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Meeting of the Parliament (Hybrid)

Tuesday 17 November 2020

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Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 17 November 2020

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): Good afternoon, colleagues. We begin business today with time for reflection. Our time for reflection leader is the Rev Dr Martin Ritchie, minister at Greenbank Parish Church in Edinburgh.

The Rev Dr Martin Ritchie (Greenbank Parish Church, Edinburgh): Thank you for the chance to share this time for reflection with you.

One of my favourite stories in the gospel of Luke is about Jesus' visit to the home of his friend Lazarus. Lazarus is out when he calls, but his sisters Martha and Mary are there. They invite Jesus in and spend time with him. What happens next is important. Mary sits with Jesus, we are told, and no doubt chats about all sorts of things—quality time, you might say. Martha, in contrast, bounces into action to respond to the hospitality codes of the ancient middle east, preparing something to eat and drink, which is a fine thing to do, as well.

The Spanish artist Diego Velázquez painted the story in 1618. He called it “Kitchen Scene with Christ in the House of Martha and Mary”. The view is of Martha slaving in the kitchen and looking a bit trauchled. Alongside her is a rather hard-looking older woman who seems to be whispering in Martha's ear, as she points through a hatch into a room beyond, where Jesus and Mary are talking, as if to say: “look at that Mary—sitting there doing nothing.”

Many listeners might more naturally identify with the activism of Martha, but I bet that most of you will have some of Mary in you, too. You are all familiar with the window pods for reflection in the offices of the Parliament building. Those are a great symbol and reminder to us that if we do not take time to pause and reflect on a regular basis to intentionally hold all the people and places of this country and the Parliament in our hearts as well as our minds, we may end up like Martha in the Velázquez portrait: a bit bitter and business-like.

In truth, we all need our Martha and Mary sides to be healthy and effective, and to fulfil our calling as humans as well as public servants. So, even in the midst of the sometimes frantic and hardball politics of our times, do not neglect to take the time to sit, or to walk and wonder, and to hold the

world close but to the side, and to let balance come once again, before you let your Martha out.

Business Motion

14:03

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S5M-23396, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out changes to this week's business.

Motion moved,

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

(a) Tuesday 17 November 2020—

delete

5.00 pm Decision Time

and insert

5.10 pm Decision Time

(b) Thursday 19 November 2020—

after

2.30 pm Portfolio Questions: Constitution, Europe and External Affairs

insert

followed by Ministerial Statement: COVID Vaccine

delete

4.25 pm Decision Time

and insert

5.05 pm Decision Time—[*Graeme Dey*]

Motion agreed to.

Topical Question Time

Covid-19 Megalab

1. **Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the announcement that Scotland will host one of the two proposed Covid-19 megalabs. (S5T-02529)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Jeane Freeman): The Scottish Government welcomes the announcement. The creation of the megalabs will be an important step in our fight against the virus, and the decision to locate one of them in Scotland is a sign of the strength of Scotland's life sciences sector, and of our strong skills and research base.

The lab will provide up to 300,000 tests per day when it is at full capacity, using end-point PCR—polymerase chain reaction—technology, and will have an important role beyond the pandemic in diagnostics and support for work in precision medicine. The exact location of the megalab in Scotland is still to be confirmed, and we are working closely with our counterparts in the United Kingdom Government on that.

Donald Cameron: I acknowledge the cabinet secretary's welcome for the announcement. It will mean the creation of an extra 1,800 Scottish jobs, which highlights the UK Government's overall commitment to supporting Scottish jobs during the pandemic. Can the cabinet secretary confirm whether she has met the UK Government to discuss the proposal? Can she reconfirm her Government's full support in resources to ensure that it can be delivered in a timely manner?

Jeane Freeman: My officials have been actively involved, virtually day-to-day, with their colleagues in the UK Government as the proposition of a megalab has developed, and they put forward the case for one being located in Scotland. They have regular contact on that.

As I think Mr Cameron knows, I have a four-nations meeting with my counterparts—the UK Secretary of State for Health and Social Care; the Minister for Health and Social Services for Wales, Vaughan Gething; and the Minister of Health for Northern Ireland, Robin Swann—at least fortnightly. Currently those meetings are running weekly, and the last one was on Friday. We discuss a number of issues in and around Covid, including testing and the Covid vaccine programme. We have been doing that for the past nine to 10 months.

We are in regular contact with the UK Government at ministerial level and official level, not only on the megalab in Scotland, but to ensure that the development aligns with our own three

regional hubs—which are on track to be fully operational by the end of this calendar year—and to ensure that we are getting the best possible shared value, in terms of consumables and other issues.

The other organisation that I should mention, which has been particularly engaged in the megalab proposition, is Scottish Enterprise. Its knowledge of locations and business needs in and around Scotland has been particularly helpful.

Donald Cameron: The cabinet secretary mentioned the pledge to introduce three new regional laboratory hubs. The new Scottish megalab will see daily testing capacity increase by 300,000. In the Scottish Government's clinical and scientific review, the pledge in relation to the new regional hubs was that they would open in November and December. Can the cabinet secretary give an update on whether the deadlines for those months will be met?

Jeane Freeman: The three regional hubs are in Glasgow, Grampian and, I believe, in Lothian. The Glasgow hub will open at full capacity of 12,000 tests per day from 12 December. It will have done its trial runs at the back end of this month and into December to ensure that it is ready to open fully on that basis.

The other two hubs will also open in mid-December, so that by the end of this calendar year, they will be contributing an additional 22,000 tests per day, over what our national health service labs and our partnerships with commercial providers and academia provide.

Waste Exports

2. Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): To ask the Scottish Government how it will reduce the amount of waste that it exports, in light of reports that 1.7 million tonnes left the country in 2018, including almost all plastics, for recycling. (S5T-02535)

The Minister for Rural Affairs and the Natural Environment (Mairi Gougeon): In 2019, the whole-life carbon impacts of Scotland's household waste reached their lowest level since official recording began. However, we know that there is still work to be done to reduce waste and develop a thriving circular economy.

We want to build a fully circular economy and to be able to manage more of our own waste within Scotland, including the 14 per cent of our waste that is currently processed elsewhere. Our deposit return scheme for single-use drinks containers will, from July 2022, support more opportunities for reprocessing plastic. Our programme for government 2020-21 committed us to encouraging investment in reprocessing, in order to create

good green jobs and a ready supply of recycled material.

Liam McArthur: It was reported at the weekend that Scotland now exports 4.5 times more waste than it did in 2004. Whether that is to England, Europe or the other side of the world, it is a filthy statistic. What are the Scottish Government's projections for offshoring our waste over the coming years?

Mairi Gougeon: I reiterate what I said to the member in my first response. We are absolutely committed, as a responsible Government, to tackling our own waste. That is why we set out a number of measures in the programme for government this year.

As I have stated, that is really about trying to stimulate the development of reprocessing infrastructure to deal with waste materials, particularly plastic. I know that the Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform and the Minister for Trade, Investment and Innovation, Ivan McKee, have been in touch with local authority chief executives to look at how we can work together to stimulate opportunities for more of that processing to take place in Scotland. In our programme for government, we committed £70 million to improving recycling collection infrastructure and developing a new route map to reducing waste. We will also introduce the deposit return scheme, which we hope will have a massive positive impact.

Liam McArthur: The minister will know that I have been campaigning for the introduction of a coffee cup levy for some time now. In October last year, the Scottish Government confirmed that that would be part of the now-dropped circular economy bill. We are already sending billions of cups to landfill per year, and that was before the pandemic introduced a new wave of single-use items. The environment cannot wait, so what can the Scottish Government do in advance of the circular economy bill being introduced?

Mairi Gougeon: I emphasise that the fact that we were not able to take forward the circular economy bill does not mean that any of the work that we looked to do will be halted. We recognise the issues, and I am sure that the member will be aware that we set out in the programme for government that we would see how we could put the single-use plastics directive into effect. That deals with 10 of the most common plastic items that we see washed up along the shoreline. The consultation started on 12 October for a period of 12 weeks, and it looks at how we can implement a ban to stop those items ending up in our oceans.

As I have outlined, we have the DRS scheme and the £70 million that we have committed to

improving recycling collection infrastructure. We are looking at using a whole host of measures to tackle the issues that we face, and I am more than happy to work with the member and other members to see how we can improve that work. If there is anything that we can be doing, or anything that we can be doing faster, I am more than happy to look at that.

Maurice Golden (West Scotland) (Con): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests.

The Scottish National Party's record shows that 3 tonnes of waste have been shipped abroad every minute, that just 2 per cent of plastics have been recycled in Scotland, that there is no 2021 landfill ban, that the 2013 recycling targets have still not been met, that recycling rates are lower now than they were in 2016, and that we are turning Scotland into the ashtray of Europe, with incineration up almost 400 per cent. Is the minister proud of that record?

Mairi Gougeon: I refute what Maurice Golden says. As I have said, we have a whole host of measures in place to tackle what we are facing, and we want to make the most of our capabilities to build the necessary infrastructure and to create a fully circular economy. I have talked about the deposit return scheme.

The member mentioned the landfill target. We continue to make progress towards our ambitious recycling and waste targets. Across Scotland in 2018, we recycled more than we sent to landfill, which is great news for our action on climate change.

We know that there is more to be done. That is why our programme for government includes the investment of £70 million that I have talked about, and we are undertaking a review of the household recycling charter and code of practice, which will ensure that the right decision is the easy decision for businesses and households when it comes to recycling.

We are absolutely committed to looking at all possible measures to improve recycling rates and to building capacity to deal with that recycling in Scotland as best we can.

Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab): As we have heard, it is shocking how much of what could be reused, recycled and remanufactured is being exported. In view of the fact that there will, disappointingly, not be a circular economy bill during the current parliamentary session, what specific support and advice has been given on the development of remanufacturing—particularly of plastics—as part of an industrial strategy? There are already excellent businesses in that area, such as MacRebur, which makes recycled plastic road surfaces, and Solway Recycling, which turns used

plastic straw bale coverings into fencing, decking, hen houses and much more. Those companies act as positive models. How can we progress that far more rapidly as we move towards net zero?

Mairi Gougeon: I am sure that Claudia Beamish and other members will understand why we could not introduce the circular economy bill, which we, of course, wanted to progress. We are actively working with potential investors in plastic reprocessing capacity in Scotland. One potential investor has gone public with outline plans for such an investment at Dunbar, and we are working with them to create the conditions for that kind of opportunity to be realised. We are also open to working with other potential investors in that market.

One issue that is causing difficulties at present is a perception that the current extended producer responsibility scheme for packaging creates incentives for exporting waste plastic. We are currently working with the other Governments of the United Kingdom on reform of that scheme, and one of the key objectives is to strengthen incentives for domestic reprocessing.

Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): The amount of waste that is exported by the UK to European Union countries is a huge issue and will potentially be a real problem post-Brexit. Will the minister expand on the progress that has been made by the waste sector on reducing greenhouse gases since the 1990 baseline, and will she outline what is in the programme for government that means that Scotland will be able to deal with its own waste material?

Mairi Gougeon: Our Scottish greenhouse gas emission statistics show that carbon emissions from waste management have fallen by more than 70 per cent, which is a reduction of nearly 4.5 million tonnes between 1990 and 2018. As I highlighted in some of my previous responses, our programme for government includes the investment of £70 million to improve collection infrastructure and to develop a new route map to reducing waste and improving recycling. There are also the other measures that I outlined to Claudia Beamish, on which the cabinet secretary and Ivan McKee are working with local authorities to see what we can do to stimulate interest in processing capacity, which is what we have to do as a responsible nation. We have to capitalise and maximise on the opportunities that are presented to us through the circular economy.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): The landfill ban has now been moved back to 2025, which industry has described as a failure of Government leadership to get the—*[Inaudible.]* Will the minister ensure that we will not see a rush to build incinerators across Scotland to fill that gap, and will she commit to including

consideration of a moratorium on incinerators in the next national planning framework?

Mairi Gougeon: On Mark Ruskell's point about the landfill ban, local authorities had already made significant progress towards the target of sending no biodegradable municipal waste to landfill by 2021. Despite that progress, it was clear that full compliance by 2021 could be achieved only by relying on exporting waste and, in particular, landfilling in England. That would have had a consequent environmental impact and additional financial implications for local authorities. Therefore, an implementation date of 31 December 2025 for the ban has now been set out in legislation. However, we expect significant progress ahead of that date. There will be a centrally supported procurement solution to help remaining local authorities to secure alternative solutions to comply with the forthcoming ban, and the Scottish landfill tax will be used to provide a further incentive to ensure that transitional work proceeds at the necessary pace.

Covid-19

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The next item of business is a statement from the First Minister on Covid-19. The First Minister will take questions at the end of her statement. I encourage all members who wish to ask a question to press their request-to-speak buttons.

14:18

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): First, I will give a summary of today's statistics. The total number of positive cases that were reported yesterday was 1,248. That represents 9.7 per cent of all tests carried out, and it takes the total number of cases to 83,259. The number of people in hospital is 1,249, which is an increase of 22 from yesterday, and 95 people are in intensive care, which is three fewer than yesterday.

I regret to say that, in the past 24 hours, a further 37 deaths have been registered of patients who first tested positive over the previous 28 days. That means that the total number of deaths under that measure is now 3,323. Once again, my deepest condolences go to all those who have lost a loved one.

National Records of Scotland will publish its weekly report tomorrow. That report records deaths confirmed through a test as being Covid related and those that are presumed to be so. It is very likely, based on the numbers that we have reported in the past seven days, that the death toll, under that wider measure, will this week pass 5,000. That is a sombre and deeply distressing milestone. It is important that we acknowledge it, and that we remember every individual whose life has been lost to the virus.

Those figures remind us of the harm and the heartbreak that Covid causes if it is allowed to spread. They also provide important context for today's statement, in which I will report on the outcome of the Scottish Government's review of the Covid protection levels and set out the difficult but necessary decisions that we have reached about the appropriate level of protection in each local authority area.

In reaching these decisions, the Scottish Government has taken careful account of case numbers and test positivity in different parts of Scotland. We have also considered the trends in each area and the pace—or otherwise—of those trends, and we have assessed what all that might mean for hospital and intensive care capacity. We are publishing today the up-to-date and detailed data for each local authority area on the Scottish Government website.

We take advice from the national incident management team, the chief medical officer and the national clinical director on the measures that are needed to control the virus, and from a range of senior officials on minimising the wider harms that result from Covid restrictions. We also consult with local authorities before reaching a final judgment, which the Cabinet did this morning. I understand that Parliament will have the chance to debate the decisions on Thursday.

This week, given that the levels system has now been in place for almost three weeks, we have had the chance to reflect on what we have learned so far about the effectiveness of different levels in reducing the prevalence of the virus, and on the importance of acting quickly and firmly against Covid.

I turn to an assessment of the situation that we face before I set out the decisions that we have reached. First, I want to be very clear that the restrictions that have been in place in recent weeks on household gatherings and hospitality have made a difference. They have slowed down the increase in cases considerably, and they have helped to flatten the infection curve. In early October, we were on a trajectory that, without action, would have seen us reporting around 3,000 cases each day by now. That has not happened—daily case numbers are almost a third of that figure and, at this point, prevalence in Scotland is lower than in other United Kingdom nations. We have made progress, which is thanks to people across the country, but the overall level of infection remains higher than we need it to be, and the national picture is masking significant regional variations.

While some areas have low and even slightly declining infection rates, a number of local authorities across central Scotland have case numbers and test positivity rates that are significantly above the national average. Although the situation in many of those areas has stabilised, it has done so at a stubbornly high level. That creates concern for a number of reasons, which I will set out in a moment.

In summary, therefore, the Cabinet has decided as follows. Nineteen council areas—the majority—will see no change to their levels this week. I am pleased to say that, from the start of next week, assuming that there is no significant deterioration in the situation before then, two areas will move down from level 3 to level 2. However, 11 local authorities will, from 6 pm on Friday and for a strictly limited period, move from level 3 to level 4. I will set out the details of all those decisions in a moment.

I am acutely aware that, for many individuals and businesses, those decisions will be both disappointing and distressing. They demand more

sacrifice from all of us. I therefore want to take a moment to remind people why the decisions are necessary and what they are intended to achieve.

First, the decisions are necessary to ensure that the national health service can cope with the range of pressures that it will face over the winter. We must ensure that hospital and intensive care services are there not just for those with Covid, but for everyone who needs them. That means that we must get case numbers down from current levels before we go into a period in which winter pressures are very likely to increase.

Secondly, the decisions will give us the best possible chance, albeit in a limited and careful way, of being able to ease restrictions in all parts of Scotland for Christmas. That is something that all of us want to look forward to, but we know that it will increase the risks of transmission, so we must get infection rates to a lower baseline now.

Thirdly, the decisions will help us to limit the impact of the virus, including through loss of life, as we steer a path through the next few months towards the brighter times that are now within sight, as vaccines and better treatments become available.

Difficult though today's decisions undoubtedly are, please do not forget that an end to all this is now within our grasp, but we must get through the next few months as safely as possible. That means that tough decisions cannot be avoided, no matter how much you and I fervently wish they could be.

I turn now to the detail of our decisions, starting with local authorities that are remaining at their current level. I can confirm that Orkney, Shetland, the Western Isles, Moray and Highland will remain in level 1. For now, in common with the rest of the country, we are asking people in Moray and the Highlands not to visit other people's houses. However, for all areas in level 1, it will be permissible from Thursday this week to meet outdoors with up to eight people from a maximum of three households.

I can confirm that Aberdeen City, Aberdeenshire, the Borders, Dumfries and Galloway and Argyll and Bute will all remain in level 2. We hope that those areas—perhaps Argyll and Bute in particular—will be able to move to level 1 soon. However, in some of those areas there has been an increase in cases in recent days. We are particularly concerned about quite sharp increases, albeit from a relatively low level, in Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire.

That leads me to make a general point—a plea—to everyone living in level 1 and 2 areas. Please do not assume that being in one of the lower levels means that you can ease up. On the contrary, having fewer restrictions means that the

virus has more opportunities to spread, so it is more vital to abide by all the rules and precautions. Please use the postcode checker on our website to remind yourselves of what the restrictions are in your area, and please stick to them.

I am pleased to report that East Lothian and Midlothian have both had a marked decline in infection rates and that prevalence in those areas is significantly below the level for Scotland as a whole. On that basis, I can confirm that, assuming that there is no significant deterioration before then, East Lothian and Midlothian will move down from level 3 to level 4—sorry; from level 3 to level 2—from next Tuesday, 24 November. Between now and then, those local authorities will be able to undertake necessary environmental health and compliance checks and work with NHS Lothian to minimise any risk of increased transmission that the move to level 2 will bring.

I can confirm that the City of Edinburgh, Clackmannanshire, Falkirk, Inverclyde, North Ayrshire, Dundee, Fife, Perth and Kinross and Angus will all remain at level 3 for now. To varying degrees, those areas are all making some progress, although it remains fragile. However, we are hopeful that, if that progress continues, they will move to level 2 soon.

I turn now to our decisions about level 4. The council areas that will move to level 4 for a limited period from Friday are: Glasgow City, Renfrewshire, East Renfrewshire, East Dunbartonshire, West Dunbartonshire, North Lanarkshire, South Lanarkshire, East Ayrshire, South Ayrshire, Stirling and West Lothian. In all those areas, there are grounds for continued and significant concern.

In the seven days up to Friday, Scotland as a whole had just over 140 new cases of Covid per 100,000 people. All the areas moving to level 4 were above that level, ranging from West Lothian, with a rate of 158 cases per 100,000, to Glasgow, with 277. Test positivity for all those areas, with the exception of West Dunbartonshire, was also above the average. Stirling has experienced a particularly sharp increase in cases over the past week. While some of that can be attributed to specific outbreaks, there is also a level of community transmission there that must be tackled.

In the other areas, infection rates have stabilised or even fallen slightly as a result of level 3 measures. However—and this is the key point of concern—the infection rate in all those areas remains stubbornly and worryingly high. At such levels, we simply do not have the assurance that we need that hospital services and intensive care units will be able to cope as we go deeper into the winter. In those areas, pressure on hospitals and

on those who work in them is already severe. With the additional pressure that the coming weeks may bring, it could easily become intolerable. Furthermore, at these levels, we would not have the flexibility that we need in order to ease restrictions over Christmas—which, in common with the other nations of the United Kingdom, we so desperately want to do.

Therefore, the clear advice of our public health experts is that we must drive infection rates down further in those areas, and they are not confident that level 3 restrictions will do so to the extent necessary. That is why, albeit reluctantly, we have taken the decision to place those areas into level 4 for a limited period.

The level 4 restrictions will be in place for three weeks, and will be lifted on 11 December. I want to be clear on that point, because I know that people are frustrated that other restrictions have remained in place for longer than planned. Level 4 is intended to be short and sharp. In this situation, it is specifically intended to have an impact in advance of Christmas and the most challenging winter period. Lifting the level 4 restrictions then, as we will do, also means that they will not be in place for most of the Hanukkah period. Again, although celebrations may be different, there will be a greater degree of freedom.

Nearer the time, we will assess the level that will apply in each area when the level 4 restrictions end on 11 December. Even if it does not happen immediately for all of them, we hope and expect that the action that we are taking now will allow those areas to move down to level 2 much more quickly than would otherwise be the case.

I will talk about what level 4 means for people living in those areas. First, as is the case already, people must not visit other people's homes, although they can still meet outdoors with up to six people from two households. However, our advice is that people should stay at or close to home as much as possible. The purpose of level 4 is to reduce interactions between people from different households as much as possible, in order to reduce transmission as quickly as possible. That means limiting work and social contacts. Those who can work from home should do so, although, unlike during lockdown earlier in the year, construction and manufacturing workplaces will remain open.

Only essential indoor retail premises will remain open for the three-week period, and non-essential retail will close. Close-contact services, such as hairdressers and beauty salons, visitor attractions, leisure and entertainment settings and indoor gyms will also close for that period. With the exception of takeaway services, hospitality premises will close, too. Therefore, except for some very limited purposes, including childcare,

caring for someone who is vulnerable, exercise or shopping for essential goods, people living in level 4 areas should not be going out and about over the three-week period.

I know that it will be tough. The pandemic is having an impact on mental health for most, if not all, of us. If people need someone to talk to, they can find out what support is available at clearyourhead.scot or by calling NHS 111. However, please remember: our objective in taking action now is to protect the NHS, create the prospect of seeing some loved ones at Christmas and complete the journey to next spring with as few restrictions as possible, and with the minimum impact on life and health.

I now turn to the issue of travel. Notwithstanding today's difficult decisions for significant parts of the country, the levels system is still allowing us to avoid a national, one-size-fits-all lockdown, such as is currently in place in England. In my view, that is important. It means that people and businesses in lower-prevalence areas, such as the Highlands or parts of Lothian, are not forced into level 4 restrictions by the situation in higher-prevalence areas such as Glasgow.

The ability to maintain that targeted approach depends on us not spreading the virus from high-prevalence to low-prevalence areas, which becomes even more important with parts of the country in level 4. To put it bluntly, and we will require to monitor this, if we see evidence that people from East or South Ayrshire are visiting places in North Ayrshire, or that people from Glasgow are going to Inverclyde, we will have no choice but to consider level 4 for those areas, too. We do not want to do that, so it is essential that we all abide by the travel restrictions.

To underline how important that is, I confirm that, from Friday, the guidance that has been in place in recent weeks will become law. That means that people living in level 3 or level 4 must not travel outside their own council area, except for certain essential purposes. People living elsewhere in Scotland must not travel to level 3 or level 4 areas, except for essential purposes. There must be no non-essential travel between Scotland and other parts of the UK.

I know that it is difficult, but it is essential. Broadly comparable restrictions have been, or continue to be, in force in England and Wales. If we are to maintain a targeted approach and allow those in low-prevalence areas to live with fewer restrictions, I cannot stress enough how important it is that we all abide by the rules.

I will say a few words about schools, those in the shielding category, business support and, finally, the wider action that we are taking to beat the virus.

I am aware that some people argue that schools should also be closed at level 4. However, our very clear view is that the harm that is done to young people by closing schools significantly outweighs any impact that schools have on transmission. Keeping schools open is therefore a priority. However, we will keep the guidance for schools—and how it is being implemented—under close review. A further evidence paper on school safety will be published by the Deputy First Minister tomorrow. Specific measures are also in place for those who are on the shielding list. We currently recommend that children who were shielding should not attend school in person in level 4 areas.

More broadly, I know that this is an anxious time for people who were shielding. We are not advising the same strict isolation as in the previous lockdown; we know how harmful that is to wellbeing. Instead, the advice is to be especially vigilant. The chief medical officer will be writing directly to all people in level 4 areas who were on the shielding list, to provide more detailed advice.

The restrictions are also very difficult for business, so we are making more financial support available. In addition to the UK furlough scheme, all businesses that require to close, at any level, are eligible for a four-weekly grant of £2,000 or £3,000, depending on rateable value, and grants of £1,400 or £2,100 are available to businesses that are open but subject to trading restrictions. Eligible businesses can apply for those grants now, through their local authority. In addition, we are establishing a £30 million discretionary fund to enable local authorities, if they consider it to be necessary or justified, to provide additional support for businesses—for example, businesses in supply chains, or taxi drivers who are suffering a severe but indirect effect.

We will also make an additional £15 million available for newly self-employed people who have not been able to access other forms of support, and we are making available to local authorities an additional £15 million to help with the community and social impact of a move to level 4. More details on those funds will be made available shortly.

In my statement, I have focused, necessarily, on restrictions. However, increasingly and much more positively, our focus is now also on the other ways of beating the virus. We have real reason to be optimistic that science will get us out of this pandemic—and soon. Later this week, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport will set out to Parliament our plans to start vaccinating the most vulnerable as soon as stocks of an approved vaccine are available—we hope that that might even be before the end of this calendar year—and

then to roll that out across the adult population as quickly as supplies allow.

Now that we have a supply of lateral flow tests, the health secretary will also, next week, set out our plans for mass testing. That will include more detail on the plans that we have already announced to test care home visitors, NHS staff and students. She will also set out plans for geographic mass testing—drawing on the lessons of the pilot that is under way in Liverpool—and the options for extending mass testing to other groups of key workers.

That is perhaps an appropriate point to end on. The pandemic is taking its toll on all of us—and on some much more than others. I know that today's decisions will add to that for many, and I am truly sorry for that. Whether you agree with the decisions or not, please know that they are not taken lightly but are essential to get us to the other side of this as safely as possible. That means all of us sticking to the rules and remembering FACTS in everything that we do—wear face coverings, avoid places with crowds of people, clean your hands and hard surfaces regularly, keep a 2m distance from people in other households, and self-isolate and get tested if you have any of the symptoms of Covid.

It also means holding firm to what this is all for. In a global pandemic that is nobody's fault, this action is necessary in order to protect ourselves and those we love from a potentially deadly virus. It is essential in helping the NHS look after all of us who need it, in giving us the hope of some respite and time with loved ones at Christmas, and in helping us, with as little suffering and loss of life as possible, to complete the final stage of this horrible journey to the point—next spring, I hope—when we will be vaccinating, testing and treating our way back to normality.

I can never thank everyone enough for all the sacrifices that are being made, and I will never underestimate how difficult it is. I hold to the belief that love and solidarity, albeit with a lot of help from science, will get us through this, and that soon we will be looking back on it, not living through it. Please, try to stay strong, and, please, stick with it and stick together.

The Presiding Officer: The First Minister will now take questions.

Ruth Davidson (Edinburgh Central) (Con): We all appreciate that there are no guarantees in a situation such as this, but if the evidence points to an essential calculation—accepting three weeks of level 4 restrictions for those authority areas affected in order to win a more general easing of restrictions over the Christmas and new year period—that is, with regret, a judgment that we will take at face value.

The need to get through the next few months with the virus as widely suppressed as possible is all the more important given the enormously encouraging news in recent days that vaccines with efficacy rates of 90 per cent and more are a real prospect by the year's end.

However, whatever the promise of an eventual vaccination programme, today's news will come as an immediate hammer blow to thousands of small businesses in the affected areas, which have fought since March to stay open, keep their heads above water and survive the spring lockdown and late summer and autumn restrictions, only to be faced with a further period of closure. Sustained Government support will be critical to those businesses' survival. We have seen the concerns that business organisations have expressed over the past 24 hours and we expect ministers to address those concerns head on.

I want to ask about the situation in our hospitals. The latest projections and the documents that accompany the statement show that NHS Lanarkshire, NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde and NHS Ayrshire and Arran could run out of Covid hospital beds over the next few weeks and that ICU capacity will soon be reached in those areas and in NHS Fife and NHS Forth Valley. We must hope that that will not be the case.

We must hope for the best; we must also plan for the worst. Will the First Minister say whether each hospital in those health board areas has a contingency plan to manage the situation, should it arise? Will she provide an update on the progress of mutual aid arrangements between NHS boards to ensure that there is enough capacity to deal with peak demand, as set out in "Winter Preparedness Plan for NHS Scotland—2020/21"?

According to the winter preparedness plan, "at least four months' supply of all the key" personal protective equipment "commodities" was to have been procured "from end October", and "a national stockpile of 60 ICU and supportive care medicines"

was to have been procured by the end of November. Can the First Minister confirm that all those items have been secured? Our NHS staff have worked heroically over the past eight months. We must spare no effort in making sure that they have the resources and protection that they need for the very worrying period ahead.

The First Minister: I thank Ruth Davidson for those questions; I will try to address them all as briefly as possible.

First, I reiterate the point that I made in my statement. These decisions are unpalatable, but they are necessary. They are necessary to protect the NHS, to open up space—I hope—at Christmas and to get us through what I increasingly hope is the final stage of this journey with as little loss of life as possible. That is why we have reached these decisions. I know that there will be people who disagree with these decisions; I can hear that there are people in this chamber who strongly disagree with them. I respect that, but I hope that nobody will think that these decisions have been taken lightly or without very serious consideration and assessment of their necessity.

The impact of this pandemic is, first and foremost, on individuals, but I absolutely understand the impact on businesses of all sizes and small businesses in particular. I make two points in that regard, which members will want to follow up in the days to come. First, it is concern for businesses that makes me so determined to stick with the levels approach as far as we can, so that small businesses in Highland are not being closed down because of high prevalence in Glasgow or Lanarkshire. I think that that is important. I say that genuinely and not as a criticism of decisions that other Governments have taken—every Government is trying to take the best decisions that it can take. We have so far avoided—and I hope that we will continue to avoid—a national lockdown. That is the targeted approach that I think is good for businesses as well as for individuals.

Today we are making available additional financial support to help businesses. As I understand it, in England, local authorities are given a discretionary 5 per cent—I think—above the level of grant support. The discretionary funding for local authorities that we have announced today is significantly more than that. It will never be enough to compensate every business for every loss—I recognise that—but we will continue to ensure that maximum support for businesses is available.

On hospital and ICU capacity, one of the reasons why we have taken the really difficult decisions that we have taken about Greater Glasgow and Clyde, Lanarkshire and Stirling—as far as it relates to Forth Valley—is to ensure that our hospitals and ICU facilities do not, over the winter, get to the point at which they cannot cope. I believe that the action that I announced today will help to protect our health service.

All health boards have contingency plans in place for ICU, including plans to double and, if necessary, treble ICU capacity. Mutual aid is already under way. For example, one of the reasons why Forth Valley is under pressure right now is the assistance that it is giving to some

Lanarkshire NHS Board patients. Mutual aid arrangements will continue to work, where necessary.

Finally, I can confirm, and will make some of this information available through the Scottish Parliament information centre, that we have all the supplies of personal protective equipment that we have assessed are required. We have healthy stocks of PPE. I think that it is true for Governments across the UK that, at the start of the pandemic, PPE was all imported. A significant proportion in Scotland is now from Scottish companies. We have been able to build some economic resilience there, as well as health resilience. We also have a much greater supply of intensive care ventilators than we did at the start of the pandemic, should they be needed.

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): I thank the First Minister for advance sight of her statement.

Swimming pools and gyms closed, driving lessons stopped, visitor attractions closed, tourism shut down, hairdressers closed, non-essential retail shops closed and hospitality shut down completely: that is the stark difference between tier 3 and tier 4. In Parliament last week, the First Minister said that the Cabinet's decision on which tier people live in was a judgment, and that

"judgment must combine with the hard data."—[*Official Report*, 10 November 2020; c 20.]

Can the First Minister explain to people, such as those in North and South Lanarkshire, what the hard data is? What is the evidence for moving them up a tier at a time when the transmission rate in Lanarkshire is coming down? What assurance can she give them and millions of others who are moving to level 4 this Friday that this time, three weeks really does mean just three weeks?

The First Minister: On that last point, I understand that people have been frustrated that restrictions that were meant to be limited have not been, but, for the reasons that Richard Leonard has set out, level 4 is meant to be a short, sharp intervention. We have looked carefully at the Welsh experience. It is still too early to say what the impact has been of the firebreak in Wales, which it lifted after two weeks. It may be after three weeks here we do not have all the evidence flowing through into the data, but the level 4 restrictions will end on 11 December, and we will decide then what levels those areas will go into.

I readily acknowledge the difference to the economy and people's lives between living in level 3 and living in level 4, but I hope that Richard Leonard will take seriously the point that the difference between level 3 and level 4 for Lanarkshire, Glasgow and those other areas may be that fewer people die over the next period, and

it may be the difference between our NHS being able to cope and its being unable to cope.

Richard Leonard asked me for the evidence. As he is aware, the data for each local authority is being published today. If we look at cases per 100,000 over the past seven days, the national average is 141. In North Lanarkshire it is 238 and in South Lanarkshire it is 229. For test positivity, the national average is 7 per cent. In North Lanarkshire it is 10.3 per cent, and in South Lanarkshire it is 9.5 per cent. Rates have declined very slightly, but the 238 in North Lanarkshire at the end of last week is only down from 274 at the start of November. The number has stabilised and slightly decreased, but it must come down faster to deal with the biggest and most important bit of evidence, which Ruth Davidson referred to in her question, which is that if we do not act now, there is a risk that, as winter pressures kick in, hospital and ICU services in NHS Lanarkshire will be unable to cope with Covid and other winter pressures. That is why we are taking this action now. I know that it is a difficult thing to do, but I believe that it is the right thing to do, in the interests of protecting the national health service and saving lives. Fundamentally, that is the most important responsibility that I have right now.

Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green): The continued rise in cases as we go into winter is a cause for deep concern. The Scottish Greens acknowledge the impact that lockdowns have, but we support the move into tier 4 for the local authorities most affected and, given the transmission of the virus across the country, we recognise the need to put travel restrictions into law.

However, would we be in such a grave situation had the Scottish Government followed the World Health Organization mantra of test, test, test? We provided the First Minister with evidence in support of regular testing six months ago, and Parliament has now voted for that to happen. I note that the First Minister said that a statement next week will cover “options” for extending testing to other groups of key workers. I sincerely hope that setting out options does not suggest any further delay. Can the First Minister confirm that that statement will finally see the Scottish Government introduce regular testing for all key workers in healthcare, in education and in our communities, as a matter of the greatest urgency?

The First Minister: I will address those points directly because they are important. On the question whether we would be in this situation, in relation to testing or anything else, we have only to look across the UK, Europe and the world to see that Scotland is far from unique. Actually, Scotland has a lower prevalence of the virus right now than all other UK nations and many countries across

Europe. That does not mean that we have done everything right—far from it—but we are in the midst of a global pandemic and that cannot be cast aside.

In relation to polymerase chain reaction testing, which is the main diagnostic test that we have had available, we have prioritised testing those who have symptoms, because that is how we need, through test and protect, to best break those chains of transmission. We have not had the technology to do routine regular testing on a mass scale until relatively recently. We now have lateral flow testing; we hope to have more of those tests, but we have a supply already. That opens up, from now, the potential to do much more, although there are still some hurdles and limitations. For example, unless this has changed over the course of today—we are expecting this to potentially change in the next day or so—lateral flow testing is not licensed for unsupervised use. We hope that that will change, which would allow tests to be provided to employers, whether in the public or private sector, to use routinely with their workers.

As the technology advances, so too does the approach that we take. Obviously, there are logistical issues. We are looking carefully at the pilot in Liverpool in relation to rolling out mass testing on a geographical basis, and there are important lessons there in relation to supporting maximum take-up of testing. We are moving forward with developing technology as soon as we are able to do so and the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport will set out more details of that next week.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): Five thousand deaths is truly a terrible toll—it is a dark day. That heavy toll is the reason why I have supported a cautious approach. People want to help and they deserve an explanation. Why are the thresholds in the strategy framework, which was published only three weeks ago, being replaced already? Why are restrictions, including a serious travel ban, being ratcheted up in parts of the country where the number of cases is going down? Why is the Government shutting down sectors of society and business without clear evidence that they are the cause of the spread? The impact of that on mental health, as well as on business and the economy, will be considerable, so is the First Minister sure that those sacrifices will help to cut the number of cases of the virus? Is the First Minister sure that that will work?

The First Minister: I am as sure as I can be, in an inherently uncertain and unpredictable situation, that what we are announcing today will drive infection rates lower, so that they are closer to the levels that we need them to be in those central belt areas. The restrictions that have been in place so far have stopped what would otherwise

have been a rapid increase in cases, and they have stabilised cases and slightly reduced them in some areas. However, for all the reasons that I set out, if we are being sensible, we cannot go into winter with a stubbornly high level of cases across the most populated part of our country.

The thresholds in the levels framework have not been changed; we look at the thresholds—or indicators, or however you want to describe them—and we apply judgment around that. If you look at NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde and NHS Lanarkshire, their case numbers and test positivity rates are at the level where we would be starting to consider level 4, but what tips them over into that, apart from the stubbornly high nature of the number of cases, is the pressure and the potential pressure on hospital services. The same is true about hospital services in Ayrshire and, in relation to NHS Forth Valley, Stirling. We pay attention to those indicators, but we have to apply judgment on the advice of clinical and public health experts about what is necessary to get infection levels down.

We always have to make balanced decisions. I am under no illusions about how difficult all this is for everybody, and countries the world over are going through it right now. Thankfully, we are managing to avoid applying a lockdown across our country and I hope that that will continue. However, assuming that the optimistic scientific news materialises, as we all fervently hope that it does, in the spring of next year, over the final stage of this, I want us to minimise the loss of life and minimise the number of people—including young people—who, this time next year, will be suffering from long Covid and the health complications of Covid.

I also want to minimise economic damage, because there is a fallacy that if we do not have restrictions to control the virus, the economic pain will not happen. What will happen is that the virus will run more out of control and the economic pain will be deeper and longer.

None of that is palatable for anybody. I hate standing here announcing decisions like this and I can never find the words properly to encapsulate how much I hate it. However, my job is not to do what is popular, but, by taking account of all the advice and judgment that I can, to do what I think is necessary to get us through the next phase of the virus as safely as possible.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you. We move to questions from back benchers. If we have succinct questions and answers, I hope that we will get through all the members.

Shona Robison (Dundee City East) (SNP): Last week, in Dundee, there was a 29 per cent decrease in case numbers per 100,000 people;

this week, it is disappointing that there has been an increase of 11 per cent. Has the data identified specific areas that are the cause of the increase, in order to ensure that every effort is taken within those areas to reverse it?

The First Minister: Dundee has had a slight increase over the past seven days, but, generally speaking, it has made good progress since it went into level 3 and we hope that that will continue.

It is understandable—I also find myself doing this—that people want to know exactly the cause of an increase and what is driving it. We look carefully at what comes through test and protect and other information, but, fundamentally, the virus spreads because people are interacting and allowing it to do so. That means that, overall, when we have community transition—and that is the really tough bit of all this—we have to reduce those interactions, whether they are in social settings or workplaces.

I know how difficult the household restrictions are, and those are probably the restrictions that people are most likely to try to get around or think that they can safely breach on one occasion. I understand that and am not criticising anybody for doing that. I know how much all of us, me included, are missing our families. However, that is one of the areas where we give the virus the most risk of spreading, and I appeal to people, partly so that we can ease restrictions a bit for Christmas, not to mix in each other's houses, because that gives the virus opportunity to spread. I say that to people in Dundee and across the country, with the exception of Orkney, Shetland and the Western Isles.

Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con): How will the laws that implement a ban on travel in and out of level 3 and 4 areas be policed and enforced? Does the First Minister acknowledge the serious difficulties that the ban creates for those who live on or near council boundaries?

The First Minister: None of the restrictions that we have put in place are easy to enforce. The regulations—

Mike Rumbles (North East Scotland) (LD): It is impossible.

The Presiding Officer: Order, please.

The First Minister: If Mike Rumbles wants to ask a question, I am happy to answer it, but he is shouting repeatedly at me from a sedentary position. I know that he vehemently disagrees with what I am setting out, but I hope that he will have enough respect to understand that the decisions are not easy and are not being taken lightly.

To come back to the important and perfectly legitimate question, the police will enforce the

regulations in the way that they have enforced all the regulations that have been in place. In other words, they will do so as a last resort. The police will use the same approach that they used for household restrictions, such as the stay-at-home regulations, earlier in the pandemic. If they have reason to believe that people are breaching the rules, they will remind and advise them of the rules and encourage them to comply. Only when there is a clear and flagrant breach will they use enforcement.

It is not for me to tell the chief constable how to do that operationally. I know that it is not easy for the police. However, ensuring that people understand the reasons for the restrictions and the reason why it is so important that people do not travel from high to low-prevalence areas is essential. In my judgment, where the law is for people not to leave their home without a reasonable excuse—as happened previously in Wales and is happening in England, albeit in a different form—passing the regulations sends a clear and strong message about the importance of our complying with the rules.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I am sure that everyone is relieved that an effective vaccine for Covid-19 could be with us in weeks. Some constituents have already been in touch with me, anxious to know where they might be on the vaccination prioritisation list. It is obvious that the most vulnerable must be vaccinated first. Will there be a clinically agreed, all-Scotland vaccination protocol, about which the public will be informed, and will vaccine distribution be based on the number of vulnerable people in a health board area, rather than simply its population, to ensure that areas such as Ayrshire and Arran do not lose out and that there is an even spread of vaccination according to risk?

The First Minister: The Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation will provide expert clinical advice that will inform decisions on how any vaccine is used. As I said earlier, the Health Secretary will set out more detail about our plan on Thursday in the Parliament. Interim advice has already been provided by the JCVI, which proposes older adult residents in care homes, care home workers, health and social care workers and those over 80 as the initial priority groups. That advice could change as further clinical or scientific evidence emerges, and we will adjust our plans if necessary.

Arrangements for delivery of the vaccine, which will include health board allocation, will depend on several factors, including regulatory and advisory bodies approving the vaccines for use, the supply that we have and the particular characteristics of the vaccine. We are considering several different delivery routes to ensure that any vaccines that

become available can be used effectively. We will be making specific provision to ensure adequate vaccine supply to rural and island communities. Jeane Freeman will set out our initial plans on Thursday and we will keep the Parliament updated as we get towards getting the first vaccinations to people, which I still hope will happen this year.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): Glasgow's infection rates have been showing a downward trend, so it is very disappointing that Glasgow is moving to level 4. Can the First Minister give Glaswegians some hope that there will be an end to the pain and that we will not simply end up at level 3 on 11 December? Does the First Minister recognise that December is a really important period for non-essential businesses, during which they could recoup some of their losses, and does she agree that the business support grant should take that into consideration? Is the First Minister confident that £30 million for 11 local authorities is enough to recognise the need of such businesses?

The First Minister: The £30 million is over and above the other business support that is available. We will of course keep it under review. As I understand the arrangements elsewhere in the UK, that is more than is being provided elsewhere, although it will not necessarily help all businesses with every loss. We will continue to do the maximum that we can.

Pauline McNeill is right that, over the past seven days, we have seen a very gradual decline in cases in Glasgow. However, it is very gradual: people can go on to the website, where they will see that the line on the graph for Glasgow is very flat. Without the restrictions that people have been living with, the line for Glasgow would not have been flat but would have shot through the roof. Flat is not bad, but it is not good enough. We must get infection rates down if we are to ensure that the health service can cope and that we have that ability to ease up over Christmas.

One of the other reasons for places such as Glasgow to go to level 4 is to accelerate a move to level 2. It remains for an assessment nearer the time for us to know whether it will go straight from level 4 to level 2, or whether it will have to go via level 3. Looking at Glasgow right now, without further action, it seems as though level 3 would have to be in place for an extended period yet. For places such as Glasgow, a period in level 4 may actually be a quicker route out of level 3 than simply remaining in level 3. That is difficult for people, but I believe that, in the medium to long term, it will be better for Glaswegians—of which, of course, I am one.

Bruce Crawford (Stirling) (SNP): I extend my deepest condolences to the families and friends of residents at the Fairview care home in

Bannockburn who have died as a result of Covid-19 and, of course, to everyone who has lost a loved one.

Under level 4, small and boutique shops in my Stirling constituency will have to close, but are very concerned that mixed-retail shops will remain open and continue to sell non-essential goods, which will give them an unfair advantage during the crucial sales period prior to Christmas. Shopkeepers are looking for a level playing field in respect of mixed retail and supermarkets. What assurances can the First Minister give in that regard? Will she advise whether non-essential shops can offer collection services to support them in continuing to sell goods online or by telephone?

The First Minister: My condolences also go to friends and family members who have lost loved ones at the Fairview care home. The health and social care partnership and the public health team are providing regular support to the service in order to manage the outbreak there.

In level 4 areas, retailers that are required to close can continue to trade online or through click-and-collect and telephone ordering services. Additionally, as I have set out, grant funding is available for businesses that have to close temporarily, and there is the additional discretionary funding that I have spoken about. Information on eligibility and how to apply for that funding is available on the findbusinesssupport.gov.scot website.

I understand that there will always be perceived unfairness. We will try to make the arrangements as fair as possible, and we will consider that on an on-going basis. Of course, people require to continue to have access to essential retail, which is what we are seeking to achieve.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The closure of non-food retail shops in 11 local authority areas for three weeks in what is normally the busiest shopping period of the year, in the run-up to Christmas, will be devastating for those businesses. Over the past few weeks, the Scottish Government has received additional guaranteed funding of £1.7 billion from the UK Government. Will the First Minister ensure that adequate support is given to affected businesses—not just those that have to close, but those in the supply chain that are legally permitted to trade but which will suffer substantial losses due to the closure of other premises?

The First Minister: I know how devastating what I have announced is to large and small businesses in every sector. It weighs heavily on me, as I know it does on all of us, but I also know how devastating the virus is to families who lose loved ones to it. We are trying to navigate a way through that.

I can give an assurance that we will ensure that every possible penny of business support is made available. We provide grant support for businesses that are not legally required to close, but whose trading is restricted. I have set out the details of that support, which we provided before the UK Government decided to make consequential funding available. That is important.

The discretionary funding that I have announced today is also important. That funding will enable councils to deliver more support for businesses in the supply chain, and for people who are indirectly but severely affected; for example, taxi drivers have made a very strong case, recently. The support will also give local authorities some discretion to provide additional funding if they think that there is a case to be made for doing so.

We will continue to ensure that as much funding as possible is made available. As I said earlier, I obviously do not know all the details of how the systems work in England, but my understanding is that, over and above the funding for the grant level, local authorities have an additional 5 per cent discretion. What we have announced today will be more than that.

I am not standing here and saying that any business will think that it is enough, but we will continue to ensure that we treat businesses as fairly as possible. We are asking them to do unprecedented things, so it is important that we respond with unprecedented support.

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): I wanted to ask the First Minister about support for long Covid sufferers, but in the light of the announcements relating to East, North and South Ayrshire, will she please say a little more about the reasons why East and South Ayrshire are to move to level 4 while North Ayrshire remains at level 3? I am being inundated with inquiries about that, as the meeting continues.

The First Minister: I do not think that I am breaching any confidences by saying that that was one of the most difficult decisions that the Cabinet reached this morning. The reason is that, right now, there is a lower level of prevalence and test positivity in North Ayrshire. There have been 140 cases per 100,000 people in the past seven days, which is slightly below the national average, and the test positivity rate is 5.7 per cent, which is also below the national average of 7 per cent.

In South Ayrshire, case numbers per 100,000 and test positivity are above the national average. I am struggling to find the figures, but that is even more the case in East Ayrshire. The reason for the difference is, basically, that we are seeing more evidence of sustained decreases in North Ayrshire than we are seeing in East Ayrshire and South Ayrshire.

I know the geography of Ayrshire very well—as Willie Coffey does—and one of the worries is that people from East and South Ayrshire could go to North Ayrshire and take the virus from areas of higher prevalence to areas of lower prevalence. That illustrates why travel restrictions are so important; they exist so that we do not have to put North Ayrshire on a higher level merely to mitigate risk.

In many respects, Ayrshire illustrates the difficulty of some of the judgments we have to make when there are tiered levels. Inverclyde, which is within Greater Glasgow and Clyde NHS Board's area does, too. The alternative would be to put all areas at the higher level, driven by the areas that have the highest levels of the virus, which would not be fair, either. We are trying to take as targeted and as proportionate an approach as possible.

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): This morning, Unison Scotland published a survey of its members who are in charge of keeping our schools clean. Unison says that only 18 per cent of cleaners said they had enough time and the right materials to clean schools properly and to keep themselves safe in schools.

Surprisingly, freedom of information requests show that many authorities have not, despite the hygiene issues that come with Covid, increased the number of cleaners whom they employ. I understand the Government's priority of keeping our schools open, but does the First Minister understand the concerns of Unison and my concerns that our children must be kept safe when they are in school?

The First Minister: I absolutely agree. I have not yet had the opportunity to see the survey. I will have a look at it, and if there are issues that we need to address with local authorities based on it, we absolutely will do that.

The Health and Safety Executive previously commented that the preparations for school return were good. We made available to local authorities £50 million specifically to help them with enhanced cleaning and other arrangements that were required for schools to return.

However, we are not complacent about any of this. As I think I said earlier, the Deputy First Minister will tomorrow publish another evidence paper about safety in schools. Parliament will debate it tomorrow afternoon.

We want to keep schools open, because we think that that is best for children. However, we are not, and never will be, complacent about the safety of young people, teachers or others who work in schools. That is an issue that we take extremely seriously.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): I know that visiting care homes is an extremely difficult subject. It affects my mother, who is in a neighbouring authority. Can the First Minister say anything about that, as some areas move into level 4?

The First Minister: I understand that the health secretary wrote to care home providers today to update them on how adult care home visiting is affected by the protection levels. She will give a statement to Parliament on that shortly.

Current care home visiting guidelines continue to be recommended for areas that are in levels 1 to 3, unless they are advised otherwise by local directors of public health. For level 4, only essential window and garden visits are recommended.

The advice also makes it clear that visiting people in care homes is exempt from national travel restrictions. People can travel into and out of level 4 areas to see loved ones in care homes, because that is deemed to be essential travel.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Does the First Minister accept that, in order to defeat the virus, it is absolutely essential that there is full public trust in the Scottish Government's guidelines, and that in order to achieve that the guidelines must be clear and consistent? My constituents have been complaining to me that that has not always been the case. For example, the announcement on 30 October said that all pupils in secondary 4 to S6 in level 3 and 4 council areas would need to wear face coverings in class. However, that instruction did not appear in the general guidelines for levels 3 and 4.

Does the First Minister recognise that that could cause confusion, and will she ensure that local government and the Scottish Government work together to avoid inconsistency?

The First Minister: I am genuinely not aware of the specific problem that Liz Smith mentioned about guidance on face coverings. However, I am happy to look into it. The guidance on face coverings in schools has been widely promoted by local authorities, and I believe that it is widely understood. Although not everybody will agree with all advice about that, I think that the reasons for it are understood.

More generally, I accept and take seriously the responsibility to set out, as clearly as I can, not just what we are doing but why we are doing certain things. That is not always easy, as we deal with what we are dealing with now. Some of what we do is a judgment; some of it is what we think—but cannot be sure—will make a difference. I have tried to be open about the uncertainties and unpredictabilities. We must make sure that the guidance reflects them. I am genuinely not aware

of the particular issue that Liz Smith has raised but, if there is an issue, I will look into it and will be happy to write to her.

Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP): A report last week from Public Health England found that people with learning disabilities were at least six times more likely to die of Covid-19. That is the latest in a number of reports that show that group's vulnerability and show why the suppression of the virus is so important. Given that the group was not specifically mentioned in the original strategic framework, will the First Minister tell us what work is being done to keep them safe and, in particular, when their carers will be offered regular testing?

The First Minister: A lot of work is being done and has been done throughout to ensure that people with learning disabilities—who, as Joan McAlpine points out, are at enhanced risk—are kept as safe as possible. They are included in the plans for testing that the health secretary will outline in more detail next week. I will ask the health secretary to write to Joan McAlpine more generally to set out the work that is continually being done to make sure that we are taking all the right precautions.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): The current round of restrictions in the west of Scotland started in September. The 16-day reset began 39 days ago. My constituents were told at the time that restrictions would be for the short term if they complied with the rules, but restrictions have only got tighter. Most of the west is now entering level 4. Is the First Minister's only explanation that that is down to my constituents' failure to comply with the rules, or is there another reason, such as the Government's failure to deliver mass testing and effective tracing in the areas that need them most?

The First Minister: Not only is that not my only explanation, it is not even one of my explanations. I have never tried to blame anybody during the pandemic. What I have done is say clearly that this is a global pandemic that is nobody's fault, but that it is unfortunately down to all of us to tackle it. The biggest responsibility for that lies with Government. That is right and proper. However, we all have to play our part with an infectious virus. That is not blaming people; it is being honest with people about the challenges that we face and how we can overcome them. I would not be doing my job if I did not set out the importance of complying with the restrictions.

I say to Neil Bibby and to others that Scotland, like many other countries, faces a challenging situation. We are seeing that sharply today as a number of areas go into the top level of restrictions. However, we are also in a position whereby—even with the prevalence levels that we are worried about now and want to reduce—we

are already seeing prevalence levels that are lower than those in the other nations of the UK and in many other countries across Europe.

The actions that we have taken in the past few weeks have avoided a situation that we would otherwise have faced in which I would have been standing here announcing 3,000 cases every day. If I had been doing that, I would also have been announcing three times the number of people—if not more—in hospital and perhaps three times the number of deaths. Through our sacrifices, we have managed to prevent that from happening.

I must also be frank. If we are to get through the next—and, I hope, final—phase as safely as possible, we must go further. We must not just stabilise infection levels but get them down further. That is not blaming anybody; it is recognising the nature of the challenge that we face and what we must do collectively to get through it.

Mike Rumbles (North East Scotland) (LD): I am not—no one is—accusing the First Minister of making decisions lightly. I want to make that clear. These are difficult decisions; we all understand that. However, for the first time, the First Minister intends to use regulations to make it illegal to travel from one area to another. That is without the authority of Parliament and may be illegal, as it is unenforceable and may not be a proportionate measure in law.

Does the First Minister understand that these draconian changes in law—which everybody would agree are, in the true sense of the word, draconian—should be a decision that is made not by her alone? It could be helpful if the changes were made not by her alone but by the Parliament before such measures could come into effect. Will she ask the Parliament to debate and vote on the proposals before Friday, when she signs the regulations into law?

The First Minister: I accept what Mike Rumbles says and I respect his vehement disagreement. The decisions are not easy, and they are obviously not uncontroversial. However, I reacted earlier because, during my announcement, he shouted continuously, which did not recognise the difficulty and severity of the situation that we face. I will put that to one side.

I understand that the Parliamentary Bureau proposes to set aside time for a debate and a vote on a motion on Thursday, although the Parliament has not voted on that yet. The travel restrictions will be in regulations. We have said that we are keen for the Parliament to approve regulations before they come into force, and I understand that the Parliament is still considering the procedure for that. I am not entirely sure where that has got to, but I am equally not sure that it is down to the Government to deal with that. Perhaps such a

process will be possible before the regulations come into force—in no way do I object to that.

On the substance, this is the first time that we have put travel restrictions in law in Scotland—although, back in the early days of the pandemic, legal restrictions were placed on people leaving their house without reasonable excuse. Under the national lockdown in England now, it is against the law for people to leave their house without reasonable excuse. Moving between parts of Wales has been restricted in law, and moving into or out of Wales is now restricted in law. The Republic of Ireland also has restrictions in law. In France, people are not allowed to leave their house unless they have papers that demonstrate that they are entitled to do so.

To keep people safe, countries are having to take what we would see as the most unbelievable decisions if we went back a year. We are trying to keep people safe and to ensure that parts of the country do not live under restrictions when they do not have to. If we did not have travel restrictions, the only way to prevent the virus going from Glasgow to the Highlands would be to have a national lockdown. I am really trying to avoid that: a national lockdown is not right if we can avoid it. However, avoiding it involves a trade-off, which I am being frank and honest with people about.

Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Last week, a number of the crew on the MV Isle of Lewis tested positive for Covid-19. That required a full crew changeover and meant that the vessel had to be deep cleaned. Given the threat that any wider loss of lifeline ferry services would represent, what steps will be taken to prevent a recurrence of such a situation?

The First Minister: The priority of CalMac Ferries throughout has been to ensure the safety of passengers and crew by implementing the guidelines on travel and transport. It is unfortunate that the outbreak occurred. CalMac and other ferry operators keep their cleaning, hygiene and physical distance processes under review.

CalMac's processes include a strict new on-board regime to keep staff and customers safe; detailed cleaning every 90 minutes; the implementation of physical distancing, signage and customer announcements; and the use of personal protective equipment. All passengers need to wear face coverings in inside areas, and the on-board food offering is restricted.

Along with Transport Scotland officials, the transport secretary engages weekly with ferry operators to ensure that they are fully updated on any changes to guidance and regulations. That will continue.

Dean Lockhart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The application of level 4 restrictions to the Stirling

Council area is deeply regrettable and will be a severe blow for local residents, workers and firms, who have done everything that has been requested of them. What precise data is available from test and protect and from other sources on the spread of the coronavirus in the area? On the basis of that data, what is the First Minister's understanding of the main factors in the spread of the virus in the area?

The First Minister: It is regrettable that Stirling has seen a sharp increase recently. In the past seven days, case numbers per 100,000 have increased there by more than 20 per cent. Specific outbreaks are contributing to that, including outbreaks in food plants. Work is being done to control that and to minimise the spread. The view of the national incident management team and the local director of public health is that there is also a wider spread of community transmission, which comes from the same interactions, such as those in family gatherings and hospitality settings—albeit that they are restricted. Other areas that have come through test and protect include shopping and personal contact services. That does not mean that it is absolutely certain that that is where people are contracting the virus, but those are the settings that we are now seeing coming through much more strongly in the test and protect data.

The Presiding Officer: We will have to finish proceedings there. Apologies to the half a dozen members whom I was not able to call for questions. Members may be interested to know that the Parliamentary Bureau will discuss later whether to put some time aside for debate on Thursday, given the significance of these matters.

Mike Rumbles: I thank the Presiding Officer for his comment. When the bureau looks at the issue of whether to set aside time for a debate and a vote on Thursday, will he use his best endeavours, as the Presiding Officer and the defender of the Parliament, to make sure that members on the back benches and other parliamentarians have a chance—whether rightly or wrongly—to debate and vote on these very important issues? The First Minister has made it clear that she does not object to that. It is an issue not for the Government but, rather, for the Presiding Officer and the members of the Parliamentary Bureau.

The Presiding Officer: Mr Rumbles will be pleased to note that that point was raised by business managers when we discussed the matter—not pre-empting the decision that we will make this afternoon.

Social Security Benefits

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): The next item of business is a statement by Shirley-Anne Somerville on an update on Scotland's social security benefits. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

15:27

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Security and Older People (Shirley-Anne Somerville): In April, I informed the Parliament about the areas of the social security programme that had had to be put on hold because of Covid-19, and said that I would update the chamber again when we had assessed the impact of the pandemic further.

Clearly, that impact is significant and continuing in all areas of life. Social security is no different. Therefore, I will set out my expectations for when we will be able to deliver the first of our Scottish disability assistance benefits.

First, I will provide some context for the considerable impact of the pandemic on the delivery of social security. Face-to-face user research and testing had to be paused, around 60 social security staff were redeployed to support the Covid response elsewhere in Government and, of course, all staff had to work from home. That impacted on front-line staff at Social Security Scotland in particular, but also programme staff, who had to try to replicate the face-to-face agile methodologies to build our future benefits systems while working remotely.

However, the impact on our delivery partners was, and still is, even more marked. Health and social care professionals, whose expertise we need to deliver disability and carer benefits, have been rightly redeployed to the front line. Local authorities are focused on supporting people during this incredibly difficult time, from keeping schools open to providing our new self-isolation support grant, and the Department for Work and Pensions, whose partnership is imperative to our work, has understandably had to divert resources to respond to unprecedented demand for universal credit as the economic impact of the pandemic hit. I do not want to dwell on that, because Covid-19 affects us all and, across society, the way we live, work and socialise has utterly changed, but the context is important.

Despite the impact of Covid on future social security benefits, I am very proud of what the Government and social security have achieved this year. We have continued to deliver and pay our benefits to people. Social Security Scotland is forecast to spend £111 million this financial year to

support 262,000 people. We have introduced three new benefits. We have also provided a raft of increased support to people to mitigate the pressures that the pandemic has caused.

We have supported people by significantly increasing the Scottish welfare fund and discretionary housing payments, as well as other housing support. We paid an additional coronavirus carers allowance supplement in June, which provided carers in Scotland with up to £690 more this year than those elsewhere in the United Kingdom. We have also introduced a brand new form of support to respond to the pandemic, through our £500 self-isolation support grant for low-income workers.

Over the past four months, we have also introduced three brand new benefits to support the people of Scotland. Our job start payment helps young people who are returning to the workplace, and from next week, our child winter heating assistance will help heat the homes of severely disabled children. By prioritising the game-changing Scottish child payment, we were able to open it to applications for children under 6 last week. That payment has never been more needed, and we have delivered it at a speed, unprecedented in the UK, of under 18 months from announcement to delivery.

That is what we have achieved, and now I want to give the Parliament clarity on when, in my judgment, we will be able to deliver some of the benefits whose introduction the pandemic has delayed. I am mindful of the continued uncertainty brought about by Covid-19. Although our resources have now returned to near pre-pandemic levels, the same is not true for our delivery partners, who are still heavily impacted in key areas. Accordingly, work to replan our timetable is continuing, but I am able to tell the Parliament about the decisions that have been made so far.

It remains my ambition to roll out the Scottish child payment to under-16s by the end of 2022, as we recognise the profound, positive impact that it will have on tackling child poverty. It could support up to half a million children, with an annual investment of £184 million. However, as I have consistently made clear, to deliver the payment on time we are absolutely dependent on the DWP giving us the data that we need on 6 to 16-year-old children. We cannot proceed without it, and currently we do not have clarity on that point. Conversations continue. Just last week, I spoke to the UK Government's Minister of State for Disabled People, Work and Health, and emphasised once again the crucial importance of the DWP's support in delivering that payment. I will continue to make that case.

I turn to disability benefits. I believe that, had it not been for the pandemic, we would by now have been delivering the child disability payment and the adult disability payment would be on course to launch early next year, in line with our previous plans. It was hugely disappointing for me personally when, in April, I announced that Covid-19 would delay those new benefits. I know that that disappointment was as nothing when compared with that felt by disabled people, who are rightly looking forward to a better service based on dignity, fairness and respect. We have therefore worked hard over the summer, in partnership with the DWP and, importantly, the health and social care professionals we will need, to determine when it might be possible to introduce those two benefits.

My decision, which the DWP has agreed to support, is that we will introduce the child disability payment from summer next year. An initial pilot to test our systems and processes will be followed by a full national roll-out in the autumn. The following year, the adult disability payment will replace the DWP's personal independence payment. That will begin with a pilot in spring 2022, and will be fully rolled out by that summer. The first Scottish clients, who currently receive child disability living allowance and PIP, will begin to transfer across to Social Security Scotland as soon as the new benefits are rolled out nationally.

Although it remains a disappointment to me that the pandemic has led to that inevitable change in our programme, it has not stopped and will not stop the work that we are doing. Members will have seen the set of policy papers that we published recently on disability benefits that shows how the new service will look, from when people apply, through to how decisions are taken and what support can be provided. Our work has continued to ensure that respect, dignity and fairness are built into how our disability benefits will look, feel and support people. I am grateful to our stakeholders and to experience panel members for helping us make those values a reality.

The work on the necessary legislation is also well under way. The Scottish Commission on Social Security is currently scrutinising our child disability payment regulations, and we will consult shortly on the regulations for the adult disability payment.

I turn to the remaining devolved benefits, which I discussed last week with the UK Minister of State for Disabled People, Work and Health. Now that our respective officials have the capacity to do so, we reaffirmed our commitment to taking forward the necessary detailed planning work on the benefits, having prioritised reaching an agreement on child and adult disability payments over the

past few months. I thank the DWP for its continued support in that work of replanning.

That includes carers assistance, the other disability benefits and our winter benefits. People will continue to get their payments under agency agreements with the DWP in the meantime. I will of course keep the Parliament updated.

As with disability benefits, we will also progress the important policy work necessary. We will consult early next year on the strategic direction for carers assistance in Scotland, to ensure that both carers allowance and the new carers additional child payment will meet the needs of Scottish carers.

It remains my ambition to launch all our benefits and complete the work of case transfer by 2025, in line with the timetable I announced last year, although, as I have always said, we will not do so if that would put people's payments at risk. I have listened to recent advice from the disability and carer benefits expert advisory group that our wish to transfer people's cases as soon as possible

"must not ... jeopardise the safe and secure transfer process".

I will always prioritise making sure that people get the payments they are entitled to, in these troubled times above all.

I know that the changes to our timetable and the continuing uncertainty will be disappointing to many people. Social security is just one of many areas of our lives that the all-pervasive impact of the pandemic has thrown off-course. Yet, as we remain focused on delivering a system that looks and feels substantially different, one that is founded on dignity, fairness and respect, I feel full of hope about what we can—what we will—achieve, despite the difficulties caused by Covid-19.

This time next week, families of severely disabled children will begin receiving an additional £200 towards their heating costs. In three months' time, the Scottish child payment will start to be paid to families of children under 6. This time next year, disabled children across Scotland will be getting support from our new child disability payment and we will have begun the work of transferring existing Scottish clients safely and securely from the DWP to Social Security Scotland. The following year we will replace PIP and, with UK Government co-operation, roll out the Scottish child payment to under 16s and help lift 30,000 children out of poverty.

There is no denying that we are living through unprecedented and difficult times, but despite the adversity, and in partnership with the people of Scotland, we are continuing to change lives for the better through our new social security system.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The cabinet secretary will now take questions on the issues raised in her statement. There are only 20 minutes or so for questions; there is no time in hand. I call Rachael Hamilton to be followed by Pauline McNeill.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): I thank the cabinet secretary for prior sight of her statement, and I take this opportunity to thank Social Security Scotland staff for their support during the Covid effort.

The financial hardship caused by the pandemic during the past seven months is unprecedented, as the cabinet secretary said. Will she commit to backdating the Scottish child payment, so that families of children who are eligible now but will turn six before February are not excluded? What estimate has the Scottish Government made of how many children will be affected by turning six before the end of 2022? What alternative support will be in place should Government decide not to backdate the payment?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As I hope the member would expect, we have looked very seriously at whether it is possible to backdate the Scottish child payment. It is not possible to do so because the system was not designed to allow that to happen. The process was put in place many months ago, when Scottish child payment was being considered. The Scottish child payment was designed to build on the best start grant and best start food, which allowed us to bring in the Scottish child payment more quickly. To backdate it would require Social Security Scotland staff to analyse every single application for every single week of the application. Ironically, that level of administrative burden would put back the start date for the Scottish child payment. The system was designed to be brought in at speed—and it has been brought in at speed—which means that there are limitations to how it can be used.

However, we have done a great deal to support people, including low-income families, during the Covid pandemic. That includes increasing the Scottish welfare fund, discretionary housing payments and, of course, free school meals assistance.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): Scottish Labour recognises that Covid-19 has set back Scotland's social security system and we thank the workforce for what they have done to keep the system going over the past nine months. Claims have shot up five-fold during that period, so the delay is unfortunate, as more people would have benefited from face-to-face contact and a new approach to social security. We welcome the cabinet secretary's announcements on the job start payment and child disability winter heating

allowance, but it is a shame for families who will be disappointed that they cannot get access to those benefits sooner.

In relation to the new adult disability payment, what progress has been made on implementing lifelong awards for people with a condition that is unlikely to change? During the passage of the legislation, there was agreement that that is where we would ideally like to be, in order that the dignity of people who have disabilities that cause a lifelong condition can be restored and their quality of life improved. Can the cabinet secretary say anything to reassure me that we are on target to get to that stage, at least by the next session of Parliament?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: That, again, is an issue that is being given active consideration, and I continue to look at it. When we have the adult disability payment, review dates will vary from five to 10 years, and people with disabilities or conditions that are very unlikely to change will be given a review date accordingly.

Importantly, the reviews will be very light touch and may be as simple as the agency sending out correspondence and getting reassurance from the client that their condition has not improved. That may be all the information that a light-touch review needs.

We are working with stakeholders and users on the light-touch review process to make sure that we get it right. When we say "light touch", we genuinely mean that. We will get the information that we need to make a decision in a way that causes the minimum stress and difficulty for the client. I will keep the issue under consideration.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Eleven members wish to ask questions, so I want short questions and answers to match.

Shona Robison (Dundee City East) (SNP): How has the pandemic impacted on the recruitment of staff by the agency to date, and what does today's announcement mean for future recruitment in Dundee?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The Scottish Government temporarily stopped all recruitment activity from March to July to protect the safety of the candidates and redirect staff to respond to the pandemic. That had a major impact on recruitment by the agency.

The first clients for the child disability payment were due to be interviewed on what was the first day of lockdown and more than 500 interviews had to be postponed, but we are now getting back on track.

We have been able to make offers to some successful candidates. We have had to make some changes to the way in which the agency

works, and much of the training and recruitment is now done virtually. More than 400 new colleagues have joined the agency since the introduction of the Covid-19 restrictions. We will continue to work in the virtual environment and support people through that process throughout this year and into next. That will include bringing more jobs to Dundee.

Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green): The cabinet secretary said that she will consult early next year on the strategic direction for carers assistance. Will the consultation include proposals to provide additional support for people who care for more than one person, and will the Scottish Government look into the possibility of scrapping the 20m rule for disability benefits? That rule has led to thousands of Scots losing their mobility component and Motability vehicles.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: We are developing our policy work within Government on the issue of the 20m rule at the moment and I will report on our deliberations in due course. Again, the issue is something that is under active consideration at this point. The carers assistance consultation will look at a myriad of issues. Alison Johnstone mentions one that is often brought up by carers when we look to see how carers allowance will develop. I would be very surprised if it was not brought up again by stakeholders during the next consultation process.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): The Prime Minister's views on devolution would appal most moderate and reasonable people. The Liberal Democrats fought alongside the Government for a Scottish Parliament and for more powers for this chamber. We agreed on the Smith commission and the creation of our own social security system. However, that was six years ago. This is really important. The cabinet secretary states that, this year—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I would like to hear a question.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I am coming to the question, Presiding Officer.

The cabinet secretary states that, this year, the Scottish Government is spending £111 million, but at its full extent the spend will eventually be £4 billion. Is she comfortable with the length of time that the process is taking? Neither the Scottish Parliament nor the DWP have covered themselves in glory in that regard.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As I said in my statement, we were on track to deliver the child disability payment this year, and we would still have been on track to deliver the adult disability payment early next year, had it not been for Covid. I hope that Alex Cole-Hamilton recognises that Covid has had an impact on the timetables of both

the Scottish Government and the DWP in that respect.

However, I point out that the agency is delivering nine benefits, six of which are completely new, while the others are more generous than their DWP alternatives. We will add to that by delivering the Scottish child payment by February next year. That is a very good use of the Parliament's powers to date on social security.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): I understand that engagement with stakeholders and experience panels has been disrupted by Covid. Can the cabinet secretary assure us that people's lived experience remains central to the development of our social security system?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: That is an important question, because it is the feedback that we get from users on the experience panels that will make our system very different. That work had to be stopped because some of the experience panel members are among the most vulnerable in our society. That was a real difficulty for the programme, because we rely on that feedback to be able to move forward.

We are now moving forward, although we are doing so differently and virtually, but engagement remains at the heart of our work, despite its being done in a different way. Recently, I was pleased to see feedback on our application form for the adult disability payment, the development of which has been heavily influenced by users and practitioners.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): We know that the Scottish National Party is still relying on the UK Government to deliver a large part of its welfare programme. The SNP is paying the UK Government £400 million to retain delivery elements of the devolved benefits system.

Even without the current crisis, the Government was always going to be delayed with regard to when those benefits were going to be devolved. Rather than relying on the DWP to deliver disability benefits, when does the Government think that the social security system in Scotland will be fully up and running?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As I said in my statement, and as I have said in previous statements, we are still determined to fulfil our ambition to complete delivery by 2025. The process is a joint programme with the DWP. I hope that every member in the chamber will recognise that we have all been impacted by Covid-19 and its implications in the way that we work, and that we have had to change the way that we work. Nonetheless, we are still determined to make use of the powers wisely, safely and securely and to deliver the programme by 2025.

Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP): The Scottish Government has published a series of policy papers on the process for people to apply for disability benefits and how decisions are made. Can the cabinet secretary reassure members that such transparency will continue as decisions are made particularly about the benefits that, as she outlined, the Scottish Government is progressing in its policy work?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I was pleased to publish the papers that Joan McAlpine mentions, as they set out the progress that we have still been able to make over this difficult year in designing disability benefits that will make a real difference. They cover the entire system, from how people apply through to the decision and beyond. The important point is that the decisions in the policy papers were very much based on the lived experience that John Mason mentioned and on the views of stakeholders. I hope that the experience panels and stakeholders were able to look at those policy papers and see the real impact that they have had on the policy that we, as a Government, have developed.

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): I appreciate the answer that the cabinet secretary gave to Alison Johnstone, but can she set out when she expects to update the Parliament and disabled people themselves about the 20m rule for mobility entitlement? It is an issue on which we are getting lobbied non-stop.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I assure Mark Griffin that I want to make that announcement, so as to give people reassurance, as soon as I can. I know that people have been concerned about the issue for some time, which is why we are determined to see what can be done. I have always said that that would be within certain parameters, such that we would need to keep adult disability payment along much the same lines as what is done under the criteria for PIP, to ensure that we do not have two systems running at once. At the same time, however, I have stressed that we can run a system that makes fair and reasonable decisions for people that will be very different, even if many of the criteria remain the same. We are examining the criteria for the 20m rule very carefully to see whether any changes can be made within the safe and secure transition that is our main priority.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): What reassurances can the cabinet secretary provide that the work to ensure that disability benefits are up and running, with the first of them starting next year, will not be impacted further by Covid-19 or, indeed, by partners such as the DWP?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The timescales that I have set out today have been subject to much discussion and deliberation not just within the

Scottish Government and the agency but with our partners, very much including the DWP. We have the DWP's agreement that it can support the dates that I have announced.

I can, I hope, provide reassurance that we will do everything that we can to deliver to the timescales that I have set out today. As members have heard from the First Minister, we are still very much in the grip of the pandemic, so none of us can be certain about what will happen next with Covid-19. If there are effects of the on-going pandemic that impact on the Scottish Government, Social Security Scotland or, indeed, any of our partners to the extent that they would change the timetables, I will, of course, update Parliament accordingly. However, I am hopeful that we will continue to make progress in controlling the virus and will be able to deliver disability assistance as I set out in my statement.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): The cabinet secretary says that it is her

"ambition to roll out the Scottish child payment to under-16s by the end of 2022".

How can we have any confidence that that will actually happen?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Because, I hope, the member and other members on the Conservative benches, in particular, will support me in encouraging the DWP to give us the data that will allow us to deliver it. The key point, when it comes to delivering the Scottish child payment for under-16s, is the fact that we do not have the data for that at the moment. We need to get that data from the DWP, but we are still waiting for the DWP to carry out a feasibility study so that it can tell the Scottish Government what we will need to do by way of building any interface to allow that to happen. I look forward to working with Mr Simpson and other Conservatives as we all encourage the DWP to move forward on that in the best interests of the children of Scotland.

Tom Arthur (Renfrewshire South) (SNP): Can the cabinet secretary outline some of the thinking behind how decisions to prioritise certain benefits such as the job start payment and the Scottish child payment were taken?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: We prioritised the Scottish child payment because of the real impact that it will have in reducing child poverty and helping hard-pressed families who are affected by the pandemic. I am delighted that we have delivered it within 18 months of announcing it, at a speed that is unprecedented in the UK.

My decisions to deliver child winter heating assistance and the job start payment were pragmatic. They were benefits that we could deliver quickly to make a difference to people

within the resource constraints that have been caused by the pandemic. The job start payment was nearing readiness for launch at the start of the pandemic, so there was a clear choice, especially as helping young people into work is key, and child winter heating assistance could be paid automatically and could therefore fit into the programme.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): Given the range of support payments that have been announced today and the fact that school clothing grant applications are available, what Scottish Government messaging will be delivered to help our constituents to access financial support and debt advice, given that more than 500,000 people now receive council tax support?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Sarah Boyack raises an important point. Although it is good to have benefits and payments in place, that alone is not good enough. They mean nothing if we do not tell people about them and ensure that the process for getting payments is easy. That is why the Scottish Government has ensured that, during the Covid pandemic, there have been marketing campaigns to encourage people to seek support and look into what they are entitled to. We continue to support Citizens Advice Scotland and others to do that work. The delivery of benefits is one aspect, but we also have a legal and an important moral obligation to ensure that the benefit take-up is exceptionally strong at all times—and especially during a pandemic.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes questions on the statement. I thank the cabinet secretary and members. We managed to get through all the questions.

Veterans and Armed Forces Community

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): The next item of business is a debate on motion S5M-23370, in the name of Graeme Dey, on Scottish Government support for the veterans and armed forces community in Scotland 2020. I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons now.

15:56

The Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans (Graeme Dey): I am delighted to present the Scottish Government's fourth annual update to Parliament on support for the veterans and armed forces community. I advise that the Government will support Labour's amendment to the Government motion.

Since 2017, we have committed to returning to the chamber annually to update members, and to showcase the work that we are doing to improve services support and ensure that there is no disadvantage for serving personnel, veterans and their families. I welcome the opportunity to deliver the update.

This week, we published "Scottish Government Support for the Veterans and Armed Forces Community 2020", detailing fully what we are doing across ministerial portfolios, and how we are working with partners in the public, private and third sectors. Cross-cutting collaborative teamwork is at the heart of the Government's approach, which is perhaps no better highlighted than through the veterans strategy. In January, we published our strategy response, detailing how we will deliver on our commitment through to 2028. Taking the strategy forward in Scotland will be a collaborative effort across Government and with the veterans community. I am committed to continuing our joint-working approach to improving the lives of serving personnel, veterans and their families.

By supporting effective collaboration, we see a force multiplier and improved outcomes. The best example of that is the unforgotten forces consortium, which is a partnership of charitable organisations that deliver services to older veterans in Scotland. Earlier this year, I was pleased, in fact I was delighted, to announce that the Scottish Government is to contribute £750,000 over three years to the consortium to improve the health, wellbeing and quality of life of veterans. That was a gesture of support for the work that the consortium has been doing, and for that model.

The Scottish veterans fund is another example of public, private and charitable sector collaboration. We continue to invest in the fund. This year, in partnership with Standard Life Aberdeen, we have funded 15 projects, with funding totalling more than £165,000. Since 2008, more than 170 projects have received a total of more than £1.6 million from the fund. The criteria for bids this year was extended to include projects that address the impact of Covid-19 on the veterans community.

I have been clear that supporting veterans and their families to develop their skills and to find fulfilling and meaningful employment is a priority. I was delighted to announce a recent refresh of the veterans employability strategic group, with new co-chairs, to develop an ambitious vision. Originally formed following a Scottish veterans commissioner recommendation, the group still has an important role to play in improving the opportunities for veterans in Scotland. I believe that it will benefit greatly from the fresh pair of eyes of our external co-chair, Sue Bomphray. Many members in the chamber will have met Sue in her role at Barclays, where she very much walked the walk in relation to veterans. I believe that she is the perfect choice for the post.

On the subject of walking the walk, I can also announce progress regarding veterans employment in the Government. The Scottish Government is offering work placements to service leavers and veterans through the going forward into employment programme. Working with the Career Transition Partnership, we will on-board ex-service personnel through short placements and fixed-term appointments, which could subsequently be converted to permanent roles. I am delighted that the first two candidates are expected to join the Scottish Government in a matter of months.

Following engagement with the Officers Association Scotland, nine veterans are now in temporary roles in the Scottish Government, primarily to support our response to Covid-19, with more joining soon. The nature of those appointments will not permit conversion to permanent roles, but they are another positive step in providing employment opportunities and experience for veterans.

On skills, the Scottish Government has committed to funding until 2023 the valuable work on mapping military qualifications against those that are recognised by employers. That will help employers and educational institutions to understand the skills and expertise that service leavers have to offer, and will support individuals to articulate their skills. That work has focused initially on infantry qualifications, but is now

beginning to look at Royal Navy catering services qualifications.

I also highlight the project that is being led by Skills Development Scotland to support veterans to develop their skills and help to address the significant gap in the nation's cybersecurity workforce. Funded by the Scottish Government, it aims to reskill those with military security training and experience for roles that include security consultants and operations centre managers. It was developed following research that was commissioned by SDS and which looked into ways that career changers and the unemployed could be reskilled for cybersecurity careers, using alternative flexible and accessible pathways.

The project will add technical cyberskills to the students' existing training and experience. Twenty ex-military participants are taking part in the eight-week programme to learn ethical hacking and penetration skills, at Abertay University and through online study and work placements. The programme restarted in September, having been interrupted by Covid-19.

Not only serving personnel and veterans need our support; I remain determined that we do all that we can to help their families, too. Service children who need additional support for learning because of their parents' service will have their needs met through the additional support for learning framework. In October, the Scottish Government published its response to the review of the implementation of additional support for learning, and accepted all the recommendations. We will continue to work with partners to deliver those actions, thereby ensuring that children and young people can flourish in their learning and beyond.

I can also announce that, at the end of November, a refresh of the capitalising on military talent toolkit will be formally launched, to include information on the benefits of employing military family members, particularly spouses and partners, and to improve the knowledge of employers on how to do that successfully, which will enable more partners and family members to secure good-quality employment and continue to participate and progress in the workplace.

My ministerial colleagues and I are also committed to improving access and removing barriers to healthcare for the veterans and armed forces community. I am delighted that the Scottish veterans care network, having suffered a delay in roll-out caused by the pandemic, will be formally launched later this week, with an immediate focus on developing a mental health action plan.

Improving veterans' mental health is a priority. This year, we have invested £1.4 million in Combat Stress, and we have provided joint

funding with six health boards for the Veterans First Point network. Since 2017, the Scottish Government has provided nearly £3 million to support Veterans First Point's services, and I am pleased to confirm that funding for V1P will continue, at the current level, for 2021-22.

We continue to work closely with local authorities, and I am committed to supporting our champions network. This year, we distributed veterans and armed forces awareness e-learning to councils. It is intended particularly for their front-line staff, to improve understanding of the armed forces covenant and how its principles should be applied locally. Feedback has been extremely positive, and I look forward to discussing it when I host the champions at a virtual round table next month.

On housing, the Scottish Government continues to offer funding from the £1.3 million grant award to Veterans Housing Scotland to support it as it progresses proposals to deliver homes for disabled ex-service personnel. In addition, the open market shared equity scheme, which offers successful applicants a stake of up to 40 per cent in the equity of a property, continues to be available to veterans who have left the forces in the past two years.

My ministerial colleagues and I are intent on providing the best support for veterans, service personnel and their families. We will continue to work collaboratively with partners across all sectors, now and in the future, to improve that support. I very much look forward to hearing contributions to the debate from members of all parties.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises the importance of Scotland's veterans and armed forces community and greatly values the significant contribution that they continue to make to Scotland; supports *The Strategy for our Veterans*, developed jointly with the UK Government, devolved governments and partners across the public, private and third sectors, which has a clear vision to ensure the best possible outcomes for veterans and their families; notes that, earlier this year, the Scottish Government published its response to its strategy consultation setting out how it will take that vision forward in Scotland, and agrees that the Scottish Government should continue to work in partnership across the Scottish public, private and charitable sectors, and with the UK Government and the other devolved governments, to ensure that the veterans and armed forces community receives the best possible support and access to services across Scotland.

16:04

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): For people who have served in the military—a military that has been at war for much of my lifetime—reintegration into civilian life can be challenging. Are we doing enough to ease that

transition for those who have served, and who have sacrificed so much, on our behalf?

I think that there is much better recognition of the challenges that military personnel face. Since the inception of this Parliament—the inception of devolution—good progress has been made. In my view, devolution has worked for veterans. That said, there is much more to be done.

The transition from uniformed duty to civilian status is not just a change of jobs. It is a change in virtually every aspect of life—career, responsibilities, job, home, community, lifestyle, healthcare, training and more. If service members have families, the transition also means big changes for their spouses and children.

Many organisations that were set up by veterans for veterans and their families have reported that during the Covid period demand for support has increased and the ability to raise funds has decreased. That is why we lodged an amendment that recognises the issue and calls on the Parliament to agree to work with such groups, to help to get them through.

Richard Lyle (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): Does the member, as a former councillor, agree that some councils do not do enough for veterans or place them highly enough on housing waiting lists?

Alex Rowley: The minister will say more about the issue, which we have discussed. There is a mix across local authorities, but I think that progress is being made in near enough every local authority that I have talked to recently. However, that is why we lodged the amendment, as I said.

We recognise the urgent need for a Scottish veterans care network and veterans mental health plan, and we welcome the steps towards their development. Mental illness is common and can affect anyone, including serving and former members of the armed forces and their families. Some people cope by getting support from family and friends or help with other issues in their lives. Others need clinical care and treatment, which could come from the national health service, support groups or charities.

Although it is completely normal to experience anxiety or depression after a traumatic event, such feelings can be tough to deal with. At a time when demand on our already-stretched mental health services is growing, it is important that the Government works with all organisations that provide support specifically to veterans.

Although good progress is being made, I say to the minister that many of the Scottish veterans commissioner's recommendations have not been fully implemented. All the recommendations, which are on areas such as housing, health and

employability, are essential if we are to ensure that veterans in Scotland are supported. That is a challenge, particularly in housing, given that we have a chronic shortage in that regard. However, older veterans in particular must be able to rely on safe, good quality and affordable housing.

Many people who have fought for their country bring long-term conditions home with them. We need to make sure that we provide top-class economic and social support for vulnerable veterans who are suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and other debilitating conditions.

As a Fifer, I cannot speak in today's debate without mentioning this morning's press headline that the UK Government is proposing to dismantle the Black Watch. Rob Scott, the chairman of the Fife branch of the Black Watch Association, has said that a decision to remove the Black Watch battalion from the Royal Regiment of Scotland would be a tragedy for history and would accelerate a downward spiral for the military side of the Army in Scotland. I ask Conservative members to have a word with their leaders in London, who seem determined to destroy all things Scottish, and to tell them about the relationship between the Black Watch and communities across Fife and Scotland. Because of that relationship, there is widespread support for veterans across Scottish communities.

I want to mention the families of people who did not come back from the recent conflicts. I have met many families of people who lost their lives and I say to them that our Parliament thinks of all those people, particularly at this time of year.

I move amendment S5M-23370.1, to insert at end:

“; notes the impact of COVID-19 on the ability of veterans charities to raise funds and provide support for veterans and their families, and agrees to work with such charities to support them through this period.”

16:10

Maurice Corry (West Scotland) (Con): I declare an interest as a proud veteran and as convener of the cross-party group on the armed forces and veterans community. I heard the rumour about the Black Watch, which greatly concerns me, although I have not looked into it yet. I was second in command of 3, Black Watch in Perth, which covered Strathmore, Angus, Montrose, Perth and Fife, so I know very well what Mr Rowley is talking about. We managed to recruit successfully in those areas and had drill halls in Dundee, Montrose and Forfar, as well as Perth, Kirkcaldy and other areas.

I am pleased to take part in the debate in support of our veterans across Scotland and the efforts made to champion what they have to offer.

We shall support the Government's motion; indeed, we shall support Labour's amendment, too, because I quite understand where my colleague Mr Rowley is coming from when he talks about the charities that need so much support at the moment, in kind and particularly in advice.

The dedication of servicemen and women in protecting our country is of the highest standard. That was most recently evidenced in their immediate assistance with the United Kingdom's Covid-19 response. Their contribution means that they deserve every opportunity to succeed when they return to civilian life. To make that possible requires continued partnered support from across our sectors and at every level of government.

“The Strategy for our Veterans”, published in 2018, was the collective work of the UK Government and devolved Administrations across the UK. Those collaborative efforts were driven not by party or political gain but by a recognised need to promote a multilevel co-ordination of veterans support to ensure that service leavers not only transition well but truly excel in whatever they choose to do. With that joined-up approach, our Governments and veterans stakeholders work to highlight and maximise the wide-ranging skills and abilities of our veterans. Now, more than ever, that co-ordinated approach must continue to improve signposting and increase awareness of the help available.

I welcome the work of the Scottish Government in building on that strategy, based on its own far-reaching consultation. The strategy abides by commendable principles: that veterans are of value and benefit to society; that they should be encouraged and equipped to maximise their potential; and that every veteran should be able to access support and advice at the point of need. I believe that every effort is being made, by both the Scottish and UK Governments, to achieve those principles. Thankfully, veterans support has generally come a long way, especially in the past decade. We have seen a welcome shift in the narrative—one that moves on from the tired notion of a one-size-fits-all approach to support for veterans. Of course, many ex-service personnel transition back into society successfully and pursue their chosen career without requiring additional support. However, some individuals experience challenges, such as securing a house—as referred to earlier—or steady work, or managing their physical and mental wellbeing.

Unfortunately, Covid-19 has exacerbated those issues. Employment is one such example. Job criteria can often be overly specific, despite a veteran's clear capability for a role. I hope that the Scottish Government will focus on incentivising more businesses to put their support of the armed forces covenant into practice, particularly

regarding the recruitment of younger early service leavers, where there is space for improvement. I am delighted to hear the minister's statement today about more emphasis on employment opportunities, skills, training and qualifications.

Given those challenging circumstances, the response of veterans organisations and charities in Scotland has been nothing short of inspiring. Operating under heavy constraints, most have fought to adapt and increase their services to answer heightened demand, particularly in cases of social isolation and anxiety. For instance, the Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Families Association Forces Help has established an emergency response fund, which has assisted veterans with accessing benefits and entitlements. In Helensburgh over the weekend, I was involved in the case of a Welsh infantryman who, unfortunately, had been sleeping on the streets for too long. We managed to bring him inside to temporary accommodation, thanks to SSAFA and Argyll and Bute Council working well together. That is a superb example of how support can work when we put our minds to it. That veteran is under care in relation to managing his housing needs.

Combat Stress, with financial support from the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust, has launched a digital treatment and support platform, which offers rehabilitative programmes and resources to improve mental health and Veterans' Gateway, as the first point of contact for all veterans in the UK, continues its 24/7 assistance for finances, employment, housing and physical and mental wellbeing.

I again emphasise to the minister my concern—I know we are going to discuss it—and my wish to include merchant navy veterans in Scotland. That is important and I know that we have discussed before the presence of a lot of them in our islands and rural areas.

Organisations such as those, which number almost 300 in Scotland, provide a wealth of practical tailor-made support for veterans who require it and, crucially, their families as well. Collaborative referral pathways—especially evident with Veterans' Gateway and, for older veterans, the Unforgotten Forces Consortium—have proved integral to removing barriers or complexities in accessing support, and I welcome the additional funding from the Scottish Government for those organisations. Of course, virtually operated services cannot replace normal face-to-face advice and the Scottish Government will want to continue to encourage work in that area on overcoming those hurdles. Obviously, the sector—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am sorry, Mr Corry, I have not given you an extra minute; could

you begin to wind up? I am smiling at you benignly.

Maurice Corry: I am trying to conclude.

The responsibility to support the veterans community lies not with only one organisation or Government. The UK and devolved Governments, along with our private and charity stakeholders and, indeed, the wider public, all share accountability for promoting the skills and experiences of our veterans. With greater signposting and co-ordination of the help available, that is the most fitting way that we can show our gratitude for their service.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Rumbles, in fairness to you, I will not grumble if you take an extra minute.

16:17

Mike Rumbles (North East Scotland) (LD): If I may, I will mention to Maurice Corry my Black Watch credentials. I served with the Black Watch and other Scottish infantry regiments during my first army posting to Glencorse barracks back in 1980. It was some time ago, but there we are.

I very much welcome the annual debate focusing on the welfare of our armed forces veterans. I cannot help but find it difficult to refer to myself as a veteran, but I left the army when I was 38. I am approaching retirement age, so perhaps I will get more used to it.

During the parliamentary session, I have repeatedly taken the annual opportunity to highlight the difficulties, particularly in access to health services, faced by veterans who live in the Grampian health board area. I have long argued that our veterans, wherever they may live in Scotland, should have the same access to NHS physical and mental health services.

In last year's debate, I was, for the first time, heartened by the approach of the Scottish Government in seriously addressing the issue. I was particularly taken with the personal commitment of Graeme Dey, the minister for veterans, to tackle the issue, building on the work of his predecessor. I was pleased to hear that the minister was to launch a national veterans care network in the spring of this year. The network was to provide service improvement and planning across the whole country, which would ensure that veterans have access to specialist care wherever they live in Scotland. That is exactly what I have been calling for since I came back to the Parliament in 2016. However, the launch of the network has been understandably delayed by the focus on tackling the Covid-19 pandemic—as I say, I totally accept the reasons for the delay. It is great news that the network is to be launched on

19 November and I whole-heartedly commend the minister for his efforts to ensure that that takes place.

I wonder whether, in his summing up, the minister could commit to briefing members who are particularly interested on how the network will operate. That would be very helpful, because there is much in the field to be done.

In June, the Scottish veterans commissioner published an update on how things were going, which covered transition, housing, employability, skills and learning, and health and wellbeing. It was a snapshot of how well Government was doing against previous recommendations. Of the 63 recommendations, 18 had been fully implemented, with two being superseded. In the time available, I will not go into those in depth, but, although there is much still to be done, Graeme Dey should be commended for driving those forward.

I will be retiring from the Scottish Parliament next year, although, because of the new bill that has been published this morning, it will be on 5 May rather than at the end of March. I am pleased to say that, in my time here, I have seen a much-needed improvement in the services that are made available for all our veterans across all parts of Scotland, and particularly in my area in the north-east. I am glad to have had an opportunity to say so.

The Presiding Officer said that I had extra time, which is funny, because I had prepared a very short contribution. The moment that I do that, she gives me more time, but that is the way of life.

I end my contribution to the debate by saying well done to the minister. Members do not often hear that from me, do they?

Members: No!

Mike Rumbles: Well done to the minister for his personal commitment to getting the national veterans care network launched this week. Long may the good work continue, because there is certainly much more to do.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you. Just because I give you an extra minute, that does not mean that you have to use it. We move to the open debate.

16:21

Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): I mark my appreciation of and offer my thanks to our veterans and armed forces community. It is a special community, which is a huge asset to Scotland and makes an enormous contribution to our country. I also commend the Scottish National Party Scottish Government and, in particular, the

minister for their continuing, unwavering support for the community and their determination to put veterans on the map. This Government was the first in the life of our reconvened Scottish Parliament to have a veterans minister and the first across these isles to appoint an independent Scottish veterans commissioner. Another key structural innovation has been the establishment across local councils and NHS health boards of veterans champions, and I commend the significant contribution within Fife Council of its veterans champion Councillor Rod Cavanagh, who is a former marine.

In the short time available, I will focus on three specific issues. The first is the important issue of mental health, which members have mentioned. Not all veterans easily make the transition to civilian life, so we need to support them in that transition. I welcome the further funding, which was announced today, to Veterans First Point Scotland, which plays a pivotal role in that regard. I am pleased to note that, as part of its regional network, its Fife base is Cardenden in my constituency.

The second issue is housing, which has also been mentioned. Although a lot of activity is going on, for which I commend the Scottish Government—including the on-going work to develop a veterans homelessness prevention pathway—more can still be done, particularly in relation to adaptations. In my experience, SSAFA provides invaluable support, but, even with its involvement, it can be difficult to get things moving in a timely manner, and I hope that the minister can use his good offices in that regard.

The third issue concerns employability and transferable skills and, again, I note the good work that is going on there. The minister referred to some of that in his opening statement, and I am particularly interested in the work of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework Partnership, which is working on the mapping of military qualifications that are recognised by employers in Scotland. Again, there is more to be done; I imagine that employers could do a lot more in that regard, and I urge them to step up to the plate.

I am proud of the Scottish Government's continued commitment to our veterans and armed forces community. Sadly, that must be contrasted with the devastating news in today's paper that yet another UK Government—this time of a Tory hue—has the Black Watch in its sights. For the sake of completeness, I ask who can forget the then Labour Secretary of State for Defence, Geoff Hoon, who started the amalgamation process in 2004 and made the announcement on the very day that the Black Watch was returning from its second back-to-back tour of duty in Iraq. Another day, another Westminster betrayal.

16:24

Peter Chapman (North East Scotland) (Con):

I welcome the opportunity to speak about the annual veterans update and how both the UK and Scottish Governments can continue to protect and support our veterans who have sacrificed, and continue to sacrifice, so much to serve our country.

The role of the armed services during the nation's most recent time of need, Covid-19, cannot be overstated, from setting up hospitals and ensuring that mobile testing units were available, to supporting care homes and rural areas with local testing, including in Peterhead in my local area—that was a real bonus. It is reassuring to know that, once more, in our time of need, the armed forces are ready and able to step up and support us.

It is with that in mind that I am glad to hear that the UK and Scottish Governments continue to work together to achieve the goals set out in “The Strategy for our Veterans” to address the immediate needs of older veterans and develop ways for the newer generation of veterans to be empowered and supported. It is encouraging to note that the Scottish Government's consultation on veteran support in Scotland found no significant gaps in support for veterans, but it outlined areas where improvements could be made. Indeed, constant improvement in veterans support should always be strived for and achieved.

I am pleased that the UK Government has committed £6 million of extra funding to armed forces charities to support veterans, personnel and their families through the pandemic and has set up a new Office for Veterans' Affairs. The new office has been tasked with delivering better outcomes for veterans, focusing in particular on mental health, employment and housing. Indeed, the launch of the HeadFIT website, a site that allows 24/7 access to online self-help tools that aim to enhance mood, drive and confidence, as well as manage the stresses of everyday life, shows that there is an important emphasis on ensuring that veterans have access to tools that aid recovery from mental as well as physical trauma.

The Scottish Government has provided significant funding to the unforgotten forces partnership to ensure that it can continue its vital work. The Scottish veterans fund continues to allocate funding to projects ranging from the provision of mental health support and employment opportunities to housing support for veterans.

I would like to highlight the use of the third sector in achieving the goals of “The Strategy for our Veterans”. In 2019, there were 291 armed forces charities operating in Scotland. I would

particularly like to highlight the efforts of Joyce MacMillan, who is the Scottish co-ordinator of Soldiers off the Street and also runs a charity shop in Fraserburgh that aims to support veterans and their families. Joyce is a real enthusiast, and with her team around her, she makes a real difference to our veterans in the north-east. I thank Joyce for her dedication.

It would be remiss of me not to highlight the extraordinary efforts of armed forces charities in adapting to the challenges of Covid-19 this year and providing opportunities to people to mark remembrance day virtually and through other means. It was a very strange and quiet occasion in Fraserburgh. Normally, we have hundreds of people marching to the monument for the laying of wreaths, but this year it was a very quiet affair.

All of us here recognise the need for help to be available to veterans in their hour of need, just as they continue to be there in our hour of need. I am sure that we all agree that it is an issue that transcends party politics. I call upon the UK and Scottish Governments to work together, with the third sector, to ensure that the needs of our veterans are met.

16:29

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate on the fourth annual update on support for the armed forces and veterans community in Scotland. It may well be our last such debate in this session. If so, I take the opportunity—I cannot believe that I am going to use these words—to join Mike Rumbles in congratulating the minister on the work that he has done over the past two and more years. In working with veterans organisations and other parties, he has shown a genuine and personal commitment. I also mention the work of Maurice Corry over the years through the cross-party group on armed forces and veterans community. There is no question about the commitment that he has shown to all sorts of veterans organisations across Scotland, so well done to him.

I am very proud that the Scottish Government's commitment to the armed forces and veterans community is a matter of public record. Not least, I am proud of the appointment of a Scottish veterans commissioner, which was the first of its kind anywhere in the UK.

In August, I lodged a motion in the Parliament that celebrated the 10th anniversary of the Armed Services Advice Project, which has been crucial in ensuring that veterans and their families get the support that they are entitled to and deserve. I thank all the members across the chamber who supported that motion, as well as those who

supported my more recent motion celebrating the removal of all land mines from the Falkland Islands.

The Armed Services Advice Project is run by Citizens Advice Scotland and has been funded by a coalition of military charities since it was founded in 2010. Since then, it has supported more than 16,000 people and has unlocked nearly £18 million—that is an extraordinary amount of money. When we look at some of the individual cases involved, we see that the change that the project has made to veterans' lives has often been huge. Veterans are perfectly entitled to the money but, through reluctance or because they are not aware of the support, they have not picked up the benefits. The support includes welfare benefits, unpaid wages, compensation and money from other funding sources.

I take this opportunity to record my thanks for the advice and support that the project has been able to provide to my constituents over the past 10 years, not least, through Ally Gemmell, who works in Stirling but has worked with veterans in my local area. In particular, I highlight the hard work and commitment of Ally and his staff. He is a regional support officer, and he and his staff cover Clackmannanshire, in my constituency, and parts of Stirling. They provide an excellent and, sometimes, life-changing service to the veterans who receive their support.

As is recognised in so many areas, we have to drive responses by including the lived experience of individuals. That is exactly the approach that the Armed Services Advice Project takes. It was the perfect organisation to work with the Money Advice Trust to ensure that its "How to deal with debt" guide, which is funded by the Scottish Government and is due to be launched later this year, addresses the specific needs of the veterans community.

Despite the challenges that we have faced over the past year, I am very pleased that sustained progress has been made to support the veterans and armed forces community. I note that adjustments have been made as a result of the pandemic, which has obviously provided a challenge for people in the community.

I agree with Alex Rowley's point that devolution has been extremely good for our veterans and armed forces community in Scotland.

The reason why the story about the Black Watch is important and should feature in the debate is that the support structure, which includes pastoral support, for locally driven recruitment areas that serve particular regiments is vital to veterans. I hope that, as a result of the debate, we will have a united approach from the chamber. It might be that there is nothing to the

story. The UK Government might not intend to get rid of the Black Watch, but if it does, a united approach from the chamber in speaking out against any attempt to remove the Black Watch would be very welcome.

On that point, I should declare an interest. My grandfather served with the Black Watch in 1918. In fact, when I was a toddler, he used to regularly regale me with stories about a young guy called Mike Rumbles and some of the things that they got up to when they were both in the Black Watch. I cannot believe that I have started and finished a speech with reference to Mike Rumbles. However, there is a very important point. The communities that our service personnel join—their regiments—are extremely important to them after they have left the service. I hope that there will be no further reduction in the regiments in Scotland.

Well done to the minister and to Maurice Corry.

16:34

Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab): I thank Graeme Dey for bringing the debate to the chamber. Last week, I had the privilege of taking part in the remembrance day debate and speaking about some charities that assist our veterans, ensuring that support is available for serving and ex-service personnel.

The Scottish Government has a responsibility to veterans on several devolved issues, including housing, health and social care, skills and employability, and education. There are about 400,000 veterans in Scotland—there are more than 500,000 people when the complete ex-service community, including families, is taken into account. The Scottish Government is committed to ensuring that no member of the armed forces, service family member or veteran faces disadvantage.

During today's debate, I would like to focus on mental health and the need for continual support—especially for our servicemen and women. I would also like to highlight charities such as Combat Stress and Rock2Recovery. Both have been working hard to develop online resources to provide peer support as well as maintaining helpline contacts aimed at coaching veterans and keeping them informed of techniques that might assist them in their time of need.

Some veterans with mental health issues might find themselves turning to drugs to alleviate their trauma. That can vary from alcohol to prescribed medication or illegal drug use. In last week's debate, I mentioned the Glasgow-based charity the Coming Home Centre. I spoke about the challenges that it faced at the beginning of lockdown and about the importance of repetitiveness and familiarity, problems being

heard and, of course, essential food packages being delivered.

The charity told me that, when it comes to mental health and wellbeing, a more joined-up method for support agencies is vital, as each individual serviceperson has different circumstances and a one-size-fits-all approach will always leave someone behind. I can give an example of a veteran with whom that charity is working who has tried, on numerous occasions, to take his own life with prescribed medication. Now his general practitioner will not prescribe until he is receiving help from an addiction team. The addiction team has a waiting list and, as he is now homeless, it has been difficult to negotiate with neighbouring councils to take responsibility for this veteran in his time of need.

Combat Stress reported that it is important to note that, as well as alcohol and drug consumption, chronic pain should be considered. In those cases, chronic pain might serve as a reminder of a traumatic event that will often make a veteran's psychological symptoms even worse and lead to them feeling low in mood or feeling that life is not worth living. Many veterans struggle with feelings of frustration and anger, and those might feel more intense due to the recent pandemic.

The charity also stated that military training means being very alert to hidden dangers, along with the ability to become angry and aggressive very quickly. That could be useful in the military and is often necessary when on active duty, but not in civilian life. Some veterans might be left feeling angry about their experiences. Therefore, building up relationships of trust is necessary, because opening up about their lived experience can increase cases of post-traumatic stress. The first step of agreeing to support is not an easy task, and once that trust has been gained a referral can be made.

However, many support agencies, such as rehabilitation centres, require a person to be alcohol or drug free for four weeks. Addiction teams are vital but, when waiting lists are long, it becomes a continuous merry-go-round. That is why it is vital that there is more support for serving and ex-service personnel who are experiencing mental health problems. It is also why increased funding for our veterans is necessary and should be considered as a matter of urgency.

It has been a privilege to take part in this very important and timely debate. Thank you.

16:38

Maureen Watt (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): Following last week's debate on remembrance commemorations, it is fitting that

this week we are discussing support for veterans and the armed forces community, as Mary Fee said.

Although the armed forces and defence in general are still the responsibility of the UK Government, it is right that the duty of care is shared with devolved Governments and partners across all sectors. The establishment of the Scottish veterans commissioner has been a very important step in ensuring that there is continuous progress and improvement in supporting veterans and their families.

Those leaving the armed forces and choosing Scotland as their home for themselves and their families are greatly valued for the contribution that they make to life in Scotland. In the north-east of Scotland, many former armed services personnel have found employment in the oil and gas sector over the years. That is not least because of the many transferable skills that they gained during their time in the forces. The harsh environment that they experienced during their time in the forces may not be that different from life offshore, if they are working in that environment.

Nonetheless, the transition to civilian life can sometimes be problematic. I therefore welcome the offer of work placements and fixed-term appointments for veterans through the going forward into employment programme.

One enduring concern for those involved with the armed forces and their families is the education of forces children. Getting it right for every child has special resonance for children who may have had many moves during their education. I commend the work that the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the General Teaching Council for Scotland are doing in that field. The GTCS is working to overcome barriers for teachers who may not have quite the right qualifications to work in Scotland, so that their qualifications can be recognised or so that they can get further qualifications.

The condition of the housing stock on bases for forces families has become an issue as we keep one eye on climate change and look to ensure that everyone has a warm, well-insulated house. It would be good to move towards more co-operation between the armed forces and local authorities on that. It is heartening that discussion with veterans charities has meant that bespoke homes are now being built for veterans with disabilities, if not at the pace that we would like to see.

The transition to civilian life is a smooth one for the majority of veterans. We should not forget that. However, that transition can be difficult for some. That can be compounded by the traumatic events that they may have experienced in action. Those

may lead to PTSD, a condition that affects not only the person themselves but their whole family. Like many MSPs, I have had to help families in such situations.

As Maurice Corry said, there are many veterans charities and there is more co-ordinated help than there once was. Many well-resourced veterans charities offer help with the issues that I have mentioned and with both physical and mental health. Keith Brown and I visited such facilities when we were ministers and Graeme Dey and I visited veterans organisations in Aberdeen in summer 2019.

What stays with me is the necessity for peer mentoring. Some veterans reject help and counselling because they believe that those mentoring them cannot understand what they have experienced. I am pleased that veterans charities and organisations increasingly recognise the importance of peer mentors who have experienced those things themselves.

Charities have found it difficult to deliver services during Covid. I commend all those who continue to be there for those who need it.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): Please come to a close.

Maureen Watt: There is help for veterans in Scotland. No one should feel that it is not there.

16:43

Michelle Ballantyne (South Scotland) (Con): Many years ago, there was a saying that, if the Army wanted you to have a wife, it would have issued you with one. When I was a young Army wife, one of my first experiences was giving evidence to an inquiry into how to improve life for families and prevent soldiers from leaving the forces earlier than they might have done.

I am glad to say that the past 38 years have seen positive change, not least because of the partnership between the UK Government, the devolved Administrations and the private, public and third sectors. That partnership has been underpinned by a recognition that our soldiers, sailors, airmen and airwomen have a right to a family life. They should also be able to trust that the country they served well will not forget them after their service ends.

The annual report contains a number of welcome messages about the progress that is being made, despite the challenges thrown up by the Covid pandemic. The commitment to rolling out the Scottish veterans care network is to be warmly welcomed. I hope that the minister will tell us more about how the network will be promoted and how the Scottish Government will ensure that

no veteran is unclear about where to go for help when they need it.

Ensuring that the first-class training that many service personnel receive finds equivalency in the world of work outside the forces is a positive step forward. There is absolutely no doubt that the British armed forces provide some of the best training anywhere in the world.

Despite efforts to increase the length and stability of postings, forces life still involves moving around and coping with separation. For children, having to move schools—potentially every couple of years—means the upheaval of making new friends, tackling a new curriculum if the education system differs, and re-establishing hobbies and club memberships.

Alongside that, service families often deal with stress and worry about their loved ones being sent to serve in an area of conflict. It is important that schools and teachers are given the skills to recognise and understand the impact of that on children. I am pleased that the update recognises that. Flagging school records so that all the people in a school know that a child has a parent who might be serving or away on active duty is an excellent step forward.

Building and sustaining a career can be difficult for the partners of serving forces members. In the modern world—especially when a serviceman leaves the forces and a family must settle—a dual income is often required, so it is important for a partner to build a career. If a person wants to move with their partner, they must be ready and prepared to change jobs and find openings where they can.

I am pleased that the General Teaching Council for Scotland is working with the Naval Families Federation to produce joint documentation—I hope that we will see it this month—that details requirements for teaching in Scotland. However, I ask the minister to say why the Scottish Government is not challenging some of the obstacles that the GTCS creates for teachers who are registered in other nations of the UK. Surely our schools could decide whether to employ individuals who are registered elsewhere. The requirement for an England-registered teacher to register with the GTCS strikes me as bureaucratic and unnecessary. It prevents schools in areas such as Moray from benefiting quickly and efficiently from the armed forces community when teacher shortages arise. I am also concerned that, if the pilot that is being run in colleges extends the GTCS registration requirement to college tutors, as is proposed, that will create further unnecessary barriers for people in armed forces families who wish to teach on postings to Scotland.

However, I will finish on a positive note. I echo the congratulations to the minister, Graeme Dey, because he has taken an extremely non-partisan and committed approach to our armed forces and veterans. We should all follow his example as time goes on.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The extra time has largely been used up.

16:48

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I thank the Scottish veterans commissioner for all his work, as I thank the minister, too. Perhaps it is a career-ending moment to be praised by Mike Rumbles, by Michelle Ballantyne and now even by me—for goodness' sake.

I very much welcome the debate. I support many of the points that the Scottish Government's motion makes, and I support the Labour amendment. The speeches that have been made show that there is a genuine cross-party desire to ensure that Scotland's ex-servicemen and women are supported and protected during the crisis and going forward. On the future of the Black Watch, which was first raised by my colleague Alex Rowley and then by others across the chamber, including Keith Brown, I think that we speak with one voice.

My constituency has a large armed forces community that is made up of veterans and current forces personnel who serve our country at Her Majesty's Naval Base Clyde as well as all over the UK and much further afield. In my 21 years—saying it quickly means that it does not sound as bad—as an MSP, I have seen at first hand the complex and unique set of needs that veterans have and the huge contribution that they can make to their communities. I welcome the decision that was finally taken earlier this year to include a question in the census that will provide information on whether someone has served in Her Majesty's armed forces.

Having a better understanding of the profile and needs of veterans is a key part of making sure that our public services are tailored for the armed forces community. However, there are legitimate concerns among trusted organisations such as Poppyscotland regarding the delay to the census. It is feared not only that the delay will result in Scottish returns being out of sync with those in other parts of the UK, but that it could hinder the planning and delivery of welfare services in the charitable and statutory sectors, which rely on accurate information about veterans and their families. Although members supported the census order, the issue can be addressed properly only by working closely with the UK Government to

minimise the negative impact that the delay will have on our veterans and their needs.

I welcome Graeme Dey's commitment to working continuously with the UK Government and the other devolved nations. He will know that I am a great believer in actions speaking louder than words. I will continue to take a keen interest in that developing relationship, not least in my role on the cross-party group on armed forces veterans.

I will turn to Covid, because servicemen and women have been actively engaged in meeting the challenges of the pandemic head on since the very beginning. Military personnel have transported vital medical equipment and resources to and from our hospitals and have contributed their time and energy by helping at testing centres across Scotland and in my community in Dumbarton and Helensburgh. At the height of lockdown, the Royal Air Force was also assisting with airlifting critically ill Covid patients from the most remote islands to hospitals, to ensure that they received medical attention as soon as possible. They have our heartfelt thanks from across the chamber for all that they have done to help and support our communities during tough times.

We all know how hard this year has been for many communities across Scotland, not least our armed forces community and all those who usually dedicate their time to supporting them. Organisations such as SSAFA, Poppyscotland, Veterans Scotland and many more carry out invaluable work that supports veterans and acts as a voice for them. Their ability to raise vital funds will have been severely impacted by the pandemic, and I hope that the Scottish Government will provide the support that those organisations need to survive the period.

It is also important to remember that armed forces communities are made up of so much more than just serving officers and veterans. The spouses and children of serving personnel and veterans have needs, too, but they also offer a huge amount of skill and talent to our local areas. I welcome the recognition of the need for family-specific support in the UK Government's strategy for our veterans, which I am aware that the Scottish Government contributed to. I hope to see that continued support for our veterans and their families going forward.

I will leave the minister with two things to do. In particular, I will highlight a couple of areas that I have raised with him before. First, on additional funding for the education of armed forces children, some of whom may have additional needs, there is a need for more targeted funding from both UK and Scottish Governments at a local level for the schools that those children attend. Secondly, the spouses of military personnel represent a huge

reservoir of talent—I say as gently as I can to Michelle Ballantyne that some of them may be men and not women—and they could be doctors, teachers or entrepreneurs, so let us encourage them. There are organisations in Helensburgh and elsewhere that do exactly that. I commend them to the minister and urge him to provide them with more support.

16:53

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): As an ex-serviceman, I am pleased that there continues to be almost total cross-party support for improving support for the armed services and for the veterans of our armed forces communities. Long may that continue.

I also welcome the combined approach that has been taken by the UK Government and the three devolved Governments to create a joint strategy for our veterans—one that promises to improve support for and empower our veterans communities.

Although the coronavirus pandemic has presented new challenges to those communities, such as the cancellation of last week's formal remembrance ceremonies, I am delighted to see that the UK Government has stepped in to provide more help in these troubled times. During the summer, extra funding of £6 million was made available to armed forces charities to support veterans and their families through the pandemic.

As we have heard, HeadFIT, a new online mental health service, has been launched to help everyone in our defence community. That is a very important step forward, because we all recognise that it is not just physical wounds that need healing. Sometimes there are mental challenges that lie hidden for years and are difficult to deal with, but which need to be addressed.

One measure that I have mentioned often since becoming an MSP and which would be a boost to our veterans community is an end to the threat of repeated historical allegations of abuse. For the past four years, I have cited the need to stop ambulance-chasing lawyers and politically motivated historical prosecutions such as those faced by a member of my regiment, Dennis Hutchings. Too many people sit comfortably in their armchairs and decide what they think is acceptable behaviour, and I believe that their judgments are ill informed and unhelpful. That is why I support the Overseas Operations (Service Personnel and Veterans) Bill, which is making progress through the UK Parliament. The bill will offer some protection to veterans who face legal action, often decades after they have left the service. To my mind, the bill will right what is

wrong, and I hope that all parties in the chamber will voice their support for it.

It is always difficult to follow Jackie Baillie in summing up—she has done a much better job than I will do, although I will do my best. I, too, want to condemn Graeme Dey's future career by saying how well I think he has done. He has started to get into the terminology that we hear from forces personnel, such as “force multiplier”—he is almost becoming a soldier. I welcome all that he has done. He has given a huge amount of support, including in stressing the importance of the armed forces covenant.

Like Alex Rowley, I recognise that progress is being made and that there is a vital need for a veterans mental health plan. He mentioned the importance of the families that, together, make up our Army. It is those families—those regiments—that are so important in protecting veterans and helping them when they leave the forces. Maurice Corry also took up that point when he mentioned the importance of the regimental system. He stressed the importance of veterans societies and communities, especially the Veterans Gateway and SSAFA, which are two very important charities.

Like Mike Rumbles, I have seen things happening. He has struggled in this Parliament for a lot longer than I have to get everything that he wants in, but it is good to see that healthcare for veterans is now going to be delivered.

I join Annabelle Ewing in praising veterans communities for all that they do. I join her in saying that it is important that, across Scotland, we have local champions to stand up for our veterans communities. Peter Chapman mentioned the Office for Veterans Affairs, which is very important, as is the Unforgotten Forces Consortium.

Keith Brown is an ex-veterans minister and a veteran. I do not know whether I will damn his career as well, but I pay tribute to the work that he did in his ministerial role. We should recognise that in the same way that he recognised the work of Maurice Corry and Graeme Dey.

Mary Fee mentioned the importance of coming home and of combat stress. Maureen Watt made the important and salient point that we all have a duty of care to our armed forces veterans. On Michelle Ballantyne's speech, I am not sure that when I joined I was ever issued a wife, but she made clear the importance of the family. I know that when I went off to do the things that I was asked to do by the armed services, my family stuck by me and made things happen at home.

We should never underestimate the sacrifices that our armed forces make to serve and protect our country, at home and overseas. They defend our country and are now helping to defend our

health. We should never forget that they are always prepared to give their all and, in return, it is right for them to ask us to give our all for their families. The support that we are talking about is a small price to pay.

I cannot let the debate pass without saying that I believe that that support would be shown in the Scottish Government making a commitment to work with the UK Government now to ensure that, where possible, our troops can legally travel home for Christmas. That is the least that we can do.

17:00

Graeme Dey: A rainforest has died today in the cause of my taking notes on members' contributions this afternoon. As a former convener of the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee, I hope that I can do justice to that sacrifice during the next nine minutes or so.

Alex Rowley asked whether we are doing enough for veterans. The honest answer is no, but as he and other members acknowledged, considerable progress has been made. We will, however, continue in that vein only if we work in the spirit of collaboration. I commit the Scottish Government to doing that now and in the future.

On Alex Rowley's amendment, which Jackie Baillie also focused on, I am happy to commit the Government to continuing to work with veterans' charities to address the undoubted challenges that the pandemic has posed, and is posing, for them. There is helpful realism in the sector that, because of the wide impacts of Covid, charitable giving in a general sense will suffer.

The bigger charities have the option of deploying judiciously some of their reserves, and I know of instances where that has been planned for. For the smaller charities, of course, that is less of an option. Veterans Scotland, which the Government funds, is there to direct and assist charities, and I will speak at its annual general meeting next week when the topic will, undoubtedly, be covered.

Building on the unforgotten forces model of close collaborative working and avoiding duplication strikes me as one way forward for the sector. I hope that I can reassure Alex Rowley about the extent to which the sector and the Scottish Government are alive to current and future challenges.

In relation to funding, the sector has been able to access mainstream charitable funds. For example, a number of veterans' charities applied to, and were successful in securing support from, the Scottish resilience fund. I do not have the exact number but, by way of illustration, more than

60 applications were received from Royal British Legion Scotland branches and clubs.

In addition, the Scottish veterans fund is available to charities, and there is £200,000 in it this year. We also held two events to provide support and guidance on completing the application form for that fund in an effort to encourage bids from newer and, perhaps, smaller projects. As I say, I hope that that gives Alex Rowley some reassurance.

Keith Brown commended Maurice Corry for his work with the cross-party group, and rightly so. He went on to talk about employment. I hold to the view that, central to making progress in that regard is getting employers in the private and public sector who proactively recruit from the cohort to evangelise about that approach and to make clear the benefits that they derive from recruiting from among veterans. It was also important that the Government played its part and gave an example.

Mike Rumbles was on familiar ground when he referred to equity of access to services. He acknowledged that the delay in the roll-out of the veterans care network had been unavoidable, and he asked for a detailed briefing for members. I am more than happy to commit the Government to doing that. Given their interest in the subject and their contributions today, I think that a number of members of the Scottish Parliament would benefit from hearing about the work that the network is going to do, and they might also contribute some thinking, as veterans and their representative organisations have already done.

As I am, Annabelle Ewing is a fan of the V1P model, but I am quite concerned to learn of her worries about housing adaptations, so I will be happy to meet her and discuss the matter in due course.

Maurice Corry: Talking about V1P, I have a concern, as the minister's predecessor knows. What certainty can the minister give to members that health boards will incorporate and deliver Veterans First Point services, given the challenges that his predecessor faced in previous times?

Graeme Dey: As Maurice Corry knows, we cannot instruct health boards to do that, but there is incentivisation through co-funding of the model. Furthermore, I view the future as being based on that model of access right across Scotland. The veterans care network can start to deliver such consistency in what is available, regardless of where in the country someone lives.

A number of members—Alex Rowley, Keith Brown and Annabelle Ewing—mentioned the Black Watch. I associate myself with their views and concerns. I will raise the issue in a virtual call tomorrow with Lieutenant General James Swift, who is chief of defence people. It might be that the

story is wrong, but if it is not, I say—as Keith Brown and others have said—let us get together on a cross-party basis and say no to what is being talked of.

Mary Fee noted the importance of mental health services for veterans. I agree entirely. It is a driver for the new network, whether in creating better understanding of veterans' needs or giving them greater confidence that they will be better understood if they present to mainstream services—the trust that Mary Fee talked about. If they ask for help, they will know that it will be available whatever their locality and on an equitable basis across the whole of Scotland, which is something that Mike Rumbles has championed.

Peter Chapman highlighted, rightly, the role of the military in responding to the challenge that has been set by the pandemic. That has been a timely reminder, for wider society and in relation to employment, of the skills that are gained through military service, and not necessarily just the obvious skills, but many others. I know that a number of departments in the Government have been very impressed by what they have seen in terms of what the military has to offer.

I thank Keith Brown—and others—for the kind words, but I have to acknowledge that I stand here building on the foundations that he established. We would not have made the progress that we have made on veterans issues without his original endeavours—not the least of which was the establishment of the veterans commissioner post.

Maureen Watt recognised the importance of peer mentoring. One of the most striking things that I have seen in my travels as veterans minister was a mentoring service within BT. It recruits proactively from among veterans and has a mentoring service to assist individuals to settle into their roles, which appears to work very well.

I will pick up on the issue about the General Teaching Council for Scotland and get back to Michelle Ballantyne on that. She also talked about spousal employment as an area in which we need to improve. I completely agree. I have made visits to various locations, including Leuchars and Faslane, where I met wives and heard the stories of their experiences. We can undoubtedly do better. Some of the most striking interactions that I have had in my role have been with wives and partners.

If we are honest, there is undoubtedly more that can be done, but I commend the work of companies such as Barclays that have reached out on spousal employment. When I visited Barclays, I was struck by how even little things can make a difference in accommodating spousal

employment. There is a lot that we can learn, in both the private and the public sectors.

Jackie Baillie noted her disappointment about the delay to the census. I recognise that disappointment and entirely understand it. I hope that what she has heard from me today, and on other occasions, gives her some comfort that we will not allow a delay in obtaining the data that she was talking about to get in the way of improving service delivery for veterans and their families.

We have heard speeches from around the chamber that have highlighted issues that we already knew of. There is a willingness to pursue those; I look forward to doing that in the coming months.

The debate has been thoughtful and constructive, as debates on this subject tend to be. The Parliament is all the better for that. In keeping with that approach, I commit the Scottish Government to continuing to work collaboratively with our partners in the public, private and charitable sectors, and to continuing to build and develop new and effective partnerships, in order to improve our support for the veterans and armed forces community.

Decision Time

17:10

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): There are two questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that amendment S5M-23370.1, in the name of Alex Rowley, which seeks to amend motion S5M-23370, in the name of Graeme Dey, on Scottish Government support for the veterans and armed forces community in Scotland 2020, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S5M-23370, in the name of Graeme Dey, on Scottish Government support for the veterans and armed forces community in Scotland 2020, as amended, be agreed to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

That the Parliament recognises the importance of Scotland's veterans and armed forces community and greatly values the significant contribution that they continue to make to Scotland; supports *The Strategy for our Veterans*, developed jointly with the UK Government, devolved governments and partners across the public, private and third sectors, which has a clear vision to ensure the best possible outcomes for veterans and their families; notes that, earlier this year, the Scottish Government published its response to its strategy consultation setting out how it will take that vision forward in Scotland, and agrees that the Scottish Government should continue to work in partnership across the Scottish public, private and charitable sectors, and with the UK Government and the other devolved governments, to ensure that the veterans and armed forces community receives the best possible support and access to services across Scotland; notes the impact of Covid-19 on the ability of veterans charities to raise funds and provide support for veterans and their families, and agrees to work with such charities to support them through this period.

Musicians and Music Industry (Covid-19)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Lewis Macdonald): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S5M-23195, in the name of Claire Baker, on the impact of Covid-19 on Scotland's musicians and music industry. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament recognises the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic has had on musicians, songwriters, composers and the wider music sector, including music education; believes that this has limited the ability of people in the sector to perform and earn income; understands that the Musicians Union and PRS for Music have been working hard to support their members by carrying out surveys and work such as encouraging action to be taken, and distributing over £3 million in hardship funding; understands that 34% of musicians surveyed have said that they may quit the industry due to the impact of the pandemic, that 47% have had to look for work outside music and 65% are facing financial hardship; notes that PRS for Music is predicting a fall of income of between 15-25%, including a 75% decline in income from live performances; acknowledges that, subject to pandemic protocols, many spaces for professional and non-professional musicians to perform and rehearse, including recording studios, are closed, further limiting options for creative output and generating income; regrets the impact that this will have on communities, including in Mid Scotland and Fife, their cultural activities, economy and wellbeing; understands that public health restrictions acutely impact live music venues, promoters and production companies; notes what it sees as the impact of the ban on background music on musicians' and composers' copyright returns, and, to ensure that Scotland's music and wider cultural infrastructure is protected, acknowledges the view that there is a need for the continued support of musicians and the music sector at what it sees as a time of crisis.

17:13

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): First, I thank all the MSPs who have supported the motion and helped to bring the debate to the chamber. I also thank the cross-party group on music, and Tom Arthur MSP, for their assistance with drafting the motion.

November 2019 was my super November—I went to five gigs that month. I was in the Hydro, the Usher Hall, La Belle Angèle and the Carnegie hall in Dunfermline. I saw artists on international tours in full venues, and I still managed to go campaigning the next day in a general election.

Here we are a year later, and all those venues, and others across Scotland, are sitting quiet, as they have been for months. All the musicians have no live audiences. All the crew, who often make a living working on different tours, are out of work. All the promoters, the technical support and the

venue staff have seen their industry decimated. They are all facing a long road back to recovery.

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a huge impact on everyone who works in the music sector. We must not underestimate the value of the sector, and we need to recognise the breadth of livelihoods that it supports. During lockdown, so many people turned to the arts to get them through it all. Music was a motivator, a comforter and an entertainer for so many people.

Before the pandemic, the music industry across the United Kingdom was worth £5.2 billion to the economy, and the live music sector had broken the £1 billion barrier for the first time. The UK is a global leader in producing content, and our music is listened to by people around the world. In 2019, Scotland welcomed 1.3 million music tourists, and music tourism alone supported almost 5,000 jobs.

Coronavirus, the lockdown and the restrictions have brought that all crashing down. People's ability to perform and earn an income has been severely limited, and opportunities for recording, rehearsing, teaching and collaborating have all been restricted.

The Musicians Union and PRS for Music have been surveying their members during the pandemic. Although there has been some financial support, 34 per cent of musicians surveyed said that they may quit the industry due to the impact of the pandemic, and 65 per cent are facing financial hardship. Musicians' incomes already compare unfavourably with those in other professions that require a similar investment of time and money in education and training, and receiving only a percentage of income as support has left many facing hardship.

There is also clear evidence that too many freelancers have fallen through the cracks. The campaign group ExcludedUK has highlighted that 3 million freelancers across the UK, many of whom work in the cultural sector, are excluded from any support packages. The UK Government needs to change that and provide support for all those who are self-employed, and the Scottish Government needs to provide as much support as possible through the hardship schemes.

The culture organisations and venues recovery fund awards were announced last week. They have benefited some medium-sized music venues, but we need to recognise that grass-roots music venues continue to be at risk. The Music Venue Trust has announced a red list of venues that are at risk of imminent closure. Backstage at the Green in Kinross, which is in my region, is on the list, along with venues in Inverness and Ayr.

The support from the grass-roots music venues stabilisation fund was intended to last only until October this year. Music venues are listed as

eligible businesses for the temporary closure grant in tier 3, and for the business restrictions grant. However, with no trade, and with bills mounting up, that support will, for many, cover only a third of their overheads. Other music businesses, such as recording studios or rehearsal rooms, are excluded from the strategic framework funds, even though the restrictions impact heavily on those businesses and many are facing insolvency. The list of eligible businesses needs to be expanded; alternatively, we must provide flexibility for local authorities to make awards that reflect their local economy.

Last week, the Welsh Government announced an additional £10.7 million for culture recovery, along with increased support for freelancers. We need to see more resources coming forward in Scotland. It is worth noting that, although the investment of £107 million in the arts was significant, almost all the funding streams were oversubscribed and the application windows were often extremely short. There is still £6 million left to allocate, and additional consequentials are coming to Scotland. Those sources must provide relief for the music sector, which is still facing a crisis situation.

However, we also need to consider how to generate some income and provide opportunities for performance. Small indoor seated events can take place in tiers 0 and 1, with restrictions, and guidance has now been published. In response to my question a few weeks ago, the Government said that it had paused the pilot events programme. Scotland's events recovery fund has now been launched with £2.75 million, but it needs to be made clear whether that will support live music events and pilots. Although venues can open, the restrictions will make the majority of them unviable. Support needs to be in place to test the safest way to operate, and all Scotland could benefit from the lessons that can be learned in the tier 1 areas.

There are calls for greater ambition. In the summer, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland published "In the Bubble of Our Making: Reopening the Arts in Northern Ireland". It is a fairly comprehensive document that looks at removing barriers and encouraging innovative ways to perform. There is also the report "The Art of the Possible", which Geoff Ellis of DF Concerts recently produced.

Live entertainment is not a business that can easily be turned off and on. The planning involved in a tour, from booking flights to securing the articulated lorries, is significant. If we are to see a return to live music at some point, planning needs to start now, and issues around insurance, physical distancing and audience testing need to be explored. The industry needs support to

provide a pathway and a road map back to performances.

I have previously asked about the ban on background music, and I welcome the fact that an expert group is looking at the issue. However, there must be swift progress on that. There is already evidence that a lower specified decibel level does not cause people to raise their voices and that it does not cause aerosol transmission. Lifting the ban would support the hospitality sector as well as those in the music sector who benefit from copyright returns.

MSPs will wish to raise other issues, but I will end by highlighting music tuition. The next generation of musicians and composers are at risk of losing valuable time and opportunity. The Incorporated Society of Musicians has raised the issue with me, and I agree that music education tutors and pupils would benefit from a consistent approach that supports their studies, and that clarity over what can be provided in school and in private tuition is important.

Music is a sector that closed first, and it will likely be the last to return. Scotland's music sector and all who work in it are still in a very vulnerable place. We need support for the here and now and strong investment for the future.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There is a high level of interest in the debate—we are now into double figures for the number of members who wish to participate. I therefore invite Claire Baker to move a motion without notice, under rule 8.14.3, to extend the debate by up to 30 minutes.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 8.14.3, the debate be extended by up to 30 minutes.—[*Claire Baker*]

Motion agreed to.

17:21

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I thank Claire Baker for securing this evening's debate, and I thank Tom Arthur and the cross-party group on music for their work and their support for the industry.

I am convener of the Education and Skills Committee, and our report on music tuition really highlighted what music brings to us. It is not about a number on a balance sheet; it is about the reaction and the wellbeing that it brings to people—the joy of working and being with people, and of performing with them. What it means to us in our interactions as human beings is almost immeasurable. For me, it can mean taking part in a little session with folk musicians in my local pub—or, indeed, going to see Ms McNeill and her band playing there—right through to the big-venue

events such as Celtic Connections and the other festivals in Scotland that we know about.

There is a lot of interest in tonight's debate, so I will just talk about one area. In doing so, I wish to highlight one of Scotland's best up-and-coming folk performers, Iona Fyfe.

Like Claire Baker, I have been reminiscing about what we would normally be doing at this time of year. Last year, I was delighted to speak at the first Scots language awards, with Iona Fyfe and Steve Byrne from Malinky providing the music for the evening. It was a fantastic experience. In fact, it was Iona's first appearance after spending a long time recovering from major surgery to her knee following a fall. Her plight, and the impact that the fall had on her, highlight the precarious nature of work for some of our musicians. She was not able to work for six months before Covid hit, and the awards ceremony was her first appearance after recovering—but then we almost immediately went into a situation where she was unable to work again. That meant that her earnings did not reflect her earnings potential under normal circumstances, so it was very difficult for her to access any of the support and grants that were in place, or any of the support that would normally have been there for her, had she been performing throughout that time.

The precarious nature of employment in the music industry, which affects venues and the people who perform music, highlights just how difficult things are. The fair work agenda that the Scottish Government has pursued has gone a great way towards doing away with unpaid shifts for young people, for example, as we seek to move away from zero-hours contracts and so on. Unfortunately, the music industry has many of those practices within it.

If we really value music in our lives, after Covid we will have to look at the longer-term problems with employment arrangements that leave people badly underpaid for what they do—indeed, people can be asked to perform for free. We must also look at the fact that musicians are not rewarded properly in the context of licences and streaming systems, given what they bring.

The Musicians Union has highlighted that 47 per cent of musicians have been forced to look for other work, 70 per cent are unable to take on more than a quarter of their usual work and 36 per cent have no income whatever from music—and tuition is a huge part of musicians' income.

17:25

Gordon Lindhurst (Lothian) (Con): The importance of Scotland's musicians and music industry is beyond doubt. That truth is expressed in Arthur O'Shaughnessy's poem "Ode", lines of

which have become very true in the current restricted circumstances in which our music makers sadly find themselves. It starts:

“We are the music makers,
And we are the dreamers of dreams
Wandering by lone sea-breakers,
And sitting by desolate streams; —
World-losers and world-forsakers,
On whom the pale moon gleams”.

The music that frames and reinforces our traditions, the music of the many artists that Scotland has produced in recent times, and the events and music that we are normally able to enjoy every day form a key part of Scotland’s social fabric. It is therefore deeply troubling that these past months have seen such a decline in opportunities not only for musicians to produce and perform music but for the Scottish public to be able to experience and enjoy it.

The figures that accompany the narrative emphasise—if emphasis were needed—the problem. They are deeply troubling. There are dramatic falls in income. For example, up to 65 per cent of musicians say that they are facing financial hardship, which tells the tale of a sector that has needed, but wanted for, support from the outset of the pandemic.

The urgency of the issue for the health of the economy in general is but one of many considerations. More important is the effect on individuals, whether we are talking about creative musicians themselves or their audiences.

The current circumstances follow hard on a recent flowering of Scottish music. Between 2017 and 2018, there was a 38 per cent rise in people travelling to Scotland for our music. The sector had become worth more than £430 million to the economy and supported more than 4,000 jobs.

Figures tell only one side of the tale, of course; the impact on people is always the most important. Music is critical to the employment, prosperity and wellbeing of people across our tourism and hospitality sector, as well as Scottish residents themselves. Venues and industry bodies here in Edinburgh have expressed a combination of exasperation and sadness at continued, and—worse, potentially permanent—closure.

Live music performance is only one part of that. Recorded music has faced many general challenges in recent years. The ways in which it is purchased and listened to have been changing in the long term, causing potential harm to revenue generation and returns.

The tight restrictions that are associated with the continued lockdown have affected music still more. They have prevented a variety of public venues from playing music, which has severely hit

returns from copyright. The question arises as to the sense in continuing such restrictions.

We need to recognise, even in these times, that music is not just entertainment. As O’Shaughnessy recognised in the concluding lines of the first verse of his poem:

“Yet we”—

music makers—

“are the movers and shakers
Of the world for ever, it seems.”

Let us ensure that the movers and shakers who make music in Scotland for the good of our nation are able to continue to do so.

17:29

Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP): I, too, congratulate Claire Baker on securing the debate, and Tom Arthur from the cross-party group on music for supporting it. I am well aware of the terrible toll that the pandemic has taken on the music industry and I draw members’ attention to the evidence gathered by the Culture, Tourism, Europe and External Affairs Committee inquiry into the effect of Covid on culture and tourism.

Today, I want to speak from personal perspective, or more precisely, from the experience of my daughter, Eleanor, who is a 23-year-old musician. She graduated two years ago with a first-class degree in actor musicianship and her career got off to a good start. Last year, she was the onstage musician at the Lyceum and Citizens’ Theatre production of “The Duchess of Malfi”. She is also a singer-songwriter with her own band. At the time that the pandemic broke out, she was living in Glasgow and had several different income streams to support her art: she had several residencies in Glasgow music venues, playing blues and rock, she taught young musicians at the weekend at a rock school and, to top that up, like many young musicians, during the day, she worked in hospitality, in a coffee bar. All that disappeared—literally overnight—with lockdown. It has never come back and her experience is typical.

Eleanor was more fortunate than some in that her employer put her on furlough and she has the safety net of her family. However, like many young people, she is fiercely independent and wants to make her own way in the world. For many of her musician friends, whose income came from playing five or six nights a week, there was no furlough. That is why emergency funds for self-employed people are so important. I support Claire Baker’s comments on the need for the UK Government to do more to help freelancers who miss out. Creative Scotland’s hardship fund for creative freelancers has helped many musicians

and they have reported back that it is very easy to access. However, it is, of course, oversubscribed, although it opened again. I encourage everyone in Government to ensure that everyone who needs help gets it.

I also welcome the awards to grass-roots music venues. We took a lot of evidence on the challenges that those venues face. I understand that, as Claire Baker said, some of them have said that they will still have to close.

It is more than simply a lack of income. It takes years of practice and hard work to be able to play to a professional standard. Having that taken away overnight is a bitter blow. Performers often draw their mental energy from playing for an audience, so the impact on their mental health is significant. There are some great examples of self-help. I urge members interested in the issue to go to the next stage, a social media platform started in Scotland by musicians who are interviewed about their experience of the pandemic and then play sets outdoors with professional recording and filming equipment. It also has its own crowdfunding campaign and can be found on Facebook and Instagram.

It is often said that the pandemic would have been unbearable if it had happened 25 years ago, before the internet was able to connect us. For musicians, the internet also has a downside. Back in the 1980s and 1990s, many musicians made money from record sales and live gigs were used to publicise their records. That model has now been turned on its head and most musicians, even quite successful ones, are—not to put too fine a point on it—being ripped off by global streaming and downloading services. One example was posted on social media this summer by the acclaimed traditional folk musician Steve Byrne, who co-wrote the Malinky song, “Pad the Road Wi Me”. It was downloaded 17,737 times on Spotify and for that, Steve was paid the handsome sum of £2.09. That is why I refuse to use streaming services—iTunes is only marginally better than Spotify, with the artists getting 10 per cent of the sale. Back in 2008, a CD-single sold for £3.99, and the songwriter could expect to receive 12 per cent of that. In that example, Steve Byrne would have got about £8,000—that is not a fortune, but it is a great deal better than £2.09.

The Scottish Parliament does not have any control over big tech, but it is time that those who do have that control tackle the exploitation of musicians. Our lockdown would be unbearable without music and musicians. They might not be classified as essential workers, but the work of musicians is hugely important to the wellbeing of us all. I back the calls for continued support from the Government. Once again, I congratulate Claire

Baker on securing debate and thank her for doing so.

17:35

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): I thank Claire Baker for bringing this important debate to the chamber, and I thank Tom Arthur—who will speak next—for the work that he does with the cross-party group on music.

My own city of Glasgow has its fair share of successful bands, such as Primal Scream, Simple Minds, Biffy Clyro and Belle and Sebastian—it is always hard to choose which ones I am going to mention. They have grown out of an energetic music scene with many small live bands and venues. I declare that I gig—as Clare Adamson mentioned—with the band Mc4. I have been gigging in Glasgow and the west of Scotland for the past four years, which has taken quite a bit of my energy.

Clare Adamson will agree with me that live music venues—such as Girdwoods, on her local patch, and the Village Inn in East Kilbride—are so vibrant for communities. They bring communities together, and so many local musicians have benefited from being able to play there. We play for the love of our music, and we miss it so much. I know that many musicians across the country miss playing to live audiences so much.

Tens of thousands of bands make a living, or supplement their income, by playing weddings and functions. It has been hard for them. Every weekend that I play in my own city, I see it absolutely buzzing with live audiences. We know that people come from all over the country to hear music in Glasgow. Yesterday, I spoke with Del Cotton, who is the owner of Hireaband. He said that, in some ways, it would have been easier for the functions sector just to have been told to put off events until next April, rather than having a drip, drip of changes to restrictions, but of course it is easier to say that with hindsight.

Joan McAlpine, in an excellent speech, talked about her daughter. My heart goes out to the young musicians, including those who are trying to learn a musical instrument but have been deprived of opportunities to learn, because music does not seem to be a great priority in schools. Given that our nation is characterised so much by its love for music, I hope that the debate will highlight that aspect as a necessary part of our recovery.

The wedding and function band sector puts millions of pounds into the pockets of musicians. That includes traditional musicians, who have suffered huge pain over the past nine months. As Claire Baker said, among those who are feeling the impact are not just musicians but roadies, lighting engineers, sound engineers, public

address system companies and promoters. Our music sector is currently on its knees. The vast majority of musicians mix self-employed and employed work, and they are therefore among those who have been most badly hit by the pandemic.

Musicians' earnings tend to be extremely low in relation to the level of skill that they possess. They are highly skilled, but not highly paid. We know that, during the current crisis, more than a third of UK musicians have thought about leaving the sector, and 41 per cent have not received any Government support. I ask the cabinet secretary to say in summing up why that is the case; I find it totally unacceptable in a country that is supposed to value its musicians.

At some point, there should be an audit of the types of funding that have been made available. While some have done very well in that regard, others have not done well at all, despite having the same needs. There is a wide variation in terms of the grants that have been received. The grass-roots music venues stabilisation fund, which was announced in July, was scheduled to help meet the costs for small venues until the end of October. Given today's announcement, I would like the Government to consider extending the fund to March 2021 in order to help keep small venues afloat.

As Claire Baker said, Geoff Ellis has been working hard behind the scenes to put forward some constructive suggestions for how we might get the live music scene running again in the UK, under the banner of Live Nation. That might involve, for example, testing audiences before events. Realistically, things will probably not be able to get back to normal completely until a vaccine is distributed. However, we must plan for the stages that follow the roll-out of a vaccine. Scotland needs to get back to major events by next summer, with a corresponding increase in tourism and hospitality. That will be a major economic boost to our own towns and cities. In Glasgow, there are plans to look ahead to an exit strategy for next year under the banner of "Back to Live". Those plans are based on reducing capacity, and those in the industry are simply looking for Government to be open minded about them.

Music is part of the character of our nation. As we manage our way out of this tragic pandemic, we need a properly worked out recovery plan for live music and the associated industries. I do not believe that we are anywhere near that now, but I hope that this debate will spark questions, as we go forward, about how we can make that recovery possible.

17:40

Tom Arthur (Renfrewshire South) (SNP): I remind members that I am a member of the Musicians Union and previously worked in music.

I sincerely thank Claire Baker for securing the debate so that we could have it this side of Christmas. I also thank colleagues on the cross-party group on music for their work in preparing the motion. In particular, I thank the secretariat and David Francis, who co-ordinated the drafting to ensure that the motion captured as many views as possible.

When I was working full time in music and out on the road 120 days and 130 nights a year, I never thought that I would have the privilege of being a member of the Scottish Parliament. When I became a candidate and was then elected, I promised myself that I would make time to be a voice for musicians.

I have been speaking to musician colleagues and friends and I really feel for them, so I decided to use my time in the debate not to share my views, but to enable musicians—many of whom I know but some of whom I do not know—to speak for themselves. I put out a call for views on social media yesterday and I said that I would try to share as many views as possible in the chamber.

These are the words of musicians in Scotland, right now:

"My music career is basically on hold until the vaccine has been distributed ... luckily I picked up a delivery driver job after seeing a notice in a window, which basically saved me as it allowed me to be able to pay for my monthly bills."

"Scotland relies on tourism and destination weddings to create jobs and wealth. How will that be affected if there are no hotels, no entertainers and no tech crew?"

"The lockdown on music affects musicians, DJs, events staff, not only financially but also mentally—not only the people who work at these events, but the people who attend and live for their friends and family get-togethers. They have nothing to look forward to as there is no end game here."

"In terms of providing a challenging and rewarding environment where bands can hone their skills and go on to achieve wonderful results and no small amount of international recognition, Scotland punches far above its weight. The visible side, the most obviously successful side of this, is rightly lauded, but the grass-roots side that always allowed these acts to grow into what they became is always taken for granted and now it's suffering and in very real danger of being permanently diminished".

"We personally—and our whole industry—are at crisis point. This year has been a nightmare. The vast majority of musicians' income these days comes from live touring, since streaming fees are nominal and online merch sales are not enough to live on."

"The majority of our friends in the industry are facing significant financial trouble: many are facing bankruptcy; many have families to support. The impact of having our industry ripped out from underneath us is impacting our mental health too—so many people who work in live music

are extremely depressed. Everyone is scared for the future.”

“My freelance friends and colleagues, on whom all the Scottish orchestras depend, are in a terrible situation and I am very aware of the widening gap in circumstances between them having little or no income—a situation that will not improve any time soon.”

“I haven’t gigned since March. I was lucky I had three years of accounts, so the SEIS payments have helped me a bit.”

“It’s a serious kick in the teeth to every musician that has spent their teenage years learning and perfecting their instrument and providing night-on-night entertainment to the citizens of our society, keeping them upbeat, laughing, giving people something to look forward to, a place to go for the evening.”

“I have lost nearly £121,000 in fees and am now firing through my own savings that are running really low due to it, and I feel annoyed as that money was for my kids’ future and to go towards their further education.”

“The total inability of the opportunity to make music is driving young freelance professional artists into really challenging positions for mental health and their future in the profession.”

I have read out about 500 words of the more than 5,000 that I received in the space of 12 hours—and more are coming in. I will look for opportunities to share those views in future debates and through other media. I am grateful to members for listening and I hope that all members will reflect on what they heard. I know that the cabinet secretary is deeply committed to the music sector and I encourage the Scottish Government and UK Government to strain every sinew and to look at every possibility to ensure that they provide maximum support to all musicians in Scotland.

17:45

Andy Wightman (Lothian) (Green): I thank Claire Baker for bringing the debate to the chamber, and Tom Arthur for his support. I have very much enjoyed my time in the cross-party group on music. The debate is important because it highlights the significant impact that Covid-19 has had on musicians and the music industry.

I also thank my daughter, a professional traditional musician who, as a young person embarking on a career in music, has shared her thoughts and experiences with me. Young people face particular challenges when embarking on a career in music, perhaps fresh out of college, when there are no current opportunities.

Music is a universal language spoken by everyone. It is the means by which we all experience the world, through the songs of childhood, the music we play and listen to and the hymns that we sing. For musicians, music is all that and more.

The months of the pandemic have highlighted the importance of music in our lives. Stuck at home during lockdown, many of us turned to the arts to sustain ourselves. We listened to music that was created by professional musicians. We watched films whose soundtracks were created by professional musicians.

During these past few months, however, musicians have faced massive challenges, most particularly through the lack of financial support. According to the Musicians Union, one third of professional musicians did not qualify for any government support, 34 per cent are considering abandoning the industry completely because of financial hardship, while 47 per cent have already been forced to seek work outside the industry.

Most musicians have a portfolio career. One musician will often be a performer, composer, teacher, community music practitioner, music therapist, recording engineer, and session musician, as well as many other things. Without live work, many musicians have been able to support themselves financially by turning to another aspect of their portfolio career, but many others have lost every single aspect of their career.

For musicians, music is work. It is their day job. It is their livelihood, contrary to what some politicians might say. It is their identity; it is who they are and it supports their wellbeing. We must realise that, without more financial support for musicians, we are facing a crisis in the music industry that might reduce it by a third or more. The effects of that will be felt not just by musicians themselves, but by us all.

Every aspect of the music industry needs support. If one falls, the rest follow. For example, without venues, there are no jobs for sound and light technicians. Without technicians, there are no jobs for performing musicians. Without musicians, there are no jobs for recording engineers. And so it goes on.

In particular, live streaming needs to be fixed. The pandemic has brought the serious flaws of the music industry into sharp relief. It has shown that musicians are sustained primarily by income generated by the live side of the music business and that streaming royalties are hugely insufficient. I welcome the inquiry into the economics of streaming launched by the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee in the House of Commons.

I thank all those who are supporting the music industry at the moment. I thank everyone who has been campaigning for better support for musicians. I thank, for example, Bandcamp for supporting musicians by holding Bandcamp Fridays every month whereby all money spent that

day on purchasing musicians' albums goes directly to the musician.

I thank the musicians who have helped us through lockdown with their live stream concerts. I thank the music teachers who have speedily made themselves technically adept in delivering online music tuition.

As we come to the end of a difficult year, and as we face more difficult months to come, many of us are holding on to certain things to sustain ourselves: family, friends, our communities, exercise, and the arts and music most particularly. Without more support for musicians, we risk losing much of the rich musical culture of Scotland—yet another loss in a year already characterised by far too much loss.

17:49

Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): I thank Claire Baker for bringing to the chamber today's debate, which is on an important issue that, until now, has perhaps not had the attention that it deserves. At the outset, I declare an interest, of a kind, as I am a currently not very active tenor in Back Gaelic choir.

Scotland has a distinctive and diverse musical scene. Not altogether surprisingly, I believe that nowhere is that truer than in my constituency, the Western Isles. Whether it is traditional music, pipes, or singing for worship, music and song are part of the fabric of life in the islands, and those traditions spill over into the band scene, too.

As others have said, Covid-19 and the restrictions that have accompanied it have had a huge impact on music and the music industry. Festivals have ceased, venues are struggling, and musicians are quitting the industry. Music production and events companies are seeing demand for business staples, such as wedding films, public address system hire, studio recording and live performance, dry up and, crucially, dry up all at the same time.

In terms of large events, the Royal National Mòd—the highlight of any Gael's year—had to move to online only. The Hebridean Celtic festival in my constituency, the Eilean Dorcha festival in Uist, as well as the fèisean movement, which was founded in Barra, have also had to move to online-only events. Not only is that a huge cultural loss, as others have pointed out, it is also an economic loss. For example, the HebCelt festival draws in around 18,000 people to the islands every year, with a net boost to the local economy of more than £2 million.

It is also worth focusing on how the pandemic has affected music in schools. We are all aware of the benefits to young people of taking part in

music in terms of creativity and other skills. Although schools have returned, there is a ban on singing, piping and playing wind and brass instruments. The ban is in place for an understandable reason, but it is worth acknowledging that it is having a real impact on young musicians, as well as their teachers, who can no longer teach face to face in schools.

Teachers are witnessing promising senior pupils give up playing altogether. I have heard that attributed, in part, to the video submission method that tutors are being encouraged to use—for understandable reasons—which can be complicated, and is perhaps not appealing to anyone other than the most dedicated pupils. I do not pretend that there is not a reason for those restrictions but, given that Covid will be with us for some time, perhaps we need to think about new ways of bringing those musical activities back into the classroom where it is possible to do so, and start planning for that. We must avoid losing a generation of musicians.

Making money as a musician was tough before the pandemic, but Covid has made it virtually impossible for all but the biggest names. For bands, not being able to tour or do live performances is having dire financial consequences, which need to be recognised. Those consequences are most acute for smaller bands, whose income relies much more on live events and merchandise than on streaming, for all the reasons that Joan McAlpine, Andy Wightman and other members have made clear. For all bands and artists, exposure and getting their name out there is a huge function of playing live.

I cannot end without giving a name check to Peat & Diesel, the local phenomenon from the Isle of Lewis. I hope that, if another Peat & Diesel were to come along right now, it would get the platform to make it. To ensure that it does, we must start planning now for what Scotland does when live music makes its widely longed-for and happy return.

17:54

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): I thank Claire Baker for securing the debate. I declare an interest as chair of the Labour trade union group, as we work with the Musicians Union.

The arts and cultural sector is one of our greatest assets. For some people, that means galleries, the ballet or an orchestra; for others, it is karaoke, a tea dance or a jamming session. Whatever it is—whatever floats your boat—we all agree that there is great pleasure and enjoyment, and a sense of wellbeing, to be derived from watching and listening to talented people sing, dance, play music and perform.

In many communities, those events take place in the local pub, community hall, social club, community arts or music venue, rather than places such as the Hydro, the Festival theatre or the Glasgow concert hall. Those small venues are the life-blood of the Scottish grass-roots music scene. In my region, we have many of those venues. That is evident during the Edinburgh festival but also at other times of the year. They include Dreadnought Rock and Smiths in Bathgate, Sneaky Pete's, miners' welfare clubs, music clubs and bars, bowling clubs, Royal British Legion clubs and all those other places where live music and entertainment takes place. They are struggling to survive. They are confused by the inconsistency of the way in which grants are awarded and funds have been rolled out in different areas, with different criteria and local authorities taking different approaches. They are confused by the mixed messages and different approaches being taken by Government at all levels from one month to the next.

During the summer I was in the Hootananny in Inverness. Many people will have been in there. It is usually jumping at the peak of the summer tourist season, but there was just a handful of people and no live music—indeed, no music whatsoever. The fact that the place was empty was not surprising given that the reason for its existence is to provide music and be a music venue. Why would people go if that was not there?

That all has a massive impact—an emotional one as well as a financial one—on the performers, owners and people who work there. No bookings means no punters, no punters means no performers, no performances means no income and no income means bills unpaid, empty fridges and creative minds in turmoil.

Pauline McNeill: Does Neil Findlay agree that it is odd, given Scotland's love for music, that we seem to be the only country that has banned background music throughout the pandemic? We are still waiting for the conclusions of the expert group, but I understand that it is the people on the expert group who have called for the reversal of the ban. Does Neil Findlay agree that that seems odd and that we should call on the Government to report on that as soon as possible?

Neil Findlay: If actions are being taken that are having such an impact on people, they have to be based on sound evidence and science. That is what people are querying.

The issues that people have raised are not just confined to the owners of venues. This affects DJs, roadies—this week I have spoken to two sound engineers I know well who have barely earned a penny since the start of the crisis—managers, agents, bar staff, door staff and venue owners. The list goes on and on. Some are

community organisations and some are independent businesses.

I have spoken to several performers and they are in a desperate situation. Work dried up completely, almost from day 1 of the crisis. People have referred to the numbers of people seeking to leave the industry or looking to do anything else just to get some money through the door. There is a real fear about what will happen when furlough ends.

Today, we heard that West Lothian will move up to level 4. That decision appears not to be based on science or evidence—it is a political decision and the evidence does not back it up. The people who run those venues will be scratching their heads and saying, "How come that decision has been made?" When we look at the evidence that was presented for making that decision, it simply does not stack up. I say that having had a cursory glance at the evidence that has been presented. If I am wrong, I will take that back.

It could be a disaster for grass-roots music and arts, which develop organically and are often promoted and supported by local venues, and it could result in areas becoming cultural deserts, where the talents of young and old alike become further collateral damage in the Covid crisis.

17:59

Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): I thank Claire Baker, Tom Arthur and the cross-party group on music for this important motion on what is happening in the industry. The cross-party support that it has received certainly reflects the mood outwith this building in the music industry.

I represent one of the most vibrant cities in Scotland. Glasgow has an incredible music scene and was officially recognised as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization—UNESCO—city of music in 2008. At the time, Scotland was one of only three countries that had had that honour—I was very proud of that. The city is now part of a 47-strong network of cities of music and until the pandemic showcased more than 130 live performances in any given week—more than any other Scottish city, I think.

I do not need to tell members or anyone outside the Parliament that our music scene is world renowned and caters for all tastes—everything from contemporary to classical, country and of course Celtic. Celtic Connections is internationally acclaimed and has grown and thrived over the years, but this year was like no other, as the event had to adapt to the circumstances of the pandemic.

Pauline McNeill mentioned Geoff Ellis of DF Concerts; I thank Geoff for his paper on the art of the possible, which makes interesting reading. I think that the Scottish Government has received a copy.

The “Scottish Music Industry Coronavirus Crisis Impact Business Feedback Report” lays bare the devastating effect of the virus on the industry, saying:

“Music venues have been devastated. Grassroots venues—large and small, for gigs and clubs—are very close to collapse. Some have been able to access bits of support but many have not qualified for various support schemes or have been denied funding, including furlough, due to technicalities. Even those who have been successful accessing some funding are depleting whatever case reserves they had and are very close to going out of business. The situation for music venues is dire. Many will soon—if they have not had to already—lay off all their staff, stop paying suppliers and will not be able to pay their overheads. If music venues go out of business then their salaried staff become unemployed, contractors have less work, suppliers lose valuable clients and the GVA contribution to the local economy is significantly diminished.”

It is a very worrying time. Grass-roots music venues such as the Hug and Pint, the Garage and King Tut’s, to name just a few, have been the springboard for so many up-and-coming musicians. I have sat in King Tut’s on many a Sunday afternoon when my nieces’ band was playing. We would see 20 to 30 young people come through that venue on a Sunday afternoon, playing for the joy of it and learning from one another. It provides a great platform from which up-and-coming musicians can showcase their talent and creativity.

Many venues applied to the grass-roots music venues stabilisation fund—that is quite a mouthful—and some were successful. However, venues are pretty worried and tell me that, if the fund is not renewed or replaced by something else, the industry will not survive. Perhaps the cabinet secretary will talk about that when she sums up the debate.

As members said, not just performers but many other parts of the industry are feeling the impacts of the pandemic. I am thinking about promoters, light engineers, sound engineers and roadies, but that is by no means a comprehensive list; it is just a snapshot of the jobs behind the scenes that ensure that our live music scene thrives. I wish that we could do something as soon as possible to save venues and ensure the survival of the music industry, not just in my constituency in Glasgow but throughout Scotland.

18:04

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): I thank Claire Baker for bringing this important debate to the

Parliament and I thank Tom Arthur for his continued work in the CPG on music.

I was interested to hear Sandra White talk about King Tut’s. For people from the west coast of Scotland, King Tut’s is a major venue. Part of the mythology around Oasis is that the band was discovered there—I think that it was Alan McGeer who saw them live there and signed them that very night; the band’s history started there, which shows how important such venues are.

I wanted to speak in the debate for exactly the same reason that I wanted to do so in the recent debate brought by the Culture, Tourism, Europe and External Affairs Committee: I love music, and it is an extremely important part of my life. Unlike Tom Arthur and Pauline McNeill, I am not a musician; I just batter away at my guitar in the house. It annoys my wife, but it makes me happy.

Part of the appeal of music is how it makes us feel. During the pandemic, musicians have shown us how important their work is to our mood, how we feel and how we relate to the world. As I have said previously, as a west of Scotland male I often do not express my feelings through words, but I can sing three verses of a standard song. Why would someone possibly say, “I love you” when they could sing three verses of an American classic instead?

Music is so important, and the mythology of musicians is part of its appeal. Robert Johnson, the master blues guitarist, died young and did not make much money during his time as a musician. He spent his life playing juke joints and street corners, with little commercial success. Some musicians are currently struggling even harder to make a living because of the world and the times that we live in. There was not much documentation of Robert Johnson’s life apart from his recordings of 29 songs. However, it has become the stuff of legends, the main one being that he supposedly sold his soul to the devil at the crossroads so that he could become a master blues guitarist. Presiding Officer, for a number of years I have been hanging about Paisley Cross with my guitar, but I am still pretty garbage at playing it. I am still looking for the devil so that I can sell him my soul and so become a master.

The mythology and ideas that run through music become an important part of everyone’s cultural background. I know about Robert Johnson only because, as a teenager and in my 20s, I hung about with a lot of friends who were in bands, playing guitars and blues music. They taught me about a man who was instrumental in what would become popular music, including blues, rock and rock ‘n’ roll. That man died penniless in 1938, but there I was—many years later, in Paisley—knowing about him because of what my friends

told me. That is how much music means to people.

The two major music venues in Paisley are the Old Swan inn and the Bungalow bar. I would like to highlight the Bungalow, which recently received £21,000 as part of the £2.2 million Scottish Government grass-roots music venues stabilisation fund. However, as Paisley moves into level 4 we will need to look at what support will be available for such venues in future.

The Bungalow, which is run by a community trust, is an important part of our town's history, although it is now in a more modern building than previously. As I said in a recent debate, in the 1970s Paisley embraced Glasgow bands and punk music in order to make a bit of money, partly because the operators of the Bungalow bar saw that as a way forward. What do the Skids, the Associates, Orange Juice, Roddy Frame, Buzzcocks, Echo and the Bunnymen, and Aztec Camera have in common? The answer is that they all played the Bungalow bar in Paisley. I am sure that they mention that every time that they talk to anyone, because that will have been one of their major achievements.

A venue such as the Bungalow, which has been hugely important to Paisley's community, is a major part of its culture. As Neil Findlay said, Scotland's music is not all about opera and the major chamber orchestras. Things as basic as pub bands and pub music are important to those of us who go out to hear them. We must consider how we will deal with them in future to ensure that we still have such venues when we come out the other side of the pandemic. Otherwise, pub music will become just another musical myth or legend.

18:08

The Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Fair Work and Culture (Fiona Hyslop): I thank all members who have spoken in the debate and who have shared their passion and pride in music and musicians. I thank Claire Baker for securing the debate, and Tom Arthur for his support and for giving voice to musicians.

Scotland has a well-deserved reputation for the strength of its music industry. From traditional music to the most modern makers such as Nova, the winner of this year's Scottish album of the year, Scotland's music is recognised throughout the world. It is a way for us to show who we are as individuals and as a country, and for us to reflect on our place in the world.

Listening to music can be a private experience or a communal one, and few things bring people together like the shared experience of live music. We are all aware of the devastating impact that the pandemic has had on the music industry, and

particularly on live music. The restrictions have undoubtedly saved lives, but they have been hard to bear for fans who cannot see their favourite artist live and for people who have been unable to meet their friends to make music together.

It has been even harder for those who work in the industry. One effect of the pandemic has been to remind us of the vast ecosystem that supports the music industry. Musicians and performers might be the most recognisable people in the industry, but they rely on a host of professionals, such as sound engineers, lighting engineers, road and stage crew, managers and promoters, as well as those who run and work in venues up and down the country, and many more besides.

Throughout the pandemic, the Scottish Government has sought to ensure that financial support has been available to people in the music industry. We have ensured that a wide range of music industry roles are eligible for Creative Scotland's hardship fund for creative freelancers, which is currently open for applications. The budget for the fund was originally £5 million, but I have increased that to £8 million so that as many people as possible can receive support. We must do what we can to ensure that people can stay in the industry because, once we lose skills and experience, they will be difficult to replace.

Neil Findlay: Can the cabinet secretary give some guidance to people who are not accepted for those funds? Where can they look to secure some sort of financial assistance to survive?

Fiona Hyslop: There are many different routes to access assistance. Obviously, people who have received assistance from one set of funds might not be eligible for another set. Clearly, it is welcome that the United Kingdom self-employment income support scheme is back, and is at a better level than it was at previously. The hardship funds that exist are very wide, and I have not had complaints about people not receiving them. If people have had problems, that is likely to be because they have been in receipt of other funds through other routes.

We have provided £2.2 million for grass-roots music venues. I hear what members say about the importance of that fund. It is a recognition of those venues' role in nurturing and showcasing artistic talent. The fund has provided support for 72 grass-roots music venues throughout Scotland. Music industry businesses have received support from the culture organisations and venues recovery fund and the performing arts venues relief fund, as well as through the original pivotal enterprise resilience fund and the creative, tourism and hospitality enterprises hardship fund. I have ensured that as many as possible of the support funds have been available for music venues. The

support has reached individuals and businesses across Scotland in all parts of the music industry.

We have also supported youth music and music education through a £3 million youth arts funding package, which is delivered by Creative Scotland. Last week, youth arts organisations, including many youth music organisations, received £1 million from the targeted fund. Recipients included Drake Music Scotland, Fèis Rois, the National Youth Choir of Scotland and the Scottish Brass Band Association, which does so much good work all over Scotland, including in my constituency in West Lothian. The funding will support those organisations to expand their work, provide creative opportunities to young people and provide work and income for artists and musicians, and practitioners generally.

During the pandemic, the music industry has done whatever it can to maintain some level of activity and to stay in touch with audiences. The Scottish album of the year award took place at the start of November, and the Nordoff Robbins Scottish music awards and the Scots trad music awards will take place virtually. Many artists have streamed performances, which obviously have been stripped back, and others have continued to write and record new music, although we recognise the challenges that exist in that regard. We have been able to allow recording studios and practice rooms to open, in line with guidance that was published on 30 June.

We know about the resilience of the industry but, as we have heard from many speakers in the debate, there are also vulnerabilities. We know that the support that we have provided cannot replace income that has been lost through the closure of live music venues, but it is an effort to try to support people to survive through this very difficult period.

Claire Baker: The funds that the cabinet secretary has announced are all very welcome but, as I said and as she will recognise, they have been oversubscribed. Will the Government look again at the money that has been provided for the strategic framework and consider whether greater flexibility can be built in so that more businesses that are connected to the music industry can apply? Although some businesses are able to open, that is just not viable because people are not using their services; at the moment, those businesses cannot access support.

Fiona Hyslop: Just over a week ago, we had the indication of additional funding. We will use the remaining funding that we have in the cultural funds to look at what needs topped up or supported. I have been attacked for not spending all the funding, but I deliberately kept some back because we knew that there would be oversubscription, which we need to address. We

will, of course, look at the strategic framework funds that are available and identify what support is still required in a number of areas—not least, events, on which musicians depend. That is our view of what the funds will do.

One of the things that will help the industry most is consideration of what recovery might look like and how we can open up so that artists can perform. The strategic framework allows music venues to open in levels 0 and 1. We obviously have to be careful, particularly at this stage. We have produced guidance that restricts indoor venues to a maximum capacity of 100 people in a seated area. Some venues in level 1 areas are making plans to open; that will be of great interest, and we are keen to see how those concerts go.

We need to identify how we can provide a route back. That is why Scotland's events recovery fund, which opened on 2 November and is administered by EventScotland, is looking at how we can restart the events sector as restrictions are eased. That addresses the point about initial events not being viable financially in terms of the revenue that is received, but support to allow such events to happen can help in identifying a route back so that communities and the public can regain confidence in hosting and attending events. Grants of up to £35,000 are available, so I ask members to help to publicise that fund, too.

Live music is represented on the independent events industry advisory group, which has been working on a longer-term plan for the return of live events, including live music. The group takes a very constructive approach.

There is much to do. A great deal of concern has been raised in the debate. The concerns are understood but, from the very beginning, when Creative Scotland produced the first freelancer hardship funds, Government's job has been to take action, make an impact and help venues and musicians to survive. The pandemic has forced much of Scotland's music to fall silent, but the voices in this Parliament have ensured that the needs of music have been heard. I appreciate the sacrifices that many of our musicians are making at this time.

Music is a central part of Scotland's life. We have recognised that in the support that we have provided. I am determined to ensure that the voices of musicians and the music that they play will be heard throughout Scottish venues and that we will come through this with a vibrant music scene. As I said, I thank everybody for their passion and pride in our musicians. Some of us have to put the policies into practice, which is what I have been doing, as Scotland's culture secretary.

Meeting closed at 18:18.

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