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AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Meeting of the Parliament (Hybrid)

Tuesday 9 June 2020

Session 5



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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 9 June 2020

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): Good afternoon, colleagues. I begin, as usual, by reminding members that social distancing rules are in place throughout the campus, including in the chamber. I remind members to be particularly careful on entering and leaving the chamber.

We begin, as we always do, with time for reflection. Our time for reflection leader today is Rabbi Moshe Rubin, Rabbi of Giffnock and Newlands Hebrew Congregation and Senior Rabbi of Scotland, who joins us via live videolink.

Rabbi Moshe Rubin (Rabbi of Giffnock and Newlands Hebrew Congregation and Senior Rabbi of Scotland): I was recently sent a picture of the first day back at primary school after the lockdown, and there, sitting at the children's desks, were pupils—all in their 90s. There is humour and sadness, laughing and crying, worry and hope. I do not envy your task, parliamentarians. The word that we keep on hearing is “unprecedented” times—and never a truer word was said.

In making decisions about how and when to end the lockdown, how and when to reopen the schools, how and when to reopen the economy, and how and when to support the many who are suffering economically due to the lockdown, you are literally debating and deciding the wellbeing of every person in the country—what an incredible ask of you.

In the great book of the Talmud, Ethics of the Fathers, the sage Rabbi Yochanan asked his students, “What is the most virtuous path in life that one should choose?” The replies came back: one said a good eye; the second said a good friend; the third said a good neighbour; and the fourth said always seeing the outcome of your actions. Finally, Rabbi Eleazar replied, “A good heart,” to which their teacher responded that Rabbi Eleazar's answer was the correct one, as it encapsulated all the other answers.

A good heart means being a supportive neighbour and a caring friend, and having a generous eye towards the other. Throughout the crisis, what has kept the country going is the good heart: the dedication of the key workers, the amazing voluntary work that is taking place in communities, the Thursday night clapping for the

national health service, the sweet art work of rainbows by the children, the home-schooling parents, the ingenuity of our teachers—it goes on and on.

However, as we come out of lockdown and the full scale of the cost and the many other challenges that are due to lockdown come to light, that good heart will be tested. It is to you—the country's leaders—that society will look for reassurance, hope and strength. It will be you and the leaders of the communities who will have the task of keeping that heart good and strong.

I bless you, and all leaders, with our prophet Moses's blessing. May it be God's will that he rest his divine presence in the work of your hands.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you very much, Rabbi Rubin. I am sorry that you cannot be with us in person, but I thank you for joining us from home.

Business Motion

14:03

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S5M-21992, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out revisions to this week's business.

Motion moved,

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

(a) Tuesday 9 June 2020—

delete

5.00 pm Decision Time

insert

5.15 pm Decision Time

(b) Wednesday 10 June 2020—

after

2.30 pm Ministerial Statement: COVID-19
(Tourism)

insert

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Showing
Solidarity with Anti-Racism

delete

5.00 pm Decision Time

insert

7.00 pm Decision Time—[*Graeme Dey*]

Motion agreed to.

Topical Question Time

14:04

Covid-19 (Publication of Figures)

1. **Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government for what reason it did not immediately publish details of the number of patients who have contracted Covid-19 in hospital. (S5T-02243)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Jeane Freeman): Details of the total number of Covid-19 cases and deaths in each national health service board are published daily. Last week, we published initial unvalidated data on the number of suspected nosocomial Covid-19 incidents. The challenge is that, in all the data on nosocomial infection, it is not yet clear whether the individuals involved contracted the infection in the community prior to admission or in hospital.

The unvalidated information, which is a compilation of reports from health boards, shows that there have been 125 Covid-19 incidents, which are associated at the moment with a potential 901 patient cases, of which 870 are confirmed Covid-19 cases and 31 are suspected, and—sadly—218 deaths. In addition, the same unvalidated information indicates 894 staff cases, including both confirmed and suspected Covid-19 cases. However, that position is very far from being definitive at the moment, not least due to the long incubation period of Covid-19, as is recognised by the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control.

I want to make available as much information as I can, as soon as I can, and information that is as accurate as possible. I will continue to do that. However, as I said in my letter of 4 June to Ms Lennon and in my response to the Government-initiated question on the same date, these are suspected transmissions, and to suggest otherwise would be wrong.

Miles Briggs: I am sure that the cabinet secretary will want to apologise to the families for the misleading picture that has developed around the spread of the Covid virus in hospital wards. The fact that she has referred to 125 incidents when we know that the number of deaths—[*Interruption.*] I hear SNP back benchers heckling me about the deaths that we have seen from Covid-19. It is important that we get clarity from this Government—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): Order. Let us hear the questioner, please.

Miles Briggs: Why did ministers decide to define almost 1,000 people as incidents? Will she

now commit to publishing more accurate figures so that Parliament can have the true picture of what is happening in hospitals?

Jeane Freeman: In publishing unvalidated data, I was attempting to be helpful. It is a lesson that I have now learned.

I say to Mr Briggs that I apologise to every single person who has lost a loved one as part of the pandemic. I think that we should all do that. Every single day, when we announce the numbers, we recognise that they are not just numbers but unique human beings who have been lost to their loved ones. If Mr Briggs thinks for one minute that I do not spend just about every minute of my day thinking about the impact of the pandemic, he is very much mistaken.

I will continue to publish validated data. Although it has been clear all the way through—in the GIQ, in the letter and in what I have just said to Mr Briggs—that these are suspected transmissions, suspected cases and suspected deaths linked to them, and that the validated data will be published—by the end of the month, I hope—Mr Briggs has chosen to take unvalidated data and pretend that it is validated. That is inexcusable. If anyone needs to apologise to the people of Scotland for sending them off with unvalidated nonsense, it is Mr Briggs. It is certainly not me.

Miles Briggs: The information was provided to *The Herald* by the cabinet secretary.

At the weekend, she admitted that hospital staff are not yet being tested regularly. Even more worrying is the fact that no plans have been published on how that testing is to be carried out. Today, surgeons have warned that a fifth of the patients who were treated for broken hips in March and April have gone on to contract Covid-19 while in hospital, and all of that is happening at a time when only a third of our testing capacity is being used. We have known for months that routine testing is vital to stopping the spread of the virus. Will the cabinet secretary finally accept that the Government's failure to test staff has also created this situation?

Jeane Freeman: In respect of the comments about orthopaedics that Mr Briggs has just made, that figure is estimated—the key word is “estimated”. When we validate the data, we will know how many of those cases—including among staff—and deaths came about as a consequence of hospital-acquired Covid-19.

As Mr Briggs should know well, Covid-19 has an incubation period of up to 14 days. We needed to reach a definition of nosocomial infection for this particular infection, as we have done for all other infections that might be acquired in hospital or healthcare settings. Now that a four-nations

definition has been reached that complies with what the European Centre for Disease Control needs, Health Protection Scotland will work through the data against that case definition, and it will publish the results. In that publication, we will be able to see whether the estimate is accurate, but it will be an estimate—it will be suspected transmissions and estimated cases. If we are going to lead the country through this pandemic properly, and if—I gently suggest—the Opposition is going to scrutinise the Government properly, we will not take estimates and suspected data as fact; we will take what is fact and use it appropriately.

I have already covered Mr Briggs's point about the testing of NHS staff. I need to know whether the chief medical officer's scientific advisory group and the nosocomial group that involves the chief medical officer and scientists from outwith the Government, as well as the chief nursing officer, take the view that we should test all NHS staff on a seven-day repetition or that we should test all NHS staff in particular clinical settings such as cancer and outpatient departments.

It should be remembered that Governments across the UK have said from the outset that we will be informed by the science and clinical advice. Once we have that information, I will make the decision about how we will institute the testing. I have already asked for a delivery plan to be prepared for that information. Once that is done, I will make sure that Mr Briggs and members of Parliament are advised of what is happening.

Miles Briggs: We are now three months into this crisis. Cancer services need to have this testing in place. After three months, that is not happening. Scotland has a capacity of 15,500 tests a day but barely one third of those tests are being done. That is a national scandal and ministers should be taking action to ensure that the tests are utilised.

That failure has meant that people have entered hospital without coronavirus and have caught it there, and they have died when the testing could not be provided.

In terms of where we are today with the development of test and protect, where has test and protect been for patients in Scotland?

Jeane Freeman: Mr Briggs should please, please, please not assert what he does not know. He asserts, yet again, on the basis of suspected transmission, that people have caught the virus in hospital and have died. He does not know that and neither do I. When the data is validated—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Briggs is mumbling at me; he should be listening. When the data is validated Mr Briggs will know it, I will know it and we will deal with the facts at that point.

On using testing capacity, we have increased testing from a starting point of 350 tests per day in two NHS labs to 15,500. There is a point about using the testing for a purpose. Tomorrow, we will publish the data that I promised we would publish on the use of testing in our care homes of asymptomatic staff, and residents and staff in care homes where there has been a case. We will publish that data every week, and so we will see the progress that is being made by health boards against national policy. When I have the clinical advice that I have asked for, that will match the delivery plan that has been commissioned on testing NHS staff.

The other area of testing, which is under way, is for all over-70-year-olds who are admitted to hospital. Surveillance testing is also under way and there are plans to expand it.

The final area is that of those individuals who are symptomatic, whom we ask to go for a test straight away. At the moment, I do not expect that number to be high, because—Miles Briggs will understand this—we know from the R rate and the published data that the level of transmission in Scotland at this point is much lower than it was.

We might see that particular number increase as we release lockdown measures, so test and protect is a vital tool. Miles Briggs needs to understand, do the homework and pay attention before making such assertions.

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): The cabinet secretary and Miles Briggs need to understand that arguments in the chamber will not bring back the people who caught Covid-19 in hospital and went on to die. Let us stick to some facts: I spent an hour on the phone today with a constituent who is absolutely heartbroken. Her mother was in hospital for several weeks, saw no one, was shielded from family and all visitors, was in a room on her own and died from Covid-19—it is on the death certificate.

Families such as that of my constituent need answers. In this case, my constituent wrote to the First Minister weeks ago and got a reply from an official who told her to go to the ombudsman if she was not happy. That is not good enough. Families deserve answers and an apology; they need an independent inquiry to get to the bottom of this and, most important, we need such an inquiry to have confidence that, as we restart our national health service, people, patients and staff will be safe.

Will the health secretary grant the public an independent inquiry?

Jeane Freeman: I absolutely agree with Ms Lennon that none of this arguing back and forth will bring back people who have died as a result of the pandemic, whether as a result of nosocomial

infection or of the impact of the virus on them in another regard. That is a huge matter of regret.

I also agree that people need answers. When the data is validated, we can have a conversation on two matters. First, we can talk about the actual numbers. Secondly, we can discuss why we think those cases happened, what the nosocomial group is doing and what it is telling us—me and members, too—because we will make that information available about how the virus was transmitted in that hospital setting. There are a number of possibilities on which I will not speculate—I am sure that Ms Lennon knows them as well as I do.

We can talk about the group's view on how the virus could be transmitted and its views therefore about the additional steps that we should take. I have asked the group, now and once the data is validated, to consider not only in what way it thinks it possible that the virus has been transmitted in a hospital setting, but what more we need to do—other than what we are doing currently with red/green or hot/cold zones, infection prevention and control and the supply of personal protective equipment—with regard to additional environmental cleans, the testing of staff, which is absolutely part of the matter, and the wearing of masks in all clinical as well as non-clinical settings, including in staff canteens and so on.

All that information will come to me shortly. I am very happy to share it with Ms Lennon and others. Let us see then whether we can do more, first, to try and give an answer to her constituent as well as mine—who wrote to me last night on exactly this matter—and to all those families and, secondly, to be sure that we are doing everything that we need to do. I want us to focus on that. Whether an inquiry is held into any aspect of how this pandemic has been handled by any party, and whether that happens in the near future or at a more distant time, will be a decision for another day.

What I need to do right now, as I am sure that Ms Lennon agrees, is focus on what we need to do to ensure that we mitigate and minimise the possibility of nosocomial infection in our hospital and healthcare settings. That is what our next conversation should be about.

The Presiding Officer: Five more members want to ask a question.

Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green): There are scores of examples in the academic literature of blanket testing having detected a large number of asymptomatic individuals. Imperial College London researchers advise that transmission from those tested can be reduced by a third by routine testing, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development now advises regular

testing for at-risk groups. Scientists are calling asymptomatic transmission

“the Achilles’ Heel of Current Strategies to Control Covid-19”.

While we ask questions in this chamber, asymptomatic carriers could be walking around hospitals, with the potential to infect patients and high-risk staff such as black and minority ethnic doctors and nurses. Does the cabinet secretary agree that the on-going absence of routine regular testing in our hospitals is indefensible?

Jeane Freeman: I agree that it is self-evident that the information and evidence have now taken us to a place where testing of asymptomatic individuals in particular settings makes sense and is the right thing to do. That is why testing of asymptomatic care home workers in care homes that have no cases is now part of the policy—and data on performance in that regard will be produced tomorrow and in subsequent weeks.

It is also evident that I agree that that makes sense in the healthcare setting, as I think that I set out to Mr Briggs and Ms Lennon. In particular settings, where the clinical advice points me to this, the testing of individuals, particularly staff, who do not have symptoms, is the right precautionary measure for us to take, along with other precautionary measures.

In doing that, we need to ensure that we have the right delivery plan. I have commissioned the delivery plan and I am waiting on advice from the CMO and chief nursing officer, which will be with me shortly. At that point, we will begin to do exactly that—I expect in particular clinical settings; as to whether there should be a wider approach, the advice from the CMO and CNO will tell me what they think I should be doing.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): What additional steps are being taken to better understand and address the impact of nosocomial transmission of Covid-19?

Jeane Freeman: As with all healthcare-acquired infection, we needed to reach agreed definitions of probable and definite healthcare-acquired cases. By and large, that relates to the incubation period of a particular infection.

The agreement across the four nations—so that we all do this in exactly the same way—is that it is a probable healthcare-acquired Covid case when a positive sample is taken when an individual has been in for more than seven days but fewer than 14 days, and that it is a definite healthcare-acquired Covid case when a positive sample is taken more than 14 days after admission. Now that we have that definition, we will use it to validate the data, which will involve looking at

dates of admission and discharge for all cases, including staff.

In addition, as Ms Harper knows and as I said, there are at least two patient pathways in hospitals, as has been the case since we repositioned the national health service to deal with the pandemic; we also have protective personal equipment, infection prevention and control—a central feature of our acclaimed Scottish patient safety programme—and additional environment and equipment cleaning.

I expect that the advisory group will suggest to me the testing of staff in particular settings, additional environmental and equipment cleaning, and the wearing of masks by healthcare staff in clinical and non-clinical settings—for example, as I said, in staff canteens. All of that is designed to protect staff and militate against transmission, particularly as, increasingly, there is recognition of asymptomatic transmission—albeit that not every asymptomatic individual who is known to have the virus will shed the virus. A great deal of scientific work is still going on to refine that, so as to be sure about which symptomatic and asymptomatic individuals are infectious to others, and which are not.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport knows that I have sought to be constructive throughout the pandemic. However, I have to say that this whole episode—125 outbreaks turning into 908, and, tragically, 218 people dying—has shaken my confidence in what the Government is telling us. What does it mean for restarting non-urgent operations in hospitals? Is the Government on top of this, or will those people have to wait even longer?

Jeane Freeman: I will explain. Health boards report suspected hospital-acquired infections on the basis of incidents. An incident is two or more cases. There was no attempt to dissemble; that is how the information comes in, and that is what was reported. As soon as the question was asked as to how many people that might have involved, the information was given straight away; again, there was no attempt to dissemble.

Mr Rennie is absolutely right, and I am grateful to him, that he and his colleagues have consistently attempted to engage constructively. I hope that he feels that he has had a constructive response. However, I do not think that, when we are talking about a number of suspected cases and unvalidated data, as has been made crystal clear in every answer on the subject, it can be described as that number “turning into” the number of cases and deaths that he referred to, because we do not know that yet. We will know it only when the data is validated.

On what this means for nosocomial infection and how patients might feel about the restart of the national health service, when I spoke in the debate last week on the framework for decision making, I recognised Cancer Research UK's example and its request that patients should feel that they have a safe space, and said that that would in part be met by the testing of staff. Clinicians also have discussion under way on asking patients for elective surgery to self-isolate for 14 days before the date of admission. That work is under way to ensure that we offer patients and staff the safest possible route in the remobilisation of our NHS. In what was said in the framework, and in the debate, I talked about doing it safely for staff and for patients, and that will involve all the measures that I have outlined.

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): No one underestimates the efforts or commitment of ministers, but it is our job to hold them to account for their actions and decisions. It is a fact that the information has been withheld and delayed. It is a fact that advice from senior advisers has been kept secret, that freedom of information requests have been blocked and that parliamentary answers have been evasive.

The cabinet secretary tells us not to assert. However, the First Minister asserted that we have the greatest testing capacity in the world, yet we are still miles behind. The national clinical director asserted that we had more than enough personal protective equipment, when people were crying out for it. The cabinet secretary herself asserted that 300 people had been discharged untested from hospitals into care homes, when in fact the number was 1,300. Is it not a bit rich for the cabinet secretary to lecture MSPs who are doing their job in holding Government to account, or to claim that they are making unvalidated assertions, when the Government has been making such assertions all the way through?

Jeane Freeman: I completely agree with Mr Findlay that it is entirely the job of every member of the Parliament to scrutinise what the Government is doing and to question our decisions. However, I will quote from an earlier exchange that took place on 17 March:

"It is not the time for Opposition parties to exploit our situation or to use partisan and pejorative rhetoric against the efforts that are being made."—[*Official Report*, 17 March 2020; c 9.]

Scrutiny is one thing, but lumping together a series of unconnected incidents and claiming that they are connected is, to me, partisan and pejorative, and—this might be my view alone, perhaps—saying that something is a fact when all the information that has been given has been clear that what has been issued is unvalidated data and that we are talking about suspected cases and

suspected transmission is not proper scrutiny. Proper scrutiny is based on factual information, and no one could say that this Government has done anything other than put out the maximum amount of information—increasing week on week, with more information coming out this week—on the testing programme in care homes and on the test and protect system. That approach has been repeated every week so that, every week, there is more and more information.

The data goes out when it is robust and when we are confident in it. In this instance, to be helpful, I published unvalidated data. I will not do that again because, clearly, all the caveats that surround unvalidated data are ignored and the numbers are taken as fact, which is entirely wrong.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): The cabinet secretary is absolutely right to say that we are not experts, but we should be listening to the people who are. She has already referred to the story regarding orthopaedics, which involved Alastair Murray, the chair of the Scottish Committee for Orthopaedics and Trauma in Scotland, saying that the green pathways in hospitals should have "nowhere near" the level of infection that has been reported. In another story that was reported over the weekend, a senior cardiologist whose mother was refused admission to hospital because her care home said that it was unable to transfer her on the basis of guidance described those policies as "immoral". I ask the cabinet secretary to respond to those assertions by senior and experienced doctors who are raising serious questions regarding infection control and admission procedures, some of which are being followed on the basis of Scottish Government policy and guidance. Further, will she ask for a rapid urgent independent investigation into the policies and practices regarding infection control and admission procedures?

Jeane Freeman: The nosocomial group is independent, because, although it reports to the chief nursing officer and the chief medical officer, it involves epidemiologists, viral specialists and others from our academic institutions and elsewhere. It is independent of Government, as is Professor Andrew Morris's scientific advisory group on emergencies. Therefore, the information and the advice that we receive are independent.

I take seriously what the group of orthopaedic surgeons have said, and I believe that I have answered those concerns. When the data is validated, we will see how the estimated number sits against the validated data and we will have discussions with that group, as we are having with all clinical groups, about the safe remobilisation of the health service. The fact is that, unless those senior clinicians agree that it is safe and proper to restart any of the procedures in primary or

secondary care, it is not possible to do that—not only would it be wrong to do that; it would be impossible.

On the issue of the cardiologist's concerns, we have responded to that issue before. The care home's interpretation of what was in the guidance was wrong. No one who has been clinically assessed as requiring to be treated in hospital should be denied that hospital treatment. The First Minister and I have been consistently and emphatically clear on that point and the chief medical officer has taken steps to ensure that that is clearly understood. Those decisions are not for politicians or for managers of any description; they are for clinicians to take, and if a clinician says that the right place for treatment for a patient is hospital, hospital is where that patient should go.

The Presiding Officer: I apologise to the members whom I was not able to call.

Guidance for Travellers from Abroad

2. **Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the guidance for passengers arriving in Scotland from abroad. (S5T-02247)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Humza Yousaf): I announced on 7 June that the Scottish Government would be introducing public health measures—*[Inaudible.]* Those measures will apply to international arrivals to Scotland, whether they are residents or visitors. These temporary measures, taken as part of the four-nations public health approach, require arriving passengers to provide contact details and travel information, as well as self-isolating for 14 days.

There will be a very limited number of exemptions, including for those working on critical infrastructure in transportation. The measures have been taken to support a continued effort to suppress the virus and will be reviewed on a three-weekly basis.

Further guidance on what to do when travelling to Scotland is available from the Scottish Government's—*[Inaudible.]*

Colin Beattie: We have seen reports in the media in recent days about so-called travel corridors between the United Kingdom and other countries. Has the UK Government consulted the Scottish Government on that?

Humza Yousaf: There has not been any consultation or discussion with the UK Government as yet on any air corridors. I should make it abundantly clear that any exemptions or any air corridors that were to be developed would have to come under the Scottish regulations. Therefore, that is not something that the UK

Government could implement unilaterally; it would have to be done by the Scottish Government via the Scottish regulations.

Colin Beattie: Perhaps I can ask the cabinet secretary to elaborate on how the guidance issued in Scotland might differ from that in the other UK nations.

Humza Yousaf: Generally speaking—*[Inaudible.]*—between the four nations, but there has also been the ability to create differentiation, where that is appropriate to the circumstances here in Scotland. There are minor differences in relation to the exemptions, I would say.

Reflecting Scotland's needs, there are differences reflecting seasonal soft-fruit workers, for example. There are some differences when it comes to enforcement measures, but they reflect the different legal jurisdiction that we have here. All of the exemptions that are different here in Scotland have been discussed with the appropriate stakeholders, including Police Scotland, Public Health Scotland, the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service and, indeed, business and industry. A full list of the exemptions that apply in Scotland is available on the Scottish Government website.

The Presiding Officer: The sound quality is not the best, but we will persevere.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Does the cabinet secretary agree that allowing people to travel without quarantine from Ireland, where almost 1,700 people have died of Covid-19, while imposing a quarantine on people travelling from Norway, Iceland or Singapore, which have a fraction of Ireland's death rate—to name just some countries—is just daft? I understand that visitors cannot just stop off in Ireland for a day or two on their way here to avoid quarantine restrictions, but can the cabinet secretary advise the Parliament as to how that will be monitored?

Humza Yousaf: *[Inaudible.]*—Ireland are exactly, as Kenny Gibson describes in the sense that anybody attempting to—*[Inaudible.]*—quarantine will not be able to do that. Even coming into Scotland via Ireland, they would have to self-isolate for 14 days, minus any period of self-isolation in Ireland.

As for how that will be enforced, there will be spot checks by Border Force. As regards any further enforcement, Police Scotland officers will, if in the normal course of their duties they come across anybody who is breaching self-isolation, have the ability to enforce that with a fixed-penalty notice of £480. If necessary, they can escalate the matter to the procurator fiscal.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con):

Regarding the differences that we discussed earlier, the maximum fine for breach of quarantine is £1,000 for the rest of the UK, but only £480 in Scotland. The cabinet secretary is on record as saying that the lower fine is because of our distinct fines system, but an exception could quite easily have been carved out in legislation, as has been done for several issues since the outbreak began. Will the cabinet secretary confirm that that was a policy choice by the Scottish Government? Can he justify it?

Humza Yousaf: [*Inaudible.*]—was done in collaboration and conjunction with Police Scotland and the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service—[*Inaudible.*]—with the Scottish Government, but in consultation with important partners.

If we had imposed a fine of £1,000 in Scotland, I think that reporting people to the procurator fiscal as a first step in response to any breach of self-isolation measures would have had a disproportionate effect and would have been a very heavy-handed measure.

The Presiding Officer: I think that we all appreciate that there is a bad connection and the volume is quite low. I ask members not to mutter in the background, because others will want to listen to Mr Yousaf's answers. We will take the next question, from James Kelly.

Covid-19 (Prisoners) (Family Contact)

3. **James Kelly (Glasgow) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what arrangements are being made to enable prisoners to have contact with their families during the Covid-19 outbreak. (S5T-02245)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Humza Yousaf): Before I answer the question, Presiding Officer, I can, if you wish, try reconnecting to a mobile phone hotspot for the remaining time to see whether that provides a better link, because I do not want to deny members any opportunity to ask questions. I will leave that—[*Inaudible.*]

To answer James Kelly's question, I recognise the value and importance of family links and the impact that the restrictions, and the suspension of visits in particular, can have on those who are in custody and, importantly, on their families too. The Scottish Prison Service has been working hard to introduce a variety of different initiatives to enable contact between those in custody and their families during the Covid outbreak.

From next week, virtual visits will go live at a number of sites, which will allow those in custody and their families to have video calls. The scheme will then be rolled out across the prison estate in the coming weeks.

In addition—[*Inaudible.*]—phones are being introduced across the prison estate as another way of—[*Inaudible.*]—during this difficult time. Directions to the prison rules to allow that to happen are being laid before Parliament next week, with the roll-out of phones starting thereafter. The email-a-prisoner service is available in all prisons, as is prison voicemail, which allows those in custody to listen to messages from friends and family.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Yousaf. With Mr Kelly's permission, I will end it there. We will try to reschedule the question if possible, but it is quite clear that the reception is getting worse rather than better. I could hear most of the answers, but I appreciate that the broadcasting system was not coping and most members could not hear. I hope that those who are listening on the channel will have heard it a bit better.

I thank the cabinet secretary very much—we will conclude topical questions on that point, although we might reschedule Mr Kelly's question for another time.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. It is very important for members of Parliament to be able to scrutinise Scottish Government ministers in this way and, if we cannot hear the answers to some very important questions, that scrutiny falls on its face. I think that you already covered the matter in your intervention, Presiding Officer.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Cole-Hamilton.

Coronavirus Acts Report

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The next item of business is a statement by the Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, Europe and External Affairs, Michael Russell, reporting to the Parliament on the Coronavirus Acts. The cabinet secretary will take questions following his statement; I encourage all members who wish to ask a question to press their request-to-speak button.

14:43

The Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, Europe and External Affairs (Michael Russell): We all know that the coronavirus outbreak is unprecedented in our lifetimes and that it poses a severe and sustained threat to human life in Scotland. The human cost is only too apparent, not just in the tragedy of death, but in illness, both physical and mental, and in the impact on all our lives. Jobs, businesses and the public service in Scotland have all been badly affected. Throughout our society, in every community, the magnitude of the challenge that we have faced and continue to face is unique and extraordinary, and extraordinary measures have been required to meet that challenge, including in Parliament.

In our collective role as leaders of Scottish society, we have a responsibility to ensure that we all take the necessary steps to protect the lives of people who live in Scotland and to support their livelihoods. In our role as legislators, we have a duty to ensure that we act for the public realm, keeping our statute book fit for purpose and providing the powers that are needed to tackle the virus and its effects. In short, our job is to secure the legislative and regulatory tools that will help us to overcome the problems that we face and remove any obstacles to that task.

The United Kingdom Coronavirus Act 2020, the Coronavirus (Scotland) Act 2020 and the Coronavirus (Scotland) (No 2) Act 2020 provide new measures to help to protect the public, maintain essential public services and support the economy. The measures are, and remain, necessary because of the continuing severe public health and economic challenges that are posed by the pandemic.

Back in early March, the four-nations coronavirus action plan outlined the collective approach and closely integrated planning processes that were put in place across these islands, including changes to legislation where needed, to help to prevent the spread of the outbreak and to combat the impact and consequences of the virus. The provisions in the UK act built on that plan and cover a range of

topics and sectors, including bespoke provisions for Scotland to reflect our different legal system and devolved areas. Those provisions were subject to a separate legislative consent motion that the Scottish Parliament agreed to. However, although the UK act laid reporting requirements on the UK Government every two months, it did not do so for the devolved Governments.

The Coronavirus (Scotland) Act 2020 introduced further measures to support our own response here, and we took the opportunity to institute formal reporting arrangements for the Scottish Government for the powers that the act conferred. The Scottish Government will now report to the Parliament every two months on the continued necessity of all the measures in the Scottish act and on the use of the powers that it contains. When the Coronavirus (Scotland) Bill was passed, I also committed to include the provisions of the UK act, as they relate to Scotland, in the reporting process.

Today, I have laid before the Parliament the first report on the operation and continued necessity of the powers in both acts. The report is a key plank in the Scottish Government's coronavirus strategy. Accountability is crucial to our work to suppress the virus. The report shows that the powers that are available to ministers have been used proportionately when it has been judged appropriate to use them, but that, crucially, they have not been used unless needed. That means that, in some cases, powers have not been commenced, because there has not been a need to do so.

More than 40 separate items are included in the first report. A great deal of work has been done within the Scottish Government—I pay tribute to the team that has done that work—and with our partners to compile a report that is clear and readable, but which maintains the proportionate approach that we set out at the start of the process, in order to avoid placing undue pressures on those who are, at this time, properly prioritising saving lives.

Our approach also reflects the fact that measures in the legislation are of varying degrees of significance in terms of their impacts and the level of interest in their operation. Some measures are of greater significance in relation to their potential impacts on individuals or groups, or to their implications for equality and human rights. Some measures are of significant interest to Parliament for other reasons. We have sought, where possible, to provide detail over and above the requirements, set out in the Scottish act, to report on the operation of the powers.

A central aspect of our reporting approach relates to the equality, human rights and children's rights impacts of the legislation. We recognise that

the Scottish Parliament's Equalities and Human Rights Committee is particularly attentive to such matters in relation to the Government's response to the crisis. As far as we can, we have sought to examine those impacts in the reporting and to include or signpost to information, including in relation to equality and protected characteristics. However, we wish to do more work in that regard, and that is one of the aspects in which we will seek to further develop our approach for future reports.

There are already some very positive examples of the benefits of using the powers under the legislation in the reporting period in order to support our response to the pandemic. The suspension of pension scheme rules has allowed former national health service staff to return to front-line NHS roles, which has added vital capacity to the workforce. The establishment of a temporary social work register has resulted in, at the end of the reporting period, more than 200 registrants being available to be deployed to front-line services. Powers that are included in the Scottish act have allowed for the easing of restrictions relating to civil alcohol and non-alcohol licensing regimes, which has worked towards ensuring that the unprecedented disruption does not cause anyone to lose their licence through no fault of their own.

The powers have also enabled extensions to be granted to planning permission, or planning permission in principle, should such permission lapse over the course of the emergency period. We have been able to ease—temporarily and where necessary—the reporting requirements that are imposed on some public bodies, to enable them to direct their focus towards the efforts to respond to the emergency, and to support, for example, access to documents by electronic means when current social distancing restrictions mean that physical access is not possible.

The report marks the beginning of our reporting process, with new measures having been in place for only a short time, and new monitoring and reporting arrangements being established, or in the process of being established, to support their operation. We will continue to develop our reporting arrangements and keep the approach under review in response to the requirements of the Scottish Parliament. In two instances, we have already responded to the views of committees and members about other items that should be included.

In addition to the items from the Coronavirus (Scotland) (No 2) Act 2020, our next report, which will be due following the end of the second reporting period, on 31 July, will include information on Scottish statutory instruments where their primary purpose relates to

coronavirus. That follows the amendment to the second bill that was originally proposed by Adam Tomkins and reflected the views of the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee.

The second report will also take into account available information from the Scottish Police Authority or Police Scotland about

“the nature and the number of incidents of domestic abuse during each reporting period”.

That reflects the amendment that was lodged by Pauline McNeill to help to inform the approach taken to domestic abuse during the outbreak, also as part of the second Scottish bill process.

The Scottish ministers will, of course, continue to be answerable to Parliament for how the Scottish Government is responding to the pandemic, including the use of those statutory powers.

I note in conclusion that, as required by section 15 of the Coronavirus (Scotland) Act 2020, ministers have conducted a review of the provisions in part 1 of the act and have prepared the report that I laid before the Parliament today. We are satisfied that the status of the provisions that are set out in part 1 of the act remains appropriate.

A review has also been conducted of the provisions of the UK act, for which the Scottish Parliament gave legislative consent, and they are also covered in the report. We are satisfied that the status of the provisions in the UK act to which the Scottish Parliament gave its legislative consent remain appropriate.

We now look forward to and welcome the opportunity of engagement with the Parliament as it considers the first report.

The crisis that we are going through is not as yet ended, but I can give one final assurance to the Parliament: when it is ended, the acts will not be needed, and they will be immediately set aside. Moreover, we will take any and every opportunity that we can to set aside some of the provisions of the acts, even if the whole of the acts cannot be rescinded, whenever it is safe to do so.

In that connection, I am pleased to be able to inform members that the use of one provision has already been revoked. On 11 May 2020, the Minister for Public Health, Sport and Wellbeing signed a direction that revoked the use of the provision on the suspension of death certification review.

We are in exceptional times. These are exceptional measures. All of us want those times to be over and, with them, the measures that are born only out of necessity.

The Presiding Officer: We now move to questions, the first of which is from Murdo Fraser.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I thank the cabinet secretary for his statement and for advance sight of it, and I welcome publication of the two-month report. It is a detailed publication that includes a great deal of information that MSPs and others will want to take time to absorb and consider carefully.

I will ask the cabinet secretary about police enforcement of health protection regulations, which restrict the behaviour of individuals. The latest statistics from Police Scotland indicate that about 5,000 notices have been issued. Their number has declined from a peak in early April. That indicates that although there have, overall, been very high levels of public compliance with the regulations, a persistent minority nevertheless continue to flout the rules, and to put themselves and others at risk.

In evidence to the Justice Sub-Committee on Policing, the Scottish Police Federation has said that measures in relation to restrictions on travel, entering other people's houses and quarantine on return from holidays are nigh-on impossible to enforce. I have also been told that in rural areas, such as Perthshire, the local police have been advised not to take any action in relation to individuals who are moving between first and second homes, even though that causes real concern in their communities and is a breach of the regulations. I am sure that the cabinet secretary will understand the frustration that that causes. What is his view on the regulations continuing in operation if the police are not able to enforce them?

Michael Russell: I thank Murdo Fraser for his welcome for the report, and I look forward to discussing it with his COVID-19 Committee.

There is, of course, always a balance to be struck between what is in legislation and what is in guidance. Police Scotland has been involved in the development of legislation and guidance, and we have absolute confidence in it, and in its ability and professionalism to support the measures that are in place. Police Scotland is keeping the people of Scotland safe in a very difficult time, and surveys show strong support for policing in Scotland during the pandemic.

The chief constable has always made it clear that it is important that policing's tone and style reflect the need for positive engagement and common sense. The vast majority of people have complied, and continue to comply, with the rules. The rules are not there simply to impose on people; they are there to save lives.

I drove to Parliament early this morning. The message about staying at home and saving lives

is still there on motorway gantries. We must reinforce that message all the time. We must also be able to say to our friends and neighbours that it remains essential that we observe the rules. I am sure that the police will continue to underwrite that, to try to continue with their four Es—engage, explain, encourage, enforce—strategy, and to explain to people why it is important.

I am sure that the police will enforce the regulations as they are: they are in place and can be enforced. We should not send out any message other than that the regulations are in force and can and will be enforced if that is required.

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): The report is welcome and includes a lot of detail that members will want to look at.

Some of the powers that have been brought in were intended to take pressure off local authorities—for example, in relation to carrying out assessments. Will there be more detailed information about that, either in the report or in a committee meeting? Before the Covid crisis, waiting times for assessments for care packages were already out of control in some local authorities. Goodness knows where they are now. We need to know what the impact of the powers has been on growing waiting lists for assessments for care packages.

Two Covid-19 bills have been through Parliament. There are areas of concern including risk assessments in workplaces and health and safety. If the reproduction number starts to go up, will the cabinet secretary be willing to take further steps to look at the response to risk assessments in workplaces, to health and safety concerns, and to collective bargaining across the whole care sector?

Michael Russell: I thank Alex Rowley for welcoming the report, which I am sure he and will have a chance to discuss.

Sections 16 and 17 of the Coronavirus Act 2020 address the duty of local authorities to assess needs; section 17 is about further section 16 provision. There is a comprehensive part about that in the report, which provides additional information. We have surveyed the 32 local authorities; 26 replied and six did not respond. We know now that five partnership areas, comprising six local authorities, used the powers during the survey period. The vast majority of local authorities used the powers.

The data that we have supplements, but does not replace, the data about how existing legislation is being used. We are adding a level of data that focuses specifically on how it is used. The next figures that we see on how the ordinary legislation

is being used will tell us whether it is helping local authorities to meet targets, or is failing to do so.

It is also interesting, as Alex Rowley will find out when he reads the report in full, that some local authorities have used the powers across their whole area, while others are targeting powers very carefully—perhaps at areas where they have been performing worst. We will have to set that information against the other data.

It will take a lot of work to look at and compare data, and to work out what is happening, but we have the data and we will have more. We are keen for those powers to be an area on which we continue to add to the data that we have.

Regarding safe workplaces, I repeat assurances that I have given Alex Rowley before, and which I gave to Colin Smyth during the passage of the second bill. There exists the absolute legal right to a safe workplace. There are no ifs or buts. Nothing that we have done in legislation does anything but reinforce that. If a workplace is not safe, people should not, and must not, be there. It is utterly irresponsible of an employer to expect people to be in such a workplace, and there are legal remedies available so that people do not have to do that.

Alex Rowley asked if we would undertake the introduction of further legislation. We have had two emergency bills, which is a lot in two months. However, if any issue requires us to return to Parliament to legislate, we will do that. I hope that we will not have to do that, but if it is required, we will. If legislation on the issue that the member raises, or any other, were to become essential, we would, of course, act on that.

Andy Wightman (Lothian) (Green): I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of the report, which is long and will take time to digest.

Paragraph 7.1.1.8 is about the establishment of the private rented sector resilience group. Who is in the group and who, if anyone, represents tenants. If no one does, why not? When was the group established, how often will it meet and will its agenda, minutes and other papers be published?

Michael Russell: I need to have that information sent to Andy Wightman, because it is not in the report. The fact that the group has been set up is an indication of the serious intent of the Scottish Government to ensure that work is done, and continues to be done, on the provisions in the legislation. I want to stress that.

The report that I have published is not, in any sense, about the decisions that did not make it through to legislation; rather, it is about the provisions that did make it through, how they are operating and what is taking place. If Andy

Wightman will allow me to do so, I will ensure that the questions that he has asked are noted, and that we provide him with answers to them in writing.

I thought that Andy Wightman might also want to ask me about his muirburn provision. I am happy to say that if he looks that up in the report, he will see that it can be reactivated in October, because there is the possibility of more muirburn at that time. No doubt, he will want to note that from the report and will, perhaps, come back to me on the matter, because he lodged successful amendments on that to the Coronavirus (Scotland) Act 2020.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): I appreciate that the provisions in schedule 9 of the Coronavirus Act 2020 on temporary modification of mental health legislation have not yet commenced. Two of the most controversial elements of the act are to be found in those provisions: first, on increasing from 72 hours to 120 hours emergency detention on the ground of mental ill health; and secondly, on removing the need for a medical practitioner to consult a mental health officer before the imposition of a short-term detention certificate.

Those provisions were passed in good faith because, at the time, Parliament had no idea what the demands on the NHS were going to be. It is now not clear why those provisions would ever be needed, because we know that the capacity strain, even in the event of a second wave of coronavirus, does not impact prohibitively on that arm of the health service.

Does the cabinet secretary recognise the view of the Liberal Democrats and human rights organisations that those provisions are unnecessary, potentially illiberal and should be repealed as soon as possible?

Michael Russell: I expressed my concern about the provisions when the legislative consent motion was passed; I am sure that I am on record as doing so. However, I am not a psychiatrist, and neither is Alex Cole-Hamilton.

Fortunately, I have the words of a psychiatrist in front of me. I have to say that he is no mean psychiatrist: Professor John Crichton is the chair of the Royal College of Psychiatrists in Scotland. Unfortunately, he directly contradicts what Alex Cole-Hamilton has said. I will read a paragraph from him:

“Up to this point, while there have been significant workforce impacts, our members have been able to cope”—

That is what Mr Cole-Hamilton has said. The letter goes on to say:

“In spite of evidence heard by the committee on 28 May, there remains a real possibility that these workforce pressures will come to bear later in the year. The real risk of a second spike, alongside an expected post-lockdown increase in severe mental health cases, would have the potential for a reduction in the mental health workforce to the point that they cannot operate mental health legislation in the normal way, placing vulnerable patients at risk. The decision to enact these emergency measures in such a scenario would need to be taken quickly in response. To not have these measures immediately available in such a situation could lead to patients facing unnecessary delays to treatment and resulting harm. We therefore call for the committee”—

that is, the Equalities and Human Rights committee—

“to reconsider its recommendation on schedule 9.”

I have to say that I disagree with Mr Cole-Hamilton. I was concerned about the provisions. We all remain concerned about them, but when we are in doubt about an issue to do with mental health, it is useful to listen to any psychiatrist—let alone the chair of the Royal College of Psychiatrists, who appears to be entirely clear about the matter.

Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): The additional supplement to the carers allowance that is provided for in the legislation represents a lifeline for hard-working carers throughout Scotland. How many carers are expected to benefit from that additional funding?

Michael Russell: I am grateful to Annabelle Ewing for her question.

The carers supplement was dealt with in part 3 of schedule 1 of the Coronavirus Scotland (No 2) Act 2020, on which we are not reporting currently because it has only just been passed. It will come into the reporting that is due by 31 July.

There will be an investment of about £19.2 million. We estimate that that will support about 83,000 carers with the additional costs of caring during the pandemic. I hope that that answers the member's question. More detailed information on what is happening in relation to the Coronavirus Scotland (No 2) Act 2020 will come in the next reporting period.

Adam Tomkins (Glasgow) (Con): The Scottish Government's route map mentions allowing marriage ceremonies to take place in phase 2. I know that we are not yet in that phase, but the route map is not law. The law requires the Scottish ministers to take steps with the registrar general—they must do so now—to ensure that marriage ceremonies can go ahead so as to comply with the right to marry under article 12 of the European convention on human rights. What such steps have the Scottish ministers taken to date, and when will they report to Parliament on what those have achieved?

Michael Russell: I know that Professor Tomkins has shown a particular interest in this subject. I commend him for doing so, because it is a serious and important one.

As I explained to Professor Tomkins when he asked a similar question at last week's meeting of the COVID-19 Committee, two things have happened. The first is that emergency marriage ceremonies have continued. Indeed, I have been helpful—as I know that he, too, has been—to people who have sought to be able to hold such ceremonies. That has been one step forward. Secondly, the route map now says that marriage ceremonies can recommence. It does so in a proportionate and sensible way, bearing in mind all the current difficulties and pressures, and the judgments that have to be reached about each item.

I am very hopeful that the start of phase 2 will be not long delayed, and that we will therefore bring forward the time when ceremonies can recommence. The pressure that Professor Tomkins and others have applied over the issue will result in marriage ceremonies being able to take place sooner than they would otherwise have done, which is important.

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): Measures in the two coronavirus emergency bills have greatly reduced homelessness. The Equalities and Human Rights Committee recently heard from the Homeless Network Scotland that, across the country, the number of people sleeping rough is now down to about 30. What will the Scottish Government do to ensure that we do not go backwards once the legislation expires?

Michael Russell: I think that all members will share that view. The reduction in the number of rough sleepers has been a useful and helpful step forward. Everyone regrets the way in which it has happened, but we should say that the recent approach has been effective and that we want it to continue to be so.

I know that the Minister for Local Government, Housing and Planning has addressed the chamber on that issue and that he will do so again. I will ask him to write to Ms Maguire with further details, but I know that his intention is to ensure that the previous level of rough sleeping does not happen again. That aim is outwith the purview of the coronavirus legislation and of the report, which concerns what the Scottish Government did and how it changed the legislation in this parliamentary session. What happens next will require a continued effort under existing legislation and possibly under new rules and future legislation. I will ask the minister to provide detailed information to Ms Maguire, but I think that we would all agree that progress must happen.

James Kelly (Glasgow) (Lab): For emergency legislation to be effective, proper consultation with stakeholders and with the Parliament is required. It is therefore regrettable that, in its submission to the Parliament's Justice Sub-Committee on Policing, the Scottish Police Federation said that there was too little consultation on the new regulations. Does the cabinet secretary therefore accept that, as we move through the different phases of the route map as we emerge from lockdown, there must be more effective effort to work with stakeholders such as the Scottish Police Federation on new regulations?

Michael Russell: I will answer that question in two parts. By definition, emergency legislation is made in an emergency situation in which the Government cannot undertake the full consultation that it would normally wish to undertake on any bill. One just has to accept that the process is truncated. People do what they can do, they listen to what they can get hold of, and they try very hard to achieve balanced legislation. Of course, as time goes on, others have the opportunity to give information and views. I doubt that there is a member in the chamber who has not heard, in detail, from a whole range of organisations on a whole range of issues relating to the current regulations and how they might change or develop. That is also part of the consultation process. I am sure that all members have also made such representations, as have many bodies. Officials are still regularly talking to organisations about how to take such matters forward. Of course there needs to be continued discussion, because that is the basis of people's confidence in regulations.

However, when a start is made on the process of enacting emergency legislation—particularly in the way that the Government had to work on a major LCM and two bills in less than eight weeks—the nature of consultation will not be the same as it would be for a piece of legislation that might normally take six or eight months to a year or longer to develop and then nine months to go through the chamber. Those are quite clearly two different processes.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): A range of the powers in the coronavirus acts are intended to prevent delays and backlogs in the justice system. I will move on a bit from James Kelly's question. Can the cabinet secretary advise members whether the measures are proving to be effective in mitigating delays and enabling our justice system to continue to function effectively?

Michael Russell: I think that when the member has the pleasure of reading the report, he will discover that it gives details on all the legal provisions and an indication of whether they have

been used—and the majority of them have been—and whether they are regarded as being effective. The conclusion to be reached is that the measures have been effective. Some will not operate as fully as we would expect—for example, should jury trials not take place. However, they are the measures that we felt were required immediately to make a difference.

I think that the report indicates that, in almost all cases, the measures have made a difference—whether small or large—and have served, and will continue to serve, their purpose.

I stress that some of the changes are only kicking in now as the issues around the pandemic develop. Therefore, one should look in the next report and perhaps in the report after that for an indication of the continued utility of some measures and perhaps less usage of others.

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): I know that there is some commentary in the report but, given that the prisoner release process has finished, can the cabinet secretary explain why those powers have not yet been revoked, and can he confirm that there are no plans to release further prisoners?

Michael Russell: As far as I am aware, the report is completely up to date. Any further release is unlikely, given the criteria that are applied, but I want the member to have that assurance from the Cabinet Secretary for Justice rather than from me, so I shall ask him to give the member that assurance.

The issue is how the powers have been used. Whether they come to an end will require a recommendation from the Cabinet Secretary for Justice, and no doubt he will want to consult—he will probably consult the Justice Committee on that matter, too. The report is about how the powers have been used and the criteria. That also relates to a number of prisoners who have not been granted early release, for reasons that are given in the report.

Shona Robison (Dundee City East) (SNP): Staying at home has been a vital part of preventing the spread of the virus, and measures to increase housing security have been an important part of enabling that. Can the cabinet secretary advise members whether the emergency measures to increase housing security are proving to be effective? How are levels of rent arrears being monitored to ensure that measures remain in place for as long as necessary?

Michael Russell: The report contains useful detail that indicates that the measures have been not only well received but well used. That will continue to be the case. I know that the Minister for Local Government, Housing and Planning, Kevin Stewart, is looking at the continued use of

the powers and at how much longer they will be required. Given what we know, it is clear that the powers will need to be in place for some further period of time. At the appropriate moment, the minister will come to the chamber and make those recommendations.

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): I welcome the report; in particular, I welcome the information on pages 56 and 57 on social work assessments. However, I am disappointed that not all local authorities replied to the survey. Can the cabinet secretary provide a list of the local authorities that have used the legislation, and can he tell us which authorities did not reply to the survey?

Michael Russell: I can certainly give the member the list of authorities that did not reply to the survey. I regret to say that we did not hear from Argyll and Bute, Falkirk, Highland, Inverclyde, and Scottish Borders, and I know that officials will be in touch with them.

Of those local authorities that are using the powers, two—East Renfrewshire and Dundee—provided information on the number of assessments and comparator data, so they went further than they needed to go.

I do not seem to have the information here, but it is perfectly possible for me to provide the Covid-19 Committee—of which Monica Lennon is the deputy convener—with information on the local authorities that are using the powers. I cannot see any difficulty in that. Perhaps we can flesh that out if the committee wishes to ask questions about that provision.

I remember that Monica Lennon asked me about that provision when the legislation was going through. There was a fear, which I shared with her, that it would be more widely used than it appears to have been used to date. That is reassuring, although I stress that that is to date, because there is still an issue to be addressed in that regard.

I am sure that we can give Monica Lennon that information. I have given her the information on the councils that have not responded, and I will ensure that officials try to get some information from them.

Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): It is understandable that powers have been given to local authorities to exclude the public from meetings on health grounds. However, it is vital that our democracy is transparent, and I note that Aberdeenshire Council has been putting recordings of all policy committees online throughout the lockdown and that it will be streaming meetings live from tomorrow. Has the Scottish Government engaged with all local

authorities to encourage interim measures such as video broadcast of meetings?

Michael Russell: The member makes an important point. The Scottish Parliament has excluded members of the public from its meetings, too, because the public galleries are closed—we have done what we have empowered local authorities to do. Of course, our proceedings are being broadcast live and they are reported verbatim. I am sure that that is not the most exciting read all the time, but it is there if people want to read it.

In the circumstances, local authorities should definitely pay heed to that. Because members of the public cannot be present as a result of social distancing and other restrictions, local authorities should be transparent in the operation of their proceedings. That should also apply to the proceedings of emergency committees that undertake business in some local authorities. I do not think that that is a burden; it is a necessity. I certainly encourage every local authority to recognise that.

Covid-19 Next Steps (Communities)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): I remind members to be aware of physical distancing on entering and leaving the chamber.

The next item of business is a debate on Covid-19, and the next steps for communities. I call Aileen Campbell to speak to and move the motion.

15:17

The Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government (Aileen Campbell): I am delighted to lead this debate alongside the Cabinet Secretary for Social Security and Older People.

Each of us across the chamber is acutely aware of the traumatic and harsh effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. Every person across the country has had their lives changed and their way of life rocked. As the time that we have spent living with the restrictions turns from days to weeks to months, the socioeconomic harms grow. As is so often the case, those impacts have not been felt equally, as those who are shielding, those who are marginalised and those who are living in poverty and experiencing disadvantage are feeling the most pain. Moreover, unfortunately, we have seen a range of specific and disproportionate impacts on people with caring responsibilities, particularly women, as well as on lone parents, older people, disabled people, minority ethnic communities and children and young people.

Because of Covid's unequal impact, it is critical that we work hard to ensure that equality, human rights and social justice are at the heart of our response. Therefore, maintaining and developing a co-ordinated approach that addresses the often multiple experiences of poverty and inequality in people's lives will be central to our ability to respond successfully to the challenges that we face. That will also support our wider ambitions such as reducing child poverty and it will align with our national performance framework, which embeds our human-rights led approach and our focus on wellbeing, fairness and outcomes.

In this debate, we aim to update the Parliament on the work that has been undertaken to date, which has been hallmarked by remarkable partnerships across the public, private and third sectors and our communities. That work, which has happened across the country against a devastating backdrop, has generated huge social gains with remarkable speed and resolve. Through that partnership and our discussions, it is clear that there is a palpable desire to continue to work differently and not to accept the inevitability of

poverty or inequality but to use this pivotal moment to do more than help the country to recover and instead to use it to renew, reform and reimagine, or to build back better, and to do so together.

The word that has often been used to describe Covid-19 is "unprecedented". The outbreak required—and still requires—our response to be unprecedented in order to meet head on the monumental scale of the pandemic challenge.

Our total commitment to additional expenditure, including for the national health service, has been worth around £3.8 billion. On 18 March, I announced a £350 million package of support for communities, to ensure that local authorities, communities and the third sector are able to support those who are most affected. That package included a third sector resilience fund, which has so far provided more than £20 million to nearly 1,100 organisations, to help stabilise and manage cash flows over this difficult period. It has saved more than 12,000 jobs to date. A supporting communities fund, which is investing in 356 organisations and communities across Scotland, has spent over £14 million up to this point. A wellbeing fund has allocated more than £25 million to date through around 2,000 awards to third sector organisations up and down the country that are supporting communities in need at this time.

We continue to manage those funds flexibly to ensure the best possible response to the crisis, including by cutting through red tape and getting money to where it is needed most across Scotland. The funding has reached every part of Scotland to support community groups and third sector organisations to mobilise local resilience plans, tackle isolation and loneliness and provide direct sustenance to those who are struggling. The range and variety of work that the funding has delivered is phenomenal, and it shows our communities at their inspirational best. I thank every organisation and volunteer who has responded to the pandemic and kept people safe, connected, fed and well. To show where that support is reaching, I have today published a series of maps that set out our investment across the country, giving the detail and information that are needed to illustrate what I have described.

Throughout, we have worked in close partnership with businesses, local authorities, the wider public sector and the third sector, and each has stepped up to respond to the pandemic. First Port, the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations, the Corra Foundation, Social Investment Scotland, Just Enterprise, Inspiring Scotland, the Hunter Foundation and third sector interfaces in every local authority have helped us set up systems and distribute the funding, and we are sincerely grateful to them for that collective

effort. I also thank all our partners who are helping us deliver the supporting communities fund.

From the start of the pandemic, access to food has been a concern for many. We have actioned a blend of different approaches in order to deliver that support where and how it is needed. Our £70 million food fund has made sure that all those in the shielding group can get the food that they need while they have to self-isolate. FareShare has distributed more than 1,440 tonnes of food, equivalent to almost 3.5 million meals, since 23 March. The fund has also supported others who are at risk from the virus or struggling financially, including families whose children are eligible for free school meals, through support for authorities to provide for more than 175,000 children.

Importantly, there has been a collective desire within the crisis response not to ditch the dignity. Our cash-first approach to food insecurity provides people with the money that they need to buy the food that they want to eat, and it is guided by the principles of human rights. That is one of the reasons why, through the communities funding package, we have more than doubled the Scottish welfare fund to help people in crisis.

Affordable and adequate housing is also a key component of a socially just Scotland. With regard to tackling homelessness, the pandemic has shown what is possible when we adopt an urgent, inclusive and human rights-based approach. Intelligence from our outreach services shows that no more than 30 people across Scotland are now sleeping rough. The willingness of all parties to come together to move hundreds of people from the streets, night shelters and hostels into a place of safety has strengthened our resolve and shown us new paths to end homelessness in Scotland.

We believe that no one should return to unsuitable temporary accommodation or rough sleeping once the crisis ends. Our ambition is to capitalise on the unique opportunity that we have to secure settled homes for those who are in emergency accommodation. We also want to prevent increases in homelessness among those who may, for example, experience a drop in household income or family breakdown. That is why I am delighted that Jon Sparkes of Crisis has agreed to reconvene the homelessness and rough sleeping action group, for a short time, to guide us through the next crucial phase.

I turn to the private rented sector. Through the Coronavirus (Scotland) Act 2020, we took immediate action to increase to six months the period of notice that a private landlord must give a tenant. We have made it clear that no landlord should evict a tenant because they have suffered financial hardship as a result of coronavirus, and that we expect all landlords in the social and private sectors to be flexible with tenants who face

financial hardship and to signpost them to the sources of financial support.

Through the Coronavirus (Scotland) (No 2) Act 2020, we are introducing private landlord pre-action protocols to set out a series of steps that a landlord should comply with when they seek to end a tenancy, and we will support private landlords and tenants to work together to manage any rent arrears that are caused as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. We have also substantially increased the budget for other discretionary housing payments from £11 million to £16 million, as well as continuing to mitigate the bedroom tax in full.

I have given a snapshot that highlights examples of significant changes in policy and practice. People have rolled up their sleeves, focused on the tasks in hand and, in the process, kept folk safe and protected. They have also transformed lives and set in place new and better ways of working that we do not want to lose. In quick time, we have seen what we already know, which is that person-centred and place-based holistic support that understands and addresses the needs of the individual, the family and the household can deliver positive results.

The pandemic response has necessitated the Scottish Government and our partners challenging traditional ways of working, cultures and mindsets. To create a post-pandemic Scotland that is fairer and equal, we need to capture what has worked well, to work out what more needs to be done and to use this space to reform and renew what we do. "COVID-19—A Framework for Decision Making" explicitly stated that that will mean upholding the principles of human dignity, autonomy, respect and equality. That will underpin the programme of work that Shirley-Anne Somerville and I will take forward as we emerge from the lockdown restrictions and take the first steps towards social renewal.

Much of what we are seeing in action consists of policy approaches that we all know work, which are delivering outcomes that we have been endeavouring to achieve for some time: empowering communities; person-centred and holistic services; a focus on prevention; and the disregarding of boundaries. Such approaches echo the recommendations of Campbell Christie from nine years ago. Therefore, we are not starting from scratch, but the challenges that are here are significant: the economic harms are ramping up rapidly; our services are suffering as a result of austerity; more folk are recognising and experiencing the insecurity of the welfare safety net that has endured cuts and reform; and we are having to learn how to live with the virus.

Working together, working differently and ensuring that people with direct lived experience

can hold a mirror up to our actions have never been more important. That is why, on 2 June, we convened an initial round table with key stakeholders to help to shape and steer that work. That was an honest, frank and rewarding conversation to help us on the path towards social renewal.

However, we do not want that to be the end of the dialogue, and I am pleased to inform the chamber that, following that discussion, Shirley-Anne Somerville and I will bring together a social renewal advisory board that we will jointly convene to help us to drive the cross-portfolio working that is required. The board will include representatives from a broad range of backgrounds and sectors who have experience and knowledge of areas such as poverty, equality, disability, homelessness and regeneration. Among those who have agreed to be on the board, we are pleased to welcome Neil McInroy from the Centre for Local Economic Strategies, Jon Sparkes from Crisis, whom I have already mentioned, Emma Ritch from Engender and Satwat Rehman from One Parent Families Scotland.

Learning from the model that was set by the national advisory council on women and girls, the board will also work through a series of policy circles, each of which will be tasked with working at pace on recommendations and solutions to a specific policy theme, linked to established groups, such as the Poverty and Inequality Commission and the homelessness prevention and strategy group, to avoid duplication and reinventing the wheel when that is not necessary.

Moreover, we want to ensure that people with lived experience are at the heart of discussions, and we will support people to engage effectively. As local authorities are responsible for providing some of our most valued services and are critical partners in the response to Covid-19, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers will be represented on the advisory board, too.

The Covid-19 pandemic has touched all our lives and has changed how we live. It has been and continues to be harsh and horrible and has devastated those who have lost loved ones. However, in among that pain, there have been moments of inspiration and achievement to help sustain our country's recovery—communities reconnecting with one another, a reappreciation of localism, rough sleeping drastically reduced, communities empowered and confident, and a desire to re-evaluate what really matters.

That spirit and this Parliament can work towards creating a response to this pandemic that dismisses the aye-been attitude and instead embraces innovation, rights, equality and fairness.

It will be challenging, difficult and bumpy, but the opportunity for us all is significant, and we want to engage with the Parliament on that agenda.

I look forward to today's conversation and debate. I move the motion in my name—although, of course, there is not one!

15:30

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con):
There is not even a motion to support.

It is fitting that we are having this debate in carers week, because the pandemic has shone a light on people who have been unsung for too long. I hope that, once this over, we will treat our carers better and that those in our care homes will not be forgotten about. It has been a hidden sector, and that cannot continue.

During carers week, we have host of events in Lanarkshire—online, of course. This morning, there was a workshop to teach key life skills to tackle low moods and stress; we had a lunchtime cuppa and meditation session; and, later, the superb Cumbernauld living landscape team will tell people how the great outdoors can improve their lives physically and mentally. An appreciation of the outdoors has been one of the good things to come from lockdown. I have had such an appreciation since boyhood, sparked by some great outdoor learning experiences at school. I hope that we put greater value on that as we emerge from lockdown.

The pandemic has given many of us cause to reflect on how things could change for the better. MSPs were asked by *Holyrood* magazine how the lockdown has affected their mental health. My answer was that, in many ways, it has been uplifting: the weather has been good; I have had more exercise than I have had in many years; I have been out on my bike and done more miles on it than ever; and I have seen parts of Lanarkshire that I had not been to before. I have also seen lots of people out and about who would otherwise have been indoors or in their cars. I hope that they keep that up, because they will have seen areas near their homes that they did not know were there.

I am lucky—I have a bike and a nice but small garden, which my family values more than ever. However, not everyone is so lucky, which has made me think. Our garden might be small, but it is bigger than most plots that you would get with a new house now. We need to see the value of the outdoors, and we need to provide for that. When we come to deal with national planning framework 4, space for people should be at the forefront of our thinking.

We must also protect what green spaces we have. I would argue that we must put in greater protections for green corridors, woods and areas around rivers and canals. I have always said that we need more homes but that they need to be in the right places. On my travels on my bike, I have seen how my own town of East Kilbride has grown massively in recent years, but in a piecemeal way, with no facilities—boxes plonked in fields, leaving other fields that you just know will end up with more boxes on them. It is soulless and all about the bottom line, and we must do better. Many of the places that I have seen on the cycle routes that I have been on require public money to maintain them. I support the Government's £30 million investment in temporary active travel infrastructure, but we need to ensure that pop-up cycle lanes are not popped out again later.

Much of the heavy lifting during this crisis is being done by councils. There has been a great hoo-hah about the money that is owed to councils. Those of us in opposition have rightly criticised Kate Forbes for not paying councils the £155 million in consequentials that they were owed until she started paying in instalments last week. Ms Forbes said last week that she is still waiting for the consequentials to arrive from the United Kingdom Government. If that is the case, it should get a move on—something that I have also called on Kevin Stewart to do when it comes to the housing market. It is not personal, but the housing market has crashed. There were more than 6,000 house sales in Scotland in February but just 103 in April, which is normally the busiest month of the year. We need to let estate agents operate again—safely—and allow viewings and allow surveyors to work.

We also need to allow the construction industry to restart. It has a safe working plan in place and it needs to be allowed to get on and operate. It needs a date. That will also see the pipeline of suppliers get back up and running, and it could see the 6,000 families whose homes are nearly complete get into them and start building new communities.

The Minister for Local Government, Housing and Planning (Kevin Stewart): I compliment Mr Simpson on his comments on the national planning framework 4. We also need to look at building standards to ensure that we are building the right homes and creating the right places in the light of the pandemic.

I say to Mr Simpson that I have worked constructively with the construction industry to create a phased plan. I recognise that many folk are waiting for a date, but it will be dictated by the virus. We hope to move shortly, but we have to do it safely. We must recognise that there have been situations in other places where those who are

involved in the construction industry have faced great difficulties in relation to the virus, including deaths from it. We have to get this absolutely right. A date will come, but we need to ensure that everything is safe.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I say to members that interventions should not be speeches and that we are very short of time this afternoon.

Graham Simpson: I hope that you will make some allowance for that, Presiding Officer.

There is a judgment involved here. The First Minister has made a judgment, but I urge her to go a bit more quickly.

Housing should be at the heart of rebuilding our society. Research that was published today shows that we should all commit to building 53,000 affordable homes during the next session of Parliament, although I note that we have fallen behind due to the pandemic, so we might need even more than that. It seems to me that all parties should be able to coalesce around the figure and not get into a bidding war as we go into the next Scottish Parliament elections.

We must also look after those who are without a permanent home. As Shelter Scotland has said, we must not accept a return to the previous situation of families and individuals living in unsuitable temporary accommodation, and vulnerable people sleeping on Scotland's streets. We have an opportunity to end rough sleeping for good and to provide proper, decent accommodation for everyone who needs it. I was therefore glad to see Kevin Stewart reform the homelessness and rough sleeping action group—I say well done to him for that.

No one should be left behind as we emerge from the crisis. We must look after the worst off and, as the Poverty Alliance has said, consider using the welfare tools that are at our disposal. The Government has kicked a number of things into the long grass, and the latest is an update on child poverty. There is no excuse for that. If it makes for uncomfortable reading, so be it. We must face up to the realities if we are to emerge stronger. Hiding away will not cut it.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before we move on, I apologise to the cabinet secretary, as this is, indeed, a debate with no motion. I am a creature of habit and I automatically prompted her to move a motion. However, it was nice to see that I was obeyed so readily. [*Laughter.*]

15:38

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): Thank you for clearing that up, Presiding Officer.

There has been nothing like it in our lifetimes and there will be nothing like it in the time to come. As we plan the way forward, we know that we will be picking up the pieces from the pandemic for years, or perhaps even for decades, although I hope not.

The lockdown has thrown up so many different aspects of life in isolation. Many friends talk of having quality time, which Graham Simpson mentioned, but, at the same time, they worry about their jobs. Those who are at work are worried about travelling to work and about their health. As we know, key workers in the NHS are risking their lives for us.

Covid-19 has also exposed the existing deep-rooted inequalities in our communities, including for women and black and minority ethnic communities, and the fragility of low-paid insecure work. Our fellow BME citizens are often on the NHS front line and they are at particularly high risk from the virus. Today, the First Minister announced that a working group will look into the issue, which I whole-heartedly welcome, because we need answers on why that is the case.

There have been good news stories throughout the crisis, and it is quite remarkable how numerous community groups across the country have stepped in. In my patch in Glasgow G13 and G14, they have been distributing food parcels and been giving mental health support, with teachers and young people helping out. The public has been utterly amazing with its donations. I hope that that continues; I believe that it will.

One word of warning must go to my home city of Glasgow, where the local authority has scrapped £23 million of funding to third sector and community organisations. There is a worry that there will be redundancies in that sector in the coming weeks. We see the work that community centres and the third sector are doing, and we must continue to support them.

We do not know what the full social or economic cost of the pandemic will be, but I say to the cabinet secretary and ministers that we need big ideas and not old solutions. This is the time to be bold. Labour gives the commitment that we will work with the Government on that.

Some households have been able to save money during the lockdown, but many others have struggled to make ends meet. Debt will be a huge issue for millions of people who have to resort to borrowing, so there must be a cap on the interest rates of high street loans.

As I have said previously, we could face mass evictions at the end of the protected period. The Scottish Government must raise its ambitions to help renters to survive. My Fair Rents (Scotland) Bill has now been introduced, and I hope that the

Government will open its mind to a new way of thinking on that.

Today, Shelter Scotland, the Chartered Institute of Housing and the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations published a report about the importance of affordable homes. I hope that all parties will make a commitment to the mass building of affordable homes in the next parliamentary session.

Yesterday, there were newspaper reports that many people have died of Covid-19 at home alone, some of whom were not discovered for up to two weeks. Unfortunately, there has also been an increase in the number of people dying of other diseases. The head of the Royal College of General Practitioners, Professor Martin Marshall said:

“we are noticing an increase in people dying in the community, often at home and often due to conditions unrelated to COVID-19, such as cardiac arrest.”

As members of all parties have said, we must begin to plan the work to get our NHS back on track. Doctors say that most of the cases involved older people who were living alone; in other cases, the person who died had a mental health condition such as schizophrenia or depression. Our treatment of older people in this situation has been a test for our society, and aspects of that treatment have been found wanting.

I will spend my final minute or so talking about people in the 16 to 24 age group. They are among the biggest losers in the crisis. They are twice as likely to lose their jobs because of the types of employment that they are in.

I am also hugely concerned about shielded young people, and I raised the issue with the First Minister last week. They are sitting at home while their chances for work and opportunities pass them by. When I asked about that group in a parliamentary question today, the answer that I got was an old solution. I hope that ministers listen to this point. Skills Development Scotland has a new fund, which is all good. However, if we consider most of the young people who we know, how many of them know that Skills Development Scotland exists? Do they have the first clue about how to get in touch with it? If ministers are serious about getting bold and being radical, why cannot the Government seek to contact every young shielded person—they have already written to all of them—to ask what skills and training they need. I really want to engage with ministers on that.

My niece said that she was interviewed for a place on a course while she was organising dinner for the family. She was asked two questions that she thought were rather odd. That was for the course that she wants to go on. We are talking about her career. She was refused a place with no

recourse to appeal, and no contact from the college.

Today, another constituent of mine asked for an advance on his rent, because there was a house that he could have moved into today or tomorrow. His advance was refused because he said that he would pay it back when he got a job. He does not know when that will be.

Those are the real stories about what is happening right now, and there are thousands of them.

Aileen Campbell: I recognise the points that Pauline McNeill has made, and I will endeavour to raise those reasonable and pragmatic suggestions with the right minister.

I also think that that the member's point about stories of lived experience and people's experiences of services is important—I spoke about that in my opening remarks. We need to make sure that we do not just bring the same old folk around the same old tables. Lived experience needs to influence and guide our approach in the future. I agree with much of what—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That was hardly quick, cabinet secretary. Ms McNeill needs to close now.

Pauline McNeill: That is the kind of answer that Labour is looking for—that the Scottish Government will listen to radical ideas.

Big companies and supermarkets, which have been doing well out of the pandemic, must pay into and continue to support communities. I close with a quote from a colleague of mine, Dave Watson, who blogs for Common Weal:

"If we are going to 'Build Back Better', we need to create a common understanding of how the pandemic has exposed the failures of our economy and democracy"

and

"develop the ideas to fix it ... many thousands of our ... citizens are dying from a virus, it should make us all think about what we want from our society. I don't think it is overly philosophical to suggest that the answer is not more 'greed and acquisition', but rather 'sufficiency and security'."

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before I go any further, I give due notice that we are well out of time, so either decision time will happen later or speeches will be cut.

15:45

Andy Wightman (Lothian) (Green): I thank all organisations, charities, voluntary groups, local government and social enterprise across Scotland for their extraordinary efforts during the past two months in supporting communities.

As we well know, the virus has exposed existing inequalities: women, minority ethnic groups and the young have been disproportionately affected by the social and economic impact of the virus. That is a structural issue, as most of those groups are often employed in the most at-risk jobs, are poorly rewarded and have the least security in relation to housing and the job market.

In the wake of the murder of George Floyd and the heightened awareness of police violence, and racism more generally, I highlight that the particular impact of Covid-19 on, and the deaths among, black and ethnic minority populations do not appear to be because of any biological predisposition, but because of structural inequality and—yes—racism.

BEMIS has been doing valuable work through its ethnic minorities national resilience network and has responded to the many and varied challenges that affect black, Asian, Roma and other ethnic groups. The Scottish Government has supported that work. However, I was concerned that BEMIS had to suspend its emergency sustenance grant fund in mid-May. Until the closure of the grant, it had distributed £32,170 to 806 people—391 adults and 415 children and young people. Despite a request for more support, BEMIS has not yet had any confirmation. I invite the cabinet secretary to confirm whether on-going support will be available for that vital programme.

The question of housing is central to the pandemic and has already featured in members' speeches. People are being instructed to stay at home—indeed, it is a criminal offence for someone to leave their home without a reasonable excuse.

It is clear that growing numbers of private tenants face growing insecurity. Last week, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation published a study showing that

"More than a third of furloughed private renters ... are worried about being able to pay their rent"

—that is across the United Kingdom—and that

"42% of private renters have already seen their income decrease due to the impact of coronavirus."

The most recent information from Scotland is that 31 per cent of private renters are very or fairly concerned about paying rent. Across the UK, 63 per cent of private renters do not have any savings.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation makes clear that renters must be offered real protection from eviction. The current emergency provisions are obviously welcome but they are time-limited. From July onwards, the First-tier Tribunal for Scotland Housing and Property Chamber plans on restarting case management discussions online.

Such discussions can and often do lead to evictions. Therefore, tenants who have spent the pandemic with an eviction notice—issued before it—hanging over their heads can now be evicted.

The eviction ban is, of course, an extension of the notice period and not a ban, which is why, on 6 October, eviction notices that were issued during the pandemic will begin their journey through the courts, should the provision not be extended. It is also the case that the grounds for eviction that the Coronavirus (Scotland) Act 2020 temporarily made discretionary will become mandatory again in October. That means that the First-tier Tribunal for Scotland Housing and Property Chamber must evict tenants who have been in arrears for three months or more.

People facing immense financial insecurity and high rents will inevitably face eviction. All that has the potential to cause a tidal wave of evictions. The Scottish Government and the third sector have done excellent work on homelessness—I welcome the re-establishment of the homelessness task force—but all that work could well be undone. Therefore, I return to the issues that I raised in the Coronavirus (Scotland) (No 2) Bill debate on 20 May, and I appeal to ministers to reconsider their approach. Even the Tory Government in London has gone further, as we saw in the announcement by the Master of the Rolls and Records of the Chancery of England last Friday.

Tenants need a new deal, to ensure that the human right to a home is upheld not only during an emergency, but beyond it. It is about giving certainty to landlords and tenants. As Pauline McNeill said, the Chartered Institute of Housing has called for no evictions as a result of coronavirus arrears.

We need additional legislative protections for tenants, principally to ensure that rent arrears that arise during the emergency and as a consequence of Covid-19 cannot, by law, be a ground for eviction. We can do more, too. Even if the law were changed, such arrears would remain debts that were payable and would need to be dealt with in time. We need a solution to that.

For example, credit unions could leverage their funds to lend to tenants in distress. Tenants could enter into a binding agreement with their landlords for revised payment terms over, say, two years. Moneys would be paid into a tenant's credit union account in a lump sum and then paid to the landlord, according to the agreed plan, while the tenant earned interest on the funds. The Government could underwrite, for example, 10 per cent of the loan amount, providing a guarantee.

Such an approach would provide a safety net for tenants and landlords, underwritten by

Government. It is the kind of scheme that ministers have the powers to initiate, develop and promote, in partnership with tenants unions, credit unions and landlords.

Those are not radical suggestions but real, workable ideas, which people are bringing to the Scottish Government. The starting point must remain that nobody should be evicted from their home as a result of coronavirus, either during the emergency period or after its expiry. This is a public health imperative now, and it will remain so after the emergency period.

I am not interested in rehashing the arguments about whether ministers have done enough up to now. I am interested in asking ministers what they will do next to prevent a perfect storm of housing insecurity in a few months' time.

I commend everyone in our communities who has responded to the crisis, including the Scottish ministers, local government and public services, and I stress how vital it is to build back into people's lives security in housing, energy, food costs and income. I urge the Government to introduce a new settlement for a post-Covid age.

15:51

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): I will speak from two vantage points: as chair of the cross-party group on volunteering; and as a volunteer. Concern for the wellbeing of our communities is exactly why I got into politics, so I am grateful to the Government for making time available for this important debate.

Since the start of this emergency, I have attended 77 coffee mornings from the edge of my driveway. We live in a small, six-house cul-de-sac in west Edinburgh, and every morning at 11 o'clock, rain or shine, everyone stops what they are doing and meets for a coffee break for 20 minutes around the edge of our grove. Recently, we have added a Friday night pub quiz. The virus has made firm friends of us all, and together we supported two of our six households through Covid-19 infection, running errands and offering help and advice. We were friendly before, but the emergency has created a lasting bond that has sustained each of us through the privations of lockdown. I am incredibly grateful for that.

There will be stories like ours throughout the country. Communities are at the heart of the emergency. They are where the impact of the virus is most keenly felt; they are also the front line in mitigating that impact.

I have said before that I do not remember a time in my life when I felt more scared than I did during the first days of the crisis. I remember working late into the evening in the constituency office, shortly

before lockdown, trying to deal with a torrent of emails from people who were about to lose their livelihoods and go under, when a member of the local community stopped by with a bottle of wine. A million such seemingly tiny acts of human kindness define, for me, the community response at this awful time.

Indeed, the Prime Minister had barely finished announcing the lockdown restrictions on 23 March when the mutual aid groups started springing up. There are now some 300 such groups, serving nearly every community in the country. They do so much more than just hang up my mother's washing or get the shopping in for friends who are shielding; they offer human contact and encouragement to the people who are left most isolated by the virus. They deserve the heartfelt thanks of members and our lasting pride.

As well as the mutual aid groups, the private sector has responded. In my constituency, businesses such as Jill's Deli, the Torfin pub, Abida Indian takeaway and the Chinese Manor House are delivering free hot safely prepared meals to people who are shielding or who have Covid-19 symptoms. Cafe Vigo recently delivered 150 filled rolls to the Covid hub in the Western General hospital, to grateful clinicians. The list goes on.

We should all be proud of the philanthropy of those businesses, despite their facing in some cases pretty catastrophic financial outlooks. They have stood shoulder to shoulder with the most vulnerable people in our community. Our community will remember that kindness, and I very much hope that the Government will remember it too, in the support that it offers them in the months to come.

Beyond the good offices of local business has been the response of the third sector. I will single out two charities in particular. The Corstorphine community centre delivers food parcels across west Edinburgh. The Scran Academy, which many members know about, delivered its 50,000th meal for those in isolation across the city of Edinburgh. It has been the privilege of my life to volunteer among them for at least two evenings a week throughout lockdown. A fortnight ago, I reached my own milestone, in delivering my thousandth meal to people who were isolating with Covid-19 symptoms.

The experience of driving with meals all over Edinburgh has given me a real insight into how our communities are faring, and what we will need to do to support them. There is such resilience out there: a common understanding as to why the restrictions have been needed, and a steadfast observance of those rules. People are learning to live around the virus, but also, in so doing, to support each other in a way that nobody could

ever have imagined. We are going to need more of that.

Since the start of the crisis, according to the Scottish Food Coalition, food bank usage has surged by 300 per cent. We are well into this crisis, but its full impact has yet to take hold. Furlough, and a grant for the self-employed, have staved off the worst of the economic hardships of Covid, but that cannot last for ever. If the suggestion is that across the UK there might be more than 3 million job losses, after the job retention scheme concludes, the social and economic consequences of the recession to come will need resilience in our communities like never before. We are going to have to look to our communities to help to provide solutions on issues such as mental ill-health, social isolation and trauma recovery. We know that loneliness increases the risk of death by 26 per cent. That is far more acute now than it has ever been.

Housing has been mentioned several times in the debate, and it has to be an absolute priority, because when unemployment rises, homelessness is sure to follow. I need not remind the chamber that, before the Covid-19 outbreak, Scotland had the worst death rate in the UK for homeless people. Although 97 per cent of rough sleepers are being accommodated, we understand that hotels are set to close their doors to the homeless at the end of June. The risk is that we slide back into rough sleeping, and that our efforts to contain the virus will be hampered by such a return.

Consideration of what we do must be folded into our community response. The American writer Margaret Wheatley said:

"There is no power for change greater than a community discovering what it cares about."

The virus has shown me what our communities care about. They are where the problems of this emergency, and of its aftermath, will be most manifest, but they are also where we will find the solutions.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to open debate.

15:58

James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP): Although there have been encouraging signs over the past few days, this pandemic can often appear to be unrelenting. That is why I am grateful to have the opportunity to discuss the next steps for our communities, just as we have recently started the careful and gradual easing of our lockdown restrictions. Many of the challenges that have been caused by the coronavirus will continue to impact on the public in the coming weeks and months—particularly on those who have been

asked to shield until the end of July, or those who, sadly, have lost their jobs or, more importantly, loved ones—while new problems and obstacles will emerge as we continue with our tentative steps to recover and renew.

The World Health Organization, in its strategy for transition, emphasises the condition that

“Communities have a voice, are informed, engaged, and are participatory in the transition.”

I welcome the Scottish Government’s commitment to enabling that.

At the beginning of the coronavirus emergency, the Scottish Government introduced the £350 million fund to allow councils, charities, businesses and community groups to respond to the situation swiftly and according to local need. As has already been mentioned, there is a £70 million food fund, a £50 million wellbeing fund, and a £40 million supporting communities fund.

Groups that are working in the heart of our communities have a wealth of experience in responding to different local and national challenges, and the funding available has been a valuable lifeline to those who most need help.

I was delighted to learn that a number of housing associations that operate in my constituency, including Ardenglen Housing Association, Govanhill Housing Association and Thenu Housing have benefited from the Scottish Government funding. Each of those housing associations is on the front line of local efforts to combat the virus.

Throughout the pandemic, members will all have experienced an increase in their constituency case load. The crisis has highlighted existing inequalities that have persisted stubbornly over decades, and the harms that are caused by the pandemic are not felt equally. As we look to the future and our next steps, it is vital that we keep doing all that we can to address some of those existing issues, as, sadly, many of them will persist or even worsen.

I want to take this opportunity to praise a number of the community support groups in my constituency that are doing all that they can to address some of the problems that are being faced. Castlemilk Together, which is also a beneficiary of the Scottish Government’s supporting communities fund, has been dropping off food parcels to households with children; The Caring Operations Joint Action Council—COJAC—is delivering care services for key workers; the Pollokshaws Area Network is delivering food across Pollokshaws, Mansewood, Hillpark and Eastwood estate; and, just over my constituency boundary, the Dixon Community, which does a lot of work with many of my

constituents, is making daily calls on their elderly service users in order to support them.

Those established organisations do great work, and did so even before the pandemic. However, it is also worth while recognising and thanking the less formal support networks that exist. Across my constituency, there are many community-based book groups whose users are selflessly supporting each other through, for example, collecting prescriptions, delivering mail and dropping off essentials. There is an incredible amount of support out there, in addition to the national phone line, which, as a reminder, can be contacted on 0800 111 4000. I hope that everyone who has been affected by the crisis has been able to access some form of assistance.

The Covid-19 pandemic has been heartbreaking and difficult for us all. However, if there is one thing that we can take as a small positive, it is the way in which our communities have pulled together and overcome institutional obstacles in a way that would have been unlikely before the pandemic made it crucial. Local carers, NHS and social care staff, local government, police and fire crews, local business organisations, charities and volunteers, to name but a few, have come together like never before, to ensure that the most vulnerable people in our communities are not left behind. The response to homelessness has been a perfect example of that, and I was delighted to see that John Sparkes, from Crisis, will lead the homelessness and rough sleeping working group, which will look at how to build on what we have already achieved. That is a perfect example of non-silo working and a collaborative approach, and shows what can be achieved by that approach.

During the crisis, it has become crystal clear to me that the third sector has an important role to play if we are to continue with the good work that we have learned to do. It has the commitment, expertise, agility and flexibility to work in partnership with local government and the Scottish Government. Almost 10 years on from the Christie commission’s report on the future delivery of public services, we have an opportunity to think about a different way of doing things and to put in place the collaboration that was central to Christie’s vision. We have a chance to move away from the institutional obstacles that so often impede progress. We have a chance to ensure that the person or community in need is everyone’s priority, and that people do not concentrate only on the bit that they are responsible for. We also have a chance, finally, to get rid of the silo culture that has held us back for so long.

These tough times have brought out the best in people, and it has been truly inspirational to see

how my constituents and people in constituencies across Scotland have worked together to try to defeat Covid-19. As we move through and out of the crisis, we need to capture that incredible community spirit and build on it in the years to come. If we do that—I have no doubt that the Scottish Government will take that opportunity—we can chart a better way forward and support all the people of Scotland.

16:03

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife)

(Con): The community resilience that has been shown during the coronavirus pandemic has been nothing short of remarkable. When faced by this terrible, invisible enemy that forced us into necessary lockdown, families, friends, neighbours, colleagues and communities could have drawn further apart but, instead, they have pulled closer together. They have supported the most vulnerable in society, who are required to shield, and they have supported others by delivering prescriptions, collecting shopping, encouraging people and so on. That must be one of the best things that we have seen as a result of this terrible situation.

Across Mid Scotland and Fife, which I represent, I have seen tremendous support for people. In Bridge of Allan, a community resilience team called the carers group was established and it created a community larder that distributes food to people twice a week. The Dollar Community Development Trust offered “stay connected” sessions through Zoom, which included yoga, pilates, singing, gardening and lunch clubs. Many organisations have benefited from such work. In Alva, the joint response group brought organisations together, ensuring that communities could adapt to support individuals. That has happened across Perth and Kinross, Stirling and Fife—across my region.

Many charities and third sector organisations may not or will not survive during the pandemic. Funding has been set aside for them, but not all organisations can be assisted and supported. We must therefore redouble our efforts to support them, financially and emotionally, so that they may survive and thrive.

After volunteers week last week, this debate provides another important opportunity to put on record our thanks to volunteers the length and breadth of the country, who give of their best to ensure that individuals are supported. It has always been my view that communities know best—better than Government—in ensuring that individuals and communities can support one another. The examples that I have given have shown that, in many cases, community groups were far quicker to organise themselves and to

start helping people in need than the efforts that were made nationally and by the voluntary sector. That is to be welcomed.

Some organisations have ensured that support mechanisms were in place, although there have been occasions when councils started trying to get involved, which created some confusion. That needs to be ironed out when dealing with such issues. It is difficult for many to hear that, but it is a fact, and we need to ensure that a broad base is in place. In many situations, the state can do the best it can by acting as an enabler of our communities, rather than a direct deliverer of services.

There have undoubtedly been some very difficult decisions to be made by Governments across the United Kingdom. We have seen and heard from many sectors across the community, but we are here to do the best that we can to flatten the coronavirus curve.

There is a cost to what lockdown has entailed, and we do not yet know what that cost is. There is both an economic cost and a human cost. Despite the enormous and unprecedented package of employment support that has been provided by the UK Government and others to ensure that individuals have kept their jobs, many people have lost their jobs, and more people will lose them as we progress through this situation.

Cutting off entire populations from loved ones for such an extended period of time has very likely been detrimental to their mental health. Individuals had been struggling enough to get support from communities across the NHS, and it is vital to re-engage with those individuals to ensure that they get that support. The steps that we are taking today are very much that: they are the steps out of this situation and they are the steps that will give us opportunities. We have to support existing groups and organisations. That may mean a step change to ensure support, including financial support. We have always been amazed and impressed by the fact that a small amount of money going into a local situation can have an enormous impact on what can be achieved. That needs to be the case.

The whole idea of genuine partnership working must be embraced. We must ensure that councils, health boards and public sector organisations work collectively together. That has happened during the pandemic, and it needs to happen in the future. As I have said, it is vital that we all organise and provide support to ensure that things are done in the best way. We do not want a top-down, Government-knows-best approach; we need to put the third sector in the driving seat, to ensure that we move forward in the best way.

Today's debate has given us the opportunity to take a snapshot of what has been achieved to date. Funding has been provided, and positive results have been identified, but reform needs to take place. We have empowered communities and we have worked together, with cross-party, cross-portfolio working. It is with that approach and mindset that we can best tackle the challenges that lie ahead. Those challenges are considerable. When we let a community lead, the results speak for themselves.

16:09

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): I was pleased to hear the cabinet secretary reaffirm that, as the focus now begins to move to the recovery and renew phases, the Scottish Government aims to build on policy and practice changes that have shown the potential to be genuinely transformative.

I also welcome the cabinet secretary's comments about the importance of lived experience. Perhaps he can say in summing up—I apologise if I missed this in his speech—whether there will be any unpaid carers or people who have disabilities on the board of the advisory group, as it would be helpful to know.

I agree that, as we emerge from this period, there is an opportunity to chart a better way forward in support of all Scotland. The Scottish Government and the Parliament must grab that opportunity with both hands. Cross-party working on the emergency legislation—productive and constructive scrutiny coupled with the unprecedented reprioritisation of resources and powers—has shown what can be done where there is a will to do it. As we plan a route through the crisis, we need that same will to tackle poverty, addiction and inequality, which also threaten the lives of the citizens whom we represent. As I and many others have said before, we are all in the same storm, but we are not in the same boat.

The current health crisis has highlighted, and in many cases exacerbated, deep existing inequalities that have stubbornly persisted for decades. The harms caused by the pandemic, and those resulting from the measures that have been put in place to manage it and save lives, are not felt equally, and the Government's responses should reflect that. In the decisions that are made, the importance of ensuring fairness and quality of life for all our citizens must be not only considered but acted on.

For years, campaigners have been calling for dignified food provision, accessible information, online classes and support with isolation. In a matter of weeks, those things have become mainstream. Six minutes is not enough time for

me to mention all the wonderful volunteer organisations in my Cunninghame South constituency, but I am grateful to each and every one of them. I will provide a snapshot of some of the good work that is going on.

Fullarton hub, in my home town of Irvine, has 56 volunteers under the leadership of Donna Fitzpatrick, and they are knocking their pans in seven days a week. They are walking dogs and picking up prescriptions for those who are shielding. They are preparing and delivering, from a relatively small kitchen, 149 fresh meals of good-quality freshly cooked food each day for those who are shielding. They are helping people not just in Fullarton but throughout Irvine. They are also providing a personal shopping service for old folk in the area. That is very important, because dignity is partly about having choice, and a personal shopping service gives older people a choice, as they decide what messages they are getting. For those in the community who need a helping hand, there is a food larder at the hub; it has been there for 10 months or so, but it has now scaled up hugely and around 200 food parcels are going out each week.

The economic and health challenges in my constituency have been there for a very long time, as has the resilience and strength of the community. Nonetheless, I am conscious that many more citizens who were previously managing or just managing will be tipped into debt as our communities start to feel the economic impact of the pandemic. Fullarton and other community hubs in North Ayrshire have stepped up and provided for our community. Indeed, they are the community and they know what is needed: the priorities are providing food and tackling isolation. They are delivering, as they have been since the very start of the crisis.

Interestingly, the hubs are reaching folk who need support but who have not previously been involved with statutory services. Those new connections can literally be life saving. Government funding should be getting as close as possible to local community groups, and those groups should be valued, trusted and properly supported and resourced.

The third sector resilience fund was designed to be flexible and to cut down on red tape, and the Equalities and Human Rights Committee heard in evidence some very positive feedback about that fund and the ease of applying to it. However, I have a local example of where that has not been the case, which I will share with the cabinet secretary.

I was struck by the evidence that the committee heard from Radiant and Brighter that the lack of certainty about sustainable funding meant that the organisation did not apply to the fund. I can

understand why there might be a reticence to set expectations for help that would be met only in the short term, but we should reflect on the impact and the potential harm of organisations starting to provide support and interventions for at-risk people and then having to stop.

Where a group has been demonstrably delivering lifeline support and meeting the needs of the community, it should not have to start right back at the beginning by having to prove its worth and knowledge in funding applications, and it should not have to use its valuable resources, whether in time or money, to secure the funding that it needs to continue.

Politicians frequently call on groups such as Fullarton community association to talk around the country about community empowerment. None of us is ever shy about that, and it is right that our small groups and charities deserve praise. However, our communities do not need empowered in the sense of developing skills, a voice or knowledge; they have all that already. They are powerful, but they need a fair distribution of resource. Let us show them with our actions as well as with our words that we mean it. Scotland can be a fairer and more equal place for all.

16:15

Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): Like other members, I thank all volunteers right around the country who have literally been saving and protecting lives by looking out for their neighbours, their loved ones and other people in their wider community. I declare an interest as a trustee of a charity that has supported mutual aid groups across the country. To each and every volunteer in all the organisations across the country, I say a deep thank you.

I want to raise a few issues with the cabinet secretaries as we enter the next phase of the response to the pandemic. The first is how we support third sector organisations. As has been said, a large number of third sector organisations will feel a massive impact from their funding having fallen through the ground. I do not just mean funding from Government but, in particular, funding from the public or institutions. How we support organisations so that they are able to continue to support people in our communities will be really important. That is one issue in relation to helping to deliver support.

There is a massive issue in relation to financial exclusion and the charities that are involved in delivering services that deal with financial exclusion. How can we give advice so that people are able to maximise their incomes at a time of economic downturn? I am keen to hear what support will be given to financial exclusion

services, so that they can maximise their impact and household incomes.

I am also worried about the shielding group. This is not meant to be a criticism of the Government—far from it—but I worry about how we continue to communicate with people in the shielding category and how we open up a constructive dialogue with them about how they can get some normality back into their lives while protecting their health at the same time. We can discuss, debate and argue about how prepared we were for the viral pandemic—no doubt, one day, we will—but we can start to make preparations now for the inevitable mental health pandemic that will follow. In response to the crisis, what preparations are we making right now to support the mental health of people not only in the shielded category but right across our society?

I want to touch on support for black and minority ethnic communities, which Andy Wightman covered. The network to which he referred is one of the charities that we have supported. We need tailored support for BME communities because, quite often, those individuals and families are hard to reach. Such charities are able to identify and reach families because they have those connections and relationships. What support can the network be given, and how can we identify further individuals?

Although I welcome today's announcement that a working group will be set up to look at the impact of Covid-19 on BME communities, I am slightly frustrated that it has taken 10 weeks for us to get to that point. We have been too slow, and far behind other parts of the UK, in recording, sharing and analysing data on the impact on BME communities. The working group needs to do that catch-up work, and we cannot allow it to take a lot of time. We need to look at what the group will do. What will the impact on BME communities mean for service delivery as well as for BME workers on the front line?

This week, there has been a lot of discussion about racism, and the Parliament will discuss the issue tomorrow. It is important to note that many people in this country get their food made and supplied by BME communities, have their shops opened by BME communities, have their shelves stocked by BME communities, have their medicines and supplies delivered by BME communities, and have their diagnoses and treatment done by BME communities. If those people can come and risk their lives to try to save lives in this country, we owe it to them to respond adequately both to the crisis and after the crisis, as we tackle much deeper and wider inequality in our society.

We cannot return to the model that we have had in the past. There is no doubt that we will have an

economic downturn through the pandemic and after it. In the 1980s, people were put on the unemployment scrap heap. Many of them never went on to work again, many of their families never went on to work, and we had structural, ingrained poverty in communities as a result of the economic downturn then. In the 2010s, there was austerity as a result of the financial crash. We have to recognise that austerity also costs lives. If we have a repeat of the failed ideologies of the past, more people will lose their lives as a consequence of the austerity of the economic downturn and the pandemic rather than because of the pandemic itself. How will we challenge that structural inequality into the next phase?

I have 30 seconds left, which I will use to make a final point about children. There are lots of children for whom respite was school. They have not had that respite in the past three months, and they are now going to go into a school holiday period, which means that they will not have had any respite for six months. What support will be put in place for those children across the country, so that they are not left behind with all the impacts that would come from that?

16:21

Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): I am pleased to have been called to speak in the debate.

It is important at the outset to recognise the significant Scottish Government support that has been made available to address emergency needs during the coronavirus pandemic. We have heard that a financial package of £350 million was announced by the Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government, Aileen Campbell, on 18 March. That was a very rapid response in recognition of the considerable disruption to people's lives that was coming down the line and the likely significant financial hardship that would follow. That package included different strands of support for local authorities, charities, businesses and community groups, and the watchwords have been flexibility and delivery on the ground, not bureaucracy and red tape.

Some £95 million has been made available directly to local authorities, including a top-up of £45 million to the Scottish welfare fund. In that regard, it would be helpful to hear from the Cabinet Secretary for Social Security and Older People, in her winding-up speech, about how the greater flexibility that is provided for the operation of the Scottish welfare fund has worked in practice.

A £70 million food fund to address the huge issues of food insecurity, a £50 million wellbeing fund, a £40 million supporting communities fund

and a £20 million fund for third sector resilience have been established. That will help to ensure the continued viability of key third sector organisations that are affected by cash flow. A sum of £50 million has gone to meet an anticipated increase in the number of applications to the existing Scottish Government council tax reduction scheme and Scottish social security benefits. It would be helpful to hear the Cabinet Secretary for Social Security and Older People, in her closing remarks, tell us about the level of drawdown to which that £50 million sum has been subjected thus far.

Finally, it is to be noted that, at the time of the announcement, £25 million was to be kept in reserve to allow speedy and flexible action when it was needed to deal with the rapidly changing circumstances that we face. It would be helpful to hear where matters stand with that significant amount of reserve. It may, of course, have subsequently been applied to other important funding streams.

Aileen Campbell: Some of the reserves have been spent. Most recently, there has been a £5 million top-up to the third sector resilience fund. We increased that pot. We are keeping an eye on all those funds to ensure that we can deploy the resource in the best way possible.

On a point that Anas Sarwar raised, we will have to think pretty cleverly about how we support the third sector.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): I think that my colleague Linda Fabiani said that there should be no speeches in interventions. I pay attention when I am in the office.

Annabelle Ewing: I thank the cabinet secretary for that very helpful intervention. However, as a lawyer, I note that there is still some money left. We will be watching that very closely, as will my constituents in Cowdenbeath. It is very welcome that that significant Scottish Government funding has been made available so quickly. I note, from details published today, that Fife has received £8,858,125 of funding, which is the third largest allocation in Scotland.

In my Cowdenbeath constituency, Fife Voluntary Action has played a key role as a third sector interface. I thank everyone at Fife Voluntary Action and all volunteers across Fife for all that they have been doing to assist people during the pandemic. There are many examples of individuals and communities stepping up to the plate—as we have heard already—and that is the case in every part of my constituency. That includes the Benarty emergency response group, the Lochgelly beat corona group, Oor Wee Cafe in Kelty and the EATS Rosyth community hub—among other

examples in every town and village in between. We see a huge effort by those very inspiring individuals, and I send my heartfelt thanks and, I am sure, those of the whole Parliament to all of them.

During the first stage of the pandemic, a particular focus has rightly been placed on the shielding group. I know from constituency casework how important Fife Voluntary Action has been in ensuring that people who are in the so-called “vulnerable” group also get the information and support that is available for them. Further clarification and information was made available for the shielding group yesterday. What is the position for the vulnerable group regarding the support that they currently benefit from, and when will that information be communicated to them? It is important to clarify that.

As we reflect on the first stage of the coronavirus pandemic and consider the next steps, it is clear that we must build on the different way of doing business that we have witnessed over the past 12 weeks. We have seen a laser focus on delivery and a stripping back of unnecessary red tape and bureaucracy. Flexibility has played a key role in decision making, and there has been a shared common purpose. In the emotionally, physically, socially and financially challenging times that lie ahead, we must capture the best of what we have witnessed over recent weeks, and we must ensure that the new ways of working become the norm and not the exception. We must focus on delivery, not on structure, and we must re-imagine our society.

I am very pleased to hear the announcement of the social renewal advisory board. I wish it well in its endeavours and, as the MSP for Cowdenbeath, I stand ready to play my part as we move to the new normal.

16:27

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): This pandemic is like nothing that we have ever known and may be the biggest threat we will face in our lifetimes. Surviving it has been a supreme challenge for many; sadly, some have lost that fight.

Life has taught me that the strongest teams are built in adversity. They are built on the shared experiences and hardships that can generate hope and positivity. That is what has happened in the Highlands. Social distancing has pulled communities together rather than driving them apart. There has been a focus on helping our neighbours, especially the elderly and the most vulnerable.

There are examples of that from all over the Highlands. In Beaulieu, the community council has

set up two community larders—one in a phone box and the other in the bus shelter—to help those in need of daily essentials. Those small acts of kindness in troubled times prove that we care.

We should never forget that highlanders and islanders are known, above all, for their generosity. Margaret Payne, from Ardvar, is climbing the height of Suilven by negotiating 282 trips up the stairs of her Sutherland home. She has just 40 flights of stairs to go before she reaches the summit. The £340,000 that she has raised will be a lifeline for the Highland Hospice and the Royal National Lifeboat Institution. That is just one of the fundraising initiatives in the Highlands and Islands. I pay tribute, as others have done, to all the fundraisers. I know that local charities and trusts are hugely grateful for those funds, especially at a time when it has been hard to generate income.

I also welcome the creation of the Scottish Government’s £20 million wellbeing and resilience fund, which has secured the future of many charity-run services, including the Highland one-stop shop. I have long campaigned for that service. There is nothing more important than ensuring that vital services continue and that no one is left behind. Communities will be at the heart of our recovery from the pandemic and we need to build on them.

Sadly, there are some disappointments. I am disappointed that Highland Council has removed community councils from the planning process. To me, that is a recipe for disaster. Local communities must always be heard, and it sets a dangerous precedent when planning applications are scrutinised only by a planning officer and the chair of the planning committee.

The pandemic has also proved that, far from being simply important, superfast broadband is critical for businesses, community groups and education and for all members of our society, from grandparents to their great-grandchildren. I am hugely saddened that we are less than 12 months away from the Scottish Government’s promised date for superfast broadband to be delivered to every property in Scotland, yet work in the Highlands has not even started. Indeed, it looks more likely that the Scottish Government’s delivery date for the Highlands will be 2027 or 2028, instead of 2021.

Richard Lyle (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Edward Mountain: By all means—if Mr Lyle would like to make an intervention, I will take it.

Richard Lyle: With the greatest respect, I have sat and listened to that complaint every month. Broadband is a reserved matter—it is the United

Kingdom Government's fault; it is not the Scottish Government's fault.

Edward Mountain: I have taken Mr Lyle's intervention and I have listened to the answer; it is the same every time. However, it was the Scottish Government, not the UK Government, that made the promise, and if it cannot hold itself to its promises, what hope do we in the Highlands have to hold it to its promises?

Public transport is also a crucial issue for our rural communities, where buses and trains are lifeline services. As lockdown is eased, the demand on those services will increase, but bus and train operators will have to keep passenger numbers low to protect public health. There is a genuine concern across the Highlands that low passenger numbers on infrequent services will eventually lead to there being no services. We need to hear more from the Scottish Government about how it intends to protect public transport networks in Scotland, and I hope that we will hear more on that shortly.

Our Highland communities need better connectivity, not less connectivity. The Scottish Government needs to deliver on what it has promised. It must also help our remote communities to stay connected. Failure to do so will lead to an exodus of people who are looking for jobs and increasing unemployment across the Highlands. We highlanders and islanders have shown that we have the spirit and determination to survive. All that I implore this Government to do is to deliver on what it has promised.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Gillian Martin, to be followed by Finlay Carson. Mr Carson will be taking part remotely.

16:33

Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): The situation has brought real hardship and loss to so many of our constituents. Yet, among the hardship, sorrow and loss, we have found some sparks of positivity. As we move out of the crisis, we must hold on to that if we are to come out of it and establish a better way of life for our communities.

The crisis has accelerated innovation in the way that we live our lives. We have been forced to accept ideas that have previously been a struggle to put into action, maybe because we have clung on to the way it has always been, as we have all seen, or because change was just too difficult. Health and care professionals are using new ways of delivering treatment and health consultations, and there has been a rapid intervention to give rough sleepers places to stay.

I am a long-time advocate of flexible and remote working, and in one fell swoop we have destroyed the arguments from naysayers who have long complained that it would never work. We are also saying hello to people as we walk past them on the street—I do not think that it is just me who is doing that. We are checking in on one another and that spirit of community is obvious for anyone to see.

However, for all those small but not insignificant glimmers of hope, this period has also highlighted existing inequalities and deep divisions in Scottish society. Covid-19 does not discriminate between us, but that does not mean that we are all in the same situation. We know that the harms caused by the pandemic have not been felt equally. Certain communities have been more badly impacted than others, in terms of both health and economic outcomes. I commend the Scottish Government for recognising that at every stage of its response, and all the back benchers who have been pushing the issue. The remarkable efforts that have been made to move people off the streets and to protect tenants facing eviction have shown what can be done. However, there is a real risk that more people will be swept into homelessness in the months ahead, as we start to transition out of lockdown.

We also know that any economic crisis has a more severe impact on low-income families and people who were already experiencing the effects of inequality. The protective measures of the response to the pandemic have been hardest on those who live alone, single-parent families, those shielding and minority ethnic people. Further, those who do not have access to outdoor space, who have precarious employment contracts or who have no family support are at most risk of mental and physical illnesses. We need to see the bold actions of the past four months continue and become the core of our policy making. The Scottish Government's response to the pandemic must put human rights and equality at the core of our recovery plans.

The Scottish Government has already provided £350 million of communities funding, first to address emergency needs during the Covid crisis and then to build on that work in the long term. Of that total, Aberdeenshire has been awarded around £5.25 million to support its needs. Although my area does not immediately spring to mind when we think of inequality, in my constituency of Aberdeenshire East and the wider north-east region, we have also felt the added weight of the drop in oil prices and a looming Brexit. Those three factors combined have already led to huge job losses—with many more to come, I fear. I refer not only to people who are directly employed by oil and gas companies but to those in the supply chain and the tangential businesses

that employ many others—including those on low or middle incomes, who will be hit worst. For the people whom I represent, a just transition to a low-carbon economy is no longer a plan for the future but an urgent, pressing need. Mass unemployment in the north-east is a real threat.

I highlight the support that my area has already had. The north-east has seen incredible effort to meet the needs of those who have been hit hardest by the pandemic. In Aberdeen City, 90 projects are being funded, to the value of £702,000, through the Scottish Government's wellbeing fund. In Aberdeenshire, a further 45 projects have been given support to the value of £431,000. I know that such funding has made a tangible difference, especially to vulnerable people. Aberdeenshire Council has already received £9.2 million, and by the end of July it will have received an extra £19.6 million to support its efforts in tackling homelessness, setting up community hubs, helping people to transition back into education and enhancing social care provision. I put on record my thanks to the officers and employees from across all the council's departments, who have done an outstanding job in supporting my constituents throughout the pandemic.

Many charities and voluntary organisations that are the backbone of our communities are also being supported by the Scottish Government. Earlier this year, one of the last visits that I made before the lockdown was to AberNecessities to find out more about the incredible work that it does throughout the north-east to provide support to low-income families with essential items that are needed to care for babies and children. It has been awarded £8,000 to work directly with families who are in need of mental health support. The Gordon group of the Riding for the Disabled Association at Keithhall has been given £6,500 to focus on its work with children with disabilities, providing them with the additional support that they need.

I close by making this point. The Covid-19 outbreak has exposed the shortcomings in our welfare system, including key gaps in provision for those who are most vulnerable. The Scottish National Party has consistently called on the UK Government to scrap measures such as the two-child limit, the bedroom tax and the benefit cap, and to replace the debt-inducing advances made under the universal credit system with non-repayable hardship grants. In the past couple of months, we have seen that the UK Government is capable of making changes to welfare provision at pace. Why, then, should we go back to the precariousness of the systems that we had before? We must ensure that adequate support is available for people when they need it.

As I have said in the chamber in recent weeks, we could do far worse than explore a national basic income in the years ahead. Better still, all welfare could be devolved to the Scottish Parliament, which could be given the powers to borrow so that we can respond to situations quickly, not just in times of crisis but as we rebuild our society in the months and years ahead.

16:40

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries)

(Con): I am pleased to recognise the fantastic efforts of many communities across Scotland in rising to the challenge of these difficult and unprecedented times. As well as recognising what they have done up to now, we also—as a matter of urgency—need to look to the future and ensure that we put in place appropriate policies that empower those same communities and give them the tools to emerge from this crisis not as they were pre-Covid but stronger, fitter and more resilient.

Last week was volunteers week. In a normal year, I would be out and about in Galloway and West Dumfries highlighting the many activities that our unsung heroes carry out, from the Food Train to our beach cleaning groups, the Castle Douglas Community Centre Development Trust, the Newton Stewart Initiative and the Stranraer Development Trust, which is responsible for our fantastic oyster festival, to name just a few. Volunteers are at the heart of our communities, and for that I put on record my thanks to each and every one of them.

This is carers week and we have already heard about the amazing job that carers do, whether that be in care homes, in our homes or in the community. Their hard work, patience and commitment has certainly been at the forefront of our hearts and minds over these past few worrying months, and that should not change. This sector needs much more positive recognition every day of every week.

Our communities have always been important and as we emerge from lockdown, they will play an even more important role. We recognise many of the benefits of working from home and in our local communities, which has the potential to enhance our climate and, in many cases, to give a boost to mental health and wellbeing. However, we must also recognise that that is not the case for everyone. The situation is taking its toll on mental health and more needs to be done to combat that now.

Even before Covid-19, there was recognition that we needed clearer policies on the community being at the centre of mental wellbeing. The crisis has put a spotlight on mental health and the

importance of fostering connections within communities. Support in Mind Scotland has been supporting people with poor mental health for nearly 50 years, looking after up to 1,500 people every week. Sadly, the Covid-19 crisis has seen an increase in demand from people with poor mental health.

Along with the national rural mental health forum, Support in Mind Scotland has undertaken the Highlands and Islands connections project to test ideas that can illustrate how improved community connections can make a difference to mental health and wellbeing in different communities. Such projects clearly show the need to think outside the box about how we can support people right across Scotland, no matter where they live.

Many charities rely on charity shops that are now closed and fundraising events that have now been cancelled. Chest, Heart & Stroke Scotland is losing £500,000 a month. With social distancing measures set to continue for some time, funding will be a real issue. As Scotland's largest charity caring for people with chest, heart and stroke conditions, CHSS plays a key role in patient discharge pathways, with its hospital-to-home service helping people who are discharged from hospital to get home and to stay well.

I must admit that the Scottish Government has shown commitment to helping charities and services during the pandemic, including welcome support for digital technology for remote working, but we urgently need a clear long-term strategy and a support package for charities, including health charities, to help to alleviate pressure on the NHS and to support our communities when they need it most.

Much of the support for our communities to become resilient in health, social care and wellbeing would be best delivered if identified and targeted locally. With that in mind, we urgently need greater flexibility around funding criteria to allow local authorities to target support to best suit the often unique and diverse needs across their communities.

Councils need to act quickly in the interests of their communities and without fear of money being recalled by the Government. Even with the recent broadening of the criteria, the current schemes still see many community groups and businesses falling between the cracks. I know of personal trainers with their own gyms with no grant award, as well as beauticians and mobile hairdressers, all seeking grant funding and being awarded none; golf and football clubs at the heart of our communities are on their knees.

We are told that councils can use discretion. However, councils say that they have to abide by

the rules set by the Scottish Government. Will the Scottish Government allow councils to use their discretion and local knowledge in spending any remaining money that has not been claimed? I believe that Dumfries and Galloway Council has in the region of £15 million available.

Our communities, individuals and businesses have gone above and beyond to work where they can and to volunteer and care for others where they can. They now have reasonable asks. Can the Scottish Government please make a commitment today to loosen the restrictions in the funding criteria and to help the businesses, organisations and ultimately the families in our communities that have spent the past three months helping the Government? Surely, that is not too much to ask.

16:45

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I thank the organisations that have ventured to give their views on where Scotland should go from here. In line with the focus of the debate and as we slowly emerge from full lockdown, I am particularly sympathetic to the suggestions from Royal Blind and Scottish War Blinded that we all have a part to play in helping visually impaired people with social distancing. It may sound obvious, but if people cannot see how far others are from them, how can they keep their distance? As a society, we have a duty to accommodate anyone with impairments. In the aftermath of this crisis, we will have to take extra care and be more proactive in doing that.

Self-isolation and anxiety about going out are concerns for some people at any time, but that is especially the case now that previously trusted surroundings are changing. In the wider social care context, Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland refers not to how we can make the pandemic an opportunity but what we need to do if we do not want to lose excellent services that are already in place. That is an important dose of reality.

One of the Scottish Government's key policies is promoting and facilitating independent living in the community. If people are at home and near their support network, we want them to be able to live independently. To facilitate that, it is important to have high-quality care in the community and discharge services throughout Scotland. Health and social care partnerships do much of that work, but the reality is that the need remains for specialised charity services such as Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland, Macmillan Cancer Support, Marie Curie and similar support providers. They make a real difference to people's lives and their value should not be underestimated. People in my constituency benefit from the hospital to home service that Chest Heart & Stroke runs with NHS

Ayrshire and Arran. The charity runs a stroke survivors support group from Largs library.

The Scottish Government recognises the value of charity organisations and community support. The £50 million wellbeing fund to support those who are most vulnerable to the virus and the £20 million third sector resilience fund to help secure continued operation throughout the crisis are crucial. In addition, third sector organisations can dip into £10 million of the Scottish Government's £70 million food fund, which was set up to address food insecurity, especially for older people and families who are unable to rely on free school meals. The provision of assistance in this time of crisis is on-going, but now is the time to look at the mid to long-term prospects of the third sector and how we can help it to continue to adapt and develop its support services in changed circumstances.

I have had several exchanges with ministers and councillors who have given evidence to the Local Government and Communities Committee on the importance of ensuring that, when discretionary powers and funding are devolved to local authorities, they take that responsibility and execute it flexibly. It is important that we do not have misinformation. Ministers must be clear to those who allocate funds about what discretion they have to ensure that the right funding goes to those who need it, and that the expectations of others should be properly managed.

During the crisis, crucial work has been undertaken at the heart of communities. I am grateful to North Ayrshire Council locally and to the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities for that. One element is community planning. From 2017 onwards, locality planning partnerships, which are based on community empowerment, have functioned in North Ayrshire. I am sure that such partnerships have filled similar roles across Scotland. Any local authority that has not channelled its efforts into communities on a locality level might well have missed a trick.

Community planning partners are tasked with making plans that describe local priorities, what empowerments are planned and when that will happen. The aim is to meet the needs and ambitions of local people, so their voices are especially important. With representation from community councils, the local authority, health and social care partnerships and community groups, decisions and recommendations are made regarding proposed developments, funding for community groups, how to help tackle social isolation and other key priorities that are identified for the locality.

There are six partnerships in North Ayrshire, four of which are in my constituency of Cunninghame North—those are Garnock valley,

north coast, three towns and Arran. Island proofing rightly enabled Arran to have its own locality. That local element has proven to be very effective in these times of crisis. Since the beginning of the coronavirus outbreak, locality planning partnerships have played a key role in North Ayrshire, with volunteers and council officers, particularly from the connected communities team, making good use of the structures to put in place local Covid-19 support hubs. The speed at which those hubs were organised in the lockdown was impressive. They have undertaken phenomenal work, for which local residents are very grateful.

The Covid-19 community hubs provide a local point of contact for any community need that arises, and they have responded with advice, signposting, referral and the tasking of local volunteers. Although digital resources such as websites and social media pages are not as costly to maintain and update, only councils can assess whether keeping physical locality hubs open after the pandemic in each locality will be justifiable from a budgetary perspective.

In moving from planning activities to co-ordinating hands-on services directly in communities we will by now have amassed a wealth of experience on processes, which I hope will be harnessed in future.

Last week was volunteers week. Those who enjoy volunteering at any time will wish to continue playing their part. We all appreciate the efforts of Alex Cole-Hamilton in that regard. However, I also recognise that councils should not rely too heavily on volunteers. Community empowerment cannot become an excuse to simply leave local communities to it—support from both councils and Government remains critical.

Covid-19 has brought much insecurity, not only to Scotland but across the world. We know that life will not be the same for a very long time to come. Getting our finances ready is only one aspect of that. The way that we help people in communities thrive is a matter of redesigning how we deliver services effectively. That requires dialogue and consultation with those who are working on the ground, and I trust that the Scottish Government will continue to facilitate that.

16:50

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):

As almost everyone has commented this afternoon, the community response to the pandemic has been instrumental in supporting people through it and will continue to be so as we move through the stages of lockdown being lifted. Across my region, I have seen huge commitment from community groups and volunteers to provide

emergency support; it is right that we recognise their contribution.

For the debate, we have had briefings from health charities that are continuing to deliver essential services that support and complement the work of the NHS, as a few members have mentioned. However, as charities, they face huge challenges, because their income has dropped dramatically. We must ensure that on-going arrangements are in place so that those critical services can continue. The research that was published last week by the SCVO shows that two in five charities are already reporting an increase in demand, and a post-lockdown surge in demand for many services is expected. Thirty per cent predict a drop in income, and half of the charities surveyed anticipate that they will run out of cash within six months.

The introduction of emergency funding arrangements for many organisations was welcome, but the fact is that most charities rely on a mix of income to survive. Without the ability to continue fund-raising activities or other income-generating services, it is only a matter of time before their reserves dry up.

In the first stages of lockdown, the focus was on meeting immediate need. Three months on, short-term financial shocks are being replaced with longer-term concerns over sustainability and how services can be adapted so that they can continue to be delivered. The immediate measures that were taken—including resilience funding—have an end date and we need to consider how longer-term funding needs will be met. With more than a third of charities having less than four months' expenditure in reserve, they are asking what will happen when the emergency funding stops. Many organisations are concerned that restrictions will not be lifted in time for them to remedy the fall in income and that they will not survive this period.

Charities and community groups that support youth work and the creative sector continue to work to provide services that improve quality of life across Scotland, and they often have to find innovative solutions to do so. However, they are feeling the impact, like everyone else. When it comes to moving past the lockdown period, 70 per cent of youth work leaders expect cuts to services and budgets and many are asking how we will support the needs of young people post lockdown.

Half of our independent museums, based in towns and villages across Scotland, face running out of money within six months and 90 per cent of heritage charities are reporting a high to moderate risk to their long-term viability. Although they are not the responsibility of the Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government, we are talking about the wellbeing of our communities,

and culture is an important factor in supporting community cohesion and place making.

I have previously raised questions regarding the process for distributing funds to community organisations in response to the pandemic. Although I fully recognise the rapid response, which has been described today as cutting through the red tape, concerns have been raised with me about transparency in both the application process and the distribution of funds. Resources were awarded before guidance was put in place, and that raised questions. I would not question the integrity of anyone who received support, but the second tranche gives an opportunity to reach out to other communities and ensure equal distribution. I look forward to seeing the map that the cabinet secretary said was being published today, in order to see some positive news.

Aileen Campbell: I assure the member that we will continue to work with all the partners to plug any gaps that there might be. We cannot give false promises, but I hope that that reassures the member that we want to make sure that there are no gaps.

Claire Baker: I have had extensive correspondence with the cabinet secretary on the issue, and I welcome that response.

Organisations face huge challenges in meeting the demand in the longer term. More people are reliant on welfare support and need community resources for support, and the Scottish Government should look to the next phase and provide information on what additional support is needed and when that will be made available. Those are two key questions for the advisory group on social renewal that the cabinet secretary mentioned.

We also need to recognise that although the pandemic has changed lives everywhere, the impacts of the coronavirus are being felt more acutely by certain groups, and people on low incomes are being disproportionately affected. People who already live in poverty are under further financial pressure, and levels of poverty and child poverty are rising fast in some of our poorest communities.

There has been an unprecedented level of food insecurity, and a third of Scots have concerns about their ability to pay for food and other essential items. It is already the case that increasing numbers of self-employed people, new applicants for universal credit and others are experiencing unseen poverty issues and are accessing food banks. Many charities are working hard to provide emergency food and support, but an increasing number of people are now reliant on those services, and demand is expected only to increase as lockdown eases and unemployment is

expected to rise. I have previously asked the cabinet secretary about additional support for all local authorities to deliver the free school meals programme over the summer and, as we approach the school holidays, I hope that she will consider that. She spoke about a cash-first approach, and such support could be part of that plan.

The Poverty Alliance's briefing includes a number of recommendations for the Government to consider in the short, the medium and the long term, and I hope that an appropriate action plan to support our communities out of the current crisis will soon be published.

I would like to say a little about the positive action that has been taken during the current period. In addition to the valuable community services that people have increasingly relied on as the pandemic has progressed, I am sure that we all know of individuals and groups that are responding to the lockdown and working in communities to raise spirits. In my region, local musicians have played in the streets and outside care homes so that residents can experience live music. In addition, every day, a band of superhero runners and walkers have brought joy to children and adults alike by taking to the streets in areas across Fife. Such benefits of community action, however small, continue to be important, and I want to thank everyone who has been part of the positive community response to the pandemic.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Gail Ross will be the final speaker in the open debate.

16:57

Gail Ross (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP): I begin, as so many of my colleagues have done, by thanking all the individuals and community groups that have stepped forward in this time of crisis to help, support and provide for people in need. There are some amazing community-led initiatives all over Caithness, Sutherland and Ross, which involve people just getting on and doing what needs to be done: sourcing funding and volunteering in the face of extreme adversity. I also thank everyone across the constituency for being so patient and understanding and sticking with the lockdown guidance. It is because of them that we find ourselves in the position of having a relatively low number of confirmed cases in the region.

All over the country, we have many challenges to overcome, and we know that some communities will be changed for ever. However, we have an opportunity to ensure that the change is as positive as we can make it. There is no doubt that our communities have risen to that challenge, as they have done on so many other occasions. It is because of the very nature of our communities

that we find ourselves in the position of being able to consider what form positive change might take.

The local community resilience groups that have been formed have looked at things from a different perspective. They have operated in the way that it was initially intended that the community planning partnerships would operate. We cannot afford to lose that momentum. The energy and way of working of those local groups must be harnessed. The approach has involved community planning being done at a grass-roots level by people on the ground who have contacts working in the sectors.

We also have a chance to look at, for example, the city region deal, to which funding has been committed but not spent. Have our priorities changed? How is that money being spent? Is it being spent to the benefit of all our communities? The Covid-19 crisis should prompt us to look at past commitments and ask how the whole region can be served in such a way as to ensure that our remote rural communities are now included.

One of the catalysts for change was the Scottish Government's supporting communities fund, which began the process of drawing together key anchor organisations to get the money to the right places; it has been a huge success in my constituency.

I was delighted to see the second phase of the aspiring communities fund announced this week. Those awards were based on the success and outcomes of the last round, and being recognised again is a huge tribute to the community groups involved.

However, not only the public and third sectors have come to the fore during the past few months. Dounreay—one of the biggest employers in the constituency, with around 1,500 people on site in normal times—has joined with the North Highland Initiative, Diageo and Glenmorangie to provide small community groups with funding for projects to help vulnerable people. It is also working with the NHS, Highland Council and the Caithness and North Sutherland regeneration partnership to develop resilience in the community and to ensure sustainability of services in the future.

This crisis has made a lot of us work in different ways, and it has made us look at what is important in our lives and at how we value and spend our time. We have been forced to embrace technology in ways that seemed almost impossible a couple of months ago. As members can see, I am making a speech to the chamber of the Scottish Parliament from my own home, which is brilliant. Although there are undoubtedly some instances in which virtual working is neither possible nor desirable, I have spoken to quite a few businesses in the constituency that are also looking at more home and virtual working as the norm, going forward. The crisis has given those businesses the

opportunity to look at the use of technology—for example, without the need for being based in a city, why can people not relocate to the Highlands?

We need to ensure that connectivity—physical and digital—is fit for our virtual working, because people can make use of technology only if it is there. Investment in connectivity in rural areas will ensure that we can connect to the rest of the country and the rest of the world. I point out that the current R100 programme in the north is affected by an on-going legal case. Mr Mountain, as convener of the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee, should be aware of that.

It is well known that our communities in Caithness, Sutherland and Ross, and across the wider Highland region, are very reliant on tourism. The businesses involved in that sector are devastated by a huge loss of income in what is already a short season. They are looking for detailed guidance on how and when they can safely start operations again—and the emphasis here has to be on “safely”. Some residents are very worried about what they see as an influx of people into the area, possibly bringing the virus with them and spreading it around some very fragile communities with high numbers of elderly people. I do not blame them at all for being nervous; there has been an increase in the number of people travelling to the area over the past couple of weeks, with little thought for the people who live here, and those communities are left feeling like they have no voice. That is not essential travel, and people all across the Highlands who have followed the lockdown guidance are right to expect others to do the same.

There is a fine balance between keeping our communities safe and becoming unwelcoming in the longer term. I have heard worrying reports of hoteliers and hospitality workers being verbally abused and told that they will be blame if the virus is brought up here; they are feeling quite threatened. The feedback that I am getting from tourism representatives and workers is that it all hinges on messaging—from the Scottish Government to business, from business to the communities, and from the communities to the people who we want to return here when the time is right.

We have to make sure that tourists and visitors are aware that, although we are currently closed to people travelling here for leisure purposes, that will not last for ever. Tourists and visitors will be welcome when they come back, and it is essential for the Highland economy that they do. Let us make sure that our famous Highland welcome is not lost in among the current concern and worry. Let us move forward in a positive manner and

make sure that our community spirit continues in the way that we have seen over the past few months.

17:04

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): I refer members to my entry in the register of members’ interests, in relation to my former employment. Like others, I agree that Covid-19 has in fact highlighted the strengths of our communities. In the face of the pandemic, communities have come together to support each other. Whether it is local groups delivering food parcels to vulnerable people, people providing support online, or key workers keeping vital services going, our communities today are in some ways more connected than ever. This is our chance to reflect on how we can support them and strengthen those connections in the coming months.

Since March, we have seen communities adapt quickly and in solidarity. We have seen councils transition to deliver their services in ways that no one would have imagined four months ago. Staff have been redeployed and businesses supported.

However, the coronavirus has also highlighted the structural weaknesses in our society and the lack of a safety net for far too many. We knew that the gig economy was bad for individual people, but it is now clear that it has a disproportionate, negative impact on women and young people. We knew that working conditions across the social care sector varied, but we now know how poorly paid and insecure many social care contracts are. We knew that councils were struggling to fund services, but we can now see just how vital those services are to protecting our communities. As Pauline McNeill highlighted, we are beginning to see the negative economic impact of the pandemic as increasing numbers of jobs are lost and people lose their incomes.

The debate has to focus on the next steps for our communities. Like others, I thank all those in the third sector and charities for the work that they have done to date to support some of the most vulnerable people in our communities, and I acknowledge the amazing contribution of volunteers. The inspiring work that we have seen in our communities has been a theme in colleagues’ speeches, and we must put that on the record.

However, Claire Baker’s points about the financial vulnerability of our charities are also really important. The fact that a third of our charities have reserves of less than four months is an alarm call, and we need a long-term plan to support them. I welcome the cabinet secretary’s comment that she is committed to there being no geographical gaps in support, but having looked at

some of the grants that have gone thus far, I believe that we need to examine that.

We also need to look at outreach services from our local authorities. That could involve, for example, social work and how we can connect people who have been shielding for weeks now, but still have the challenge of getting through the next few weeks. The points that Anas Sarwar made about communications were vital, and they reinforce the points that were made about the need for adequate funding to ensure that services reach the people that need them.

Homelessness, which used to be in the “too difficult” category, has almost been eradicated. However, as Pauline McNeill and Andy Wightman argued, we need more action. Many people have been on the verge of homelessness and they will be at risk as jobs are lost. Those who were on the verge of eviction before the lockdown will, as things stand, lose their protection against eviction at the end of September, so we need action now. Pauline McNeill’s member’s bill will be critical to helping to prevent homelessness and ensure fair rents.

I spoke to councillors in Edinburgh this week and I am told that we have 1,200 households where people are not homeless but are living in unsuitable accommodation. That is not 1,200 people; it is 1,200 households. Much more needs to be done to provide suitable and affordable long-term housing.

Like Graham Simpson and Pauline McNeill, I welcome the publication today of the report by the Chartered Institute of Housing, the SFHA and Shelter, which asks us to look at the range of affordable housing needs in communities across Scotland. I know from talking to Homes for Scotland that its members and the construction industry are ready to start building again when it is safe to do so. There is an appetite to get going, but we need the long-term commitment, which needs to be cross party.

As colleagues across the chamber have said, we are facing unprecedented times, but the poorest and the most vulnerable in our communities have been worst hit. The briefing that we received last week from the Trussell Trust highlights a 62 per cent increase in food parcels being given to children. I know from talking to council colleagues that they are really worried about their ability to continue providing support, because they are facing huge financial pressures.

Like colleagues, I could not speak in Parliament today without acknowledging the black lives matter movement. We have seen protests across the world, including here in Scotland, but we have also seen how Covid-19 has disproportionately impacted on black, Asian and minority ethnic

communities, and we know that key services are staffed by members of those communities.

I ask the cabinet secretary to address in her summing up the concerns of the Unison members in Edinburgh who contacted me this week. They are worried about the lack of guidance for councils to support those black and ethnic minority staff who are doing vital work. I am keen to know whether the cabinet secretary is considering producing a race equality impact assessment and action plan so that we come out of the pandemic with health and safety at work being central to employers’ concerns, building in the evidence that we now have of those communities’ experience of the pandemic.

Now is the time not just to condemn outright occurrences of racism, but to address the structural inequalities that put up barriers to minority communities. We must listen. We might have to have difficult conversations, but we must learn and build back better.

Finally, we need to address the inequalities that scar too many of our communities, seen in the impact of the pandemic on older people, on women, on people from low-income communities and people who have disabilities. We need not just a better safety net, but to build back a better equality, right into society, with rights that people can hold and can see being implemented.

In closing, I echo the points that Pauline McNeill and Anas Sarwar made. In the weeks to come, we must think about the impact of the pandemic on children and young people, and make sure that we protect their futures. We must make sure that we look at education and employment and the support that young people can get in their communities, so that the pandemic does not hold them back. It is not just about a new normal; it is about building a better and more equal society. We all need to play our part in that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Jeremy Balfour will close for the Conservative Party; he is contributing remotely.

17:11

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): This has been a helpful debate. There have been quite a few common themes from all speakers.

I believe that we need a medium and long-term solutions to many of the issues that have been raised. We cannot resolve some of the long-term issues immediately, but we need to start addressing them constructively and, I hope, across parties.

I will pick up three main themes that have come across to me this afternoon. The first is about the third sector. We have heard many examples of

those from the third sector across Scotland who are doing a remarkable job. Within my region of Lothian, I know of many groups that have filled a gap and helped people who have been most in need at this very difficult time. However, there is an issue about how we fund the third sector in future and what place the third sector has within our society. As someone who is a volunteer and has worked in the third sector, I understand—and I am sure that the Government understands—the financial pressures that many groups are under. We need to look at how we fund third sector groups, particularly the smaller charities that are working in local communities. Too often, the money goes to the usual suspects and, as much as they need it, and as much as we need to support those groups, that money does not often trickle down to the grass roots. This is an opportunity for us all to pause and look at how we spend that money, how people apply for it, whether they have too many forms to fill out, and how difficult it is, particularly for small charities that are run by volunteers, to access the money that they need to make a difference in their society.

The second clear theme that has come out of the debate is about how we help the most vulnerable, particularly those who have been homeless or might become homeless within the next few months. Graham Simpson was absolutely right to say that we need to get houses built, and we need to get the construction industry working here in Scotland as soon as possible. We will not solve the crisis unless we have the appropriate housing. A number of houses are very close to completion and they will free up other housing and allow the market to get moving. I hope that the Scottish Government will address that in the near future.

We have also heard about the remarkable work that has been done on homelessness here in Edinburgh, in Glasgow, and in other parts of Scotland. I, too, welcome the cabinet secretary restarting the homelessness working group. Perhaps my question about that could be dealt with in the cabinet secretary's summing up. What is the timescale for that working group?

We heard from a number of speakers that the use of hotels in this city might come to an end in the next few weeks—or certainly within the next couple of months. The danger is that individuals who have been helped will end up back on the streets. Will the cabinet secretary say how quickly the working group will report and how quickly the Scottish Government, local authorities and the third sector can work together to find a proper solution to the issue?

I understand, to some degree, why the Government is being cautious about people who are shielding, but we have to understand the

pressure that we are putting on those individuals and their families, particularly where there is a disabled member of the family. How will we get more people back into employment, if they are being shielded? How will people go to college and university in September if they are still subject to shielding restrictions? A constituent of mine in Edinburgh who is shielding has two school-age children. Will they be allowed to return to school? If not, how will their education be affected? How well will they be educated, whether their education is provided remotely or in some other way? We have to look at the impact that shielding is having on many individuals and families and consider whether we are moving quickly enough on such issues.

I think that all members recognise the challenges that we will face over the next months and years. I am confident that our communities, with the right support, can meet and address those challenges. I hope that the third sector will continue to play a greater role in that regard.

17:17

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Security and Older People (Shirley-Anne Somerville): I thank members for their speeches, and I thank all the parties for their positive and constructive suggestions.

As we have heard, the pandemic is a universal experience, but the harms that it has caused have certainly not been experienced equally. None of the direct and indirect health impacts or economic and social impacts has been felt equally across society, and some groups have been particularly affected.

Aileen Campbell and I want to address the social impacts in particular, while focusing on the interrelated nature of harms. We acted quickly to respond to the pandemic. As Aileen Campbell pointed out, we did so to ensure that immediate needs were addressed. As many members have said, the crisis has highlighted existing poverty and inequalities, some of which have persisted stubbornly for decades. We simply cannot allow those inequalities to be made worse over the long term by the impact of the pandemic.

That is why we are taking forward social renewal work to lock in the progress that we have made and the good work that has been done, and to grasp opportunities as we move to recovery and renewal. We are aware that that will not be easy and that there are many challenges ahead.

At a recent round table, stakeholders shared with Aileen Campbell and me the idea that we should see the recovery as a healing process: we need to heal the trust in our social contract. Stakeholders said that there are already some

great examples in that regard, telling us that organisations and people have

“dropped their egos, their logos and their silos”

to get jobs done.

When the crisis hit, we proved that we can change rapidly and improve outcomes. I do not want the change to be temporary—I want it to be permanent and sustainable. Many members have talked about how that can be done. Graham Simpson pointed to the importance of planning and community facilities, and talked about the importance of the outdoors and green spaces, which have been much valued by people over the past couple of months and are much missed by people who are not able chance to use them.

Kevin Stewart pointed out in an intervention that we should remember the importance of building standards, too.

I am disappointed by Graham Simpson’s unfair characterisation of what has happened to the child poverty report. The Government has been busy supporting the very communities that we have been talking about, and has been unable to make sure that the report was completed in the timescale that we wanted. We will report as soon as is practicable.

Pauline McNeill raised a number of very important points. She was the first of many members to talk about and pay tribute to community groups in her area—some well established, and some brand new. It would be remiss of me not to pay tribute to the West Fife support for vulnerable people SHIELD—Sarah’s help in economic living difficulties—group in my local area, which is one of many that have sprung up in communities.

Pauline McNeill also rightly pointed out that we need to be aware of how we treat older people in our society. We need to learn lessons about that all the time, as has been brought into sharp focus during the pandemic.

Pauline McNeill also pointed to the impact on young people of job losses, and the importance of looking at the young shielding group. I will take on her challenge to be bold and innovative; as Aileen Campbell said, we will look at the ideas that she has suggested.

Andy Wightman talked about the importance of ensuring that we protect tenants. He and other members will be glad to hear that I will not rehash the details of past bills, but I assure him that we will consider any bold and workable solutions that come forward, because the Government is determined to support tenants—as we have done already, during the pandemic.

Alex Cole-Hamilton and others talked about acts of kindness from individuals, community groups and local businesses. I will add to them many faith groups—for example, Dunfermline central mosque, in my constituency, which has been a shining light in a very dark period in our country. Those acts of kindness have been very welcome, and are much appreciated by many people.

Alex Cole-Hamilton also spoke, as did others, about the resilience of many of our communities, and about the importance of localism, which Ruth Maguire, too, pointed to. The importance of localism and empowering of our communities have been much talked about, but we must ensure that they happen in practice much better than we have done in the past.

Ruth Maguire also asked about membership of the advisory board. I stress that we have not, as yet, sent out all the invitations for it. However, I confirm that Tressa Burke from Glasgow Disability Alliance has accepted an invitation to take part, and that more invitations are due to go out over the next few days. We will also look very carefully at the circles that will flow from the advisory board, to ensure that we have representation from as broad a spectrum of Scottish society as possible.

Graham Simpson: Will there be a way in which the advisory board can report to Parliament, rather than straight to the Government?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: We are certainly keen to ensure that the board is as open as possible in its workings. Aileen Campbell and I will give serious consideration to how we can ensure that we continuously update Parliament at key stages in its work. I am sure that a number of committees will also want to find out more about the board

Anas Sarwar dealt with many important issues, and I will try to cover as many as I can. He spoke about the importance of income maximisation. The Government has given money to Citizens Advice Scotland, among others, to encourage people to find out what they are eligible for. That is particularly important because many people are new to the benefits and welfare system, and need that additional assistance.

Anas Sarwar also spoke, as did Jeremy Balfour, about the shielding group. The First Minister has reassured the shielding group that we will look to give more individualised advice as we move through the process.

Anas Sarwar also rightly pointed out the impact of the coronavirus on black and minority ethnic communities. He spoke about community networks and the established contacts that many organisations have, and mentioned BEMIS in particular. BEMIS has been successful in applying for money from the Scottish Government. Of

applicants in round 1 of the wellbeing fund, 27 said that their target group is black and minority ethnic communities. Round 2 of the fund is under active consideration.

I also stress that the expert reference group that was announced by the First Minister will meet tomorrow. It will be important, as we move forward, and will consider the implications of Covid-19 for the black and minority ethnic communities.

To deal with Sarah Boyack's point, I note that an item on the expert reference group's agenda for tomorrow concerns health and safety, risk assessments and how to support the workforce. I hope that that gives some reassurance that the issue is being considered.

Anas Sarwar rightly pointed out that we also need to challenge ourselves on the structural inequalities that exist, as well as what has been happening in the global pandemic that we are currently experiencing.

Gillian Martin spoke about flexible working and home working, as did Gail Ross. It is important that we learn lessons from what is happening in that regard; the experience of Gail Ross gives us a prime example of how home working can be used in practice.

Gillian Martin also spoke about the importance of equalities and human rights, and asked whether they will be embedded in the work that we are doing. I reassure her that Angela O'Hagan, too, has accepted an invitation to join the advisory group. Obviously, she has expertise in the area, as will many other members of the group.

Claire Baker spoke about pressure on the third sector, as did many others. The Scottish Government has provided £350 million of funding to support communities, which has included support for the third sector. We have opened up a dialogue with the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations and others about the future focus of support, and we are actively considering what support there will be for children and young people during the summer holidays.

I hope that I have covered most of the points that members raised.

Today, we are launching a bold policy and practice platform for social renewal that takes account of people and their lived experience. We intend to build on the collaboration that has been taking place. We do not want to reinvent the wheel or have meetings for the sake of having meetings. A crucial aspect of our approach will be the importance that we place on lived experience. An example is the involvement of social security panels in design and delivery of devolved social security policy. The panels have ensured that

people with lived experience have exerted real influence on the process. We want to build on that and see how we can use the experience panels—and other things—to learn from that lived experience as we continue our work.

We have set out a clear and ambitious vision of what we are looking for during the process. It is about having a more equal, prosperous and socially just Scotland. Our board will be guided to deliver that. Our work will have to be evidence based and it will be guided by local responses.

We must also be mindful of the financial realities of our times, and of the fact that our outcomes must be sustainable. As part of that work, we intend to get a better understanding of what has worked, of where the gaps are and of what we might have done differently, if we had a second chance. That will take account of the learning and will be used to inform our future approach.

Today, we have set out a vision to renew Scotland and to take a first step towards healing the harms that have been caused by Covid-19 in our communities. We speak often of renewal and building back better: our stakeholders have challenged us to build forwards better. That is something that we can all support.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

17:28

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The next item of business is consideration of a Parliamentary Bureau motion. I ask Graeme Dey to move motion S5M-21993, on designation of a lead committee.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Economy, Energy and Fair Work Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the legislative consent memorandum in relation to the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Bill (UK Legislation).—[*Graeme Dey*]

The Presiding Officer: The question on the motion will be put at decision time.

Decision Time

17:28

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): There is one question to be put as a result of today's business. The question is, that motion S5M-21993, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on designation of a lead committee, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to

That the Parliament agrees that the Economy, Energy and Fair Work Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the legislative consent memorandum in relation to the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Bill (UK Legislation).—[*Graeme Dey*]

Meeting closed at 17:28.

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