



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Meeting of the Parliament (Hybrid)

Monday 4 January 2021

Session 5



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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Scottish Parliament

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

Covid-19

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): Good afternoon. Although Parliament has been recalled to discuss some very serious and perhaps worrying matters, I begin by wishing you all a very happy new year.

We will shortly hear from the First Minister. Following her statement, she will take questions. I encourage all members who wish to ask a question of the First Minister to press their request-to-speak buttons now.

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Before I begin, I would like to mark with great sadness the passing of one of the former members of our Parliament, Kay Ullrich.

Kay was one of the original class of 1999, and she was hugely respected across the chamber. She was a Scottish National Party member of 55 years standing and a lifelong, extremely passionate campaigner for the cause of Scottish independence. However, for many of us, she was first and foremost the dearest of friends; somebody whom we loved. She was one of the biggest influences in my life, and was literally the first person I met and campaigned for when I joined the SNP as a 16-year-old. We will all miss her hugely and, in paying tribute to her today, I send my love and condolences to her husband, Grady, and her children, John and Shelley. I also say to her beloved grandchildren that you really were the light of her life. Your granny was a very special person, and she was extremely proud of all of you.

I will turn now to my statement. First, I thank the Presiding Officer for this recall of Parliament and join him in wishing everyone all the very best for a new year that we hope—despite its difficult start—will bring better times.

The Cabinet met this morning to assess the up-to-date Covid situation—which, I must say at the outset, is extremely serious—and discuss what further action is necessary to minimise further spread of the virus. Shortly, I will set out the decisions that we reached. However, I can confirm now, in summary, that we have decided to introduce from midnight tonight, for the duration of January, a legal requirement to stay at home except for essential purposes. This is similar to the lockdown of March last year.

Before I set out cabinet's decisions in more detail, I want to explain in some detail why they are so necessary.

During the past few weeks there have been two significant game changers in our fight against this virus. One—the approval of vaccines—is hugely positive and offers us the way out of this pandemic. However, the other—the new, faster-spreading variant of the virus—is a massive blow.

Possibly the simplest way to explain the challenge that we face right now is to compare it to a race. In one lane we have vaccines, and our job is to ensure that they run as fast as possible. That is why the Government will do everything we can to vaccinate people as quickly as possible, and I will say more about that later. In the other lane is the virus, which—as a result of this new variant—has just learned to run much faster and has most definitely picked up pace in the last couple of weeks.

To ensure that the vaccine wins the race it is essential to speed up vaccinations as far as possible. However, to give the vaccine the time that it needs to get ahead, we must also slow the virus down. Because it is now spreading faster, that means that even tougher restrictions are necessary.

The evidence is now compelling that the new variant is up to 70 per cent more transmissible than previously circulating strains, and that it may add as much as 0.7 to the R number. According to recent analysis of polymerase chain reaction test samples, it appears that the new variant already accounts for almost half of all new cases in Scotland. That increased and faster spread is undoubtedly driving the very serious situation that we now face.

Today's case numbers—1,905 new cases, with 15 per cent of tests being positive—illustrate the severity and urgency of the situation. No new deaths were reported today, because yesterday was a Sunday and registration offices were largely closed, but 289 deaths have been recorded in the daily figures since I updated Parliament before Christmas. That again reminds us of the continuing grief that the pandemic is causing.

However, I stress that this is not just about one day's numbers—we are now seeing a steeply rising trend of infections. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that I am more concerned about the situation that we face now than I have been at any time since March last year. In the week from 23 to 30 December, the seven-day incidence of cases per 100,000 of the population increased by 65 per cent from 136 to 225 per 100,000. Test positivity has risen sharply, too.

The next update on the numbers of Covid patients in hospital and intensive care will be

published tomorrow. I would expect that update to show that, nationally, the total number of Covid patients in hospital is close to its April peak. In some boards, the pressure is already very real. For example, in terms of hospital beds, NHS Ayrshire and Arran is currently at 96 per cent of its Covid capacity and three other health boards—NHS Borders, NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde and NHS Lanarkshire—are above 60 per cent of their capacity.

The number of people in intensive care is still significantly lower than the April peak, which partly reflects the fact that the treatment of Covid has improved significantly, but even so, the total number of patients in intensive care in Scotland is already above normal winter levels. Indeed, all mainland health boards have now exceeded their normal intensive care unit capacity.

It is important to be clear—this is a key point—that people who are in hospital and intensive care now are likely to have been infected 10 days to two weeks ago, which means that those numbers reflect what the level of new cases was around two weeks ago. Given that the number of cases has increased significantly since then, we can expect to see significantly increased pressure on the national health service over the course of this month.

Contingency plans remain in place to double and then treble ICU capacity if necessary, and the NHS Louisa Jordan continues to be available to help meet demand, as indeed it has been doing in recent months—12,000 patients have attended there for scans and out-patient appointments, nearly 5,000 NHS staff and students have been trained there and it is currently being used for Covid vaccinations.

In short, NHS services are coping at present, although the pressure on front-line staff is considerable, but already in some areas the position is fragile and getting more challenging. If the rate of increase in case numbers that we have seen in the past two weeks was to continue unchecked, there would be a real risk of our NHS being overwhelmed—even with contingency plans in place. In fact, our modelling suggests that without further intervention, we could breach in-patient Covid capacity within three or four weeks. Of course, a sharply increasing number of cases means, in human terms, many more people becoming ill and dying.

All that explains why we have to act quickly and decisively. The situation in some other parts of the United Kingdom, where case numbers are already much higher than here and where the contribution of the new variant is already greater, shows what may lie ahead if we do not act. As things stand, we estimate that we are possibly about four weeks behind the position in London and the south-east

of England. The rapid acceleration in London began when it was at about 160 new cases a week for every 100,000 people. That is the level that Scotland was at a week ago. London is now seeing 900 new cases a week per 100,000, its test positivity is around 27 per cent and pressure on NHS services is acute.

We have an opportunity in Scotland to avert the situation here deteriorating to that extent, but we must act quickly. The advice of our clinical advisers is clear that the increased transmissibility of the new variant means that the current level 4 measures may not be sufficient to bring the R number back below 1. Therefore, it is essential that we further limit interaction between different households to stem the spread and bring the situation back under control while we vaccinate more people. In short, we must return for a period to a situation much closer to the lockdown of last March.

I will, therefore, set out in more detail the decisions that the Cabinet reached this morning. It is important to stress that those decisions were not taken lightly. I am acutely aware of the impact that they will have and I know that they will not be welcome, but we judge them to be essential.

Our clear and overriding duty as a Government is to act quickly to save lives and to protect the NHS. We know that any delay or prevarication in the face of the virus almost always makes things worse, not better, even if that stems from an understandable shared desire to wait for more data or evidence.

I will speak later about our decisions on schools. Those will apply to all parts of Scotland. The other decisions that I am about to outline will apply to those parts of Scotland that are currently in level 4—which is all of mainland Scotland—and are effectively an enhancement to level 4. The island areas currently in level 3 will remain there for now, although we will continue to monitor them carefully.

The additional level 4 restrictions—which essentially return us to a position similar to the lockdown of last March—will be in place for the whole of January. We will keep them closely under review. I cannot, at this stage, rule out keeping the restrictions in place for longer or making further changes. Nothing about the current situation is easy.

The first measure is that our fundamental advice to everyone is to stay at home. That is the single best way of staying safe. We consider that stay at home message to be so important that, from tomorrow, it will become law, just as it was in the lockdown last year. That means that it will only be permissible to leave home for essential purposes. Those will include, for example, caring

responsibilities, essential shopping, exercise and being part of an extended household.

In addition, anyone who is able to work from home must do so. It will be a reasonable excuse to leave home to go to work only if that work cannot be done from home. We are asking people and businesses to take that really seriously—as we all did during the first lockdown in March—because the situation is at least as serious now as it was then.

The law already requires many businesses in certain sectors to close if they are in level 4 areas. We now need every business to look again at its operations, and to ensure that every function that can be carried out by people working at home is being done in that way.

Businesses have already shown tremendous capacity for adaptation during the pandemic, and I am grateful to them for that. We need them to consider their operations again, as we all work together to reduce transmission. The Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Fair Work and Culture will speak to business organisations about that, starting later this afternoon. We will also engage with trade unions on the issues and we will continue to consider whether more regulatory action is required.

We are also providing new guidance for people who are shielding. Our clear advice now is that people who were shielding and cannot work from home should not go into work at all. The chief medical officer is writing to everyone who falls into that category and his letter will count as a fit note for those who need it.

Unlike during the lockdown last year, the frequency of outdoor exercise is not being limited. It is important for physical and mental health that we get outdoors for fresh air and exercise as much as possible. However, from tomorrow, the rule on outdoor gatherings will change. As of now, up to six people from two households can meet outdoors. Given the greater transmissibility of the new variant of the virus, we consider it necessary to restrict that further. From tomorrow, a maximum of two people from up to two households will be able to meet outdoors. Children aged 11 and under will not be counted in that limit, and they will also be able to play outdoors in larger groups, including in organised gatherings. However, for everyone else—including 12 to 17-year-olds—outdoor exercise should take place only in a way that is consistent with the two people from two households rule.

In addition, strict travel restrictions remain in place across Scotland. From tomorrow, if you live in a level 4 area, as the majority of us do, you cannot leave your home except for an essential purpose. When you do go out, stay as close to

home as possible and stay away from crowded places. I stress that it remains the case that no one is allowed to travel into or out of Scotland unless it is for an essential purpose.

A number of other measures will come into effect on Friday. It is with real regret that we consider it necessary for places of worship to close during this period for all purposes except for broadcasting a service or conducting a funeral, wedding or civil partnership. I am well aware of how important communal worship is to people, but we believe that the restriction is necessary to reduce the risk of transmission. Although up to 20 people will still be able to attend funeral services, wakes will not be possible during January, and a maximum of five people will be able to attend wedding and civil partnership services. I know how devastating such restrictions are, and I give an assurance that we will not keep them in place for any longer than is absolutely necessary.

There will also be additional measures in relation to businesses, in addition to the tightening of the “essential retail” definition that took effect from boxing day. The current 1m exemption for workplace canteens will end, so canteens will have to ensure that employees sit 2m or more apart, rather than 1m.

The number of non-essential services that remain open will be further restricted. Premises that will need to close as a result of the changes will include, for example, ski centres, the showrooms of larger retailers and clinics that offer cosmetic and aesthetic procedures.

I know that many businesses have already been hit by the restrictions that were put in place on boxing day, and of course I know that the vast majority of businesses have taken their responsibilities seriously and invested in Covid safety measures. In addition, the move to home working has brought challenges for workers and employers, and I am hugely grateful for the way in which businesses and their staff have responded to those challenges.

Grants are, of course, available for businesses that are required to close as a result of restrictions. That support is in addition to support through the UK-wide furlough scheme. The Scottish Government’s financial support for businesses during the pandemic currently totals more than £2.3 billion, but we will continue to assess what more we can do, either through closure grants or other forms of support, to help businesses and those who work for them. We will also work with councils to ensure community and social support for those who need it, including for parents balancing work and online learning. We will confirm additional resources for those purposes later this week.

The final substantive issue that I want to address, before giving an update on vaccination, relates to schools. Before Christmas, we announced that most school pupils would learn remotely, rather than in school, until Monday 18 January. I can confirm that we have now decided to extend that date and keep schools closed to the majority of pupils until 1 February. We will review that again in mid-January. The change will apply to all pupils, except vulnerable children and the children of key workers, and it will include nursery schools as well as primary and secondary schools.

There is no doubt at all that, of all the difficult decisions that we have had to take today, that was the most difficult of all, and its impact is, of course, the most severe. The evidence to date makes it clear that, thanks to the hard work of school staff and pupils, schools in Scotland have been low-risk environments for Covid. We will work with partners to ensure that that can remain the case. That will include on-going work on testing in schools and discussions about when, in the context of the overall programme, it will be possible to vaccinate school staff.

I want to be clear that it remains our priority to get school buildings open again for all pupils as quickly as possible, and then to keep them open. However, right now, two factors mean that it is not consistent with a safety-first approach for all children to attend school in person. First, the overall level of community transmission is simply too high. We need to get transmission down before schools can safely reopen. A period of online learning will help us to do that. The second reason is that there is still significant uncertainty about the impact of the new variant on transmission among young people.

We must therefore adopt a cautious approach at this stage, and that is why most pupils will be learning online for at least the rest of the month. On 18 January, we will review whether they can, as we hope, return to school on 1 February. I know that remote learning presents significant challenges for teachers, schools, parents and young people, and we will work to support children and parents throughout this time. The Government, Education Scotland and local authorities are working together to further improve the remote learning options that are available for schools.

It is worth highlighting that, since schools returned after the summer, more than 50,000 devices such as laptops have been distributed to children and young people to help with remote learning. More devices are being distributed by councils every week and, in total, we expect our investment, which builds on existing local authority action, to benefit about 70,000 disadvantaged children and young people across the country.

I want to stress one final point. Just as the last places that we ever want to close are schools and nurseries, so it is the case that schools and nurseries will be the first places that we will want to reopen as we re-emerge from the latest period of lockdown. They remain our priority. That is why we are considering whether and to what extent, consistent with our overall duty to vaccinate the most vulnerable first in line with Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation recommendations, we can achieve vaccination of school and childcare staff as a priority. I point out that many teachers will be vaccinated over the coming weeks as part of the JCVI priority list.

The fortnightly review will not simply be a choice between opening and closing schools. We will always seek to maximise the number of pupils that we can safely get back to classrooms and nurseries, so if the evidence tells us that we can get some pupils back safely, that is what we will do. However, ultimately, the best way of enabling more pupils to return more quickly is by reducing community transmission of the virus as much as possible. All of us, by accepting and abiding by the wider restrictions that I have set out today, have a part to play in achieving that.

Before I leave the issue of education, let me remind the chamber that we already had plans in place for the staggered return of universities and colleges. We will be considering this week whether any further change to that plan is necessary.

Before I close, I want to give a brief update on our current expectations around vaccine supply. The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport will give a more detailed update on vaccination in a statement to the chamber next week. However, I can confirm that well over 100,000 people have now received their first dose of the vaccine. The first doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine are being administered in Scotland today.

In total, over the period to the end of January, including the more than 100,000 already administered, we expect to have access to just over 900,000 doses of vaccine, although we obviously hope that that number will increase. Those doses will be split roughly equally between the Pfizer and AstraZeneca vaccines. However, we anticipate that some of the AstraZeneca portion will be available only in the final week of January. We do not yet have certainty on supply schedules beyond January, but we will keep Parliament updated as those become firmer.

Our current expectation, based on assumptions about supply and the new advice on doses being administered up to 12 weeks apart, rather than three, is that by early May everyone over 50, and people under 50 with specific underlying conditions, will have received at least the first dose of vaccine. That is everyone who is on the JCVI

priority list and comprises more than 2.5 million people. Once everyone on the priority list has been vaccinated, we will start vaccinating the rest of the population, in parallel with completing second doses for those on the priority list. Those timetables are, of course, heavily dependent on vaccine supply and, for that reason, they are also cautious. However, I have tasked our vaccination team with exploring and keeping under on-going review all possible options to speed up the rate of vaccination and bring those timescales forward as far as possible.

I am grateful for the many offers of assistance that we have received and, although many of them may not prove possible or practical to take up, they will all be considered. The health secretary will say more about all that in her statement next week.

To conclude, this is most certainly not the new year statement that I wanted to give and I know that it is a statement that no one wanted to hear. However, as I said at the beginning, we are now in a race between the vaccine and the virus. The Scottish Government will do everything that we can to speed up distribution of the vaccine, but we must all do everything that we can to slow down the spread of the virus.

We can already see by looking at infection rates elsewhere some of what could happen here in Scotland if we do not act. To prevent that, we must act immediately and firmly. For Government, that means introducing tough measures, as we have done today, and for all of us it means sticking to the rules. It means continuing to follow the FACTS guidance and it means, above all, staying at home.

That is, again, our central message: stay home, save lives, protect the NHS. If we do that, we will give the vaccine the time that it needs to get ahead and, ultimately, to win the race. I know that the next few weeks will be incredibly difficult. I am sorry to ask for further sacrifices after nine long months of them, but these sacrifices are necessary.

The difference between now and last March is that, with the help of vaccines, we now have confidence that the sacrifices will pave the way to brighter days ahead. Therefore, for everyone's sake and safety, please stick with it and stay at home.

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

Ruth Davidson (Edinburgh Central) (Con): First, I offer my condolences and those of my party on the news of the passing of Kay Ullrich, who was respected by members across the chamber.

I, too, am grateful to you, Presiding Officer, for recalling Parliament for today's statement.

Nobody wants to live under restrictions for a moment longer than is absolutely necessary or wants those restrictions to be any tighter than needed. However, the increase in infection rate and the transmissibility of the new variant give grave cause for concern. We have come too far to throw all our efforts away, and the roll-out of the vaccine means that we can see a time, soon, when all this will begin to be over.

That said, this is hard news at a hard time, when the resilience of people across the country has already been worn down over the past year. Many will be dismayed by today's news, not least the parents of school pupils, who now have to rip up their childcare plans, negotiate with their employers and worry about their children's fractured education.

The Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland has expressed concerns that closing schools poses

"a serious risk of harm to the wellbeing of children and young people".

He has warned that

"support for online learning is being provided inconsistently"

across Scotland and that

"there is not enough national guidance and support for schools"

from Government ministers, which threatens a further widening of the attainment gap. What further steps is the Scottish Government taking to address those concerns and to ensure that Scottish pupils continue to get equal access to high-quality education?

The First Minister: I agree that it will be very hard for everybody across Scotland to hear this news today and to contemplate the reality of it over the next few weeks. I reiterate to people that we do not take these decisions lightly. We agonise over them, and we announce such restrictions only if we really feel that there is no alternative. Right now, the only alternative is greater loss of life and the potential for our national health service to be overwhelmed. At this point in time, speed of action is the most important factor of all.

The decision over which we agonised most was that on the further closure of schools for the majority of pupils. The issue of schools, closed or open, has been contentious in recent weeks, and teachers and others have understandably raised concerns. However, I hope that people see from the responses and actions of the Government that we have striven, and will continue to strive, to keep schools open as normally, as often and for

as long as possible. We deem today's decision to be necessary, for the reasons that I have set out.

I will ensure that the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills sets out for MSPs over the next couple of days the steps that are being taken to ensure that the provision of online education is as parents want it to be and that local authorities are working to ensure that it is of a consistent quality across the country. As I indicated in my opening remarks, we have already taken steps to ensure that more young people have access to digital devices, in order to make online learning more accessible to them.

Schools and local authorities already have contingency plans in place. Advice for parents is available via the Parent Club website. Parents can also speak direct to schools for more advice. Glow, which is the national online learning platform, has seen a huge increase in users and usage since earlier last year, and we are working actively with local and national partners to enhance the online and remote learning options for pupils. That work will continue over the course of next week and for as long as is necessary.

I end my answer by reiterating that we want the measures to be in place for as short a period as necessary, for all the reasons that I think everybody understands and agrees with.

Ruth Davidson: Today's announcement underscores the need to have a comprehensive test and trace system in place. In August, the First Minister promised that, between the UK Government Lighthouse laboratories and NHS Scotland facilities, we would have the capacity for 65,000 tests per day. However, the highest number of tests that were carried out in a single day was 30,619, on Christmas day. Currently, one third of tests are carried out by NHS Scotland, and the majority by the Lighthouse labs. She also promised that the three regional hubs for testing would have opened by the end of December but, so far, only two have done so.

The test positivity rate over the past seven days is now the highest that it has ever been since the Scottish Government started publishing that data in August. Is there capacity in Scotland to carry out 65,000 tests per day? If there is, why is the number of tests that are carried out on any day well below half of that capacity? When will the Edinburgh regional hub be open for testing?

The First Minister: Yes, there is capacity for 65,000 tests per day. That target, which we set earlier in the year, was met by Christmas. However, the number of tests that are actually carried out on any given day is largely demand driven, because it depends on the number of people with symptoms who come forward for testing. We have seen, and I think that we will

continue to see, that number rise as, unfortunately, the faster-spreading strain of the virus infects more people. However, the numbers for capacity and the demand for testing will often not be exactly the same, for obvious reasons.

Although some aspects of testing of asymptomatic people are not done through the PCR testing that goes through the laboratory network—they are now increasingly done through lateral flow testing, the results of which do not appear in these numbers—other aspects of it are done in that way. For example, we are well through the process of transferring testing of care home staff from the Lighthouse lab network to the NHS Scotland lab network.

We have a well-functioning test and protect system, which continues to be a really important part of our response to the virus. However, because the virus is now spreading faster, we must have a range of different responses in order to complement that system. As far as interventions are concerned, just as the test and protect system has been important, the vaccine programme will become increasingly important over the next period.

I understand that there has been a last-minute—or, I should say, late-stage—issue with a sprinkler system in the Edinburgh regional lab. That is in the process of being rectified, and the lab is due to open shortly.

Ruth Davidson: Today's announcement of further restrictions is particularly difficult to take when in recent weeks we have had such positive news of vaccines being approved and being bought in such large quantities by the UK Government. In her statement, the First Minister said that we are in a race between the vaccine and the virus. It will be impossible to know whether we are winning that race at any given time if we show only the daily infection figures without the daily vaccination figures. Members of the public need more information on precisely how the roll-out is going, both nationally and in their areas, as well as on when they will receive their doses. Also, last week, the health secretary said that those aged over 80 will be invited by letter to attend for vaccination.

Will the First Minister commit today to publishing not just the national vaccination figures but the numbers of people who have been vaccinated, broken down by health board, so that people can see the progress that has been made in their communities? Can she tell us now when everyone in the over-80 cohort will receive letters with details of their vaccination appointments?

The First Minister: When Parliament was recalled last week, I said—I think in response to a question from a Labour member—that we intend

to break down into categories the numbers of people who have been vaccinated, which we currently publish weekly. I hope that we could also do so by region and by health board. I will consider whether there is potential to have greater frequency of publication. I am simply mindful of not putting too many burdens of data collection and publication on the people whom we are expecting to undertake that huge logistical challenge, so it might be that weekly publication will remain the best balance, together with a greater breakdown of statistics.

It is not that long since the vaccines were approved. In particular, the Oxford-AstraZeneca one is still at an early stage. However, we have already vaccinated more than 100,000 people. At this stage, a small percentage of our population has been vaccinated; the level in Scotland is slightly higher than those in the other UK nations. However, we must continue to focus on accelerating the process as much as possible. As I said earlier, at the moment that is largely constrained by supply. We know what we expect to receive for January, which I hope is a conservative estimate. We are not yet clear on what supplies we can expect beyond that.

As for the call for priority for the over-80 population, vaccination of those people will start shortly and will be an on-going process. We have been recalculating our modelling for the speed and timescale of vaccination as a result of the change in the chief medical officer's advice on giving the second dose of the vaccine up to 12 weeks after the first dose, rather than three weeks after it. That will allow us to get the first dose of vaccine to more people much more quickly. We are ensuring that we take full advantage of that, just as we are taking full advantage of the supplies of the vaccine as we get them.

Ruth Davidson: Today's announcement raises immediate practical questions, and one of the primary ones concerns the legal requirement for people to work from home where they can. That raises all sorts of issues, including who is a key worker and what constitutes essential labour in a workplace outside the home. Who should make such decisions, and what is the process for arbitration in the event of a dispute between a workplace and a local authority or between a boss and an employee? In the first lockdown, we saw different interpretations being used by different local authorities, and different services being provided depending on category. People need to know what the new rules are, how they will apply to them and what recourse will exist where there is conflict. Will the First Minister therefore provide clarity on those important points?

The First Minister: We will set out more guidance on those points. On the issue of key

workers in the education context, local authorities have specifically asked for some flexibility in that regard, which I think it is important to afford them.

There is a balance to be struck. In terms of business, we are not, as of now, in quite as restrictive a position as we were back in March—when non-essential work in construction and manufacturing, for example, was closed—but we need to keep that under review. We need to look at not only the spread of the virus but the really important relationship, which I understand, between people's ability to work—or rather, the requirement on them to work—and their ability to look after their children and take part in online learning for those children at home.

The Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Fair Work and Culture will have discussions as early as this afternoon with business organisations, and discussions with trade unions, to ensure that we help people—just as we did back in March—to navigate their way through what I recognise is a difficult situation. However, the message to businesses is that we are again asking them to scrutinise their operations rigorously, as they did in March, and assure themselves that the people whom they are requiring to be at work are genuinely only those who cannot do their job at home. There is a need to ensure that as many people as possible who can work from home are supported to do so.

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): I offer the Scottish Labour Party's condolences to the family of Kay Ullrich, who was widely respected across the spectrum of Scottish politics.

The issue today is not just whether schools and school buildings are open. It is about how much preparation the Government has made for the continuation of our children's education; whether the remote learning materials that we were promised were ready back in July are ready now, six months later; and whether teachers have the support that they need, whether plans are in place and whether they have the resources that they require to back that work up. It is also about how much support there is for working parents and what the plan is for them. For example, does the First Minister have a plan to encourage all businesses to furlough all working parents who need to take time off to support their children? Can she assure us that all that is in place?

The First Minister: I will not pretend to people that any of these decisions are easy—they are not easy for the people who have to live with the consequences, nor are they easy for any Government, anywhere. Nonetheless, we will do everything that we can—as we did earlier in the pandemic, and at the outset when we were in lockdown previously—to help people to navigate

their way through those decisions and deal with the impact of them.

We have taken significant steps on online learning. For example, the national e-learning offer, which is a collaborative programme involving the Scottish Government, Education Scotland and local government, has already helped to improve the options that are available to schools and enhanced the provision for live remote learning, recorded lessons and supported learning via online digital learning. One initiative within that is e-Sgoil, which has been refreshed with an expanded range of study support courses, ranging from national 5 to advanced higher.

That support has already been strengthened in a number of ways, but we will seek to do that on an on-going basis. Fundamentally, however, the priority in getting transmission down again is to keep the period during which schools are closed as short as possible.

As I said earlier, we will discuss with business organisations—starting today, with the economy secretary—the expectation on businesses to do everything that they can to support their workers to work from home and to support workers who have childcare responsibilities. We will keep Parliament updated on any further initiatives that arise from that, but I know that businesses have already worked hard to do those things. Again, we are at a stage when we need a massive national collective endeavour to overcome the severe challenge that we face, and I know and expect that businesses will play their full part in that.

Richard Leonard: I will stick to the theme of support for working people. Last October, the Government promised to protect low-income workers from financial hardship, should they be asked to self-isolate by test and protect. However, the £500 grant does not seem to be reaching many of the low-paid workers who have applied for it.

According to the Government's most recent data, published in December, 23 per cent—less than a quarter—of individuals who applied to the self-isolation support scheme received a payment. With the infection rate rising, more and more working people will be required to self-isolate. Can the First Minister tell us why the award rate for that vital payment for low-income households is so low and what she will do to drive it up?

The First Minister: The eligibility criteria for the £500 support payment were set out at its establishment, and they are tied to entitlement to benefits, although we sought to have a degree of flexibility around that in Scotland. The payment is administered through the Scottish welfare fund. We will continue to consider how we ensure that support for self-isolation and more general support

for the new circumstances in which we are now in reaches more people.

At the outset of the pandemic, we made significant resources available to support communities and people in deprived communities in particular. We will be discussing with local authorities how we refresh and supplement that. There was also the £100 million winter support package, with grants going to low-income families before Christmas, as well as a range of other support for organisations supporting people and different groups living in poverty.

We have done a great deal, but we recognise that, in the new, more severe circumstances that we are now in for the next period, we must continue to increase what we are doing. As I indicated in my statement, later this week we will make announcements about additional resources covering many key aspects, with support for communities and vulnerable groups in particular, parental support and any support in addition to the support strands that are already in place for business that we can make available for affected companies.

Richard Leonard: It seems to me that, if 77 per cent of the people who apply to the self-isolation support scheme do not receive a payment, there is something wrong with how the scheme is operating.

We all recognise that the new variant of Covid-19 demands new action to suppress its spread. The advice from the scientific advisory group for emergencies—SAGE—is that actions such as delaying the second dose of the vaccine form only one part of a comprehensive, ambitious strategy to do that. However, less than two weeks ago, one senior Government adviser, in response to a question about people's immunity from the first dose, said:

"They get a little bit ... but it is not like 50 per cent and then another 50 per cent. These numbers are not right ... it is more like 10 per cent and 90 per cent, so the second dose is much more important on top of the first dose."

A week later, a statement from the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation said:

"Short term vaccine efficacy from the first dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine is calculated at around 90%, short term vaccine efficacy from the first dose of the AstraZeneca vaccine is calculated at around 70%".

Maintaining public confidence in the vaccination programme is critical, but that means ensuring that messages are clear and consistent from all Government advisers. Can the First Minister take responsibility for that? Can she today set out the expected number of people to be vaccinated each week, based on current assumptions?

The First Minister: I take responsibility for all aspects of the Government's handling of the

situation—I have never tried to shy away from that. Consistent messaging is important. As an aside, I must admit that I have struggled, from week to week, to know what Richard Leonard expects the Government to do; he has gone from wanting to ease restrictions to wanting to impose more severe ones. These things are difficult, but I understand the importance of the point.

Before I come on to the issue of vaccine dosage, which is important, I will round off on the first point on the support payment. We have already extended eligibility for the payment since it was introduced, and we will continue to look to do that.

On the issue of the two doses and the period of up to 12 weeks between them, that is clinical advice. I take responsibility for every aspect of the Government's response, but I am not clinically qualified; I rely on advisers to give us the best possible advice. The four chief medical officers have collectively given their advice to the four Governments on dosing, and they have done that on the basis that the proposed approach allows us to vaccinate more people with a significant degree of immunity more quickly than under the original strategy. Given the race that we are in and the circumstances that we face, if they believe that that is a safe and sensible thing to do, it is incumbent on politicians to follow that advice.

The short-term efficacy from the first dose is 90 per cent for the Pfizer vaccine and 70 per cent for the AstraZeneca vaccine. That is set out in a letter that I think went to MSPs yesterday or this morning, and a briefing on the matter from the chief medical officer has been offered to all MSPs.

While I have the opportunity, I will address another issue about the vaccination policy that has been raised in the past two days, in order to give clear and consistent messaging. It has been suggested that people might get their first dose of one vaccine and their second dose of another vaccine. That is not our policy in Scotland, and it is not what the chief medical officer advises—unless there were exceptional circumstances in which, for example, it was not known what vaccine had been given in the first dose. The policy at this stage is that people will get both doses with the same vaccine.

The Presiding Officer: Patrick Harvie joins us remotely.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): I thank the First Minister for her statement, and I add my condolences and those of the Scottish Green Party to the friends, family and colleagues of Kay Ullrich.

Once again, we are seeing the announcement of new measures, which everyone will find regrettable, but which I think the vast majority of

people will recognise are necessary. However, with schools closing for longer than planned, there is a need for a package of practical support for parents, not only from Government but from employers. That need will be particularly significant for single parents, people who live in cramped conditions and people who are coping with working from home while schools are closed. People struggled last time, but they got through. They need and deserve our help if they have to do it again.

The First Minister recognised the uncertainty around the new variant's impact on transmission among young people. Does she agree that over the next couple of weeks, before the review period, we will need clarity on such issues? We will need answers that give us confidence on the question of transmission among young people before we can know whether it is safe to fully reopen schools or what additional measures are necessary to keep young people safe.

The First Minister: Yes, I agree. As everybody knows, we have been determined, from the moment that schools reopened in August until now, to keep schools open. That has been contentious at times and legitimate concerns have been raised. However, at every stage I have been satisfied—on the basis of the advice that I have been given and my understanding of the situation and the data that we have gathered and that has been published by Public Health Scotland and the Office for National Statistics—that schools could safely reopen. Although not all teachers and parents have agreed with that, I have felt able to look them in the eye and say that that is my clear judgment, based on the advice that I have been given.

That has changed, at this time, for the two reasons that I set out: the high level of community transmission and the uncertainty among the scientific community about the impact of the new variant on transmission among young people. Some evidence or opinion that I have seen, read and tried to understand suggests that the new variant might be more likely to infect young people. Others think that that might be only an apparent effect, because in England during the November lockdown schools were open while many of the places to which adults would go were closed. We need to understand that more and I hope that we will have a greater understanding of that in the weeks to come.

There can be no greater responsibility than that of making sure that the schools to which we send our children are safe. Therefore, in order to get schools open again—as I desperately want to do and will strive to do as quickly as possible—I need to be satisfied that I can say to teachers and

parents that it is safe to do so. We will be looking at all those issues very carefully.

Before I touch briefly on the other point that Patrick Harvie raised, I will say that we all have a part to play here. If we all abide by and accept the tough restrictions that we are setting out today, we can bring community transmission down. That creates the best possible conditions for getting schools back open.

I agree with Patrick Harvie that we need a package of support for parents over the next period. The Government will play a part in that, and we will work with businesses to ensure that they do, too. We will be working with councils, with additional resources to make sure that support can be made available.

Patrick Harvie: It seems from that answer that the Scottish Government is committing to taking a precautionary approach, should scientific uncertainty still exist two weeks from today, when the decision about schools is to be reviewed.

I hope that the First Minister agrees that teaching unions are rightly concerned about the safety of pupils and the wider community, as well as the safety of school staff. It has been appalling to see some people—including prominent political figures, who should know better—appearing to question the judgment and even the integrity of unions in their call for a precautionary response to the pandemic. Will the First Minister commit to work with teaching unions on the challenges that schools face?

I welcome the fact that today's statement appeared to acknowledge that more needs to be done to accelerate vaccination for teachers and other school staff. Will the First Minister assure us that teachers and school staff will see meaningful progress on that before the review date of 18 January?

The First Minister: First of all, because many parents will be watching this, I take this opportunity to say that there is no evidence that this virus is leading to more severe illness among young people, and there is no conclusive evidence that it is more likely to infect young people—not that Patrick Harvie tried to create an alternative impression, but it is important to reassure parents of that.

However, there are some uncertainties about the impact that the new strain has and whether—even if it does not lead to greater risk of infection in groups of young people—young people might be more likely to carry it and infect older people, be they parents or teachers. It is important that we give the scientific community time to come to a more certain view on that.

Secondly, we work with trade unions. The Deputy First Minister, in particular, works with the education unions. They are integrally involved in the education recovery group, which met this morning and made the recommendation to Cabinet that I announced today.

I respect the views of unions. I would never, for a single second, doubt their integrity or motivations on this, and I deprecate anybody who does. That does not always mean that we will reach a position in which we are in absolute agreement; the issue of schools has been contentious. However, I give my commitment that I will always take the utmost care in decisions about schools, and that I will satisfy myself—as the Deputy First Minister does—with the advice that we get about the safety of schools. That has been true in the past, and, in these changed circumstances, it will be true in future.

I do not want to oversimplify the complex issue of vaccines in any way. We all want to get everybody vaccinated as quickly as possible. Vaccinating key groups, such as teachers and school staff, would allow us to give greater assurance to teachers in the determination to reopen schools. However, we have clear, expert clinical advice on the need to prioritise those who are clinically most at risk of getting ill and dying from this virus, and ethically we have a duty to ensure that we use the supplies that we have to do that first. Many teachers will be in those groups—for example, teachers who are over 50 or who are under 50 and have other health conditions. Beyond that, we want to get teachers and school staff vaccinated as quickly as possible, but we must ensure that we follow advice about those who are clinically most in need. We will discuss—internally in Government, with our advisors, and with teaching unions and local authorities—how we can accelerate that whole process, because we understand the central importance of it.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I wish to express my condolences about the sad death of Kay Ullrich.

There will be a price to pay for these measures in mental health, economic wellbeing, health services, inequality and loss of education. However, I agree that evidence supports the return of stricter measures. It would be a tragedy if the NHS was overwhelmed and more lives were lost when the protective coat of the new vaccine is within touching distance for millions of people.

I want to ask about childcare. More people will be back at work—especially as construction and manufacturing continue—compared with the situation in the spring, so what advice does the First Minister have for working parents who are not key workers? What advice, support and childcare

will be available for those people? The availability of informal childcare and childminders is much more restricted than is necessary. Therefore, what advice would the First Minister give to affected families to ensure that they have appropriate childcare in place?

The First Minister: I agree that there is a price to pay for all sorts of aspects of this pandemic, which will definitely be paid back for some time to come, in Scotland, the UK, Europe and the world. However, there will be a much bigger price to pay if we do not act to get this virus under control. That is the central, driving imperative that motivates the Government every single day.

I will not insult the intelligence of any parent in relation to childcare—this is a very difficult situation and nothing that I can say, standing here, takes away the challenges with which parents are confronted. We will do everything that we can to help, in a range of ways, firstly through the key worker provision and the flexibility that we have left local authorities. There is the possibility—although it is more restricted—of informal childcare, where there are no alternatives. As I said a couple of times in response to previous questions, we will work with businesses to make sure that they help parents in their workforces who have childcare responsibilities. We will consider, in very short order—including with additional resources—what further practical and financial support we can provide to those who need it.

There will be a package of support, but I do not want to suggest that that will take away every difficulty that working parents will face over this next difficult period. That is why the most important thing that we can do—it is a job for Government and for all of us—is get the virus under control so that the period in which schools and early years education do not operate normally is as short as we can possibly make it.

Willie Rennie: I agree with the First Minister on that point.

We know that the threat of the virus increases with the age of the individual, so is the First Minister considering reopening nurseries and primary schools earlier than secondary schools, after February?

The islands will remain in level 3 but their schools will close; what is the justification for that decision? Many islands do not have adequate broadband and will find remote learning quite difficult, so what provisions will be made available to them?

The First Minister: The justification for the decision is to do with the uncertainty around the impact on transmission among young people. If schools were to remain open in those areas and that had a bigger impact than has been the case

before, the overall stability of those areas, in terms of the levels of the virus, might be jeopardised. It is a precautionary decision.

We have decided to leave the island communities in level 3. We are looking carefully at Shetland, because it has had a high number of cases in recent days, but the indications yesterday and today are that case numbers are stabilising. We will monitor that very carefully indeed.

I take the point about the greater accessibility issues around digital and broadband. We will discuss what more we can do to assist not only island but remote communities on that issue.

In response to Willie Rennie's first point, yes, we will consider that. I deliberately made the point in my statement that when it comes to getting schools back, it will not necessarily be a binary decision to open or close; if we can get some pupils back ahead of all pupils, that is what we will do. Obviously, we will consider whether primary schools can come back before we feel that it is safe to bring back secondary schools, if we feel that that is not safe by the time we get to the review point on 18 January. All those things will be very much under consideration. We want all children to be in school as normal as quickly as possible, but short of that we want as many to get back as quickly as possible.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): It is clear that vaccination is the key to defeating the virus, so having people trained to inoculate and assist that process is of great importance. In England, volunteers have been put off by having to complete 21 forms, including on such irrelevant topics such as deradicalisation and fire safety. Has the Scottish Government minimised the bureaucratic impediments to vaccination and, given the new lockdown, what steps will be taken to ensure compliance, as many constituents are concerned that it can be patchy, which inevitably leads to viral spread?

The First Minister: First, we do not have the same requirement for the kind of form filling that has raised concerns in England. I think that I heard the Prime Minister say yesterday that in England they are trying to sort that out as well. I do not think that any of us wants to put up unnecessary barriers, although it is important with any clinical programme that the right checks are in place. We have around 2,300 vaccinators already registered and the programme is gearing up as we speak and will gather pace with every day that passes.

Kenneth Gibson raises an important point about compliance. The police increased their visibility over the Christmas period in relation to travel restrictions, but we and they will continue to see enforcement as a last resort. My message to

everybody who has been finding their compliance with the restrictions dipping—given the longevity of the situation, that would be understandable particularly over the Christmas period—is that, if there was ever a time to really think about this and to abide by the restrictions, it is now. We face a perilous situation, which is more serious than at any time since the outset of the pandemic. We cannot afford to have anyone inadvertently spreading the virus. The message to all of us is that we must redouble our efforts.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): Our inboxes are full of emails from parents and teachers who are concerned about their own health and that of their children and about the safety of schools. They are also rightly concerned about education. We do not know how long online learning will go on for. Why, 10 months into the pandemic, is it still the case that not every pupil in Scotland can fully access online learning? Also, will nurseries, schools and teachers provide education for the children of key workers, or will councils be asked to reopen learning hubs?

The First Minister: Schools will remain open for the children of key workers and for vulnerable children, and teachers will be part of that. We have already set out the steps that we have taken to improve the provision of online learning. We do not think that the job is done and that we have no more to do. That work will continue and will include the distribution of devices and the other steps that I have set out. We take that very seriously.

We are all concerned about the impact on education. That is why we want the period of school closure to be as short as possible. For understandable and legitimate reasons, and in the face of pressure that I do not criticise, we have been determined to keep schools open in recent months. I hope that nobody will doubt the Government's determination to open schools again as quickly as we deem it safe to do so.

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): I know that the First Minister had a lot of ground to cover in her statement, but thousands of care home residents have had little or no meaningful contact with their loved ones since last March and the statement did not address their needs. What hope can she give to people living in our care homes that they will see their relatives again? What must happen to allow indoor visits by dedicated care givers to take place? Is it one or two doses of the vaccine? If that is contingent on the roll-out of vaccinations, will she say when that will be complete in care homes?

The First Minister: We will not keep restrictions on care home visiting in place for any longer than is necessary. I know that saying that does not take away the pain, anxiety and suffering of care home

residents and their families who have been through a dramatic and torrid few months.

The new strain of the virus is spreading perhaps 70 per cent faster than the previous one. We know that that strain took a toll on care homes. We would be negligent if we did not give stringent advice about the need to restrict indoor visiting in care homes. We are also, as we have been for some time, rolling out further testing in care homes. Residents and staff are also in the top priority group for vaccinations. We hope that we will reach a much better position not too far into this year and that we will get care home visiting back to normal.

In the meantime, as I would also say about schools, we all have a part to play. If we can drive the spread of the virus down, we will all help to create the conditions in which that will become more possible more quickly.

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): The First Minister explained in her statement that schools are not closing but are moving to a different way of working: providing face-to-face learning for vulnerable children and the children of key workers, and supporting remote learning. The First Minister has laid out a serious situation, which will inevitably bring new worries, stresses and strains for all school staff. How can she ensure that support is available for the whole school community?

The First Minister: I am aware of the pressures that remote learning will bring for everybody in our school communities. Schools already have contingency plans in place for remote learning and have thought through the issues of staff workload and deployment.

I want to make clear to parents, carers, children and young people that they are not alone, even if they feel as if they are. No one expects parents or carers to replace teachers. Schools should be able to provide written or digital materials to support learning at home, and the national e-learning offer, which I have spoken about already, is improving the options that are available. If parents or others have questions about support, they should contact schools in the first instance.

As I have said many times, this underlines why it is so important for us to get the situation under control so that we can get schools open again as quickly as possible.

Maurice Golden (West Scotland) (Con): Scottish Chambers of Commerce described today's news as "another blow" to our economic recovery. Thousands of businesses are still waiting on support from July and, now that we have returned to a full lockdown, more support requests are inevitable. When will the outstanding claims from July be processed? Will the eight new

schemes that were announced on 9 December all launch as planned this month, and when will businesses receive their first payments? Finally, will the First Minister outline when businesses that must close as a result of today's announcement will receive support?

The First Minister: I know that today's news is a blow for businesses; it is a blow for everybody. I do not make this point to sound unsympathetic to the plight of businesses or anybody else—because I am not, in any way—but things will be much worse if we do not take firm decisive action now to get the virus under control. We do not have to look too far to see how much worse things will get if we prevaricate now and delay taking necessary actions. That is why this is tough. I do not want to be standing here announcing restrictions, but they are necessary in order to avoid the situation deteriorating.

It is highly likely that businesses that have been waiting since July have not been eligible for the support that they applied for. In some circumstances, that will unfortunately be the case. A range of funding streams are already open, and businesses that are newly required to close will be able to apply for those. The strategic framework business fund is open now. There is also the local authority discretionary scheme which, as its title suggests, is discretionary so that local authorities can meet the needs of businesses that fall through the cracks of other schemes. It might be available to those who are not eligible for other support schemes. There are also a range of funding strands for different sectors of the economy.

Significant support is already available. I have said openly before that that will not compensate every business for every loss, but I encourage businesses to apply for all the support that they can. We will continue to look at what more we are able to do in the weeks ahead.

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): The First Minister has explained why the plans for schools in January have changed. The plans that were announced previously involved teachers and school staff returning to schools this week to staff hubs and to lead remote learning for other pupils. Many teachers and school staff who are listening to today's statement will now be unsure whether they should plan to go into school. Will the First Minister provide clarity on her expectations?

The First Minister: We expect teachers to still be in schools to help with provision for vulnerable children and the children of key workers. My key advice to teachers is, of course, to take their guidance from their employer, which is their individual school and local authority. We work through the education recovery group to ensure that there is a consistent and understandable framework for local authorities and schools.

Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP): Clearly, the size of some local authority areas, such as Dumfries and Galloway and the Borders, means that many residents might have to travel quite a distance to shop for essential goods or undertake exercise compared with those in more urban local authorities. Will the First Minister explain whether there are restrictions on the distance that people can travel? How do we encourage more people to stay at home or close to home, if they go out?

The First Minister: That is an important issue, but it is not easy to get the balance right. We want to restrict travel as much as possible, but we have to be careful that, if we restrict travel by distance too much, particularly in urban areas, people who go out for outdoor exercise might end up congregating in very confined spaces. We are trying to get the balance as right as possible.

The stay at home regulations will come into force from midnight. As is the case with the travel regulations, there are exceptions that allow people to go out for essential shopping, for exercise and for other essential purposes, such as caring for a vulnerable relative.

However, I cannot stress enough that, particularly when it comes to exercise and shopping, people should stay as close to home as possible. Although it is important for everyone's wellbeing that they take exercise outdoors, people should travel only locally to get to a safe non-crowded place to exercise in a socially distanced way. Just as was the case in March, this is a time for people to stay at home, because that is how we save lives and protect the NHS.

Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con): The First Minister spoke about vaccinating everyone on the JCVI priority list by early May. However, there is still considerable uncertainty about when and where groups on that list will be vaccinated in each health board area. Although that is dependent on supply, as has been recognised, will the First Minister commit to publishing precise timescales and locations across Scotland for each group on the priority list and thus bring some much-needed clarity to the members of those groups who are waiting to be vaccinated?

The First Minister: The health secretary has reminded me that every MSP was sent a communication last week that had a map of every health board's initial plans for vaccination in terms of the general practice and community provision. If any members have not received that, the health secretary will be happy to send it again.

There are some issues that we cannot be definitive about right now because of what I set out around the remaining uncertainties about overall

supply schedules and the timing—the phasing—of the schedule of supply. That information is becoming clearer all the time and I hope that it will become much clearer and firmer in the days ahead. As it does so, we will make sure that Parliament is updated and, crucially, as people start to get the invitations for vaccination it will become clear to the public, as well.

We are following the clinical priority list of the JCVI, which is important because that is based on the people who are most likely to get ill and die if they get the virus. In totality, that list includes about 2.7 million people and our reasonably cautious plan at the moment says that we will complete at least the first dose for everybody on that list by early May. However, we want to accelerate that if it is possible to do so. That is what we have tasked the vaccination team with exploring all options to achieve.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Given that it is a race against time, rolling out the vaccination must be a top priority. I ask the First Minister whether, if we can provide daily reports on Covid-19 cases, we can also provide daily reports on the number of people vaccinated. I received the health secretary's communication but, as I recall, the anticipated timescales for vaccinations were not included. Can that information be provided as soon as possible, and will the First Minister consider using retired NHS staff who have experience of giving injections to help to accelerate the programme?

Finally, given the reports in the Sunday papers about NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, I welcome the First Minister's comments on the Government's policy position, but what practical action has she taken to ensure that people who are getting second doses in that health board area will receive the same vaccine?

The First Minister: We have been very clear about that. The chief medical officer has made it clear and I have made it clear today. Unless the scientific advice at a later stage makes it clear that something different can be done, the policy will be that people get two doses of the same vaccine unless there are very exceptional circumstances, such as there not being a record of the first vaccine that they got, but that should not happen. That is clear nationally and for all health boards.

The precise timescales were not set out because we are not yet able to do that, for the reasons that I have set out. As the information becomes firmer and clearer, we will set it out. I have set out as much as I can today and we hope that it will become clearer almost daily.

I will consider the frequency of publication, but I want to strike a balance. It is a massive logistical exercise for the whole health system—we will,

indeed, consider retired health care workers and anybody who can reasonably help us to do the vaccination as quickly as possibly—and therefore we have to make judgments. Is the extra burden created by daily publication of figures justified by the value of that information? If the answer is yes, we will do that, but if the judgment is that weekly publication gives us the information we need and that we do not need to put that burden on the system, that is the judgment that we will arrive at.

We are trying to support a very under-pressure health system through a global pandemic and those are the difficult judgments that we will continue to make. We will keep Parliament updated on the detail as we go.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): Mental health is obviously an extremely important issue, perhaps especially with regard to people who are living on their own, of whom I am one. Some people enjoy being on their own but others find it a struggle. Going to a place of worship can be particularly important for single people in that situation. Can the First Minister say anything to them?

The First Minister: I can say that I am desperately sorry that we are in this position. Nobody wants to be in this position, but the new variant of the virus has created, yet again, a very challenging situation. It is in everybody's interests, and it is essential if we are to stop the situation from overwhelming us in all sorts of ways, that we limit human interaction as much as possible. That is the cruellest thing about the virus: the way to stop it from spreading is to stop doing all the things that are so valuable to us as human beings. There is no easy way to say that or sugarcoat it. However, we want to try to deal with that social isolation as much as possible, which is why we have always tried to create in the rules provisions for outdoor interaction, through which, even now, people can meet somebody from another household.

I understand the importance of worship for people, and the restrictions that I have announced today will not be in place for a moment longer than necessary. I do not expect anybody to feel anything other than dismay at today's restrictions, but I ask people to understand that we would not be doing this if we did not think it absolutely necessary.

I understand that the Prime Minister is due to speak at 8 o'clock this evening. Obviously, I cannot predict what he is going to say, but I suspect that it will not be dissimilar to what is happening here, because every part of the UK is facing a really perilous position right now.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): The winter eviction ban, which was pushed for by

Living Rent, Scottish Green Party members and many others, will expire on 22 January. During a lockdown, and the worse surge yet of the virus, evictions would be grossly unjust but also downright dangerous. Will the Scottish Government extend the ban on evictions until the end of the furlough scheme in April?

The First Minister: I know that that is under consideration right now. I do not want to pre-empt the final decision that I am sure that the housing minister is in the process of taking and will set out in due course; however, I hope that it will give a signal of the direction of travel when I say that I agree with the sentiments that were expressed in the question.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): I start by declaring an interest, in that I am married to a primary school teacher.

I welcome the news that the Government is currently in discussions with the JCVI about reprioritising the vaccine for teachers and the childcare workforce. However, that is only half of the equation, if we are safely to reopen schools. Considering that the Pfizer vaccine is safe for 16 and 17-year-olds, and that those students are currently missing out on key face-to-face teaching in advance of the vital qualifying assessment work that they will need to do by the end of term, will she also consider including them in the JCVI's recommendations?

The First Minister: It is not for me to decide what is in the JCVI's recommendations, because I am not a member of it. It is an independent group of experts.

I want to be clear that I did not say that we were in discussion with the JCVI about changing its priority list. It is really important that people understand what I said rather than what they thought they heard me say. I said that we are considering internally in Government, and will discuss with those in the teaching workforce, how—without compromising the JCVI prioritisation list, which is there for very good reason—we can look to accelerate the vaccination of teachers and other school and early years staff. Such judgments are not easy to arrive at, practically or in principle, but that is what we intend to seek to do.

I am also clear that the JCVI prioritisation list includes everybody over the age of 50, and those under 50 who have underlying health conditions. Many teachers will be in those groups. However, for those who are not, we want to look at how, without compromising clinical prioritisation, we can accelerate their vaccination.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I think that we all accept that Borders residents might have to cross the border for essential purposes and, of

course, the same will be true, for example, for residents of Berwick travelling to Scotland. Does the Scottish Government have any information as to whether that will breach the rules in any way? That is particularly important as Scotland moves, from midnight, as the First Minister has announced, into higher restrictions than are in place south of the border.

The First Minister: I genuinely do not know what difference there will be between the restrictions north and south of the border later this week. The Deputy First Minister is indicating to me that, as well as the Prime Minister being due to speak at 8 o'clock this evening, the House of Commons is being recalled on Wednesday, so any differences might be less real than they might appear at the moment. However, it is very important that there is an understanding of the rules wherever in the country they apply, and that we encourage maximum compliance with those rules.

I know that there is a sense of fatigue; we all genuinely feel it. However, right at this moment, it is more important than it has been at any time since last spring that we abide by all the restrictions, because lives depend on it.

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I welcome the news that parts of the Highlands and Islands region that are currently in level 3 will remain there. However, that also means that businesses in some areas, particularly those in the tourism sector, will be legally, although not practicably, able to remain open and will therefore be denied access to the full range of business support that is available. Does the First Minister accept that that is unfair and that it threatens jobs and livelihoods? Will she ensure that businesses in level 3 areas that are practicably unable to open will be able to access the full level of financial support that is being offered to businesses in other parts of the country?

The First Minister: There is already support for businesses that are not legally required to close but whose trading is restricted or impaired because of the current situation. In addition, there is local authority discretionary funding. However, as is the case for any aspect where we think that categories of businesses are falling through the cracks of the support schemes, we will always be prepared to look at particular cases to see what more might be done.

Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): I do not like the measures that the First Minister has just announced, but I say unequivocally that I understand the need for them and I support them. It is clear that, for our country, vaccines are the way out of this crisis. However, 10 months on from its start, we still have issues with the mass testing

regime, which does not inspire confidence in our mass vaccination programme. This morning I spoke to home carers in Glasgow and their representatives, the GMB union. They told me that, sadly, the Government's rhetoric does not meet the reality. The union has been forced to ballot its members, 93 per cent of whom have said that they are considering taking strike action in the city. Those home carers are not making such a decision lightly. They care about their own health, that of their families and of those for whom they care. Can we therefore have an urgent intervention from the First Minister herself to sort out testing for home carers in Glasgow and across the country, which will also help us to inspire confidence in our vaccination programme?

The First Minister: First, I pay tribute to the contribution that home care workers make. It is very difficult to convey properly to them our appreciation for everything that they do. I know that any decisions that they might take on industrial action would absolutely not be taken lightly, and I hope that we will be in a position where they will not feel that that is necessary.

That does not require an intervention from me. We have already set out the plans for the testing of home care workers; they will get under way this month. I include myself when I say that we all want such processes to happen more quickly and for us to be able to go faster. There have been limitations because of the availability of technology, including the use of lateral flow technology. We are making great progress on that, and our plans will accelerate. I will be happy to ask the health secretary to set out afresh later this week exact details of the roll-out plans for testing of home care workers.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): Although, like the rest of the population, the vast majority of businesses are complying fully with all that is being asked of them, some will always seek to find a loophole or to justify why they could or should stay open. How can we encourage everyone to behave responsibly, and what more can we do to close such loopholes?

The First Minister: As we have done all along, we will always look to close genuine loopholes. However, the fundamental point is that the vast majority of individuals and businesses have behaved responsibly—not because the Government has told them to, but because they recognise the vital importance of everything that they are being asked to do. The message is about protecting health, saving lives and ensuring that our NHS can continue to care for everybody who needs it. That is vital for the safety and security of us all.

However, I say clearly—and I stress—that this is a moment to recapture the sense that we had

back in March last year, when I think that everybody wanted to operate not only within the letter of the rules but within their spirit. We need to get that back. I understand why people want to have as much normality as possible, but, instead of looking for loopholes, our attitude must right now be to observe the maximum that we can do to limit the spread of the virus. The more we do so, the greater the chance we give the vaccine to get ahead more quickly, and now—much more so than in March—the better the prospect of our being able to get genuine normality back later this year.

Mark McDonald (Aberdeen Donside) (Ind): I entirely support the measures that the First Minister has outlined. However, as the parent of a child with additional support needs, and having undertaken home schooling during the previous lockdown, I am acutely aware of the difficulties that will be faced by many families with at least one child with a disability or such additional needs in being able to deliver home learning for all their children on an equitable basis. How tightly will the definition of vulnerability, to which the First Minister alluded, be drawn? What steps will be taken to give families of children who have additional support needs and disabilities the appropriate support to ensure that they can provide equitable home learning for all the children in their household?

The First Minister: The responsibility on the part of local authorities and schools, and indeed the Government, is to meet the needs of every child. Right now, we require to do so in very difficult and unique circumstances, but the responsibility continues to be there. There is flexibility for councils around the definitions of vulnerable children and children of key workers to help to ensure that that can be done. Within the support that is being made available to schools, and from schools to families, support for the particular needs of children with additional learning needs and children with disabilities is incredibly important, and I know that schools and local authorities are very cognisant of that.

Bruce Crawford (Stirling) (SNP): Does the First Minister agree that, although we may yet face some of the darkest days of the pandemic, it is even more vital that people are given hope and greater certainty that brighter times lie ahead?

We know that our amazing NHS staff will step up and perform when the vaccines are delivered to them, but I believe that it would greatly help people if we were to get more medium to longer-term certainty from the vaccine manufacturers about production volumes and timescales for delivery to the NHS front line. What more could the Scottish Government do, in discussion with the UK Government and the vaccine companies, to

provide that greater certainty in the medium to long term?

The First Minister: It is really important to give people hope. It feels very difficult to stand here talking about hope today, but I will use my race analogy again. Back in March, the virus was in a race of its own—there was only one lane, with the virus in it, and we were all desperately trying to slow down the virus and bring it under control. This time, although it feels very dark and difficult today, we have another lane with the vaccine in it, and we hope and expect that the vaccine can win the race over the next few months. That gives us hope that the sacrifices this time are absolutely paving the way for brighter, better and much more normal times ahead.

We continue to do procurement on a four-nations basis through the UK vaccines task force. To be clear, that does not involve—in the language that some have used—the UK buying vaccines for us; it is about all four nations pooling our resources and efforts to ensure that we get the best position. These are new vaccines—Covid vaccines have been authorised for supply for only a matter of weeks—and we are working with counterparts in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the Department of Health and Social Care and Public Health England to establish a reliable supply schedule for health boards in order to support their vaccination programming.

I have set out our expectations for supply. Before Christmas, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport and I had discussions with Pfizer about its supply expectations, and we intend, and will seek, to have the same discussions with AstraZeneca over the next period.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I ask the First Minister to answer a question that I was asked by a vulnerable constituent this morning. He has just moved from the north of England to Kinross and has not yet been able to register with a general practitioner; he has been told that that may take some weeks. Does he require to have that registration before he can obtain a vaccination?

The First Minister: Instead of seeking to give an answer in the chamber to that very specific and important question, I will go away and double check to ensure that I get the answer right. I will get the answer to Liz Smith for forward communication to her constituent, and we will then make that information available for anybody else who might be in a similar position.

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): Most people in the country will understand and support the measures that the First Minister has announced today, because public health has to

come first. However, what work is the Government doing, based on what we have already learned, to develop an exit strategy? It is difficult to see where transmission of the virus is most prevalent. Is it in businesses, in cars or in schools? In order to inform an exit strategy for how we start to get our schools and economy going again, will the Government bring forward that type of information? Will it start to set out what the plan is as we move towards the spring and summer, to get our country up and running again?

The First Minister: The exit strategy now is the vaccine—it is a very definite exit strategy that we have not had before. Therefore, the quicker we can get people vaccinated, the more we can get back to normal. If the restrictions that we are living under right now help us to suppress the spread, as we hope they will, we would hope to be able to lift some of them, even as we are vaccinating. Unlike in March, the vaccine gives us a definite exit strategy that we lacked back then.

On the point about where the virus spreads, we have all been desperate over the past 10 months—I include myself in this—to think that there are some complicated answers to the problem and that, if we can just crack them, we will have the solution. As I have come to realise, the science at the heart of the matter is actually not that complicated: the virus spreads when individuals come together, and it hops from one person to another and then goes from one household to another. Whether it is in cars, bars, workplaces or our homes, the way to stop it spreading, unfortunately—this is the hard and cruel part—is to stop the interaction between us and to keep essential interactions on as safe a basis as possible. Basically, that is the science and the epidemiology at the heart of the issue, and that is what drives the restrictions that we are unfortunately having to put in place.

John Scott (Ayr) (Con): The First Minister knows of my concerns, which I have repeatedly raised with her, about the threat to bed capacity in Ayrshire and Arran, with particular regard to ICU capacity as the pandemic progresses. With NHS Ayrshire and Arran at 96 per cent of bed capacity, what further information and reassurances can the First Minister give to the people of Ayrshire that plans are in place to deal with the expected increase in demand for bed space that does not currently exist in Ayrshire?

The First Minister: The 96 per cent level in Ayrshire and Arran is for hospital bed capacity; it is not for ICU capacity. Generally, that will vary across different health boards but, although it would be wrong to say that ICU is not under pressure, it is nowhere near the peak that it was at in April. That is largely because fewer people who go into hospital now require intensive care,

because treatment options have got better. However, hospital capacity is more of a concern, and that is particularly true in Ayrshire and Arran, Glasgow, the Borders and Lanarkshire.

That goes back to the need to ensure that we do not add to that pressure. The 96 per cent refers to Covid capacity. We need to take the steps that I have set out to ensure that we do not overwhelm that capacity. That is one of the reasons why we have decided to act so quickly and decisively.

NHS Ayrshire and Arran is the health board on which many members of my family depend. My sister works in NHS Ayrshire and Arran, and I know about the particular pressures there, but they are replicated in boards across the country, which is why sticking to the restrictions is the best thing that all of us can do to help to meet the pressures and ensure that they are not exacerbated.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I previously raised with the Scottish Government the issue of people in the Highlands and Islands often not having access to home testing. I received a letter that said that more priority mailboxes had been set up, along with courier services, to ensure that home testing happened, but today I heard of at least one case in Skye where the courier did not return to pick up the home test, and the person taking the test was forced to use a normal mailbox to return it. As far as I know, they have not received the result of their test. That again calls into question the testing regime and what access people have in remote rural Scotland. What will the First Minister do to ensure that everyone has equitable access to testing?

The First Minister: It is important to take up and address individual cases such as that one. If Rhoda Grant wishes to write to the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport—she might wish to email her this afternoon—we will look into that case. Obviously, we cannot be there with every courier service, so things like that will inevitably happen, but we will address them.

Although such individual cases are important, they do not necessarily indicate a whole system that is flawed. The home testing system is run through the UK-wide system, and we will continue to take up any issues in that regard with the UK Government and to work with it to resolve them. We have also been expanding the network of walk-in centres, and we will continue to do that.

Whether it is about testing or any other aspect, if constituents are experiencing individual issues they should let us know about them, please, so that we can address them and check whether they are indicative of a wider system problem or are just isolated cases.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): Unlike the first lockdown in March, this lockdown will be taking place over winter months. What additional guidance will be given to local authorities on the proper gritting of all local roads, given what we have seen in Edinburgh today, where roads were not gritted? That raises concerns about the ability of people to exercise, as well as about additional pressures that result from grazes and falls among older people.

The First Minister: Gritting is obviously a responsibility of local authorities—I am not trying to shrug off the question, but it is for local authorities to make sure that they undertake their responsibilities. That applies to Edinburgh and all local authorities. We will make sure that the issue that Miles Briggs raised is drawn to the attention of the City of Edinburgh Council.

Clearly, a different aspect of what we face now is the concurrent risks. One concurrent risk was the end of the Brexit transition period; weather is another. The integrated nature of our planning enables us to seek to address all those risks. Of course, we rely on our partners, who are part of our resilience framework, to make sure that they take seriously those responsibilities, as I know that all councils do.

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): During the first lockdown, MSPs were inundated with contacts from workers who were concerned about being told to return to work. Will the Government immediately establish an employee helpline for all workers—unionised or not—so that they can get free, impartial advice on their rights and their health and safety at work?

Also in the first lockdown, those who were shielding received free food and essential items from the Government. Will that happen again?

The First Minister: Yes, we will make sure that there is provision of support for people in the shielding category if they need it, in terms of food or other supplies.

We had a hub-type arrangement that helped us to resolve issues to do with workers and employees during the first part of the pandemic. I will certainly take away the need for us to revitalise and re-establish that, because it is important that we help workers to navigate through those issues. I will ensure that, when we have worked out how exactly that will happen this time, we get that information to all MSPs as quickly as possible.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the statement and questions. There is no further business this afternoon, so I thank colleagues for their participation and close the meeting.

Meeting closed at 15:37.

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Published in Edinburgh by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP

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