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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 23 July 2020

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

Progress Towards Reopening Schools

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): Good afternoon. The first item of business is a statement by John Swinney to update Parliament on progress towards reopening schools. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of his statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): On 23 June, I confirmed to Parliament that the collective efforts of the people of Scotland to suppress coronavirus had enabled us to bring forward our plans to reopen schools, with the aim that they should be open to all pupils on a full-time basis from August.

Since then, we have continued to see improvements in the data, we have benefited from further, detailed scientific advice and we have witnessed a relaxation of some of the wider restrictions that were placed on non-essential aspects of everyday life. In Scotland, the infection rate in the general population is currently reducing by 30 per cent each week, which means that there are now only around 700 infectious people in Scotland, compared with 1,300 four weeks ago and 5,000 at the end of May.

Although our country has had to wrestle with the loss of so many of our citizens to Covid, there have been no deaths among people under 16 years of age, and, by 12 July, only 42 of the 5,939 hospitalisations had been of people aged under 15. That represents less than 0.01 per cent of the population in that age group and demonstrates an important message about the relative risk for school-age children.

Today, I will update Parliament on progress towards fully reopening schools in August and set out how we will address the wider impacts of the virus on the health and wellbeing and educational progress and attainment of our children and young people.

We are now about halfway through the school summer holidays. I want to express my appreciation to parents and carers for their support for young people, to the teaching and wider workforce across Scotland for their efforts to sustain education, and to children and young

people for their resilience during this difficult period.

Throughout this crisis, the Scottish Government has been open when speaking with members of the public and in providing updates to Parliament. I have taken many opportunities to seek views from parents, teachers and young people on how the Covid situation and our journey out of lockdown are impacting on their lives. We know for certain that children and young people from across all age groups will have experienced some negative effects from being unable to attend school and from living in a world restricted by physical distancing. We know that academic learning, peer relationships, safety, wellbeing and mental health are all at risk. It is both a moral and an educational imperative that we lift those restrictions on our children and young people as soon as we know that it is safe to do so.

Last Thursday, our Covid-19 advisory sub-group on education and children's issues published its latest scientific advice. The advisory group set out that we needed to consider the protection of the public from Covid alongside the need to address the other harms that are caused to children and young people by absence from school. It was clear in its advice that there was an overwhelming justification for the reopening of schools, with appropriate mitigating approaches in place, and that, on balance, that would be significantly better for the wellbeing of children and young people.

The advisory group specifically examined information on physical distancing and safe school transport. That advice, which draws on multidisciplinary evidence from within Scotland as well as internationally, makes it clear that, subject to complementary risk mitigation measures being implemented, there is no requirement for physical distancing between children in primary schools. Although the advisory group recommended that, on balance, no physical distancing is needed among secondary school pupils, it noted that the position was less clear in that respect.

After carefully considering that advice and the views of stakeholders, the education recovery group is developing guidance that involves taking extra precautions and envisages that secondary schools will be asked to take a practical approach to maintaining distancing between pupils where possible.

That could be accomplished, for example, by managing the flow of pupils and staff within schools and adjusting the layout of classrooms, always subject to that not reducing capacity within schools.

That approach, which is similar to that set out in the guidance developed by the Welsh Government and the Department for Education, means that

pupils should be able to return to both primary and secondary schools full time, with appropriate mitigations in place.

The advice recommends that staff should observe 2m physical distancing from pupils wherever possible, and it is important that this point is reflected in advice.

Regarding transport, it is the view of the scientific advisers that dedicated school transport should be regarded as an extension of the school estate and, therefore, that physical distancing between pupils will not be necessary. The guidance will be developed to reflect that view and will set out a proportionate approach towards ensuring the safety and wellbeing of children, young people and transport staff.

I want to make it clear that the advice remains conditional on continued low rates of infection, effective surveillance measures and a process for handling any local outbreaks.

We are working with our partners in the education recovery group to produce guidance by 30 July that would enable schools to reopen in August. A final decision regarding whether we are in a position to reopen schools full time and for all pupils will be taken by the Cabinet on 29 July and will be set out to Parliament next Thursday. We will then introduce an educational continuity direction to implement the provisions that are agreed.

Importantly, that guidance is being developed in partnership with local government, unions representing teachers and other school staff, parents' representatives and public health representatives. This represents a shared commitment to provide parents, pupils, teachers and other staff with the reassurance that they need.

Clear communication with all staff, parents, providers and trade unions on the reopening of schools will be important as we develop and implement the guidance, to ensure that all those concerned understand the required changes and are confident in the revised arrangements.

Local authorities or schools will be in touch with parents regarding the specific arrangements for the return of children and young people to school. We know that, across different local authorities and within each local authority, there will be a range of unique challenges to address. There will be a need for some degree of flexibility in finalising the detailed arrangements for the new term.

Some schools and local authorities may phase children back in to school where necessary to provide assurance on safety. Those issues will need to be addressed by individual schools

through risk assessments to identify the appropriate actions and put them in place.

The guidance will sit alongside similar information for early learning and childcare, other childcare services, youth work and community learning and development activity. This suite of national guidance is designed to help all our partners to operate within the clear public health measures. The guidance will set out the comprehensive package of protocols that are necessary to reduce the risk of transmission of the virus, as well as advice on practical arrangements.

Important school mitigations will include good hand hygiene practices, ventilation and improved cleaning regimes. Those school mitigations are about working together to protect and support each other. A number of specific public health measures will also be in place in schools, including test and protect, outbreak management and quick access to testing for all symptomatic staff and pupils. We shall also be monitoring very closely cases of the virus in schools, drawing on our tried and tested community surveillance and on existing healthcare surveillance measures.

In addition, we are currently developing proposals for a targeted enhanced surveillance programme, which will allow us to cast more light on any impact on pupils and staff in schools throughout the country. These measures will provide reassurance and will allow adjustments to be made, either to ease further or to tighten up, in the light of clear evidence of developments on the ground.

As we progress, we know that we must continue to be ambitious, to be led by the evidence and to work in partnership with others. There will almost certainly be additional costs involved, and the £100 million of additional investment that I announced in June demonstrates our commitment to this agenda.

As part of that new funding, we are ring fencing £50 million specifically for the recruitment of additional teachers and support staff for the academic year 2020-21. That will enable schools to intensify support for children and young people as they return to face-to-face education and will help to mitigate any learning loss.

Although I stress that final numbers will depend on the precise mix of staff recruited and the needs of children and young people, I expect that the money will provide sufficient funding for approximately 850 extra teachers and give local authorities the flexibility to bring in around 200 support staff in schools across Scotland, subject to final agreement with our Convention of Scottish Local Authorities partners.

Everyone in the school workforce has a crucial role to play in our education recovery mission, and

it is vital that they are supported to do so. I do not underestimate the logistical challenges involved in reopening our schools safely, whether in providing enhanced cleaning services or in addressing continuing capacity constraints on school transport.

For that reason, I confirm that I intend to allocate a further £20 million of funding to local authorities to help to address those additional requirements. That allocation recognises the extremely valuable work of our school cleaners and facilities management and school transport staff, who are essential to the successful delivery of education in Scotland and to whom I pay tribute.

Although that funding should provide local authorities with the assurance that they require to progress plans immediately, we will continue to work with COSLA to understand the additional costs associated with the school reopening guidance that each local authority is facing and how those costs can be addressed alongside any loss of learning. COSLA has advised us that it will share the outcomes of the cost-collection exercise associated with the school reopening guidance, authority by authority, as soon as it has completed that work. We will take a responsible approach to supporting local authorities as we move forward, and the level of funding will require regular, rigorous and transparent monitoring of costs.

I make it clear that that funding is on top of the additional support that we have already made available. That has included providing local authorities or schools with enhanced flexibility of £182 million of attainment Scotland funding and the ability to redirect up to £508 million as a result of suspending the provision of 1,140 hours of early learning and childcare. We have provided a £350 million package of community and wellbeing funding to support those in need. In addition, we have provided local authorities with a further £27.6 million to continue the provision of free school meals and wider food support to families through the summer holidays.

We are investing £30 million as part of a huge digital boost through the provision of laptops for disadvantaged children and young people. That includes £25 million of funding to enable a roll-out of digital devices to school pupils to enable them to study online.

When these measures are considered alongside the range of other measures, the Scottish Government will have made available or provided flexibility of more than £1 billion across local authorities to tackle the impact of coronavirus and ensure that children get the support that they need.

I mentioned in my statement on 23 June that we would be seeking the assistance of the youth work

sector in supporting those families and communities who need it most. The sector has continued to support and engage children and young people throughout the pandemic, including through the use of digital technology and outreach work, to mitigate the impact of Covid-19 on the mental health, learning and development of children and young people. I take the opportunity today to reinforce that commitment by announcing that we will make a further £3 million investment in youth work to support education recovery.

As well as providing important updates on the practical and logistical preparations for reopening schools, I restate our vision and ambition for education in Scotland. Our collective aim is to achieve excellence and equity for all children. Our education recovery mission must be to further improve Scottish education and accelerate progress in closing the poverty-related attainment gap.

At the outset of this planning, our partners in the education recovery group agreed five guiding principles to ensure that the child is always placed at the centre of our considerations. We agreed that our approach must be safe, fair, ethical, clear and realistic.

The guidance and health mitigations that we are developing, based on scientific advice, will be designed to demonstrate to parents, carers, staff and pupils that it is safe for schools to reopen, subject to the continued suppression of the virus. A final decision on the reopening of schools will be announced on 30 July.

The plans for blended learning remain an essential contingency, which could be applied at local, regional or national level, if needed. I am grateful to local authorities for their continuing work to refine their local plans for blended learning, with appropriate challenge from Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education.

In parallel, Education Scotland is expanding its close working with e-Sgoil to ensure the availability of online lessons that will help to support and augment the work of classroom teachers when schools reopen. E-Sgoil will train additional teachers to provide online lessons, across a range of subjects, which learners in the senior phase across Scotland can access via the glow network. Partners are now working together so that the lessons are designed, in the mediums of English and Gaelic, to complement what is being delivered in local schools.

This statement has inevitably focused on the many practical and logistical issues around the reopening of schools. It is vital, however, that the work is set in the context of the moral and educational imperative of delivering education to every one of our children and young people. They

have suffered during lockdown, and the Government and our partners are focused on putting in place the opportunity to access school to support their wellbeing and develop their potential. That drive must lie at the heart of all that we do.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We have around 30 minutes for questions, after which we must move on to the next item of business. Members who wish to ask a question should type "R" in the chat function.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of his statement. Given the progress that we have made in tackling Covid-19, the question that many people still have is: what scientific trigger is the Government waiting for to give the green light to reopen schools fully? We could do that today and end the uncertainty. Pubs, restaurants, churches and even the tourism sector have all reopened. We know that children are at least risk of anyone in the country from Covid-19. Surely the balance of evidence is overwhelmingly in favour of schools reopening next month. I can see that and the public can see that, but we still have a refusal today to commit to schools reopening in just three short weeks.

I have three additional questions. First, I think that the cabinet secretary again used the phrase "a phased return". Can he tell us how many of our 32 local authorities have indicated that they will be reopening schools fully to all pupils in the week commencing 11 August? If the answer is anything less than all of them, parents have a right to know when their children are going back to school.

Secondly, if there are localised clusters of Covid outbreaks, can the cabinet secretary confirm that those would be dealt with on a school-by-school basis, rather than being addressed through a blanket closure of all schools across the country?

Finally, on the issue of funding, given that one council alone has stated that it would require £20 million to reopen its schools safely, does the cabinet secretary consider that the additional £20 million announced today for all local authorities will scratch the surface of what they need in order to reopen schools safely?

John Swinney: Mr Greene has asked four questions. First of all, the Government has made clear that the planning assumption is to reopen schools full time to all pupils in August, and that is what we and our partners are working to achieve. However, we can do that only when it is safe to do so, and we must see the continued suppression of coronavirus in our community. Therefore, it is important that we make the judgment at the correct moment, when we can see some of the effect of the relaxation of lockdown that has taken place.

Mr Greene mentioned some of the relaxations that have taken place. We must monitor the data to determine whether there is any increase in the prevalence of coronavirus as a consequence of some of the measures taken to relax the lockdown, and we must guard against any of that taking its course. Therefore, the decision will be taken next week and communicated to Parliament next Thursday.

Secondly, on the return to schooling, all local authorities will open their schools on 11 August, as we indicated that they would. That is the start date for the school term. Schools must make individual judgments, based on the circumstances that they face and those that might face individual pupils, on whether it is safe for pupils to return. For example, we need to take great care to ensure that proper and effective transition arrangements are put in place to meet the needs of young people with additional support needs. Ensuring that there is local flexibility in that respect within a national framework to resume education on 11 August, as we have promised, will be a priority for the Government.

Mr Greene asked about the emergence of coronavirus in localised clusters. I suspect that it is fairly likely that we will see outbreaks of coronavirus within the school estate once schools reopen. The Government is currently dealing with a localised outbreak in Lanarkshire. We will take the type of targeted action that is currently being taken in Lanarkshire to deal with a particular circumstance, should an outbreak arise in an individual school, because we want to avoid having more extensive lockdowns than are, in fact, necessary.

Finally, I acknowledge that there are funding issues associated with the reopening of schools. That is why, as a consequence of my statement today, £70 million will be invested directly in the delivery of education in Scotland. That is within the context of two other factors. The first is that the Government has allocated about £1 billion-worth of public expenditure to local authorities in order to provide flexibility and support their activities. The second is that the Government is actively engaged in dialogue with local authorities to assess the proceeds of their cost-collection exercise on the reopening of schools, which have not yet been supplied to the Government in full. The Government will consider that issue in due course. It is important to consider the context in which the Government has, today, announced a significant amount of money to support local authority activity.

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): I thank the cabinet secretary for early sight of his statement. Schools are due to open in just over two weeks, yet we still have no final decision, councils still do

not have the additional resources that they need and guidance on risk mitigation is still being written. The Government has never had a route map for the return of schools, and it still does not have one—it still looks as though it is making it up at the last minute.

The number of additional teachers referred to today amount to fewer than half a staff member per school, and councils have two weeks left to try to recruit them. Hundreds—perhaps thousands—of newly qualified teachers, probationer teachers, supply teachers and retired teachers, who all want to help to get their schools back, still cannot get a job. Surely, we need to use every available qualified teacher we can. How ready are we, really? How many additional teachers have been recruited? What proportion of school buildings have been risk assessed for the return of pupils?

As for mitigation, anyone over the age of five is wearing face coverings in shops. Can it really be the case that nobody is to wear a face covering in schools?

John Swinney: Our dialogue with local authorities on the recruitment of teachers is under way. We are setting out to local authorities the financial support that is available to them to recruit teachers. I am very keen to ensure that newly qualified teachers are able to be utilised in the education recovery work that is taken forward. Local authorities and schools around the country have done an extensive volume of risk assessment and planning for the resumption of schooling. That work has been on-going for considerable time, as a consequence of the lockdown, to enable us to be in a position to reopen schools.

On the question of face coverings, my view is quite simple: if anyone in a school environment wants to wear a face covering, they should be able to do so. However, the scientific evidence does not indicate to us that we should be obliged to enforce that position in schools. Individuals should be left to judge what their considerations and priorities are in that respect, and they should be supported in their judgment.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I have 13 questioners and 20 minutes for them, so the usual mantra applies: there should be short questions and answers, so that everybody gets their shot.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): I am grateful for today's update from the Deputy First Minister. He has confirmed that the routine testing that the Greens called for will not be offered to staff and pupils in schools. Will he explain why there will be no such routine testing?

There was nothing new in the cabinet secretary's statement about vulnerable young people. Last week's advice was that the burden to

request protection should, in essence, be on them. We can compare the situation with that for health boards, which have been told to conduct risk assessments for black and minority ethnic staff, for example. Will schools be required to conduct equivalent risk assessments for vulnerable young people and staff?

John Swinney: On Mr Greer's final question, the answer is yes. Risk assessments must be carried out in schools to support the resumption of schooling for young people and the work of individual staff.

I sympathise with Mr Greer on the issue of surveillance testing. The Government has taken extensive advice from Public Health Scotland on the appropriate approach to surveillance testing. It is obvious from the measures that are available in the community in general that we will have in place a very active test-and-protect arrangement, which we have seen working effectively in Lanarkshire in recent days. That will be supplemented by additional surveillance testing in schools.

I will be in a position to set out more detail on that next week but, at the request of the education recovery group, Public Health Scotland has been exploring what more can be done to provide the reassurance that Mr Greer seeks. The details of the approach might not be identical to Mr Greer's proposals, but I assure him of the Government's interest in the issue and of its determination to ensure that we have in place effective surveillance testing that can address the legitimate issues that he has raised.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): It is right to prioritise the health and wellbeing of pupils when schools return, as young people might have experienced trauma during lockdown. However, teachers have reported that they were ill-equipped to deal with pupils' mental health concerns before Covid and were feeling the effects of the loss of thousands of support staff. How many of the extra 350 school counsellors who were to be in place by September 2020 will be in post in time for schools reopening?

John Swinney: We expect the overwhelming majority of those counsellors to be in place by September 2020. However, because of the disruption of Covid to the recruitment process, some of the personnel might not be recruited and able to start until October.

Gail Ross (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP): The recent report from the advisory subgroup on education and children's issues states that activities that cross classes and age groups, such as assemblies, choirs and gyms, should be introduced incrementally. What might that look like? Will any other practical subjects be affected,

bearing in mind the positive effect that most of them have on mental health?

John Swinney: I am afraid that, for obvious reasons, we must proceed cautiously with activities that involve large gatherings, such as whole-school assemblies and choirs. The act of singing can contribute to the spread of coronavirus, as we had to make clear in relation to the arrangements for the reopening of places of worship.

We are proceeding with caution because we want to create a safe school environment for children, young people and staff. We want to minimise the risks for everyone involved. There may well be constraints on some of the activities that have traditionally taken place, but it is important—as I stressed in the guidance that has been issued to schools about priorities for the school term—that we take time to address the experience of young people during the lockdown period, particularly in relation to the issues raised by Gail Ross and Beatrice Wishart, and to make sure that we properly, fully and effectively support the wellbeing of children and young people at what has been a difficult time.

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): The education secretary said that

“plans for blended learning remain an essential contingency”.

However, the Scottish Government’s failure to address severe gaps in digital poverty since schools were forced to close has been all too apparent. Can the cabinet secretary confirm how many of the 25,000 laptops that he mentioned have been issued to local authorities or to pupils? Can he confirm whether the Government still expects, as it did at the start of the month, that those 25,000 devices will be in the hands of the young people who need them by 11 August?

John Swinney: We are now in the school holidays. We are working with local authorities to make sure that the 25,000 devices that we have ordered are in the hands of school pupils for the start of the term.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): I welcome the £20 million that has been allocated to support schools with other costs that they will face as they introduce the new health protection and cleaning regimes. Will it be a decision for local authorities to determine how those funds are best invested to meet local need?

John Swinney: Those resources will be allocated to individual local authorities and it will be up to them to decide how to utilise those resources to support their priorities.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): [*Inaudible.*—proportion of the existing teaching

workforce will be unable to return for the new school year because of shielding and other coronavirus-related considerations? What additional resource, over and above existing workforce levels, is it estimated will be required to implement the new guidance? How much of that will be covered by the implied uplift in funding that the cabinet secretary announced today?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Did you manage to get all of that, cabinet secretary?

John Swinney: I think that I caught most of it, Presiding Officer.

As Mr Johnson may have heard in the First Minister’s statement earlier today, we expect that shielding will be paused at the end of this month, so issues around shielding are less likely to arise at the start of the school term.

Local authorities and schools will have to make individual judgments, school by school, about the staffing resources that they have available to them. The Government has today set out provision for additional teaching resources to support local authorities and schools to tackle the loss of learning as a consequence of lockdown. Those resources will be taken forward in consultation with local authorities, with which we are engaging, in order to ensure that they are additional to the teaching complement that is currently available and active in the education system.

Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): Many pupils in my constituency rely on school buses to get to school. The Deputy First Minister has advised that social distancing will not be needed on school transport. First, can he give us the rationale behind that decision? Can he also indicate whether any additional guidance and support is available to parents, pupils and bus operators with regard to any measures that they may have to take to make school journeys as safe as they can be?

John Swinney: The rationale behind the advice that our expert group has provided to us is that the prevalence of coronavirus among children and young people is very low and that the evidence that is available to our advisers—which takes account of evidence from Scotland, the United Kingdom, Europe and further afield—indicates that young people are not particularly active in the transmission of coronavirus. A requirement for physical distancing in schools is therefore judged not to be appropriate. The advice goes on to say that we should consider school transport as an extension of the school estate and that, therefore, no physical distancing should be required in that context.

On 30 July, we will publish guidance that will draw together advice on all questions that relate to the reopening of schools. That guidance will cover

issues connected with school transport to provide clear and proper advice for bus operators, with whom we have been in active discussion, as we have with parents and families, to ensure that everybody has knowledge of the issues and can proceed safely.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Given that the cabinet secretary promised to offer all newly qualified teachers guaranteed employment for the next academic year, I welcome the funding to which he committed in his statement today. Can the cabinet secretary confirm that councils will be given all the necessary funding and support to fulfil the commitment on teacher employment and support job security for newly qualified teachers?

John Swinney: The Government is allocating resources to enable local authorities to employ additional newly qualified teachers. The funding will be ring fenced to ensure that it is used for that purpose. That will ensure that we are successful in boosting and expanding the teaching population to enable staff to contribute to the necessary work of supporting children and young people to address learning loss, which has been a factor arising from the experience of lockdown.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): What support will be available for pupils who might have to self-isolate for two weeks, to ensure that they do not fall behind with their school work and that they can continue to engage with classroom activities?

John Swinney: That is one of the issues that I suspect will be an on-going feature of our education system in the period ahead. Coronavirus has not disappeared; cases will still emerge, and it is likely that some young people might have to self-isolate as part of efforts to contain the virus's spread. There will therefore be an obligation on the education system to make sure that those young people are properly supported in their learning at home, so that they suffer no learning loss in any way.

When the overwhelming majority of young people are physically present at school, one of the priorities for the education system will be to ensure that the needs of all young people are met. In some circumstances, when young people are unable to be physically present because of the constraints of self-isolation, we will have to make sure that their education is properly supported.

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): There has been a level of inconsistency in the educational offer across schools, which risks increasing the attainment gap. After the cabinet secretary's most recent statement, I asked him to commit to a pupil equity audit, which he agreed to do. What progress has there been on

implementing that audit, and what targeted interventions will be introduced?

John Swinney: The Government is taking forward the necessary work to identify all the issues, factors and responses inherent in an equity audit. That will enable us to identify the scale of the challenge, what measures we can take to address it and what impetus we can bring to the education system to ensure that issues arising from the equity audit can be properly and fully explored.

The interventions that we are taking forward are focused strongly on boosting the size of the teaching workforce. That will enable the workforce to make a substantive contribution to ensure that there is no further expansion of the attainment gap and that the needs of children and young people are met as part of their activity and participation in the education system. That will be a focused element of the work that we take forward to address the contents of the equity audit.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): I have been contacted by peripatetic teachers, who go around different schools and who have a lot of contact with different teachers and with a range of pupils. Are there any special arrangements for those teachers when schools go back?

John Swinney: It is likely that we will have to make alternative arrangements about how peripatetic teachers deliver their contribution to the education system. Mr Mason is correct: many peripatetic teachers may be in a number of schools even during one day, and certainly during a week.

Local authorities and schools will work closely with peripatetic teachers to work out how we can minimise the number of visits that they make to schools. One of our priorities will, unfortunately, be to reduce the number of school visits so that we avoid unnecessary circulation of the virus. That will involve some degree of change to working approaches, but that will be taken forward in discussion with peripatetic teachers.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Jeremy Balfour, to be followed by David Torrance.

Mr Balfour, you do not have your microphone on—we cannot hear you. We will get that sorted and come back to you. I will take David Torrance first.

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): I am pleased to hear that £50 million will be used specifically to recruit additional teachers and support staff. What guidance will be provided to ensure that that additional resource can support young people in order to mitigate any loss of learning as a result of a lack of access to

resources or because they have additional support needs?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before the cabinet secretary answers that question, I suggest that, if we cannot get Jeremy Balfour back, he can type his question in the chat bar so that it can be answered.

John Swinney: Mr Torrance's question gets to the heart of what I mentioned in my statement: the moral purpose and imperative of education, which is to ensure that young people's life chances are transformed by its positive good and benefits. The additional resources that we are putting into the education system for the employment of teachers are designed to address directly the point that Mr Torrance raised.

We must also make sure that the needs of all young people who have additional support needs are properly met when schooling resumes. In that context, we must—and schools will—take care to ensure that proper transitional arrangements are put in place so that young people can make a safe and effective return to school when it is appropriate for them to do so.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Is Jeremy Balfour able to come in now?

We cannot hear Mr Balfour, but he has typed his question in the chat bar. I will read it out. His question is, will after-school clubs and breakfast clubs be able to open in August?

John Swinney: Ideally, yes—but we will have to take specific risk assessment steps to ensure that we come to the right decisions on those activities. I see essential breakfast clubs as a priority, as they ensure that young people's wellbeing is supported. Some after-school clubs may involve a degree of connection and contact that runs contrary to the general advice that we are putting in place about minimising circulation within individual schools. Those clubs may have to wait longer before they can be restarted.

The priority is to commence mainstream education and to ensure that it is available for young people. We will do our level best within the education system to open up broad opportunities for young people at the earliest possible opportunity.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes questions on the statement. We will find out what went wrong with the sound for Mr Balfour, but we got there in the end.

14:45

Meeting suspended.

14:55

On resuming—

Childcare

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): The next item of business is a statement by Maree Todd, on childcare. The minister will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

The Minister for Children and Young People (Maree Todd): I am grateful for the Parliament's time in making this statement today. Saturday was Mandela day, and I was reminded of his famous quote:

"There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children."

I am proud that, in Scotland, we are prioritising our children's wellbeing and the wellbeing of those who work most closely with them.

I reiterate the First Minister's message from her daily press briefings: the safety of the people in Scotland is our first priority. As Minister for Children and Young People, it is my responsibility to ensure that all children and their families, and all those who work with children and families, are, above anything else, kept safe. I feel that responsibility keenly as I look at my own community and my own family.

I say "thank you" to all the children and families for everything that you have done during this crisis. I also give specific thanks to the childcare workforce, many of whom have worked throughout the emergency response period. Thank you—there is no job more important than ensuring that our children are safe, loved and nurtured.

From 3 June, when childminders and outdoor settings were able to open, to last Wednesday, 15 July, when all registered childcare services were able to reopen, formal childcare options have been opening up across Scotland. Care Inspectorate records show that 942 childcare services and 2,110 childminders were open yesterday, and thousands of families are now able to access formal childcare for the first time since lockdown.

That is fantastic news for many people across the country, but I know that this will also be an anxious time for some. The evidence tells us that our youngest children, in particular, are much less likely to catch Covid and become ill, and there is very limited evidence that children transmit the virus. That fact underpins our decisions to relax restrictions for children and young people. However, we must be ever mindful that the risks remain—the virus is here, and we have no vaccine. There is a fine line between effective suppression and community transmission.

It is therefore essential for our precious childcare workforce, in particular, that public health measures are front and centre while we reopen services. The message remains largely the same as the guidance that we published on 15 June: measures should be taken to enhance hand hygiene and cleaning practice; limit children's interactions; maximise the use of outdoor spaces; ensure physical distance between adults in the childcare setting, including parents at drop-off and pick-up times; and actively engage with test and protect. Those measures will ensure the safety and wellbeing of staff, children, families and the wider community.

On 30 July, working closely with the childcare sector, we will publish a suite of guidance for the sector that will come into effect in August. Alongside that guidance, we will publish the scientific evidence and public health advice that has helped to inform our decisions. That updated advice indicates that we can remove the need for consistent bubbles of up to eight children and ease the current restrictions on blended care. I know that that will be welcome news for the sector and for members in the Parliament.

However, that will not be a return to normal childcare arrangements, and we will all have to think very carefully about how we manage children's interactions. We are all still living through a global pandemic, and evidence of a resurgence in the virus around the world and closer to home underlines how fragile our progress to date has been. The virus must therefore continue to be suppressed.

To be clear, until new guidance is published and the dates are confirmed, the current guidance remains in place. While no one wants to keep any of the current measures in place for any longer than is necessary, I underline to providers that those measures do not stop them welcoming back their children with open arms and a warm hug.

We know—and the evidence shows—that keeping a high-quality experience at the centre of childcare is what makes the difference for children and what creates such a rewarding profession. Now more than ever, that golden thread of quality is just as important, although perhaps it now needs to have a core of steel. Quality relationships, quality interactions and quality practice are woven through our children's experiences in childcare in Scotland, and quality remains our focus.

We know that childcare providers have been really worried about their on-going sustainability and being able to keep going for the children they care for, their families and their staff. The past few months have shown us what a vital role the childcare sector plays in Scotland's overall economic recovery as well as in enabling us to

achieve our ambition of improving outcomes for children.

Together, national and local government and sector representatives have been looking carefully at measures to support the childcare sector during this challenging time. We are also pressing the United Kingdom Government for more action at a UK level. On Tuesday this week, the Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Fair Work and Culture and I wrote jointly to our counterparts in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Department for Education to emphasise the childcare sector's importance to economic recovery. In particular, we urged them to influence the Chancellor of the Exchequer to consider tax-free childcare to support parents.

We recognise that childcare is a varied sector that includes a large number of small businesses, social enterprises, third sector organisations and self-employed workers. We depend on that vibrant variety to give children and families what they need, so we must support all parts of the system.

On 16 July, the Deputy First Minister announced £11.2 million for a transitional support fund for private and third sector childcare providers, to help them to address the impact of the pandemic response. Providers will be able to find out more about that fund, which will be for all private and third sector childcare providers, not just those that deliver funded early learning and childcare, by the end of July. We have also worked in partnership with the Scottish Childminding Association to establish a workforce support fund to help childminders who face short-term financial difficulties. That fund opened for applications on 16 July.

The Scottish and UK Governments introduced a range of measures to support businesses through the closure period, including the coronavirus job retention scheme, the self-employment income support scheme and the bounce back loan scheme. The Scottish Government and local authorities guaranteed that payments for the statutory early learning and childcare entitlement would continue for the duration of closures, thereby ensuring that millions of pounds continued to be paid to providers.

The Scottish Government remains absolutely committed to making Scotland the best place in the world to grow up in. Covid-19 will not stop that. In 2014, we made a commitment to deliver the most ambitious childcare offer anywhere in the UK, and, in March this year, Audit Scotland said that we were on track to deliver that.

When the scale of the national emergency became clear, we took the extremely difficult decision to take away the legal duty on local authorities to deliver the ELC expansion from this

August. The Parliament approved that step on 1 April. Local authorities have had to focus on managing their local response to Covid-19, and I am grateful for their incredible efforts, along with those of their partners in the private and third sectors.

That decision weighs heavily on me, as I know it does on many members, but I have made it clear from the outset that we have not stopped the expansion. Councils have continued to develop their ELC offer even over recent months, and I am delighted that many councils are telling us that they have the capacity to deliver more than the minimum of 600 hours. It is such welcome news to hear that councils in some parts of the country are able to provide 1,140 hours to eligible children from August. As restrictions ease, more will be able to do so.

We are determined to return to our commitment to the expansion of childcare for all children, and we will work with local government and providers to deliver on that as quickly as possible.

We are confident that the careful reopening of childcare that we are setting out ensures that all children, as well as the adults working with them, will be safe and will feel safe, allowing them to make the most of their time together.

Our public health measures are key to keeping children and staff safe and healthy, while the experiences that children have ensure that their development flourishes, and all those who work in the sector can fully embrace the work that they love so much.

I was so reassured to hear this in a wonderful video from the Lullaby Lane nursery in Bearsden, where the message was clear:

“Things may be a little different when you return, but the fun and love will remain.”

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): I thank the minister for circulating her statement in advance. The new guidance on bubbles and blended care will be welcome news to many people watching these proceedings.

The minister will be aware of the huge strength of feeling on the issue of childcare. Our inboxes are full of letters from parents who have illustrated the very direct link, out there in the real world, between childcare and their ability to go back to work.

Covid has been impactful—no one disagrees with that—but it has been clear to Parliament for some time that the Government’s plans to expand childcare have been making painfully slow progress and that they were not on track long before the current crisis hit. There was very little in today’s announcement to fill parents with any

confidence that the minister’s commitments to childcare will be delivered any time soon.

How many of our 32 local authorities have committed to still offer 1,140 hours of childcare from August? Many nurseries in the private, voluntary and independent sector have confirmed that they have the capacity to deliver 1,140 hours, so why are councils—which have inevitably used their childcare budgets for Covid—not being supported to deliver those hours with the capacity that we already have?

Given that the policy was a national one, why have we, in effect, created a postcode lottery in childcare in this country, whereby someone’s ability to participate in the workplace is now dictated by who they pay their council tax to? Surely that must be unacceptable to the minister, as it is to the many thousands of parents who have made their voices loudly heard on the issue.

Maree Todd: The decision about the delivery of 1,140 hours was not made out of choice. The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic across many aspects of our lives have been and will continue to be challenging. The delays to building work and recruitment to support the delivery of 1,140 hours have meant that, out of fairness, we could not expect all local authorities to be in a position to deliver a duty to provide 1,140 hours.

That is not a uniform position, however, and the “postcode lottery” to which the member refers is a result of the point at which the pandemic disrupted our delivery. Back in March, not everyone was ready to deliver 1,140 hours, because we had committed to delivering it in August.

Comfortingly, the Audit Scotland report that was published in March confirmed that we were on track to deliver in August. That is what gives me confidence that we will get back on track as soon as we possibly can. I am committed, the Government is committed and local authorities are committed to delivery. The passion of everyone in the sector to deliver that commitment is entirely undimmed but, at this moment in time, we cannot reasonably assess when delivery will be achievable. We have committed to reviewing readiness later in the year, and we will reintroduce the duty to deliver 1,140 hours as early as we possibly can.

Regarding the number of local authorities that are able to commit to providing 1,140 hours of childcare, of course that is a changing picture. As the operational guidance for childcare is reviewed, the impact on capacity will change. Thus far, two local authorities are committed to delivering in August, but I expect that to change if we are able to ease restrictions further. I urge people to look out for updates from the Government and their local authority about what the offer is likely to be.

With regard to the financial importance of the childcare sector, we have been totally committed to quality—it is the golden thread that runs through everything that we say about the expansion to 1,140 hours—but everybody understands the economic imperative to get childcare fully operational to enable people to work. It is therefore disappointing that the chancellor did not mention that issue at all when he made his grand announcements about economic recovery. Further, unlike the Scottish Government, he has not put in place any scheme to support the sector, nor has he put in place a scheme to support parents in meeting childcare costs. As I said in my statement, my colleague Fiona Hyslop and I have written to the UK Government this week to request that the chancellor put such schemes in place quickly.

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): I thank the minister for providing early sight of her statement.

Women at work face a perfect storm. There was a pre-existing gender employment gap, women are more likely than men to be employed in jobs that are affected by the crisis and, statistically, they spend more time looking after children who have been forced to stay at home. If the Scottish Government does not urgently come up with a plan to deliver the required childcare alongside good-quality, secure jobs, women will be the worst affected when the furlough scheme ends.

What the minister has outlined is not that plan and it does not remotely rise to meet the imperative of the jobs crisis that we face. We need something much more than a joint letter to the chancellor. A delay to the implementation of 1,140 hours of childcare for all young children might be understandable, but the minister has previously suggested a delay of a year, which is unacceptable. Will she therefore give us a timetable now and resource her own pledge to bring in the 1,140 hours for all as soon as possible and long before next August?

Maree Todd: I assure the member that we will bring in the 1,140 hours commitment for all as soon as we can. I hope that he understands that it is my wish to do that as much as it is the wish of everybody in the Parliament, but a number of challenges are involved in doing that. For the past four months, local authorities have rightly focused on responding to the emergency situation that we have found ourselves in. They have also had to put in place critical key worker childcare to ensure that front-line workers were able to respond to the emergency situation. A suite of interventions by our local authority partners has been required.

In addition, the public health guidance and the operational guidance impact on capacity, so we might not be able to have quite so many children in each setting as we had originally planned.

However, as I said, the guidance is expected to be updated at the end of the month, and I hope that that will relieve the capacity challenge.

The next challenge is that very few local authorities have been able to progress with recruitment. There are also staff who are unable to attend their work at the moment because of shielding. Finally, we have the very obvious challenge that construction was halted because of the pandemic and has been able to restart only recently.

Everybody agrees that pausing the expansion was unavoidable, but we are totally committed to resolving those challenges and to getting back on track with the 1,140 hours. Nobody is keener on that happening than I am, and I expect it to happen very soon.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Forgive me, but those were long answers. Twelve members want to ask questions and I have less than 12 minutes, so we need to move things along a little. In the interests of everyone getting the chance to ask their questions, I ask for crisp questions and answers.

Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green): In her statement, the minister said that, on 30 July, the Government will publish guidance that will come into effect in August. She said that bubbles and certain restrictions on blended care would be removed. School begins in 19 days. Can she clarify whether parents will be able to use a childminder? Will a childminder be able to take children to local authority and independent nurseries? Will children be able to go to after-school clubs?

Maree Todd: I understand why Alison Johnstone asked that question but, at this moment, I am unable to give clarity. I would love to be able to give clarity about what the exact arrangements will be when schools open, but she will understand that we are reviewing scientific advice regularly and, in collaboration with the sector, we must also write new operational guidance.

When schools open, it is our intention to remove bubbles and the restriction on blended childcare, and we will be able to do so if we continue to make progress against the virus. However, the decision on whether that is possible will not be made until next week's Cabinet meeting, and its decision will not be announced until 30 July.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): The decision by Scottish ministers to cancel childcare for key workers before children are due to return to school means that, for just one week, key workers will need to find alternative childcare at short notice and childcare providers will have to change their arrangements. Is that not a short-sighted

rule? Would it not be wiser to extend childcare for one more week, so that there can be a smooth transition to school?

Maree Todd: I am grateful for the question, because it gives me the opportunity to state again how grateful we are for the national effort to care for those children—without critical childcare, Scotland could not have responded to the Covid-19 pandemic in the way that we did.

As formal and informal childcare options have opened up and schools prepare to reopen, we can wind down that critical childcare provision. On the assumption that schools will reopen as currently planned, we have agreed with local government colleagues that, from the week commencing 3 August, local authorities will no longer be required to provide critical childcare. However, they might do so beyond that point. I anticipate that there will be a period in which local authorities will need to transition to accommodate the start of school, but I would not expect them to leave critical workers with no access to childcare.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): I was pleased to hear the minister quote the wonderful Lullaby Lane nursery in my constituency.

Does the minister consider that the £11.2 million transitional support fund will give providers sufficient support to respond to the changes that are needed to ensure that childcare is carried out safely?

Maree Todd: The Scottish Government is aware that, in order to give staff and parents confidence, the Scottish childcare sector has been working extremely hard to ensure that its settings have put in place measures ahead of their safe reopening. The transitional support fund will help childcare providers in the private and third sectors—including out-of-school care providers—to meet the extra costs incurred in complying with public health guidance in response to coronavirus. The size of grant will vary according to the size of the childcare setting, because we acknowledge that additional costs vary across settings. We will be able to set out more information on that next week, by 31 July.

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): The minister has confirmed that the commitment to provide 1,140 hours of childcare will be far from uniform across Scotland and—[Inaudible.]—very different levels of provision for parents in different councils areas. To give parents some hope, will the minister confirm what percentage of the infrastructure—the facilities and the staffing—that is required to deliver 1,140 hours is in place? How many local authorities have indicated to her that they can reach the 1,140 hours level this year if, as she

suggests, delivery increases after restrictions are eased?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I hope that the minister got all that.

Maree Todd: It sounded a little bit like the member was under water, but I hope that I will be able to respond.

The Audit Scotland report that was published in March confirmed that we were on track to deliver in August. We know that more than 50,000 children were already benefiting from more than 600 hours of childcare, so we were well on the way to delivering what was required for August. Unfortunately, it has not been possible to continue with the data collection that would have given us assurance on what stage different councils were at. Of course, as I explained in an earlier answer, councils have incurred extra costs and have diverted some of the money for the provision of 1,140 hours towards critical childcare. A period of assessment of readiness is required, council by council, before we can recommit to a universal statutory duty of providing 1,140 hours.

As well as Stirling Council and Angus Council, which are absolutely committed to providing 1,140 hours, a number of other local authorities are keen to deliver. For example, North Lanarkshire Council, which covers a large number of children, has made it clear that it should be able to deliver 1,140 hours in September, should we continue to make progress against the virus and should restrictions be lifted. Glasgow City Council, which is another large local authority that covers many children, is also near to delivering on the commitment.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Eight questioners are left, and the session is supposed to finish in four minutes' time. I do not want them to miss out, so I ask for short questions and answers, please. I cannot let the session run on for ever.

Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): I return to the important issue of blended placements. The minister will be aware that the current restrictions mean that some playgroups, such as Aberdour playgroup in my constituency, might have to close their doors permanently. Although I very much welcome the indication that new guidance is coming, what specific considerations will be given to the range of circumstances in which blended placements will be permitted and, crucially, from what date will such placements be permitted? Otherwise, playgroups such as the one in my constituency simply cannot make plans in time to keep their doors open.

Maree Todd: The Deputy First Minister confirmed last week—and I have reiterated

today—that the latest expert guidance gives us confidence that we will be able to ease the restrictions on blended childcare from August. The importance of the arrangements in providing flexibility for families and in offering children a range of experiences is well understood. They are also important to providers, because they support business models. We have not imposed restrictions lightly. To counter the risk of virus transmission, it will remain important that we all limit our range of contacts. If the virus continues to be suppressed, we will ease the current restrictions, but we need to be mindful that the virus is still out there.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): Parents are receiving conflicting information about the resumption of breakfast and after-school club provision. Different schools are saying different things about whether they are able to recommence in whole, and some are saying that such provision cannot restart at all. Given the chaotic and confused current situation, will the minister set out what she will do to improve it?

Maree Todd: We are assessing the situation regularly. The current priority is to resume schooling. From what we know about coronavirus, the risk increases in accordance with the number of interactions that we have. The risk of the virus becoming out of control is greater the more interactions we have, which is the reason for limiting the number of interactions. As time goes on, we will be making careful assessments of how and when we can remove those restrictions, and next week is absolutely key in that regard. However, it is not the case that we do not understand just how important such matters are in supporting children and their families as they return to school.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): Given the importance of ensuring safety within ELC settings and that children have a good early learning experience, can the minister confirm that the work that was done in providing for the reopening of the ELC settings has been undertaken with the principles of both getting it right for every child and realising the ambition in mind?

Maree Todd: I thank the member for his important question. We know that there will be challenges in returning to services after the turbulent break. In line with realising the ambition, our focus has to be on supporting children when they are in childcare and ELC settings to form a secure and emotionally resilient attachment base, which will stand them in good stead as they grow and develop.

Nurturing and attached relationships are absolutely essential to creating the conditions for children to flourish in early learning and childcare.

Additionally, all children have a right to play, learn and access experiences that meet their physical, social, emotional and cultural needs, as well as a right to associate with their peers. In line with Scotland's commitment to getting it right for every child, children also have the right to the best possible health, with their best interests the top priority in all the decisions and actions that affect them. Of course, adults also have fundamental rights in relation to their health and wellbeing. Those important rights and considerations are all being factored into the development of a framework for reopening and delivering ELC services.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): We know that councils have been paying for key worker childcare hubs from the original 1,140 hours budget. Will councils be reimbursed for that, to make sure that they have full funding for the 1,140 hours roll-out?

Maree Todd: We are in the process of reassessing the readiness of councils to deliver 1,140 hours. As I have mentioned many times, we are looking at buildings, staffing and partner providers. Councils may well want to revisit their delivery plans and consider partner providers. We undoubtedly will be having negotiations about finances as time goes on, and we are in regular contact with our local authority colleagues about the costs associated with the pandemic.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): During the pandemic, many employers have been quite flexible and have allowed staff who are parents to work at home. Should we expect employers to continue that flexibility, or is there a danger that some of them may draw back on that approach?

Maree Todd: Access to flexible working is highly important and benefits all workers. It is especially beneficial for workers with childcare responsibilities—particularly women, who are still regarded as the main carers in a household, as a number of members have said. Although the legal powers governing homeworking are currently reserved to Westminster, we are committed to working with employers directly through their representative bodies to explore ways of promoting and supporting flexible working. Our approach to fair work is underpinned by the fair work convention framework, which defines fair work as

“work that offers effective voice, opportunity, security, fulfilment and respect”.

The principle of security includes

“giving opportunities for hours of work that can align with family life and caring commitments.”

Mark McDonald (Aberdeen Donside) (Ind): I have been contacted by constituents who operate

businesses that provide music and movement classes for nought to five-year-olds. Those classes are not covered by statutory ELC provision but are nonetheless important to children and their families. What steps will the Government take in the guidance to offer those businesses some assurance about their ability to resume offering classes? Many of them use community facilities, some of which may not yet have reopened under the existing guidance.

Maree Todd: I thank the member for raising that important issue. I would appreciate it if he could write to me with details of the businesses involved and of the challenges that they face, so that I can give him a fuller answer.

There is no doubt that the rich experiences that those businesses offer children help them to fulfil their potential and contribute to making Scotland the best place in the world to grow up in. We are keen to support those businesses and to get them up and running.

There are a number of challenges. Indoor operation is challenging—we have heard questions about the use of changing rooms. I am keen to hear details of the particular businesses that the member is concerned about, and I will see what I can do to offer guidance and support.

Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Has the minister been encouraged by the operation of those outdoor nurseries that opened earlier in the summer, and has their experience informed the reopening of indoor services?

Maree Todd: Outdoor nurseries, by their very nature, offer a model of childcare that reduces the likelihood of virus transmission. Children in those settings are outdoors for the full time that they attend, going inside only in the most extreme weather. The risk of spreading the virus is therefore far less than in indoor environments.

Throughout the pandemic, many outdoor nurseries have been acting as emergency childcare hubs and have shared how they have adapted their practice to further mitigate the spread of infection while providing high-quality experiences for children. We have consulted outdoor nurseries during the development of our guidance on reopening, and we are encouraging greater use of outdoor play and learning in all early learning and childcare settings. Increased time outdoors will reduce the opportunity for infection while giving children positive, nature-based experiences that will greatly benefit their physical and mental development.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): Children, parents and the economy need good, affordable childcare. Parents simply cannot work without it. However, none of the 25 recommendations made by the advisory group on economic recovery,

which is led by Benny Higgins, relates specifically to childcare. Does the minister accept that an economic recovery requires the Scottish Government to have a childcare strategy? If so, can the minister explain why the advisory group made no specific recommendations on childcare, and can she tell us whether it was asked to do so?

Maree Todd: I assure the member that the Government absolutely recognises the economic importance of childcare. It is clear for all to see. We have recognised how important it is, and we are supporting the childcare sector with a transitional fund that will help childcare providers in the private and third sectors, including out-of-school care providers, to meet the extra costs that they have incurred in complying with public health guidance in response to the coronavirus. Those grants will be used to support childcare settings in implementing the cleaning measures and everything else that will be required, and they will allow them to invest in any additional necessary equipment. That will reduce the risk of those costs being handed on to parents. As I mentioned earlier, we are very keen to see the UK Government act through the tax regime both to support the childcare sector and to support parents and families to access affordable childcare.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I thank the minister and members. I let questions run on because it is an important area. That concludes the ministerial statement and questions.

Meeting closed at 15:34.

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