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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 7 May 2020

[The Presiding Officer opened the meeting at 13:30]

Members' Virtual Question Time

Rural Economy and Tourism

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): Welcome to the Scottish Parliament's virtual question time on the rural economy and tourism. As ever, I am joined by ministerial colleagues and MSPs from their homes and constituencies around the country.

Seafood and Fishing Industry (Support)

Maureen Watt (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): My question is for the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism. What progress is being made on getting support to the seafood and fishing industry?

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism (Fergus Ewing): We are providing substantial financial support to the fishing industry. The total package of financial support is just less than £23 million, and it forms three schemes. We are assisting those with vessels of 12m and under and some of those with vessels of over 12m, as well as shellfish processors and others who are facing severe difficulties because of the loss of markets for their produce.

I am very pleased that we have been able to provide that support. The purpose is to address financial hardship. In other words, we want to support businesses—fishermen or shellfish producers—who, in effect, have little or no income at this time but still have overheads to pay. The packages have been tailored with the objective of assisting such businesses in meeting those unavoidable fixed outlays and to tide them over until the Covid-19 crisis is over, as we all hope it will be.

Maureen Watt: We know that some enterprising fish merchants have taken to the road to sell their fish products. How can consumers find out whether a fish man is coming to their area, so that they can eat the healthy fish?

Fergus Ewing: I have seen examples of ingenuity and entrepreneurship among individuals who are taking action to sell their produce themselves. Information on direct deliveries is available online from Scotland Food & Drink, and local information is also available.

On a wider note, one thing that we might see almost as a legacy of Covid-19 is that, because people are becoming more used to working online, they will perhaps avail themselves of purchasing food online, rather than necessarily from shops or supermarkets. That would be a step forward for the food and drink sector. Scotland Food & Drink and the Scottish Government are working hard to enable that for more people as a workable option.

Dairy Farmers (Support)

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): My question is for the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism.

Yesterday, the United Kingdom Government announced a new fund for dairy farmers to enable them to cope with the impact of coronavirus. The new fund will help to support dairy farmers who have been affected substantially by the reduction in demand from restaurants, cafes and bars. As the cabinet secretary will know, dairy farmers in Scotland face the same financial hardship. A new fund would give essential support to them to cover lost income, excess milk and falling prices. As the cabinet secretary knows, our dairy industry plays a crucial part in the Scottish economy. Will he stand alongside our dairy farmers through this difficult period and introduce a similar hardship fund?

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism (Fergus Ewing): I am pleased that that question has been raised. I reassure Rachael Hamilton that we are working extremely closely with NFU Scotland, the sector and others to ensure that we take whatever steps are necessary to assist. We have also been working closely with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and George Eustice. I have had discussions with him, and my officials have had discussions with his officials. I know that there was an announcement by the UK Government yesterday evening on the outline of a scheme, but I believe that its details have not yet been finalised.

We are working closely with the UK Government and Scottish stakeholders to consider whether such assistance is necessary in Scotland. I understand that the assistance is relatively limited, but nonetheless it could be of real help to farmers in Scotland who are suffering hardship. Those farmers were supplying the restaurant market rather than directly to supermarkets. It is a distinct group, some of whom have suffered considerable financial loss.

We are contributing—as are the other devolved Administrations—to the costs of a marketing campaign to promote the consumption of milk. Milk is a highly nutritious product that is particularly good for healthy bones in children. The

Scottish Government is contributing money to that marketing campaign, which will be led by the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board. We are pleased to play a part in that.

I will report back to members as soon as we have been able to give further consideration to the question whether a financial package of support is required and should be provided in Scotland. If it is required, full details will be provided to the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee as soon as possible.

Visitor Attractions (Support)

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I believe that my question is for the Minister for Rural Affairs and the Natural Environment, Mairi Gougeon.

The Association of Scottish Visitor Attractions has warned that some 80 per cent of visitor attractions could go out of business during the coronavirus crisis. For Deep Sea World and St Andrews Aquarium, both of which are in my region, the current circumstances are extremely challenging. This week, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs announced £14 million for a zoo support fund to support zoos and aquariums. They are able to access support to furlough staff and hibernate the business, but they still have to provide care for the animals. Will a comparable fund be introduced in Scotland to support that unique sector?

The Presiding Officer: Claire Baker indicated that the question is for Mairi Gougeon, but I saw the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism indicating that he wishes to respond.

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism (Fergus Ewing): My colleague Mairi Gougeon has responsibility for certain matters relating to animal health and welfare, but I have responsibility for tourism. I do not think that we will wrangle over the issue.

I have certainly been dealing closely with the Association of Scottish Visitor Attractions, and I had a conference call with Gordon Morrison and Susan Morrison fairly recently. I am acutely aware of the pressures that a huge range of visitor attractions in Scotland face, particularly those that depend on international visitors. They are all hard hit at the moment because they are shut, and they are very worried that there will not be an easy resumption or recovery even if the restrictions are lifted, because many of the visitors are international visitors.

I will carefully look into the question of whether there is a specific fund that should be applied. I understand that the funds that were announced last week by my colleague the Cabinet Secretary for Finance, which include the pivotal enterprise

resilience fund—PERF—are designed to enable eligible businesses to obtain financial assistance, and I expect that that will include some members of the Association of Scottish Visitor Attractions.

Claire Baker: I appreciate the cabinet secretary's commitment to look at that, but does he recognise that zoos and aquariums offer a unique visitor attraction and have a responsibility to care for their animals while the closure is ongoing? I understand that they have tried to apply for the additional funds that the Scottish Government has offered, but so far have not been successful.

Fergus Ewing: I entirely accept that zoos and aquaria provide a pleasant, educative and enjoyable visitor experience. Indeed, my family and I visited Edinburgh zoo not so long ago. I therefore agree with Claire Baker's assertion, which is entirely correct. I also note that they have a responsibility to look after animals or fish and are responsible for their welfare, so regard must be had to that.

The funds that were announced last week have only just opened, so it is fairly early days, but I am happy to consider how we can address the particular needs of the businesses concerned. I will ask my officials to investigate that issue. I would be happy for Claire Baker to provide me with any further information thereanent if she wishes to do so.

Tourism (Resumption of Activity)

John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Green): My question is about tourism and is for the cabinet secretary. He will be well aware of a tension that exists in the Highlands and Islands between businesses that want to start operating and the resident population, who are concerned about any erosion of the high standards that apply at the moment to protect people. Indeed, he may be aware that, as early as this morning, Parkdean Resorts was taking bookings from 16 May. Will the cabinet secretary outline what discussions he has had with his United Kingdom counterpart, particularly in light of potential announcements from the UK Government about the co-ordination of any resumption of tourist activity in the time ahead?

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism (Fergus Ewing): There are two parts to that question. The first relates to a particular business that has two caravan parks in the Highlands. My understanding is that that business has made it absolutely clear that it is not reopening at the current time—I received that information from trading standards officers just this morning. I have not had contact with the business directly but, out of fairness to it, I should say that, in respect of the issues that were raised in the

press—just yesterday evening, I believe—according to local trading standards officers, no offence has been committed and the business is acting responsibly, as I would expect it to do as a major responsible business.

With regard to the UK Government, Mr Finnie is correct that, in general, many communities throughout the Highlands and across the country are concerned that, at the moment, it would not be safe to lift restrictions, because people coming into an area may increase the risk of spreading the virus. That is a perfectly fair comment and it is undoubtedly the case at present. Plainly, the Scottish and UK Governments have a responsibility to ensure that, at such time as it is safe to lift restrictions—and not before then—that is accompanied by clear messaging to reassure the public and to ensure that every business respects and applies the Covid-19 rules of social distancing as they are at the time.

Mr Finnie's question is a serious one. I discussed those issues this morning on a conference call with my UK Government counterpart, Nigel Huddleston, and colleagues from Wales and Northern Ireland. The issue is recognised as one that we must address in all parts of these islands.

Orkney Economy (Business Support)

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): Over recent weeks, the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism and I have discussed how vital local wholesalers are to the Orkney economy. Of course, they are not the only businesses that play a pivotal role, but Orkney Cheese, for example, operates as a co-operative and supports a number of local dairy farms as well as dairy businesses that produce everything from smoked cheese to ice cream, all of the very highest quality. These are challenging times, but the implications of those sorts of businesses failing would be serious and widely felt. I therefore welcome the decision to set up the pivotal enterprise resilience fund to support businesses that are linchpins in their local economies. Does the cabinet secretary agree that the wholesalers and Orkney Cheese are just the sort of businesses that epitomise that and need to be supported to continue to play the vital role that they do in their local economy?

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism (Fergus Ewing): I would largely agree with Mr McArthur. He is right that Orkney Cheese is an excellent business. I visited it a couple of years back and spoke to some of the farmer members, and I am an enthusiastic consumer of its products. I am in contact with that business with regard to potential financial support for which it may be eligible. I believe that I may have been in contact with it by correspondence as

recently as yesterday. I will check up on that and make sure that Mr McArthur is informed.

As a general point, the fund is intended to benefit such businesses. I believe that some wholesalers in Scotland have already availed themselves of applications to the fund, which is a good thing. We will obviously keep members advised as the fund progresses and as applications are processed from it.

The last point that I will make is that there is an overriding concern that the funds may not provide sufficient financial support to deal with all the hardship that is caused for businesses around the country. I make that general point and, indeed, I made it when I spoke to the United Kingdom minister this morning. We need to do more across these islands to make sure that businesses can navigate this crisis. At the moment, I do not think that we are quite able to achieve that. It is best to be transparent and open about that fact right now, and to reassure people who are watching this Scottish Parliament virtual question time that we are aware of that and are doing everything we can to deal with it to the best of our ability with the availability of financial resources.

International Trade (Protected Geographical Indications)

Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): As the Covid-19 pandemic affects international trade, what discussions has the cabinet secretary had with the United Kingdom Government, and perhaps others, about the continuation from 2021 of protected geographical indications for Scottish food products, which are so essential to continuing recognition in export markets where the superior quality of products in Scotland is understood?

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism (Fergus Ewing): PGIs are extremely valuable for Scotland. Our quality Scotch beef, lamb and specially selected pork as well as Arbroath smokies have a particular cachet, and the conferral of PGI status brings with it a commercial premium and an additional value. The production of those high-quality foodstuffs is therefore extremely important to the rural economy in Scotland.

PGI status is, I think, more of a Brexit than a Covid-19 issue. One concern about Brexit is that we could lose the benefits of those PGIs, because we may no longer enjoy the reciprocal arrangements that we have in the European Union whereby we recognise, for example, Parmesan cheese. Will that reciprocity still be there? It is hugely valuable, because it is in the European markets that those premiums are earned and received. The loss of PGI status that could result from Brexit, possibly without a similar

replacement, has caused us concern. To answer Mr Stevenson's question, I have repeatedly raised that concern with various Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs ministers. I am not sure whether I am on my fourth or fifth DEFRA secretary of state—as it were—at the moment. We will certainly continue to press the case for preservation of that enormous benefit to Scottish prime produce.

White-fish Fleet (Illicit Activity)

Peter Chapman (North East Scotland) (Con): The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism will be aware that our white-fish fleet is voluntarily restricting its days at sea to ensure that the market is supplied but not swamped. [*Temporary loss of sound.*] However, when they return to their traditional fishing grounds, they find line and gillnet vessels from Spain and France moving in on those traditional Scottish fishing areas and refusing to move. What on-sea support can the Scottish Government provide to our fishermen, who should not have to tolerate such inexcusable behaviour by foreign vessels?

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism (Fergus Ewing): I caught the gist of the question but not all of it, so I apologise in advance if I do not respond in a way that reflects the totality of the question. I heard Mr Chapman say that arrangements had been made for white-fish vessels to operate in a co-ordinated fashion at the present time, to avoid swamping the market. My information is that those arrangements are broadly welcome. I have discussed them with Scotland's most senior fisheries official, and I understand that they are designed to have that salutary effect. I am happy to speak to Mr Chapman about that, should he so wish.

The member's second question is about illicit activity. Any illicit activity needs to be reported to Marine Scotland and marine protection vessels need to be deployed if necessary. The marine protection staff deal with any such incident. The press often raise those matters, although sometimes without specifying the details of the vessel or the type of infringement or encroachment.

I am happy to pursue the matter with Marine Scotland if Mr Chapman wishes to write to me with specific information. The staff who deal with fisheries protection, both in the vessels and onshore, are extremely professional and well regarded in fisheries circles. I am able to assert that they discharge their duties professionally and effectively.

The Presiding Officer: I am conscious that four members still wish to get their questions in before 2 o'clock if possible, but Peter Chapman has a brief supplementary question.

Peter Chapman: This is in case the cabinet secretary did not quite hear. My point was that, on sea, our white-fish vessels are encountering foreign vessels in their traditional grounds that refuse to move to allow them to come back to fish. We need to insist on maintaining the best possible opportunity for our fishermen in our traditional grounds.

Fergus Ewing: We wish to ensure that that happens, of course. Any illegal activity should be reported clearly and will be investigated by the relevant authorities.

Seasonal Businesses

Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): The cabinet secretary will recognise that a large number of seasonal businesses in my constituency and others face the prospect of going from September 2019 until—probably—Easter 2021 with virtually no income. I recognise the need for the current restrictions, but communities such as mine are very dependent on seasonal businesses and face a particularly difficult situation. What is the Scottish Government doing to recognise that?

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism (Fergus Ewing): Dr Allan makes a strong point, which applies to many of our islands and to our more remote rural communities. Various types of activities, such as tourism, are highly seasonal in nature and those businesses tend to derive their income from the period between Easter and autumn. That is a factor, not only for tourism but for other areas of the economy as well.

The impacts on tourism of Covid-19 have been extreme. Basically, there is no tourism at the moment and, indeed, as we touched on earlier, any tourism activities are offences. There is a need for Governments to recognise that, post-Covid-19, the impacts are going to be very serious, especially on our islands, and especially on those communities whose survival depends on the continuance of successful, easily conducted economic activities. I entirely accept that general proposition.

It is difficult to overstate our concern about tourism businesses on the islands. I have fairly recently discussed the issue with the Hebrides tourism body, which offered the view that it does not really expect any significant recovery at all this year for the Outer Hebrides. That is a pretty bleak prognosis. It is our responsibility to work with Dr Allan, the local authority and the local MP to address the problems in an effective fashion, and we will certainly be doing that.

Coach Companies (Financial Support)

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): As the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism will be aware, although there has been sector-specific financial support for bus companies that provide timetabled services—through, for example, the continuance of concessionary travel reimbursement—there has been no sector-specific support for companies that provide only coach hire services, which would normally be gearing up for the busy tourism period. Tourism is likely to be one of the last sectors to leave lockdown and recover.

Is the Government considering specific sectoral support for the many hundreds of coach firms that are struggling at this time?

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism (Fergus Ewing): This morning, I wrote to the 20 or 30 coach companies that wrote to me in the past 24 or 48 hours expressing concerns of that nature, and I will have a conference call with the Confederation of Passenger Transport UK—the trade body—in the next few days, as soon as that can be arranged.

In the letter that I sent to all those businesses—or that is being sent today—I indicated that we value their work and that their high-quality coaches give our visitors to Scotland a comfortable experience and a means of enjoying the country's scenery. They also take visitors to and from cruise liners, to visitor resorts and to hotels, and tours are arranged through a number of coach companies.

Many coach companies are wholly or substantially reliant upon tourism, and therefore I believe that there is an extremely strong case that, just as other businesses in the tourism sector have received support, so coach companies that are substantially in the tourism sector, and that are suffering hardship because of the Covid-19 restrictions, should in principle also be able to be afforded whatever protection is required to help them to navigate these difficult times. I am pleased that an opportunity has been provided for me to make that clear.

This morning, I made that point to the United Kingdom Minister for Arts, Heritage and Tourism. He discussed an example of a coach business down south, and I added my voice for there to be specific consideration of support for that important part of our tourism economy. He agreed that that was a sensible point well made, and he is passing it on to the UK Cabinet.

Seasonal Workers

Richard Lyle (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): Will the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism indicate the impact of

recruitment campaigns to provide seasonal workers for Scotland's farmers?

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism (Fergus Ewing): With your permission, Presiding Officer, Ms Gougeon may be better able to deal with that question, as I know that she has been working hard on that area.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, cabinet secretary. I call the minister for natural affairs, Mairi Gougeon.

The Minister for Rural Affairs and the Natural Environment (Mairi Gougeon): Campaigns to try to recruit seasonal workers have been running on a range of platforms not just in Scotland but right around the United Kingdom. For example, we have been working with Lantra Scotland, which has been running a skills matching service, and NFU Scotland is hosting a website to link directly to job opportunities with growers.

However, we are hearing from growers that, even though such websites have been getting tens of thousands of hits, there has been a low conversion rate and interest is not necessarily translating into applications.

When it comes to people taking up the opportunity to work on farms, they are not always able to commit to working for the whole season. There is a mixture of factors involved in that, as there will be a variety of reasons why people have gone for the job opportunities. For example, they might be furloughed workers who find that they have to return to work.

We are aware of how key this issue is to fruit and vegetable production, which is why we continue to closely monitor the situation and to engage regularly with producers and stakeholder representatives.

The Presiding Officer: I believe that Mairi Gougeon's correct title is the Minister for Rural Affairs and the Natural Environment, rather than the minister for natural affairs.

There is a brief supplementary question from Richard Lyle.

Richard Lyle: I know that the issue affects the minister's local area. As a member of the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee, I am interested to know what support is available to fruit and vegetable farmers who have concerns about workforce availability.

Mairi Gougeon: As I said in my previous response, we have been working closely with the sector. Workforce availability is a standing item on the agendas for our weekly meetings with fruit and vegetable sector representatives.

Those meetings provide the opportunity for growers to discuss the problems that they are

experiencing right now and for us, as a Government, to look at what we can do to support them in the challenges that they face. A recent example of our work with the sector was the production of sector-specific guidance on social distancing, as there are particular challenges in different areas. We are also working closely with the sector on potential activity to recruit migrant workers from the European Union. That work would normally happen and we continue with it.

Barley Sector

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I remind members of my farming interests.

Two weeks ago, I raised with the cabinet secretary the devastating prospect that thousands of barley growers face if whisky distilleries remain closed for safety reasons and their malted barley is not required. In the past two weeks, what discussions, meetings or telephone calls has the cabinet secretary had to ensure that distillers stand by their primary producers and suppliers?

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism (Fergus Ewing): As I indicated to Edward Mountain before, I am acutely aware that the financial returns of arable farmers in Scotland are dependent on a functioning whisky sector. In other words, whisky distilling is based on the primary product of barley, so the barley market is essential, and the concern is that unless whisky distilling can resume, there could be significant difficulties in that sector.

To answer Edward Mountain's question, I have had a lengthy and useful discussion with Willie Thomson, the farmer who is the chair of NFU Scotland's combinable crops committee. At that meeting, it was agreed that I would seek discussions with other stakeholders, including maltsters and others who work closely with the sector. I have visited many establishments in the sector, such as Highland Grain Ltd, which is in my area of Scotland. At the meeting, I also expressed a desire to take part in the relevant meeting of the group that regularly deals with those issues. I asked whether that meeting could be brought forward and yesterday I was informed that it will take place on 28 May. The restrictions are in place at the moment and we perhaps do not expect them to be lifted in the immediate term.

To answer the question, between now and 28 May I will be doing further work with further engagement—as will my officials—to prepare the ground on some of the complex issues that are involved. The aim is to ensure that, assuming that we see the restrictions lifted over the coming weeks and months, whisky distilling will be able to resume and that, working together, the sector can make effective arrangements to avoid a collapse in the price. As Mr Mountain knows, that is not an

entirely straightforward issue, but I can absolutely assure him that it is receiving my and my officials' full attention.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you to all my ministerial and MSP colleagues. We will resume with health and sport questions in about 10 minutes' time. In the meantime, thank you for your participation.

14:06

Meeting suspended.

14:18

On resuming—

Health and Sport

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): Welcome back to the Scottish Parliament's virtual meeting. The next item of business is members' questions on health and sport.

Contact Tracing Apps

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): My question is for the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport. Today, the *Financial Times* is reporting that NHSX, the national health service's digital unit, is considering switching from the contact tracing app that it has developed to the one that is being developed by Google and Apple. Can the cabinet secretary tell us whether the Scottish Government has been made formally aware of that potential change by the United Kingdom Government?

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Jeane Freeman): No, we have not.

Emma Harper: That was a short answer from the cabinet secretary. What action can be taken to request a more formal update from the UK Government?

Jeane Freeman: The same action as we have been taking to try to get the information that we need about the NHS England proximity app can be taken. As I said in the chamber earlier this week—perhaps on Tuesday—we are still waiting for information from NHS England: first, on the app's technical information, which we need so that we can understand how it would work and how the data that it gathers would feed into our NHS Scotland system, and secondly, on the ethical and data security questions that are important if we are to assure users that the app is safe.

As I have said, if we feel that, on receipt of that information, the app will enhance our approach, we will, of course, want to use it. However, we have not had that information or information about anything that is being reported in today's media,

so we will continue to press the UK Government for it.

Cancer (Diagnostic Tests and Treatment)

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): Has any national guidance been given on what cancer diagnostic tests and treatment can take place within Covid-19-free sites, or are such decisions currently being taken by health boards and regional cancer centres?

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Jeane Freeman): The cancer clinical network will have provided clinicians who are treating patients with cancer, or suspected cancer, with guidance that they should follow in order to take account of the risks that are associated with Covid-19 in the clinical decisions that they reach and in the conversations that they then have with patients about what they might do.

Urgent cancer care continues, but in some individual cases clinicians take the view, which they discuss with the patient, that due to the circumstances that might surround that individual's case, the risk of their acquiring Covid-19 outweighs the risk of postponing a procedure for a time. That guidance is updated constantly, and it is one of the areas that we are looking at as we look at restarting parts of our health service.

Miles Briggs: Will the cabinet secretary outline the current capacity for cancer diagnostic tests and treatment in Covid-19-free sites across Scotland?

Jeane Freeman: I cannot do that at this point, but I am happy to find that information and then to provide it to Miles Briggs. We have created capacity for 3,000 beds for Covid-19 patients, not all of which are currently being used. We also diverted a number of staff to assist with rotas for other staff who are working in Covid-19 areas, including respiratory wards, and we have trained more staff so that they can cover rotas in intensive care. The current intensive care surge capacity is 585; as Miles Briggs knows, we are working towards quadrupling capacity. According to the figures that were reported today, 15 per cent of intensive care unit capacity is being used.

Cancer (Referrals and Screening)

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): Earlier this week, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport said that the Scottish Government's campaign to get people to come to the national health service is working. Can she provide an update on the latest figures for urgent cancer referrals, given that we heard that there was a dramatic drop of 70 per cent last month?

The cabinet secretary might not have heard Professor Linda Bauld's evidence to the COVID-

19 Committee this morning. Professor Bauld believes that cancer screening should be restarted. Can the cabinet secretary give an update on that? Does she agree with Professor Bauld that providing Covid-19-free environments and ensuring that there is adequate personal protective equipment for staff and patients could be part of the solution to getting people back to work?

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Jeane Freeman): I absolutely agree that it is vital to provide staff with adequate PPE in the clinical areas in which they work. Members—especially Health and Sport Committee members, given our meeting this morning—will be very familiar with all the work that we have done on that.

I regret that I cannot provide Monica Lennon with the figures that she asked for. Without having seen questions in advance, it is not possible for me to provide accurate figures in response. However, we will undertake to secure the figures and pass them to Monica Lennon when we have done so.

In answer to the question on increasing the levels of cancer work, I say that of course urgent suspicion-of-cancer referrals have not been paused as a consequence of the current pandemic. However, perhaps equally important is that a significant amount of work is now under way on which services we might restart in the current situation.

We are doing as much as we can to keep the reproduction number as far below 1 as possible. As Monica Lennon knows, our current estimate is that the figure is, at best, R0.7. That is not far enough below R1 for us to have confidence that we can ease lockdown measures at this point. However, easing includes restarting areas of the health service that we can restart without risking the capacity that we need to keep available should there be an increase in Covid-19 cases.

Monica Lennon: I appreciate that the cabinet secretary does not have the figures at her fingertips. However, if she is willing to provide a written answer to me and the rest of Parliament, that would be great.

Today, Macmillan Cancer Support has raised with me concerns about what the figures on people from more deprived communities who have been referred might tell us. As well as the update on urgent cancer referrals, can the cabinet secretary give a further breakdown, by areas of deprivation, of people who have been referred in the past month?

Jeane Freeman: I am more than happy to agree to look at that. Breaking down the figures in that way is a significant task. As, I am sure, Monica Lennon appreciates, a very large

proportion of my health officials and many officials from elsewhere in the Government are currently working on all areas of the pandemic, including the options to restart health services that have been paused. Our analysts are highly involved in the modelling work that we consistently undertake.

I will certainly be able to supply the first set of figures. I have agreed to that, and am happy to look at what more we can do, and to advise Monica Lennon of that, as we go.

Covid-19 (Occupational Disease Classification)

Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green): Health and care workers have a high risk of infection from Covid. Experts are calling for data on the long-term health effects, and a global debate on compensation for those workers is taking place. Belgium has added Covid-19 to its list of prescribed occupational diseases. What modelling is the Scottish Government undertaking on the long-term health effects on health and care workers, and will Covid-19 be classed as a compensable occupational disease in Scotland?

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Jeane Freeman): In answer to the last part of that question, I am unsure at this point, but I will find out who is responsible for the classification of occupational diseases and will advise the member of that.

Work is under way on looking at the long-term health effects of Covid-19 on patients. That includes all patients. As the member will know, some evidence of long-term effects is emerging in patients who survive the virus and are left with an impact on their lungs, respiratory system and, to a degree, their renal system. That research work is in its early days, but it is under way. Ninewells hospital, in particular, is actively engaged in the respiratory area of that work. All of that will inform our decisions, not only about how we restart areas of our health service but about whether there will be new or additional demands in the areas of healthcare that we currently provide.

Alison Johnstone: Does the cabinet secretary know how many health and social care workers in Scotland have contracted Covid-19 and how many of those who have been discharged from hospital or who are recovering at home have moderate to severe effects from Covid-19?

Jeane Freeman: That is not information that I have.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): I understand that the current plans for increasing the testing capacity in Shetland involve sending swabs to the mainland, thus delaying the speed of the delivery of the results.

In Shetland, there are two machines that are normally used for testing fish diseases—one is at Grieg Seafood Shetland, the other is at SSQC. The cabinet secretary will no doubt be aware that an increase in the testing capacity in the Faroe Islands was achieved using similar equipment. What consideration is being given to using equipment like that, where companies are keen to help and support efforts in dealing with the coronavirus? I urge the cabinet secretary to ensure that all options for adopting and expanding local infrastructure, for example with mobile lab units, are fully explored.

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Jeane Freeman): The use of private and, for example, veterinary and other public agency laboratories is under consideration as part of the additional scaling up of our testing capacity that is needed during this month to ensure that we are fully ready and operational for the test, trace and isolate strategy. Support for some of that testing and tracing work is already under way.

We are scaling up testing in our national health service labs; we are also looking at other public agency labs and those in the private sector. If we are to use them, we need to ensure that their machines are the right ones for the polymerase chain reaction test that we use. That test has a sensitivity accuracy of 91 per cent; it also has around 90 per cent accuracy in identifying the Covid-19 virus. Aside from the machines, there is the issue of the supply of the chemical reagents and the other pieces of equipment that are necessary to carry out the testing.

It is not my understanding that, at this point, we would be expecting swabs from Shetland to come to the mainland in order for them to be tested. My understanding is that we now have labs in all our territorial health boards. I am happy to check that for the member; I will also keep her advised on our progress in bringing in the additional lab capacity.

In order to scale up our capacity to 8,000 tests a day, which we will reach around about the middle of next week, we will use laboratory capacity from the University of Edinburgh, the University of Aberdeen and the University of Dundee. Those universities will then scale up from there.

Mobile units are part of the four-nation approach. The swabs that they take go to the lighthouse laboratory in Glasgow, which is run by the University of Glasgow. Those swabs are not diverted anywhere in the United Kingdom other than to the lighthouse labs.

Mobile testing is possible. The swabs from such testing go to the lighthouse labs and it is not possible to divert them elsewhere. As I am sure the member knows, the turnaround speed of

getting results from the samples is critical to the effectiveness of the approach.

Covid-19 (Lifting of Restrictions)

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): Various media outlets have reported that the United Kingdom Government has briefed that it will soon lift restrictions that are preventing the spread of Covid-19. Have Scottish Government ministers been formally advised by their UK Government counterparts about any of those proposals?

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Jeane Freeman): The answer to that is a straightforward no, we have not.

I do not know whether members have had the opportunity to watch our lunchtime briefings, which we give every day, except for Saturday. If they watched today's briefing, they will have seen the First Minister set out clearly our current view on the lifting of restrictions. She also advised that a call is taking place later today between the devolved Administrations and the Prime Minister. It is our hope that, at that point, we can begin the collective discussion about what our four-nation approach might be to the easing of the lockdown measures.

The Presiding Officer: Mr Adam has a brief supplementary question.

George Adam: Will the UK Government's plans not make it increasingly difficult for us to maintain a four-nations approach, given its behaviour? If it continues down the same path, will that not make things even more difficult for us all?

Jeane Freeman: Right at the moment, we do not know what the UK Government's plans are; what we do know is what we have read in the newspapers. Therefore it is really important to recognise that if we are to take a shared approach we should do so collectively, and through discussion. We will have opportunities—for example, through Cobra, but also by other means—to reach a shared view on where we all are in suppressing the virus and on what the scientific and clinical advice is on the impact of easing any of the current lockdown measures. We will be led by such advice here. Where we can, we will reach an agreed view on what the steps towards easing should be. We would aim to carry those out at the same time if that is at all possible.

If it is not possible to reach a shared view on releasing the measures at the same time, we should at least agree a co-ordinated approach that would reflect how we went into lockdown in the first place. The Scottish Government's desire would certainly be to see such an approach replicated as we look towards continuing, in a phased and gradual way, our steps towards coming out of lockdown with clear public health

messages. It is our view—and we have no reason to think that it is not also the approach of the UK Government or of our colleagues in Wales and Northern Ireland—that the overall objectives remain what they have always been: to suppress the virus, break the transmission chains and save the lives that could be lost if we are not successful in doing so.

We all want to return to aspects of normal life as far as we can do so, but we need to take such decisions in a way that will allow us to continue to keep the virus suppressed, to break the transmission chains and consequently to save lives. Our view is that if we can reach those considerations collectively, across the four nations of the UK, that would be preferable. However, if the nations of the UK take different views on the timing of easing any of the lockdown measures, we should certainly share such views through discussion and we should co-ordinate our approaches. We will see whether we can reach that position over the coming days.

Covid-19 (Testing of Workers)

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): We are currently ramping up our ability to carry out tests, and the cabinet secretary will be aware that there are now testing facilities at Prestwick airport and at the Ailsa hospital. However, there are reports that they have been extremely quiet, which is worrying because at both sites there are essential workers who will need testing. What is being done to promote those test sites to all workers who are eligible for testing?

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Jeane Freeman): The testing site at Prestwick airport is a drive-through centre that is part of the United Kingdom Government-led four nations mobile and drive-through testing centre system. The samples that are taken there go to lighthouse labs across the UK, which for Scotland means the facility in Glasgow. The testing site is for key workers and is accessed by both employers and employees through the UK Government's portal, on which questions are asked and answered in order to ascertain the status of employees, after which appointments are made for testing them. Managing the demand for that facility is therefore not within our control.

However, we have made sure that it is understood that it is not only available for a wide range of key workers across all the categories that the Scottish Government has set out—beyond health and social care, those categories include oil and gas, key infrastructure, food and food distribution workers—but for those aged over 65 who have symptoms and for those who are not key workers but who cannot stay at home to do their work and therefore leave home to work. The

facility is available to all those groups, but they access it through the UK Government's portals.

Brian Whittle: My point is that if that facility is available, it is surely within the capabilities of all Governments, including the Scottish Government, to ensure that those who are eligible know that it exists. I am asking what the Scottish Government can do to make sure that that happens within the boundaries of Scotland.

Jeane Freeman: I understand that. We have made the information publicly available. We have taken steps to ensure that employers are advised about the facility, particularly the employers in those three or four categories of key workers so that they all know that their key workers can access that testing.

We have taken steps to ensure that people over 65 with symptoms and workers who have to leave home for work but are not in the key worker category and have symptoms can also access the facility and know how to do so. That will be a continuous process to make sure that we use the platforms that are available to us so that workers and employers who are eligible to use that portal know how to access it and, where they wish to, can access it.

The Presiding Officer: I remind members that quite a few members still wish to ask questions, so please keep the questions, the supplementaries and the answers relatively concise, if possible.

Intensive Care Unit Occupancy

Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): In response to an earlier question, the cabinet secretary mentioned the current intensive care unit surge capacity. Can the cabinet secretary also tell us what the high point of occupancy has been during the emergency period and what the occupancy figure for Covid-19 cases is today?

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Jeane Freeman): The current figure, as reported at 9 am this morning, is 86. That is the number of patients with Covid-19, or suspected Covid-19, in ICU.

As I said, the surge capacity remains at 585. We have 435 ICU beds available but with the capacity to surge up to 585. From memory, the occupancy figure was over 150 at the highest point, but I am happy to double-check that and to advise Ms White of the figure.

Support for Dental Practices

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): The cabinet secretary will be aware that there has been wide coverage in the press of the issue of dental practices—many are struggling and fear that they might go bankrupt because they are not getting

the support that they need. I do not need to say that Scotland has made great strides in eradicating tooth decay, particularly among children, so it is a concern that, post-lockdown, we could lose practices from the sector. In addition, many people are suffering from acute pain and are desperate to get to a dentist.

Is the cabinet secretary aware that Sweden, Norway and Switzerland have already opened dental practices? Has she had a look to see whether they have a workaround? If so, what workaround have they been using?

Can the cabinet secretary tell me about any plans that she has in that regard? Are there any details that she can provide on workarounds that are being looked at? The big fear is that, if we do not have some long-term planning, we will lose dentists, with the result that not every citizen will have access to a dentist, which is a real concern for us all.

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Jeane Freeman): I agree with Pauline McNeill that we have made significant strides in Scotland in access to national health service dental care and in improving the level of dental health of adults and, in particular, children, so I share her concern that we should not go backwards in that regard.

We have made financial support available to dental practices, particularly those that charge fees or receive fees from the NHS, to assist them during the period when they are not able to practise. For individuals who suffer dental pain, we have set up emergency dental hubs that they can access. The hubs are staffed by highly qualified dentists who will undertake emergency treatment and pain relief treatment.

When it comes to the reopening of dental practices and the measures that might be put in place to allow that to happen safely, we must consider two distinct areas. First, we must ensure that there is physical distancing, which probably has an implication for appointment times and the number of patients a dentist could see. Secondly, we must ensure that a supply of personal protective equipment would be available for when a dentist or hygienist engages in aerosol-generated practice, as they often do. Those are two important mitigating measures that we would need to make sure were in place before we moved down that route.

Consideration of the reopening of dental and optometry practices in the community is part of the work that is under way right now. The issue of screening, which the member has raised with me previously, is also being looked at. All those issues are under consideration. We are working to see what we can do in a phased and safe way to

restart areas of healthcare that have been paused in order to deal with the pandemic. As part of that work, we will consult not just the royal colleges, the British Medical Association, the Royal College of Nursing and the unions, but the dental associations and others.

Covid-19 (Reproduction Rate)

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): Some of the most difficult aspects of the pandemic are to do with the emotional side of it. I have heard from constituents who are worried about loneliness and isolation or who have relatives in care homes or shielding. Earlier in the week, the epiforecasts unit at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine estimated that the reproduction rate in the United Kingdom was 1.1.

There are two things on which I would like to hear from the cabinet secretary. First, I would like reassurance that, when we are in a position to alter or ease restrictions, our older population and people who are labelled as vulnerable will be at the centre of those decisions and will be taken into account. Secondly, and importantly, I would like to hear about why the R rate needs to be well below 1 for us to ease the restrictions, and why that is so important.

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Jeane Freeman): Essentially, the R rate is the rate of transmission. If I had the virus and the R rate was 3, I would infect three people, who would then infect another three people and so on; it would increase exponentially in that way. The broad estimate is that, at the start of the pandemic, our R rate here in Scotland was above 3. There is some debate about how far above 3 it was, but it was certainly above 3.

The lockdown measures have significantly reduced the R rate, because the vast majority of people in Scotland have followed all the instructions and advice that we have given them about staying at home, keeping the physical distance of 2m apart, not mixing households, only going out for essential purposes, and following good hand and respiratory hygiene, which is critical. The number has come down. The estimate is that it is below 1; it might be 0.7, but it is certainly not lower than that.

The more we can suppress the transmission rate—the reproduction rate, if you like—of the virus, the greater room we give ourselves to ease measures. That might result in a slight increase in the R number, but the health service will still cope, and we can use the test, trace and isolate strategy to capture those outbreaks and suppress them again.

The job in all of this is to capture where the virus is and break all the transmission routes. It has

been described as making sure that there are no bridges for transmission between one person and another. That is why the R number needs to be lower than it currently is and why we need to see some more days' and weeks' worth of data to assure us that we are persistently seeing a downward trend in case numbers, in ICU numbers and, importantly, in the number of deaths. This week is the first week in which we have seen a reduction in the number of deaths. That will always be the last figure to be reduced. We could see case numbers and ICU numbers come down, but the last figure—in time terms—to come down will be the death rate.

We have asked those who are at the highest risk to isolate, which is described as shielding. I absolutely understand that we are making a very hard ask indeed of those individuals, but we are doing so because they are at the most serious clinical risk, and therefore the most serious risk of death, if they contract the virus. The other group—those who are over 70, those who are eligible for the flu jab and so on—also face a risk, but not as great a risk as those who are in the shielding group.

For all those individuals, what we are asking them to do is very hard, and poor mental wellbeing, loneliness and isolation will, of course, compound that situation for them. The Minister for Mental Health has taken a series of important steps to ensure that digital tools are available to people to help them with their mental health and wellbeing. She has invested in order to make sure that that happens and invested in particular areas to make sure that telephone helplines are manned for longer and that support is there for people.

Today, I was able to announce an additional £5 million to assist those individuals who do not have either the equipment or the confidence or knowledge to use those digital platforms. We think that that will assist a significant number of people across the country. They will be given an iPad or a tablet; a digital buddy, if you like, to help them; and training so that they can access all that support.

As we consider what options we might take to ease the lockdown measures and make matters a bit easier for people, those two groups will be at the front of our consideration.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, cabinet secretary. I appreciate that you have given detailed and very helpful answers. However, I am conscious that at least five more members want to ask questions and we have very little time left.

Cancer Treatment

Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): My question is for the cabinet secretary. One of my constituents is recovering from having breast cancer in 2018.

She receives a bone infusion every six months, but unfortunately the latest treatment has been postponed by four months. I understand that it is difficult to establish a firm timeline at present, but can the cabinet secretary give people who are waiting for cancer treatment an indication of when such treatment will resume?

Jeane Freeman: It is regrettably not possible for me to give a definite timeline at this point. That will come from the work that I have already described. However, I need to say that decisions to postpone particular areas of treatment—for cancer patients, for example—are clinical decisions that are made with patients by those who are best placed to make them. My job is to ensure that we start up the facilities and the opportunities for treatment, where it has been postponed, to continue. At the end of the day, the decision about whether a treatment progresses will always be a clinical one.

NHS Boards (Resumption of Activities)

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): What work have national health service boards in Scotland been asked to undertake to allow for the resumption of a wider range of activities in the future?

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Jeane Freeman): All health boards have been asked to consider how they can restart areas that are paused. A very complex exercise has to be undertaken. Members may be aware of a range of options that have come from the scientific advice, some of which was published today on our website. One of the options for any easing includes restarting areas of the health service, but we have to take a number of factors into consideration, such as—I will be brief—social distancing measures, the demands of a particular procedure on lab capacity when we need the labs to do work for test, trace and isolate, and where we can deliver those healthcare facilities. Consideration will be given right across primary care and into acute care, and that work is under way.

I hope that, at some point in the next week to 10 days, I will be able to set out the factors that are being considered, the criteria that are being used and the views of the professional and other bodies that we will engage with. I also hope to be able to set out some of the options that we are looking at and how we will take decisions against those options. Again, I am very happy to discuss that point with members.

Covid-19 Death Rates (West of Scotland)

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): The coronavirus is not the leveller that some have said that it is. I am sorry to see that, according to the

latest National Records of Scotland figures, Inverclyde, West Dunbartonshire and Renfrewshire, which are all in my region, have the highest death rates in Scotland. Some of the first care workers in Scotland to die were from West Dunbartonshire, and the first healthcare worker to die was from Inverclyde. In Paisley, 22 people have died at the Elderslie care home. I have written to the cabinet secretary about reports that, in comparison with elsewhere, testing in the west of Scotland has been described by a care provider as hopeless.

Does the cabinet secretary know why the west of Scotland appears to be disproportionately affected by the virus? If not, will she investigate why that appears to be the case? What additional resources will be made available to areas that have reported a death rate that is in excess of the national average?

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Jeane Freeman): The member raises a very important question that concerns us greatly. I have never thought that the virus would affect us all equally. The health inequalities that people across Scotland suffer are significantly exacerbated, if not caused, by income inequality, and that will play a part in an individual's capacity to withstand the virus, just as age and other clinical conditions do.

We have asked Public Health Scotland to look at the figures and the factors that might contribute to them, and then advise us of its conclusions. That work is under way. We have made it clear to the relevant health boards that, if they require additional resources to help them tackle what they need to tackle in their area, they should make sure that we understand that so that we can assist them. If the member would like to make any particular proposition about where services could be scaled up and has the evidence to support that, I would be, as always, happy to look at that.

Mental Health Support (Pregnancy)

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): The minister will know that 20 per cent of women are affected by mental health illness during pregnancy or in the 12 months after giving birth. Such illnesses can include anxiety, depression, post-partum psychosis and post-traumatic stress disorder.

I declare an interest as an expectant father, and I put on record my thanks to organisations such as Dads Rock for providing online antenatal and postnatal workshops for dads.

My partner is part of a new mums network in my constituency, and the feedback from that forum is that there is little or very little mental health support during or after pregnancy. During the pandemic, feelings of anxiety and depression will

be magnified substantially, particularly given that some routine scans and appointments are being cancelled. When the current situation ends, I fear that pregnant women and mums will still not get the support that they need.

Does the Minister for Mental Health recognise that that is a problem? If so, what is the Scottish Government doing right now to support the mental health of expectant and new mothers, and what is in place to support them after the lockdown?

The Minister for Mental Health (Clare Haughey): I thank Finlay Carson for bringing up an important issue that is extremely close to my heart, given my background of working in perinatal mental health.

Mr Carson might remember that, last year, the First Minister launched a £50 million programme for the improvement of perinatal mental health care right across the country. As part of that investment in perinatal mental health, earlier this week, we announced a fund that Inspiring Scotland is administering for third sector organisations, to ensure that there is support for women and their families across the country.

In addition, maternity units have specialist midwives who work in perinatal mental health, and we have invested heavily in our mother and baby units and perinatal health community schemes across the country, including in Finlay Carson's region of Dumfries and Galloway.

Covid-19 (Infections)

Andy Wightman (Lothian) (Green): We are continuing to see Covid-19 cases—215 were reported today. What, if anything, do we know about the source of those infections and who is being infected?

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Jeane Freeman): On who is being infected, we know that the pattern follows expectations regarding the most vulnerable groups. However, it is interesting that, in the early days of our understanding of the virus—I am not sure what day we are on, but it is somewhere between 130 and 140 days, so it is a very young virus to all of us—our scientific and clinical advisers estimated that the older generation would be most likely to be infected and become ill. We are seeing that that is not strictly true. We are seeing—*[Temporary loss of sound.]*

That may be as a consequence of other health conditions that make those individuals more vulnerable to the impact of the virus, but at this point—*[Temporary loss of sound]*—compliance rate with all the measures is around 60 per cent, which is what we—*[Temporary loss of sound.]*

In the very early days, the expectation was that people who did not have symptoms could be infected, but would not be infectious.

[Temporary loss of sound.] me via my mouth, my eyes or my nose. Hand hygiene, for example, is so important because people can pick up the virus from surfaces. Depending on the surface, the virus can last on it for up to 72 hours.

Those very basic hygiene measures are critical in breaking the transmission chain, as is that distancing *[Temporary loss of sound.]* individually, collectively and as a Government and a health service to break those transmission chains.

The Presiding Officer: I thank all members for taking part.

Meeting closed at 15:06.

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