confess that I am rather distracted by other issues, despite the fact that, over a long period of time, I have expressed concern about what is happening in the education system. However, we are in uncharted waters.

Before I make my main contribution, I want to reflect on what I see as the role of schools—not only their education role, but their social role. They are a community hub and can be a place for sharing information, wise counsel and helping people avoid panic; crucially, for some children and young people, they can be a place of sanctuary, nourishment, security, routine and care.

I would not like to be in the position of the cabinet secretary, who has to decide what should be done about our schools. Although the instinct is

to say that we should close our schools, we would lose a huge amount of important caring that goes on in our communities through them. I am sure that, whatever decision is made, it will be made with that awareness in mind.

John Swinney: I place on record my appreciation of Johann Lamont's understanding of the dilemmas that she has highlighted. As she has characterised, these are the dilemmas that we are wrestling with because of the centrality that school represents in the stability of some young people's lives in our society. I am grateful to her for her acknowledgement of that.

Johann Lamont: Many families will be able to make decisions, but we know that, for some of our young people, school is an anchor in their lives, and we give that up at our peril. If schools have to close, I am sure that the cabinet secretary will be thinking about how we can replicate such support, without which some young people will face immense difficulties.

In relation to the review, I will raise a number of issues that, I trust, any examination of curriculum for excellence will include. The approach of curriculum for excellence secured cross-party support, but many of the subsequent developments were not foreseen, were not consulted on and do not have cross-party support or, indeed, support within communities, families and the profession. Such support is in danger of being lost, which is why the review is so important.

Aspiration is easy to sign up for, but we need to be vigilant about delivery. One of my concerns is the decision not to have an external exam at the end of S4 for many students who are doing national 4. It is astonishing that, during my time on the Education and Skills Committee, we were not able to establish who had made that decision, never mind whether it was a good one. In my teaching career—back in the day—I saw the direct benefits for many young people of what was called certification for all. Schools had to provide courses, which were tested externally, that met the needs of all our young people. The system valued all our young people and treated them all with respect. It is concerning that some young people might now leave school without any qualifications whatsoever, and that we might be going back to the world of certificate and non-certificate classes, which abandoned many young people when, with a bit of support, they could have achieved a great deal more.

Year-on-year cuts to local authorities' budgets have had an impact on the effectiveness of our schools. I am sure that the review will look at that issue, too. There has been a reduction in the number of support staff, personal assistants, educational psychologists, behavioural support workers, group workers, school nurses and home

link workers, and there has been a decrease in, if not the ending of, learning support. In the past, all those people have played a critical role in supporting young people, and they are a critical means of bridging the gulf in opportunity that exists for far too many young people in our education system, whether it is because of their family circumstances, because they are disabled, because they are autistic or because they face other barriers that create daily challenges.

It is ironic that, while such support has stopped or is disappearing for some of the most disadvantaged young people, the use of private tutors is increasing for those who can afford it to maximise young people's achievements. I urge any examination of the decisions relating to the implementation of curriculum for excellence to be underpinned by a rigorous equalities impact assessment. Such decisions should be tested because, far from confronting inequality, they are in danger of reinforcing inequality and disadvantage.

There is a fear that decisions on multilevel courses are driven by personnel management issues and timetabling difficulties that are not about education. I contend that young people who are doing a subject for the first time in fourth year have a level of maturity and ability that is very different from that of a youngster who is taking an advanced higher course. I could not have taught both those courses in a class, although I did manage to teach general and foundation certificates. The gulf is immense, and the age gap between the pupils is significant and should be acknowledged. Such classes being convenient for the timetable is not an educational reason for them to be taught.

I am also concerned about subject choice. There is an issue relating to core subjects that we need to discuss, and we need to hear more from people with expertise about that. Some theoretical freedom of choice actually results in a lot of young people having very limited choices, not just in relation to numbers. A pupil might have only six subjects, but I contend that there is a difficulty in relation to the choices within those subjects if we do not have a sense of what the core subjects in our curriculum might be.

It is essential that the review examines how decisions about external examinations, subject choice and multilevel teaching have a direct impact on those who are already disadvantaged in the system and thus reinforce the evident gap in attainment instead of challenging it.

Multilevel teaching will be more prevalent in schools where fewer young people take a full group of highs or advanced highs. If plenty of young people are doing highs, they will not be in multilevel classes. As a consequence, those who

are already achieving, or who are fully supported, are learning in a less disruptive set of circumstances.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Can you wind up, please?

Johann Lamont: Sure.

There are key issues to do with subject choice, multilevel teaching and so on. I welcome the review. It must be acknowledged that those who are highlighting the problems are not the problem. The review is an opportunity for the cabinet secretary to listen to those who have expertise in the field, whether they are teachers or others working in schools and supporting young people. Those people need to be at the heart of the review.

16:45

Maureen Watt (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): It is really important that the education system in any country be open to review. That applies to our system, although it has probably been reviewed and scrutinised more than most.

As has been said, curriculum for excellence was started by the Lib-Lab Executive, with the support of the whole Parliament, and it fell largely to the SNP Government to implement it from 2007 onwards.

Of course, any new system must be implemented gradually. Implementation at primary school level was smooth and was welcomed. Children were looking forward to continuing curriculum of excellence in secondary school, and most did so smoothly. Teachers who did not feel confident about their implementation of it were given extra assistance from national bodies.

Our young people were not to be taught to the test but were, through their individual learning, to be taught to become successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors.

The OECD review, "Improving Schools in Scotland: An OECD Perspective on Scottish education", which was published in 2015 said:

"There is a great deal to be positive about in such a review: learners are enthusiastic and motivated, teachers are engaged and professional, and system leaders are highly committed. There has been intensive activity to create suites of support materials and a drive to address excessive bureaucracy. There have been extensive professional learning events organised throughout Scotland. CfE has been anchored in consensus and a wider set of parallel reforms. These include teacher education, extensive work on qualifications and vocational educational and training, and the establishment of a National Parents Forum and a new Leadership College."

The report's conclusions and recommendations said:

"In the next phase of the CfE journey, Scotland has the opportunity to lead the world in developing an innovative national assessment, evaluation and improvement framework that is consistent with what is known about promoting student, professional, school and system learning. The current system has a strong formative emphasis for the players at each of these levels and other stakeholders through the development of carefully constructed processes of assessment, evaluation and appraisal. These processes are informed by research about how to promote positive outcomes for learners, their teachers and their leaders."

The report went on to say:

"The challenge now is to construct systems and processes to develop this more robust evidential platform on which to base judgements about the health of the system at all levels while retaining the strong developmental and improvement emphasis. This is not an easy task because the potential for narrowing and distorting the curriculum and undermining the professional judgements of teachers is real. Scotland, however, has demonstrated innovative ways to use benchmarked information to inform development in upper secondary schooling through its Insight tool. Education Scotland, together with the complementary expertise of others within the system, now has the opportunity to develop similarly innovative processes for the years of the Broad General Education in ways that support the continued development of CfE."

I presume that that is what the new review will drill into.

However, much has changed and developed in the education system since curriculum for excellence's inception. The increase in nursery education hours has had, and will continue to have, an effect on our children, and building on play-based learning will no doubt have a great effect. I am sure that all members who go into nursery and primary schools know how inquisitive and engaged pupils of that age are.

However, there is no doubt that most concerns have been about the senior phase, and if the results of the new study and report can help with that, that will be welcomed. Having recently visited one of the larger secondary schools in my constituency, I know that staff are concerned that much of the criticism is totally unfounded—it is not landing with parents and is serving only to undermine the confidence of staff, who all want to do their best for their pupils.

Members who took part in Jamie Halcro Johnston's debate last week on Scottish apprenticeship week will know that I recounted my learning experience of the positive value of foundation apprenticeships. Not only are they giving pupils work experience in a wide variety of settings, especially in areas of the economy in which we are always likely to need workers, but they are attracting higher passes at a high level. I learned at first hand that foundation

apprenticeships are helping to close the attainment gap by widening access.

I watched pupils who are doing a healthcare foundation apprenticeship in Aberdeen royal infirmary and heard from one grateful parent—a general practitioner—whose daughter had been on the way to disengaging from school but had started an apprenticeship programme and loves it, and who now sees the value not only of her apprenticeship but of her other subjects. The parent said that all pupils should have to do foundation apprenticeships.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I must ask you to conclude there, please.

Maureen Watt: There is no doubt that more work needs to be done to help our poorer-performing schools, and I hope that the review will show that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am sorry—I did a bit of drama there to show what “conclude” means.

16:52

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I welcome the Scottish Government’s having brought the debate to the chamber today. Along with other Opposition parties, we have for a considerable period been pressing for an education debate in Government time.

Education is one of Parliament’s primary functions and—in more normal times, at least—the Government states that it is its foremost priority. However, despite the importance that is attached to it, and despite the efforts of staff and teachers, it has become increasingly clear that there have been falling standards in many areas of schooling. I know that many teachers will be concerned about the coronavirus outbreak and the impact that potential absences and resulting organisational issues might have on their work and their personal circumstances. I am sure that ministers will be looking to allay their fears as much as possible. Ministers will have difficult decisions to make, but will have the support of Conservative members as they make those decisions.

The debate feels a little uncomfortable because of that, but it is also reassuring because, as we look to the future after the current crisis, the review of curriculum for excellence can, if properly handled, be an important step in restoring Scotland’s reputation in education. However, we should keep it in mind that a curriculum can only ever be as good as the system that supports it.

There is a focus on the implementation of the curriculum, but there remains the wider question of whether some of the policy assumptions behind

CFE remain appropriate. We should be able to consider the curriculum at a distance from other areas of school performance. There is also a broader question of capacity in our schools. We have fewer teachers, and concerns continue to be raised regularly about teacher workload and staffing. Those issues inevitably impact on how the curriculum is delivered, but they are distinct from it. However, they add pressure to how the curriculum is received. There are questions, for example, about multilevel teaching, which no one, I am sure, suggests is inherently desirable.

Similarly, our qualifications framework being altered in tandem with major curriculum reform has significant implications, so it is welcome that the Scottish Government’s motion recognises that

“this review must form part of a wider drive to tackle key weaknesses in aspects of Scotland’s school education and the qualifications structure”.

Too often in the chamber, legitimate concerns have been batted away. Too often, particular narratives have been pressed until they bear little relation to parents’, teachers’ and pupils’ experiences.

However, we should be heartened that, across the parties in chamber, there has been willingness to listen on education. Although we may differ on ideas, there is a willingness to work together in the common interests of pupils. We saw that with the initial development of curriculum for excellence many years ago, so should the Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills wish to drive forward constructive change, he will find that members of other parties are willing to listen. With that in mind, and as Parliament has previously recognised, it is important that the review take account of the broad general education phase, the senior phase, and the transition between the two. It must be an honest and thorough assessment of where we stand.

As the Government’s motion seems to recognise, the issue goes beyond the remit of the OECD review. In responding to the review, ministers and other parties can address some of the wider concerns around secondary education. Simply adjusting the curriculum and its delivery in isolation will not make the marked improvement that is required. Such an assessment will require honesty about shortcomings.

For example, on attainment, I have heard repeated in the chamber the assertion that exam results are not the only thing that we should look for in pupils. That is true: a young person’s educational journey is a wider process of personal development. However, whenever a variation of that phrase is uttered, the motive always seems to be to justify a fall in attainment. Perhaps we should reflect that attainment does matter, and

that it is at the core of why our schools exist. Results will determine the future career prospects of young people, as well as where their later educational journey will go.

There seems finally to be some acceptance that the trends in results are more than just annual fluctuations. When the quality of our education system drives down results, it reduces opportunity and fails our young people by passing over their abilities and hampering their aspirations. Equally, when we restrict opportunity, as we have heard in discussions about subject choice, we narrow the horizons of young people early in their lives. STEM subjects can create a generation that is ready to take on the jobs of the future, and modern languages can open up entirely new worlds to a person. Falling attainment cannot be a legacy that any party should wish to leave behind.

There is also the question of how fundamentals are taught. We now have one recognised international comparator for pupil attainment—the PISA figures—and the results continue to cause concern. Whatever comes out of the OECD review, a real focus from the Scottish Government on literacy and numeracy will be important.

As a new member of the Education and Skills Committee, I have not contributed to the work that it has done in that area over the past year. That work has driven forward examination of curriculum for excellence in a useful and constructive way. However, there has been a tendency for the Scottish Government to claim that all is well with our schools, when that is patently not true. We have to wonder whether the review would be taking place, if not for external pressure.

The value of the review will be in the ability of ministers to take on board its eventual recommendations and their willingness to change, to demonstrate flexibility and to accept seriously that there are legitimate issues to contend with, as we go forward.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You must conclude there.

16:58

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): This has been a good debate that has been important in highlighting precisely why we need the review. Although I acknowledge the comments that colleagues have made about the challenges that our schools, local authorities, teachers and young people will face over the next few months, we need to find the space to ensure that the review is successful.

While listening to the debate, we must not lose sight of the wider issue of local government, as it is local government that provides our children's

education, runs our schools, and pays our teachers. Education is the Government's top priority, yet the underfunding of local government is pushing tough decisions on to our schools and councils. We could see that in this year's budget. There were really good policy proposals, such as the expansion of funded early learning and childcare, work on teachers' pensions and additional support for learning, but the fact that local government will be collectively underfunded by more than £200 million will add pressure, and that should concern us. One of the issues that was recorded by the Education and Skills Committee that we need to think about is teacher shortages in certain areas, and how they impact the situation on the ground.

In addition to the review, it is critical to think about investment as the basis for success. That is vital, because quality education has long been known as a leveller. As a key tool in tackling inequality, we have traditionally been hugely proud of education in Scotland, but we are not seeing delivery on the ground.

Clare Adamson talked about additional skills being important to giving school students extra value when they leave school. Let us look at some of the tough choices that local authorities are now making in areas such as staff numbers and having to charge for music tuition. Those things are critical to the quality of the education that our school students get. My own council is having to make the tough choice of having to take more than £17 million out of the education revenue budget, to pay for new schools and to invest in and refurbish the school estate. That is vital.

In education, our population will grow by more than 26 per cent over the next two decades. We have to make the investment to ensure that whatever recommendations the review comes up with can be implemented properly. At the moment, attainment levels at higher have fallen for the fourth year in a row. Pupils are not enrolling in qualifications. Professor Jim Scott has calculated that almost a million qualifications have been lost since the new national exams were introduced. That is not good enough. We need to make sure that schools do not struggle to keep teachers or provide a broad range of subjects. We need to do better. The attainment gap is accidental but it is failing students across Scotland.

Colleagues have talked about subject choices. Students who get to study eight or nine subjects at national 4 and 5 are able to do so, not because of academic ability, but because of where they go to school. Pupils in independent schools are more likely to study eight or nine subjects. For those in the state sector, a postcode lottery decides what they can study. Students who leave school straight after their nat 4s and 5s could be doing so with

fewer qualifications, which means that they will face an immediate disadvantage in the jobs market. That is not acceptable, and it needs to change.

We need the resourcing crisis in our classrooms to be addressed urgently so that we can tackle teacher recruitment and workloads at the same time as the review is being done.

The Education and Skills Committee has raised important concerns that need to be addressed about the overall responsibility for curriculum structure and subject availability. Interestingly, it also agreed that there is continued confusion about the responsibilities of Education Scotland, and that that body is failing to provide adequate support for the continuing implementation of curriculum for excellence.

Key issues need to be fixed in our schools and we need to see them being addressed urgently. The OECD review is timely. Professor Jim Scott has stated:

“we will be in danger of creating a generation of people who have not had a good experience in education.”—*[Official Report, Education and Skills Committee, 24 April 2019; c 17.]*

That is a generation of young people who will have been failed by SNP mismanagement and underfunding. That is not good enough

The review needs to be successful. It needs to be conducted, it needs to get input from our Education and Skills Committee, and it needs to be open and transparent, and to engage parents and young people who have been through the system. It is crucial, and it is important that we are discussing it today, but it has to be a success.

17:03

Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Amid some of the recent coverage of curriculum for excellence, it would be easy to forget that there is, or there certainly should be, cross-party consensus about CFE and about the achievements of Scotland’s schools, teachers and young people. All parties have had a hand, one way or another, in the development of Scotland’s modern classrooms, and all have reasons to be proud of their success—particularly, possibly, the Scottish Government.

We are all entitled to seek to improve things in Scotland’s schools; indeed we have an obligation to do so, and the Government’s review recognises that fact. However, politicians who cast wider and more fundamental doubts on curriculum for excellence have a duty to say whether they have a preferable spare curriculum to hand. Indeed, they should recognise that, in some ways, curriculum for excellence, despite its name, does not lay

claim to being a curriculum in the most traditional sense of the word. Unlike his apocryphal French counterpart, Scotland’s education minister has never been able to look at his watch and know that third year pupils across the country are all doing double maths. The Scottish Government has never sought that degree of uniformity.

Instead, the curriculum for excellence gives schools the freedom and flexibility to design a curriculum that best meets the needs of their learners, with decisions about curriculum design, learner pathways, and presentation for qualifications taken by schools and, of course, by young people themselves. Headteachers already have to take account of the national framework for Scotland’s curriculum along with the needs of their own school and community, as agreed between schools and local councils.

We should look at the OECD review as a way of improving something that is good, rather than as a means of rehearsing familiar political grievances. Young people, schools, and local authorities will be at the heart of the review, and I am sure that the OECD will listen to their feedback on that and other areas before producing its report. As the Education and Skills Committee and others have indicated, including members in the chamber today, that will mean looking at several questions in depth, one of which is the balance between skills and knowledge.

In that argument, I come down firmly on the side that says that knowing stuff is far more likely to be a consolation than not knowing it, and that the joy that is to be derived from learning something is in inverse proportion to its potential or likely usefulness. However, there is a balance to be struck, and I hope that the review will help us to do just that.

The review will look at curriculum design, the depth and breadth of learning in the senior phase, local flexibility versus the questions about prescription that some members have raised or alluded to today, and the transition from the broad general education to the senior phase.

I welcome the fact that the review is looking at subject choice again, because I believe that we have to start with a recognition of what is working. More young people are coming out of more schools with more qualifications than ever before, and more young people are staying on in sixth year, with all the opportunities that that brings. The measure of all that is what qualifications people leave school with, not which subjects they study in any one specific year.

Nonetheless, there are legitimate questions to be asked about what is happening to specific subjects, particularly languages, and whether there is a way of ensuring that the number of

pupils who are taking them does not continue to decline, as it certainly has in recent years. If languages are not being taken in fourth year, we have to make sure that they are being taken at some other stage in the school career. I am sure that the review will also take views on the decisions that many schools are making about multilevel classes.

Neither Parliament nor the review should flinch from any of those difficult questions. We should have a debate that is grounded in an understanding of what actually goes on inside Scotland's state schools. Such an understanding has not always been evident from some political commentators or from the sometimes nostalgic view of education that has been uttered from some quarters that seems to spring from a much rosier recollection of the 1980s than I have.

Improving education is the defining mission of the Scottish Government, and that commitment is being backed by significant investment. We know that closing the attainment gap will take time, but what we are doing is having a real and measurable effect. That is why headteachers back the Scottish Government's plans.

Last year, a record 95 per cent of school leavers were in a positive destination, such as study, work, or training, about three months after leaving school. I am proud to say that my local authority was at the top of that particular set of statistics. The OECD review gives us a chance to build on all the work that is going on in Scotland's schools, and it deserves a serious response from us politicians. I hope that that has been reflected in Parliament today.

17:09

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I remind Parliament that I have a daughter who is a secondary school teacher.

I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak in the debate. As the Deputy Presiding Officer knows, my specific remit and passion lie in improving the health of our nation, especially given Scotland's poor health report card—which, considering the situation in which we currently find ourselves, is all too stark. I strongly believe that education and health are intrinsically linked. I have said here many times that education is the solution for health and welfare.

It is entirely right that the aims of curriculum for excellence are supported across the chamber. Excellence and equity are principles that we should all want for our children, and holistic learning is a key element of curriculum for excellence. My colleagues and members from across the chamber have spoken about academic achievement and a relative decline in some of its

aspects. That is a fundamental measurement of the success—or otherwise—of the policy. After all, to a great extent, the qualifications that are achieved at school will dictate potential pathways for a pupil's career.

However, that is not the only measurement by which we should judge our education system. I believe that wellbeing—both physical and mental—should sit in the education brief, not just in the health portfolio. To achieve equity and excellence—those twin pillars of curriculum for excellence—access to opportunity is a prerequisite. Taking part in activities that enable social inclusion helps the development of interpersonal skills, confidence and resilience, and those skills are fundamental to the long-term chances of our children. With regard to access to sport, connectivity, art, music and drama—I am back on that hobby-horse again—my concern is that opportunities to take part in the activities that I took for granted in my school days have been steadily eroded for years and, in fact, decades, going all the way back to the teachers' strike of the mid-1980s and even before that.

The introduction of curriculum for excellence was an opportunity to tackle the issue, but the feedback from teachers is that timetabling and an increase in paperwork have seen a continuing decline in opportunities to participate. Furthermore, extracurricular activity is not universally available—again, an increase in paperwork has been cited by teachers.

I also highlight the lack of access to the school estate after hours for third sector groups as a major issue. I was pleased to hear Johann Lamont speak about the importance of a school as a social hub, which is a key element that must be grasped. That is especially highlighted in the current climate, but a school should always be a social hub outwith the traditional educational element.

The fact that music tuition in schools is no longer free in 26 of 32 local authorities, along with the decline in opportunities to play sport and to participate in art and drama in school, has reduced opportunities to excel, which does not speak to equity. That is important, because being physically active has a positive impact on physical and mental health. If our young people are physically active at a young age, it is more likely that they will be physically active when they are older and throughout their lives. Social inclusion helps them to develop skills such as confidence and resilience; positive traits such as application and being rewarded for effort; and the important skill of self-discipline. Those skills are important to achieving in the classroom.

Opportunities to participate in those activities while at school form the cornerstone of tackling not only the attainment gap but preventable health

issues such as drug and alcohol addiction, poor mental health, obesity, type 2 diabetes, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, musculoskeletal conditions, and so on. I believe that that approach is entirely consistent with the objectives of curriculum for excellence. In fact, I will go further and say that we cannot fully realise the potential of curriculum for excellence without including music, art, drama and sport as being integral to every pupil's life, as those activities can have such a positive influence on a young person's life.

I can cite dozens of people I have met whose chance meeting with a teacher who encouraged and nurtured an interest shaped their life—and the same happened in my life. Primary 1 sport at Symington primary school is where I discovered that I could run a bit faster than most. I was supported throughout my school life by teachers and I was encouraged to represent the school, ending up at the British schools championships. Every sportsman and sportswoman, actor and actress, musician and artist can tell us a similar story: those skills follow us through life.

The fact that that path has led me here might not be a persuasive argument for the cabinet secretary, but I hope that he accepts the principle of the debate. I will give one more example. I was visiting a prison recently and bumped into a prisoner who was taking part in art. His work was phenomenal; it was art of the highest quality. I asked him why it had taken being in prison for him to learn how to do that, and he said, "Because I didn't have the opportunity before." He was in prison for eight years. The big question is: would he have spent eight years in prison, at a cost of £34,000 a year, if he had had that skill at school? We must free up teachers' time to allow them to teach, so that they can deliver all that they are trained to do and all that they want to do.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: And there you are.

Brian Whittle: If we do, we may find that that stubborn attainment gap begins to close.

17:15

Iain Gray: Ross Greer described the debate as "a bit surreal". He was referring to the background of Covid-19, but there have been some slightly odd aspects to the debate. One of those is that we have not spent any of the debate exchanging statistics with each other in order, in our case, to convince people that there is a problem and, in the cabinet secretary's case, to—

John Swinney rose—

Iain Gray: Oh he has his statistics there. They are coming. Right. Good-oh. If there is anybody in

the world who watches our education debates, that will be a great relief to them.

I am making light of an important point. One of the recommendations of the previous OECD review was that the Government should increase the data available in the school system. The education secretary took that recommendation seriously and often says that we now have more data available than ever before. That claim is based largely on the gathering of achievement of curriculum for excellence level—ACEL—results and on the introduction of the national literacy and numeracy tests. All of those replaced the Scottish schools literacy and numeracy survey, which was statistically rigorous and provided a run of data going back some years.

The truth is that neither the Scottish national standardised assessment nor ACEL has established a reputation for rigour among educationists. The First Minister often claims that they are better than the survey was because they are universal and not a survey, so they test everyone. That is nonsense, as ministers have conceded that the SNSA is not a normative assessment that can be added up. The results do not tell us with any certainty how the system is doing. To be honest, even if they did, we would still have problems in judging the success of our schools, not just of individual pupils.

The Government has developed a "basket of measures of attainment",

which is apparently another response to the OECD requirement to make more data available. What that actually means is that we cannot agree on how attainment is to be judged or even on whether the Government's top priority of closing the attainment gap is being progressed.

The education secretary likes to cite the percentage of pupils who are achieving at least one higher or national 5 exam, but one higher or national 5 does not open many doors. The figures for the number of pupils who are achieving three or even five exam passes at any level are arguably much more useful, but they are less favourable to the Government and so are left in the basket while the measure of at least one national 5 pass or above is brought out.

Similarly, we are also often told that we should judge success on pupil outcomes and on what they leave school with. Yet, this year, exam results for school leavers show a decline in the number of pupils achieving even one qualification or more at level five or above. They show the attainment gap widening, not closing. Where it does close, it is closing because high attainers are doing worse quicker. None of that suits the Government's narrative, so it moves away from school leaver

outcomes and chooses to focus on one year's exam diet rather than on leavers.

We must reach some agreement on how we judge the performance not of individual pupils but of the system and of education policy. If the OECD would advise on that, that would be helpful.

I will spend some time on an issue that the education secretary brought up and that we have not returned to. Another argument that we have had over some months has been about whether the curriculum is narrowing and whether subject choice is reducing or growing. Part of the confusion is that the education secretary often argues that the range of courses from which pupils can choose has increased. That is true, not least because of the increase in the number of vocational courses that are available—Mr Swinney mentioned that. Maureen Watt spoke about foundation apprenticeships and other vocational options, which are a very good thing but need examination, and that is also part of the problem of judging success in the system.

If we are to judge the performance of the system not just on highers and nationals, we will have to find a way of recognising attainment in those vocational courses that gains acceptance and that is clearly equivalent to traditional exams not just through being at the same Scottish credit and qualifications framework level but through its acceptance by FE, HE, employers and parents. We have not yet reached that stage, and that is part of the issue.

That would involve a big change in attitudes that have persisted for decades. Johann Lamont noted that the Education and Skills Committee has heard evidence that schools that serve deprived communities are more likely to offer more of those courses to more pupils than schools in better-off parts of Scotland, which, it would appear, sometimes focus on offering seven or eight of the traditional exams instead by subverting the three-plus-three model. Johann Lamont is right in saying that that two-track approach is not acceptable, and I was pleased to hear that the Deputy First Minister is going to commission work to find out more about that.

The review needs to cover a lot of issues. It is an extremely important move by the Government, and it is very welcome. I look forward to seeing the outcome of the work in a year or two—I hope that it will not be delayed.

17:22

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I will pick up on several points that have been raised in the debate but before I do so, it is important to set the context of the debate. I note Johann Lamont's excellent and important point that schools are

about more than just education; they are about the social cohesion of our society.

When the OECD produced its very important and comprehensive report on school education in Scotland in 2015 it prioritised some key recommendations. It was clear, as Maureen Watt indicated, that the principles behind the curriculum for excellence were the right ones, that the twin ambitions of excellence and equity should underpin all aspects of education policy—as they certainly should—and it had many good things to say about the approach to holistic learning. Incidentally, that is one of the reasons why the Conservative Party is very keen that the BGE is included in the review, because the holistic approach to education is very important. There were some good things and we should acknowledge that, because it is important that we see the review in that context. That is clearly the reason why all parties in the chamber agreed with the minister at the time, Peter Peacock, that in its basic principles, the curriculum for excellence was the right approach for the 21st century.

However, the 2015 report warned that there were significant challenges, which were to do with not so much the principles of CFE but its delivery. It highlighted that there was absolute—and in some cases, relative—decline in some aspects of attainment. Mathematics was its primary focus at the time. Five years on, sadly, mathematics is still an issue in our schools. It also looked at the concerns about what we have to do to evaluate the curriculum for excellence. Iain Gray just made some very strong points on that.

There is a data issue. The cabinet secretary has said several times—and I think that he said this in answer to my colleague Jamie Halcro Johnston at education questions last week—that schools now have more data than ever before. That may be true in some cases, but there are a lot of issues about how we interpret that data. Beatrice Wishart and Iain Gray made the point that we still debate how to interpret the information, particularly when it comes to the testing: what its purpose is and how we measure it. As Iain Gray rightly pointed out, we will not be able to say how well we are progressing if we do not sort out those critical questions.

That said, there is no doubt that the curriculum for excellence was designed to build on the widely acknowledged strengths of Scottish education—we should never forget what those are—and to ensure that schools can build not only on a different society but on a change of culture. The cabinet secretary has said several times, on education issues, that we need a change of culture. I agree—I think that we need a different approach—but, as I have said in a number of debates, let that never be an excuse for saying

that we cannot address some of the current problems in Scottish education. We have to do both. We have to ensure that we are working within that new culture while addressing a lot of the problems. We have to acknowledge that those problems exist.

The cabinet secretary often cites the increase in the number of new qualifications that are available—a point raised by Clare Adamson and Alasdair Allan. That is true, but it brings us back to the debate about what it means to have a core curriculum. I am glad that the cabinet secretary accepts that there is a debate to be had about what the core curriculum actually means—to parents, to pupils and to teachers. It is time that we had that debate about what should be in the core curriculum. Brian Whittle made some good points about some of the extra dimensions within the core curriculum. It is not just about having a lot of new qualifications, although those are welcome. In the context of the OECD recommendations, the debate about the core curriculum, which is an important part of many people's education, and is what employers are looking for, is crucial.

The issue of attainment in different core subjects is a matter of concern. Alasdair Allan has said consistently at committee, and again today, that we have issues about decline in certain subjects, such as languages and STEM. We have to look at whether there is a progression issue here, which is another reason why we should have an holistic approach to the BGE and the senior phase. It really matters what subjects pupils are able to do at what levels. If some subjects are progressive, it is difficult for pupils to come back to them later in their school career. That is part and parcel of the issues that the OECD should be looking at.

The subject choice section of the overview is perhaps one of the most critical issues that we have to examine. It is clear from evidence given to the Education and Skills Committee over a long period that there are fundamental concerns about subject choice. Regardless of whether that affects people from better-off backgrounds—Sarah Boyack made that point—it is true, in some schools, that parents feel that because their children do not have the same opportunities that they would have in other schools, their youngsters lose out. There is concern about how that affects colleges and universities, and, more important, the world of work. It is a worry that there are significant concerns about that.

There are also serious concerns about the percentage of the school leaver population in some local authorities—although by no means all—who are leaving school without very much at all, even within the context of some different

qualifications. It is important that, collectively, parliamentarians are seen to address that matter.

In 2016, Dr Mark Priestley said something very interesting about the curriculum for excellence, which was that although it was very much built on the right founding principles, the structure might have to change in order to deliver better results. I come back to the points that Mark Priestley raised.

He agreed with the OECD that its implementation had at that stage been incomplete—that goes without saying—but he said that there had to be a much clearer process for curriculum development, where who has responsibility for deciding it is completely clear. We have seen issues around the role of Education Scotland and the SQA in that. There also needs to be an accountability element. As the cabinet secretary knows, I would like to see that and it has been part of my issue with what we have been doing for some time.

I come back to the issue of the Education and Skills Committee's concern over the lack of clarity about who has been in charge of decision making. Johann Lamont made a good point about who made the decision on whether the national 4 qualification should have an external exam. She was quite right to point out that although we had a debate about it, we could not get to the nub of who had made the decision. That is something that we cannot have; it is crucial that we know why decisions are made, who is making them and who will be accountable for them.

The OECD in 2015 described CFE as a “watershed moment”. It found that the levels of academic achievement were above average international levels in science and reading, but it highlighted considerable concerns about maths, and we are still there; we have not moved on from that. It said that social inclusion in Scottish schools was very encouraging and that attitudes to school life were generally positive—although it had some worries about whether those declined in secondary school—but it also found that one fifth of schools were no better than satisfactory. That is one of the crucial outcomes that we need to address. There is something far wrong if we cannot find a better way of ensuring that all our schools are more than satisfactory.

17:31

John Swinney: This has been a good debate, which makes me wonder why the Government has not had more debates on education—it has been such an enjoyable afternoon that I will reflect on that in the light of the discussion. I am glad that it was Iain Gray who sullied the debate with statistics. I have my usual compendium here ready to be delivered, but I shall not detain Parliament

with that; I will detain Parliament on the much more interesting things that were said by members.

I will start with the comment that was made by my colleague Maureen Watt, who recounted the experience of visiting one of the secondary schools in her constituency. She talked about having seen a practical example of a young person who had been able to re-engage with education by virtue of their participation in a foundation apprenticeship. I have had the pleasure of having many conversations of that type in schools around the country, when it has not been the pursuit of national qualifications that has met the needs of particular young people and sustained their engagement—although I appreciate that national qualifications are important in our system—but the fact that a pathway was available. Had it not been available, it is likely that they would have disengaged from education.

That is one of the big improvements that has been made, and I was mindful of that when I listened to Brian Whittle's story about the prisoner. I do not know all the ins and outs of that story, but I would hazard a guess that that individual had probably disengaged from education not because of any active decision on their part but because the education did not interest or engage them. I will let Mr Whittle in in a second. Our education system is now increasingly looking at individual young people and finding the routes that enable them to remain engaged in education and to make progress. That is a product of the curriculum for excellence.

Brian Whittle: In searching for ways to re-engage pupils who are not that engaged in general in school, I am trying to shine a light back on the sort of engagement that we had all the way through our school life and to see whether we can bring it back.

John Swinney: I had a slightly different experience in my school days. School worked perfectly for me. It served me fantastically well and got me everything that I needed to get on with the rest of my life, but there were lots of my peers whom it did not serve well and whose experience was exactly the type of journey that Mr Whittle recounted. Therefore, I am all for finding ways to engage individual young people in their learning, and I think that CFE enables us to do that.

Liz Smith: I think that the cabinet secretary makes a very good point. In that context, will he undertake to have a look at different models of schooling, such as the model of which Newlands Junior College, which did very good work for many disengaged youngsters, was a classic example?

John Swinney: I think that the issue is about what our education system delivers. I must be satisfied that, regardless of which part of the country a young person lives in, they can go into a school that will be able to meet their needs. If they live in rural Perthshire, where I live, and Newlands Junior College is the only option available for disengaged learners, that will not meet their needs. The local schools in Perthshire must be able to meet the needs of every young person who comes in the door.

In that respect, Alasdair Allan is absolutely correct: CFE gives schools the freedom and the flexibility to meet the needs of learners in their own circumstances. Many schools have done what Clare Adamson talked about—they have taken forward the developing Scotland's young workforce agenda, which enables a much greater configuration of educational pathways to be delivered to meet the needs of individual learners.

Michelle Ballantyne: I was thinking about how to formulate my intervention. The cabinet secretary keeps using the term "meet the needs". What does he consider the needs of young people to be? Is he talking about what they want to do or what a teacher says that they ought to do? It would be helpful to get a definition of that.

John Swinney: For me, the needs of learners are twofold. First, they must be equipped with the core attributes that are necessary in our curriculum, which I set out earlier in my intervention on Michelle Ballantyne. They must also have the capacity to move on to a positive destination as a consequence of their education, whether that is higher or further education, the world of work, the world of training or the world of employment. All those opportunities must be available for young people, but they will represent different things to different young people, based on their interests.

I am happy to confirm that we must pay very close attention to the aspirations and the interests of young people. Last week, I had a group of young people in to see me who had a conversation about listening to the pupil voice in our education system. They did not want to have everything prescribed for them; they wanted to be influential over the curriculum that they chose. I hear that a lot from young people in our education system.

I think that our debate is heading in a direction in which we must have a good, open understanding of what we think all young people must have experience of. That way, we can give them the capacity to make choices about the broader range of experiences that they want to have. I will have one view about what I think should form part of that core activity, and I am pretty certain that Liz Smith will have a different

one. I fear that Liz Smith's view will resemble that of Forrester high school in 1978 or 1980, but we can debate that later. That epitomises some of the choice that is at the heart of curriculum for excellence.

That brings me on to the points that Johann Lamont made about subject choice. I think that it is beyond dispute that there is much more choice available to young people in the education system today—there are many more options, courses and possibilities. The hard point that Johann Lamont raised was about whether the nature of the way in which we structure our education system allows young people to exercise a reasonable choice within that expanded range, or whether their ability to do so is much more limited than it should be. That is one of the core issues that I want the review to look at.

Johann Lamont: I have a slightly different point to put to the cabinet secretary. The issue is not that, in some of our schools, pupils' choices are more limited in terms of the number of subjects that they can do; it is that the nature of the subjects that they can do is more constrained than it is in other schools, which means that their opportunity to leave school with certain qualifications and compete with others is reduced. Does the cabinet secretary agree that there is an equality issue in that respect?

John Swinney: I certainly would not want that to be the case. That is one of the issues that we have to address. I go back to my core point in response to what Liz Smith said. I want every young person who goes into their local secondary school—or their local primary school, for that matter—to come out having had their educational opportunities fulfilled as a consequence of their education. That should not in any way be undermined by a lack of equity around the country. That point is of enormous significance to me.

Ross Greer raised teacher workload issues. I have put a great deal of effort into reducing the teacher workload or focusing the teacher workload on what enhances learning and teaching. For me, the critical test is whether the work enhances learning and teaching. If it does not, under the teacher agency model that I support, teachers should be free to exercise professional responsibility over whether they exercise those functions.

Iain Gray raised a significant issue, which relates to the relationship between the curriculum and our methods of assessment. We must have a system of assessment that is driven by the nature of our curriculum rather than the other way round. I think that those questions will be explored in the review along with some of the other issues that Iain Gray raised that relate to the attitudes towards

achievement and performance in the education system.

I wanted to make an intervention when Mr Gray was speaking but, as I was getting up, he mentioned the Scottish credit and qualifications framework, which is what I wanted to mention. We are very lucky in Scotland that we have a credit and qualifications framework that allows us to have a read across different qualifications from different sources, all of which are benchmarked against particular standards of achievement. That is a huge asset for us to have, but I accept that public attitudes do not equate the range of qualifications that individuals are achieving at any given time. There is work that we need to do to strengthen the valuing of alternative routes to the national qualifications. Actually, we should stop talking about things such as alternative routes to national qualifications. The routes that young people are pursuing and taking forward will deliver good outcomes for them.

Ultimately, we all want to ensure that curriculum for excellence delivers good outcomes for young people. There is one statistic that I will mention. Just a few weeks ago, we saw that 95 per cent of young people who left school went on to an initial positive destination as a consequence of their education. That speaks volumes about how young people are being well served by curriculum for excellence.

One of the strengths of this afternoon's debate has been that all the parties have put on record the strength of their support for the foundations, aspirations and ambitions of curriculum for excellence. That is very welcome. Knowing that the Scottish Parliament, across all parties, remains hugely supportive of the conclusions that we made at the outset in establishing the curriculum for excellence will help the OECD to undertake the review. Curriculum for excellence is serving young people well and we have to challenge ourselves to ensure that that is done more effectively. That is what the review will undertake, and I am sure that this debate will inform the OECD's deliberations in due course.

Sentencing (Pre-consolidation Amendments) Bill

17:43

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The next item of business is consideration of a legislative consent motion. I ask Humza Yousaf to move motion S5M-21260, on the Sentencing (Pre-consolidation Amendments) Bill.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the relevant provisions of the Sentencing (Pre-consolidation Amendments) Bill, introduced in the House of Lords on 21 January 2020, relating to the transfer of community orders and suspended sentence orders imposed by courts in England and Wales to Scotland, so far as these matters fall within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament, should be considered by the UK Parliament.—[*Humza Yousaf*]

Business Motion

17:45

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): Members, staff and the public will wish to note that the Parliamentary Bureau agreed today that the priorities for parliamentary business in the coming weeks should be the response to Covid-19 and other time-bound legislation. Conveners are also being consulted on their committee business priorities. We have therefore agreed to propose to the Parliament a number of temporary procedural changes that will allow us to do that

The Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body has also agreed today to close access to our public galleries. All our decisions are consistent with public health advice and are designed to minimise the impact of Covid-19, to help keep our staff and members of the public safe, and with a view to safely and sustainably delivering essential parliamentary business.

The Parliament will now be invited to agree a series of motions that put those decisions into effect. Business motion S5M-21282, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, sets out revisions to the week's business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees the following revisions to the programme of business on:

(a) Wednesday 18 March 2020—

delete

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:
Justice and the Law Officers;
Constitution, Europe and External Affairs

followed by Scottish Labour Party Debate: Women in Scotland

after

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

insert

2.00 pm Ministerial Statement: Education – COVID-19

followed by Ministerial Statement: Economy – COVID-19

followed by Portfolio Questions:
Justice and the Law Officers;
Constitution, Europe and External Affairs

followed by SPCB Motion: Reimbursement of Members Expenses Scheme

delete

followed by Members' Business

(b) Thursday 19 March 2020—

delete

2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 2.30 pm Portfolio Questions:
 Economy, Fair Work and Culture
 insert
 2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 2.00 pm Ministerial Statement: COVID-19:
 Supporting our Communities
followed by Ministerial Statement: UK Coronavirus
 Legislation
followed by Portfolio Questions:
 Economy, Fair Work and Culture
 delete
followed by Members' Business—[*Graeme Dey*]

Motion agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

17:45

The Presiding Officer: The next item is consideration of four Parliamentary Bureau motions. I call the Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans to move motions S5M-21283 to S5M-21286, on suspension and variation of standing orders.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that Rules 5.6(a), (b) and (c) of the Standing Orders be suspended for the duration of the public response to the Novel coronavirus COVID-19.

That the Parliament agrees that, for the purposes of electing an additional deputy Presiding Officer for the duration of the public response to the Novel coronavirus COVID-19, Rules 11.9.4, 11.9.5, 11.9.13 and 11.9.16 of the Standing Orders be suspended.

That the Parliament agrees that, for the purposes of committee meetings for the duration of the public response to the Novel coronavirus COVID-19—

(a) in Rule 6.3A.1 after “member” the words “or members” be inserted

(b) Rule 6.3A.2 be suspended

(c) in Rule 6.3A.4 the first sentence be suspended

(d) after Rule 6.3A.5(d) be inserted “(e) a political party withdraws in writing to the Bureau that nomination of the member or members nominated for the purposes of the duration of the public response to the Novel coronavirus COVID-19.”

(e) in Rule 12.1.15 the words “(other than a committee substitute)” be omitted in both instances where they occur.

That the Parliament agrees that Rule 15.2.1 of the Standing Orders be suspended for the duration of the public response to the Novel coronavirus COVID-19.—
 [*Graeme Dey*]

Decision Time

17:45

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The first question is, that motion S5M-21263, in the name of John Swinney, on the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development review of curriculum for excellence, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament confirms its support for the establishment of an independently-led review of curriculum for excellence; notes the publication of the remit for the OECD-led review; further notes that the remit covers curriculum design, the depth and breadth of learning in the Senior Phase, local flexibility versus increased prescription, the transition from the Broad General Education into the Senior Phase, vocational and academic learning and awards, and roles and responsibilities in relation to the curriculum; recognises that this remit has been informed by the work of the Education and Skills Committee, including its report, *Subject choices in schools*; agrees that this review must form part of a wider drive to tackle key weaknesses in aspects of Scotland's school education and the qualifications structure, and further agrees that benefits that can be derived from all participants in the education system working together as part of a shared national endeavour to ensure Scotland's curriculum helps support Scotland's young people achieving the best possible outcomes.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S5M-21260, in the name of Humza Yousaf, on the Sentencing (Pre-consolidation Amendments) Bill (UK Legislation), be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the relevant provisions of the Sentencing (Pre-consolidation Amendments) Bill, introduced in the House of Lords on 21 January 2020, relating to the transfer of community orders and suspended sentence orders imposed by courts in England and Wales to Scotland, so far as these matters fall within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament, should be considered by the UK Parliament.

The Presiding Officer: As no member objects, I propose to ask a single question on the four Parliamentary Bureau motions.

Motions agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that Rules 5.6(a), (b) and (c) of the Standing Orders be suspended for the duration of the public response to the Novel coronavirus COVID-19.

That the Parliament agrees that, for the purposes of electing an additional deputy Presiding Officer for the duration of the public response to the Novel coronavirus COVID-19, Rules 11.9.4, 11.9.5, 11.9.13 and 11.9.16 of the Standing Orders be suspended.

That the Parliament agrees that, for the purposes of committee meetings for the duration of the public response to the Novel coronavirus COVID-19—

(a) in Rule 6.3A.1 after "member" the words "or members" be inserted

(b) Rule 6.3A.2 be suspended

(c) in Rule 6.3A.4 the first sentence be suspended

(d) after Rule 6.3A.5(d) be inserted "(e) a political party withdraws in writing to the Bureau that nomination of the member or members nominated for the purposes of the duration of the public response to the Novel coronavirus COVID-19."

(e) in Rule 12.1.15 the words "(other than a committee substitute)" be omitted in both instances where they occur.

That the Parliament agrees that Rule 15.2.1 of the Standing Orders be suspended for the duration of the public response to the Novel coronavirus COVID-19.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Breastfeeding etc (Scotland) Act 2005

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S5M-21178, in the name of Elaine Smith, on the 15th anniversary of the Breastfeeding etc (Scotland) Act 2005. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament acknowledges that 2020 marks the 15th anniversary of the Breastfeeding etc. (Scotland) Act 2005, which received royal assent on 18 January 2005; understands that the act made it an offence to prevent or stop a person in charge of a child who is otherwise permitted to be in a public place or licensed premises from feeding milk to that child in that place or on those premises, and to make provision in relation to the promotion of breastfeeding; notes the subsequent work that has been carried out to support women in breastfeeding their babies both at initiation and in sustaining maternal feeding; welcomes the progress made in increasing breastfeeding rates, as reported in February 2018 in the first Scottish Maternal and Infant Nutrition Survey, which found that 43% of mothers were continuing to breastfeed up to six months after birth, compared with 32% in 2010; is, however, concerned that 27% of women responding had sometimes decided not to breastfeed their baby in a certain place because they thought that they would be made to feel uncomfortable; believes that there is more work to be done to change societal attitudes to understand that a child has a right to be breastfed, wherever and whenever they are hungry or thirsty, to ensure that women can feel completely comfortable with this normal, nurturing, maternal behaviour in public spaces; celebrates and supports breastfeeding as being good for mums, babies and society, and encourages any woman who feels they have experienced an infringement of their lawful protection to seek legal redress in line with the provisions of the act.

17:48

Elaine Smith (Central Scotland) (Lab): I have a registered interest, having received funding from Unison and Boots the Chemist and assistance from the Govan Law Centre.

I thank Emma Harper MSP for asking about the possibility of a debate on the 15th anniversary year of the Breastfeeding etc (Scotland) Act receiving royal assent. We should also thank her for her decision to volunteer to help the national health service during the unprecedented pressures of coronavirus.

The 2005 act was the first member's bill to pass in our new Parliament building. During the chamber stages of the bill, a number of breastfeeding mums and babies were in the public gallery. Sadly, there are none today, due to the circumstances, but anyone who is interested can watch via our live stream.

I could never have imagined that, 15 years on from the 2005 act, the world would be suffering from such a horrendous viral pandemic, which not only is a very real threat to life but has fundamentally changed normal life as we know it.

At present, the advice to breastfeeding mums is that they should thoroughly wash their hands before breastfeeding. If they are unwell, they should wear a mask while feeding or express their milk so that someone else can feed their baby. There is no evidence that the virus is passed through breast milk, and World Health Organization guidance, which is frequently updated, reminds us that breastfeeding protects babies: mums can supply their own designer food to their babies.

We should also be aware of the distressing reports of mothers desperately searching supermarkets for formula milk due to recent panic buying, and we should ask people to be considerate of the needs of others at this difficult time.

Rather than rehearse all the reasons why breastfeeding is good for mums, children and society, I will outline the history of the bill and my hopes for the future. I am sure that other members will want to cover health, local support groups and other issues.

The initial idea and motivation for a member's bill to support and protect breastfeeding in public came from my own personal experience. Breastfeeding my son, Van, showed me that society did not always support breastfeeding in public, with women being asked to feed in toilets, being stopped altogether or simply fearing to breastfeed due to such attitudes. In fact, some desk-based research for the bill, funded by Unison, found that, among other things, the fear of being stopped was a big influence on women's choice to breastfeed. I take this opportunity to thank Kay Sillars, who did that piece of research.

In 2001, I was asked to speak at a breastfeeding conference in Lanarkshire. While researching for the conference, I discovered that Coatbridge had some of the lowest breastfeeding rates in Scotland. Since the country itself had among the lowest rates in Europe, that was extremely concerning. I brought the issue forward as a members' debate, which was the first time that the Scottish Parliament had debated breastfeeding. Of the 10 members and one minister who contributed to that debate, only two are still serving MSPs—myself and the Deputy Presiding Officer, Christine Grahame.

During my speech, I mentioned an incident involving a mum and baby who were put off of a Lothian bus for breastfeeding on the bus. In

responding to the debate, the minister, Malcolm Chisholm, said:

“There have been many instances of hostile reaction to mothers who breastfeed in a public setting. Elaine Smith referred to the incident in Edinburgh in which, we were all horrified to learn, a mother was told to get off a bus because she was breastfeeding. Ministers wrote to Lothian Regional Transport, as it then was, but under current laws we do not have powers to enforce anything on a bus company in that regard”.—[*Official Report*, 17 May 2001; c 901.]

There it was: my challenge was to change the law to give powers so that that appalling situation could not happen again.

The Scottish Parliament unit that supports individual members in bringing forward legislative proposals initially ruled out my idea out, giving an opinion that it was that it was reserved as a matter for the United Kingdom Parliament. Having a can-do attitude, I found a solicitor who was willing to help me write a bill for Scotland. Mike Dailly, of the Govan Law Centre, deserves much of the credit for the protection that is now available to mums and babies; he also deserves my thanks.

We set up an advisory group that included trade unions, the health sector, the voluntary sector, the police and business, and the national breastfeeding adviser to Scottish Government at the time, Jenny Warren, was a fantastic support. I also thank my office manager, Lesley Dobbin, who has worked with me for most of my time in office and has supported me and helped with her own breastfeeding knowledge and research over the years.

Unfortunately, the Presiding Officer at the time, David Steel, would not grant the bill competence, so it fell at the 2003 election. I resurrected it the following session, and Mike Dailly and I rewrote it to focus on children’s health. Presiding Officer George Reid approved it as competent for consideration by this Parliament—a lesson in how our devolved powers can be used creatively to deliver the legislation that we need.

Then the hard work started: getting political support, giving evidence to committee and steering the bill through its chamber process. I was also lucky to gain the assistance of Susan Deacon, who had been the health minister when I initially proposed the bill. She was a great help, not only with the process, but with her knowledge, encouragement and personal support. The majority of parties were eventually persuaded to support the legislation—with the exception of the Tories. However, I thank them now for supporting my motion tonight and for being in the chamber.

UNICEF calls breastfeeding a public health imperative, for which Government, policy makers, communities and families all share responsibility. Unfortunately, although rates have been

increasing, breastfeeding is still not the norm and society still falls down on celebrating and supporting breastfeeding.

There is also concern that austerity and cuts to local government and health funding impact on breastfeeding support. Therefore, it is vital that politicians such as us lead the way in continuing to demonstrate the value of breastfeeding and support its promotion—to improve not only health, but the impact on the family purse and the economy in general.

It really is shocking that natural maternal feeding of hungry and thirsty babies that benefits mums, babies and society as a whole is still sometimes seen as unacceptable. One major issue that influences that is that breasts are sexualised in our society. In addition, attitudes to breastfeeding are tightly tied to misogyny. Professor Amy Brown notes that the higher a man scores on sexist traits, the more he is opposed to women breastfeeding in public.

The Breastfeeding etc (Scotland) Act 2005 has played a part in changing attitudes, but women must also feel confident using the legislation. Although there are still reports of problems in public, the only case that I am aware of involved a big retail store in Glasgow, which, disgracefully, threw a mum, who was also a paediatric doctor, and her tiny hungry baby out of its shop and onto Sauchiehall Street. The case was investigated and reported by the police, but the shop was merely given a slap-on-the- wrist letter from the procurator fiscal. Breaches of the 2005 act need to be taken seriously, because they can have a detrimental impact on the health and wellbeing of mums and babies.

Education from a young age is vital in normalising breastfeeding. I was pleased to learn recently that North Lanarkshire Council’s lesson plans on infant nutrition include children learning about breast milk and caring for a baby. Des Murray, the council’s chief executive, said of the project:

“We strongly believe that lessons on infant nutrition at such an early age will help increase the number of mothers breastfeeding their babies in future years.”

I whole-heartedly agree with that, and I encourage other councils to follow NLC’s lead.

The principle of normalising the feeding of babies in public and of providing legal protection for a baby to be fed where and when it needs that, whether by breast or by bottle, underpins the 2005 act. When I closed the stage 3 debate on 18 November 2004, I said:

“If passed, the bill is not an end, but the beginning of the Parliament pursuing practical ways to support and encourage breastfeeding. Although I am having the final word in this debate, I assure Parliament, the minister and

all those with an interest in breastfeeding that I will have much more to say on the subject during the rest of this parliamentary term and I am sure that many of my colleagues will too.”—[*Official Report*, 18 November 2004; c 12118.]

Well, I have had much more to say over the years. I will continue to celebrate, support and promote breastfeeding when I can, and I ask other members to join me in doing that, too.

17:56

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to speak in this important debate, and I congratulate Elaine Smith on securing it and, indeed, on all her hard work on the issue over many years. She will know that I have spoken in her debates and signed her motions on this important matter on a number of occasions. I also congratulate her on the 15th anniversary of the passing of the bill that she pioneered.

I wish to make it clear that, today, I am not speaking for myself but for my colleague Emma Harper, who has been urgently called away.

There is no doubt that the 2005 act has given mothers greater security and protection to breastfeed in public, as well as raising awareness of breastfeeding and its benefits to both mother and child. Although not all mothers breastfeed, for many different reasons, it is important that mums who wish to breastfeed are supported in their choice. Breastfeeding provides immune system support for the baby, and skin-to-skin contact is an important part of breast and bottle feeding.

When Emma Harper was first elected, she met Veronica King, a health and wellbeing specialist and maternal and infant nutrition lead with NHS Dumfries and Galloway, who was originally tasked with leading the breastfeeding welcome scheme. In 2018, Emma was at the formal launch of the scheme by NHS Dumfries and Galloway, which was well attended by mothers and interested parties from across the region. She agreed to work with Veronica to raise awareness of the work that was being carried out, with the aim of encouraging more businesses to sign up to the scheme. Emma wrote to all appropriate businesses and public spaces across Dumfries and Galloway—about 230—to make them aware of the work that Veronica was carrying out and to urge them to take part and achieve “breastfeeding welcome” status. Although there has been some interest and a generally positive response, when Emma met Veronica again just last week, it was pointed out that there could be significant improvement in the number of businesses taking up the scheme.

We know that breastfeeding offers considerable health benefits for both mother and baby, and it is important that the community supports a mother in

her decision to give her baby the best start in life. University of Glasgow research indicates that many new mothers across Scotland give up breastfeeding because they feel isolated and embarrassed and that they might offend other people by feeding in public. Of course, that feeling stimulated Elaine Smith’s bill all those years ago. We need to continue working to change that narrative and to support business and the public to promote breastfeeding and take part in the various national health service board schemes, which are free to participate in.

In Dumfries and Galloway, businesses can display a “Dumfries and Galloway is Breastfeeding Friendly” window sticker and scheme certificate once they have applied, as long as they can demonstrate that they offer an environment that allows mothers to feed without interruption or obstruction. By taking part in the scheme, mothers can distinguish whether a business is an inviting one, which can increase repeat business and attract more mothers by word of mouth through the mother and baby groups that women attend. Emma is happy to continue to support such work, and she appeals to local businesses to play their part in achieving a breastfeeding-friendly Scotland.

I will briefly mention the world-leading work that is being undertaken by the Scottish Government to promote breastfeeding-friendly practices.

In June 2019, the Government published the “Becoming Breastfeeding Friendly Scotland: report”. It identified eight key recommendations that should be progressed to scale up the protection, promotion and support of breastfeeding. Many stakeholders and local groups have welcomed the recommendations, which were developed through evidence-based research and engagement with mothers and businesses, and are being implemented by the Scottish Government in partnership with others.

However, one issue that has been brought to Emma Harper’s attention is the need for greater promotion of breastfeeding in our rural areas, such as in her home area of Dumfries and Galloway. I therefore ask the minister to give assurances that rural Scotland is absolutely kept in mind when progressing the recommendations. I will revert and speak for myself for a moment: as someone who has island communities and rural areas in my constituency, I am also keen for them to be prioritised. Indeed, the minister represents a large rural area.

I, again, congratulate Elaine Smith on securing the debate, and I encourage businesses in Dumfries and Galloway—and across Scotland—to take part in breastfeeding welcome schemes to support mothers who choose to breastfeed.

18:00

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife)

(Con): I am delighted to have the opportunity to take part in Elaine Smith's debate today and congratulate her on securing it. As we have already heard, 2020 is the 15th anniversary of the Breastfeeding etc (Scotland) Act 2005, which received royal assent on 18 January that year.

I commend and congratulate all mothers who decide to breastfeed their babies because, as the campaign slogan of old said, "Breast is best". Breastfeeding should be a very natural thing for a mother to do, whether at home, in a public place or at work, and she should feel confident in her ability to do that. I congratulate Elaine Smith on her work to ensure that that is the case.

Most of the time we do not even notice women breastfeeding. That is how it should be; we should not think of it as being strange. As many of us know, some people feel uncomfortable about breastfeeding, but that is not how it should be looked upon.

As we know, sometimes, individuals stare. However, the Breastfeeding Network has said that that is not always because they disapprove. It said:

"We heard from one mum who was feeding her baby, and an elderly couple"

were in the vicinity.

"When they got up and began making their way over to her"

the mother was little bit concerned about what might be said. The elderly woman simply said how lovely it was to see a mother breastfeeding her baby, because she

"had previously breastfed her own children and it ... brought back fond memories."

That is how people should be thinking about breastfeeding—fond memories; good feelings; and confidence. Unfortunately, some individuals have decided to make a fuss. We know that some passers-by have axes to grind, or that some people have specific views on breastfeeding, which they are vocal about and make public. However, we should ensure that everyone embraces breastfeeding. We should support and encourage individuals to breastfeed.

Elaine Smith: Does the member agree with me that educating people at a young age about breastfeeding may help to change such societal attitudes? Where people are not used to seeing breastfeeding as the norm, they can take on those attitudes because of ignorance.

Alexander Stewart: Yes, I completely concur. Breastfeeding should be seen as the norm; people should not have to hide from it or be ashamed about it. It should be natural to do it, and it is up to

all of us to ensure that we educate individuals to that end.

We have already heard about the nutritional, psychological and bonding benefits that breastfeeding promotes, and the scientific evidence is there on the benefits of wellbeing and nurturing. We also know that work is carried out at antenatal and postnatal levels. That encourages first-time mothers, who sometimes feel a bit anxious and nervous about breastfeeding. It is important that they get training and encouragement, and that approach has led to a remarkable increase in breastfeeding rates across Scotland. That should be welcomed, and we should applaud those who continue to work on the attitudes that continue to exist across society today.

It is a travesty that a quarter of breastfeeding women who provided feedback in a survey indicated that they sometimes felt concern about what might happen if they breastfed in public and that they sometimes felt uncomfortable. As Elaine Smith said, that is why we need to look at training.

I congratulate Elaine Smith on all that she has done in her endeavours on the topic. Through her deeds and actions, she has achieved so much for people around the country. That must be recognised, because breastfeeding is one of the most natural things that people do, which should be celebrated in our society.

18:05

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): I join colleagues in thanking and paying tribute to Elaine Smith for the work that she has done over many years, and for giving us the chance to gather in the chamber tonight to debate something that is positive and a true cause for celebration.

I have been taking notes, because it will not have escaped members' attention that I am working on a members' bill—the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Bill—which has recently passed stage 1. When I embarked on that piece of work, I had no idea how challenging and time consuming it would be, and when Elaine paid tribute to her staff and the other people who helped her, it made me think about my situation. It also reminded me that it is really important that we have a Parliament that is as gender balanced as possible. If we did not have women driving such issues, we might not have the Breastfeeding etc (Scotland) Act 2005, which is important in itself and because of the culture change that it has created.

There is no doubt that Elaine Smith's act has played a huge role in increasing the number of women who breastfeed in Scotland, as well as in raising awareness beyond Scotland's boundaries.

However, members have already touched on the fact that we continue to have, in the UK and in Scotland, the lowest rates of breastfeeding in the world. I have been acutely aware of that in Central Scotland and, in particular, in Lanarkshire, where breastfeeding rates are still low in areas of higher deprivation.

However, I am encouraged by the progress that has been made and the work that is being pursued. Elaine Smith highlighted the efforts of North Lanarkshire Council, whose work to introduce infant nutrition to the curriculum in schools is key, as are its efforts to normalise breastfeeding, and to tackle and get rid of the taboo about breastfeeding in public.

Elaine Smith mentioned the underlying sexism and misogyny that still present barriers. When people have not seen others in their family or group of friends breastfeeding, that lack of visibility has an impact on their fears. I have been reflecting on my experience as a former breastfeeding mum. Elaine's bill received royal assent in 2005—hence its 15th anniversary. My daughter was born in 2006, and not many among my immediate group of friends had had babies. My experience was positive, in the main, but it is important to say that breastfeeding is not without challenges. Women need good support from their midwife, general practitioner, friends, family and employer, if they have one.

I remember that, leading up to my return to work, there was lots of discussion about where I might want to go if I needed to express milk. I was pointed towards cupboards and other such places, which made the situation stressful. Even though the legislation was in place at that point, there was probably not enough by way of policy in the workplace to ensure that every line manager knew their responsibility and how to make things less stressful. A lot of progress has been made since then.

Elaine Smith touched on the fact that, around the world and as a Parliament, we now have to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic. Breastfeeding support groups, whether in Lanarkshire or elsewhere, provide vital support; but pregnant women and new mums who have to self-isolate might not be able to access those support networks. I am interested to hear what the minister says about what the Government is doing on online support and how we might ramp that up. If community groups cannot meet, perhaps we could divert resources from them to the national breastfeeding helpline, which is vital.

Tonight is an opportunity to reflect, celebrate and recognise the importance of legislation not just in changing the law for the sake of changing the law, but in changing our attitudes and how we behave as a society. It is an opportunity to

celebrate and to thank mums, babies and the health professionals on the front line who help them every day. Long may that work continue.

18:10

The Minister for Children and Young People (Maree Todd): I thank Elaine Smith for lodging the motion to mark the 15th anniversary of the Breastfeeding etc (Scotland) Act 2005. I am very grateful to members for their contributions on this important matter.

I reiterate some of the advice that Elaine Smith gave at the beginning of the debate for mums who might be experiencing concern about the Covid-19 pandemic. Breast milk provides protection against many illnesses and, although there have been only limited studies, there is no evidence at all that mothers who have the virus can transfer it to their baby through breast milk. All new mums should be strongly advised to breastfeed or to express breast milk to protect their infants, regardless of the Covid-19 pandemic.

At this time, it is prudent to advise new mums, particularly those who have premature or sick infants, to limit contact with the wider public. Everyone who comes into contact with a new family should be very careful about the hand-washing guidance and about coughing and sneezing. I am very aware that babies are born into a family and a community, but at this moment in time, we need to take specific precautions.

Elaine Smith mentioned the challenges that some mums are having in accessing formula milk. If people are having difficulty accessing their usual brand of stage 1 formula, they can use any brand—they are all made to the same standard and people can switch between them. We are urgently trying to confirm through official channels that there will be a limit on how many tubs of formula can be sold at one time, in order to preserve supplies for those who are seeking them. That is my public service message.

Elaine Smith: Members might not know that the act is called the Breastfeeding etc (Scotland) Act 2005 because it focuses on the child's right to be fed, including bottle feeding when mums and babies are out and about.

Maree Todd: I thank Elaine Smith for her intervention, which is very welcome.

Children get only one go at childhood, and it is incumbent on us all, whether we are parents, members of the public or politicians, to do what we can to get it right for every child, and to ensure that children have a chance to flourish and improve their health and wellbeing. As we are all well aware, breastfeeding plays a big part in improving health over an entire life, and the

Government continues to promote, protect and support breastfeeding.

Research is very clear that the greatest benefits for the mother and baby are gained through exclusively breastfeeding for the first six months of life. Breast milk provides a complete source of nutrition and contains a range of immunological substances that cannot be manufactured and which support the development of the digestive and immune systems of a growing infant.

A key benefit of breastfeeding is that it can happen at any time and anywhere, but for it to be effective, both mum and child need to feel relaxed. Any embarrassing interruptions can result in an upset mum and a crying, hungry baby. As the motion highlights, a key finding from our survey was that mums' concerns about breastfeeding in public, including embarrassment and negative public attitudes, have been identified as being among the main barriers to breastfeeding. Although the act protects the right to feed a child without fear of interruption or criticism, legislation alone is not enough to ensure the support that needs to be in place to allow women to feel comfortable to breastfeed their baby in public.

In June last year, the Minister for Public Health, Sport and Wellbeing launched the Scotland-wide breastfeeding friendly Scotland scheme. The advantages of a national scheme include that there is a recognisable logo and staff training materials, such that, no matter where a mother visits, her breastfeeding experience will be the same. By signing up to the scheme, businesses and organisations can help to show that they welcome and support breastfeeding mothers, and they can inform their staff about why breastfeeding is important and how it is protected.

It was great to hear about all the work that is going on in North Lanarkshire, and I was also pleased and proud to hear that my alma mater, the Robert Gordon University, is a breastfeeding-friendly campus. We are going to extend the scheme into early learning and childcare settings and schools—of course we are. Our aim to normalise breastfeeding in all communities will begin by increasing the knowledge of our very youngest people as they progress through their school career.

Breastfeeding rates across Scotland continue to rise. The latest statistics show that more than half of babies born in 2018-19 were, at the time of their first health visitor visit, breastfed. Focus on our support to mothers to enable them to breastfeed for longer is also starting to emerge in the national statistics, which show that 43 per cent of babies who were born in 2018-19 were being breastfed at their six-to-eight week review, and that 32 per cent of those were exclusively breastfed. That represents the highest percentage of babies being

exclusively breastfed at six to eight weeks since recording began.

However, there is more to do. A clear demonstration of our commitment to supporting breastfeeding is the provision of an additional investment of £3.7 million over the past two years. Health boards and third sector partners are carrying out breastfeeding projects and quality improvement initiatives. Our aim from the improvement work is to reduce the incidence of key feeding problems, particularly those that are associated with early breastfeeding cessation, as was clearly highlighted in the survey.

Our on-going commitment to the UNICEF UK baby friendly initiative includes providing more training for all staff, and developing specialist training and skills. That supports the recommendation of "Becoming Breastfeeding Friendly Scotland: report" on national implementation of consistent appropriate practice skills for all those who care for mums and babies, and it builds on the baby friendly initiative's core standards. I am delighted that we have celebrated Scotland's being the only country in the UK—well, I am not delighted, I wish that the other countries did it too, but it is great that Scotland is leading the way—to achieve BFI accreditation in 100 per cent of our maternity units and health and social care partnerships.

The Breastfeeding Network, the National Childbirth Trust—for which I was an antenatal teacher—and La Leche League GB have also received funding for expansion of peer-support provision across Scotland. That makes clear our commitment to including third sector partners in the work that we do. Our review of peer support is under way, and the valuable work of peer supporters will be celebrated at an event later this year.

Supporting the provision of breast milk for our very tiniest babies is crucial, and we are supporting mothers and staff in that, too. Neonatal staff will be able to attend an event later in the year at which they will hear from experts about how neonatal experience impacts on a baby and their family in the long term. Of course, we have also developed the donor milk bank.

Presiding Officer, for many years, Scotland has aspired to be a country where breastfeeding is valued and supported by our society, and where mothers can have the best breastfeeding experiences possible and can continue to breastfeed for as long as they are able to and want to. I hope that you will agree that all the initiatives, policies and investment that I have outlined today will help us to realise that aspiration.

Meeting closed at 18:18.

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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