



OFFICIAL REPORT
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COVID-19 Committee

Wednesday 17 June 2020

Session 5



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COVID-19 COMMITTEE
10th Meeting 2020, Session 5

CONVENER

*Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)

*Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)

*Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green)

Shona Robison (Dundee City East) (SNP)

*Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)

*Adam Tomkins (Glasgow) (Con)

*Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

David Lonsdale (Scottish Retail Consortium)

Donna Manson (Highland Council)

Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP) (Committee Substitute)

Helen Martin (Scottish Trades Union Congress)

Nick Sharpe (Scottish Renewables)

Clare Slipper (NFU Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Jane Williams

LOCATION

Virtual Meeting

Scottish Parliament

COVID-19 Committee

Wednesday 17 June 2020

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:00]

Easing Lockdown Restrictions

The Convener (Murdo Fraser): Good morning and welcome to the 10th meeting in 2020 of the COVID-19 Committee. I welcome members and our witness guests. We have received apologies from Shona Robison, for whom Gillian Martin is attending as a substitute member. Before we move to evidence, I invite Gillian to declare any relevant interests.

Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): I have no interests to declare.

The Convener: We have one item on our agenda today, which is taking of evidence on options for easing the coronavirus lockdown restrictions. We have two panels of witnesses. For the first evidence session we are joined by Donna Manson, who is the chief executive of Highland Council; Clare Slipper, who is the political affairs manager of NFU Scotland; and Nick Sharpe, who is the director of communications and strategy at Scottish Renewables.

We will go straight to questions. I remind members that because of time constraints they should direct their questions to a particular witness. I ask members and witnesses to keep questions and answers as concise and to the point as possible.

I will start with a question for Donna Manson. Highland Council's written submission talks about the need for the council to be consulted on the measures that are being implemented as part of the Scottish Government's "Coronavirus (COVID-19): framework for decision making", and about the need for local authorities to be appropriately resourced. We have heard a lot over the past few days about how schools will return in August with a blended-learning model, and what that means for parents, pupils and teachers. Has enough support and guidance been provided by the Scottish Government for delivery of blended learning? I ask particularly because we hear Scottish ministers say that it is up to local authorities to ensure that it is properly delivered.

Donna Manson (Highland Council): Throughout the process, there have been many examples of councils having enough time, even if that is just a weekend or a few days, to respond to matters. A really good example was when we set

up the humanitarian assessment centres. Councils were given a few days' notice that a decision was coming, so we were able to work closely together. Lots of structures have been set up to do that. However, some decisions have been made overnight, which has put councils in a very challenging position.

On the announcement that has been made in recent days, Highland Council is very lucky. We have for a number of years had a system that uses Chromebooks for our young people. All our pupils from primary 5 to secondary 6 have a Chromebook, so learning using information technology at home is an established process. Therefore, we are in a position in which we could do extensive work, to which we have had very positive responses. However, when positions change quickly, such as in relation to the expectation that learning at home will form 50 per cent of learning, that puts the whole education profession into a flurry.

I know that many people were involved in working on the guidance. What we received two weeks ago was very clear in saying that there will be a blend of learning at school and learning at home, and our communities have been accepting of that, as we have been working closely together. However, the recent announcement has called into question the quality of what we have done, and there was perhaps no need for that.

We recognise that things sometimes need to change—we are very much aware of the economic pressure—but our having a couple of days to work through the key messages, as has happened on many matters, makes a big difference.

Sometimes announcements are made in the media, and parents and communities make up their minds before we get there. The very good level of acceptance of blended learning that we had in the Highlands is now being questioned.

A number of parents have contacted us in the past few days to say that they have really enjoyed the process. The problem is not about working together—we are very good at that—but about timing and having space to work out the key messages so that we get it right with our communities.

On blended learning, we have 203 schools: some will be able to offer a return rate of 90 per cent, but we have others where it will take more time. Blended learning has been successful in councils that had an earlier starting point; councils are not all starting from the same place.

The Convener: When do you expect to be able to give parents the information that they are looking for about what exactly is on offer for their children in a particular school?

Donna Manson: Our head teachers had a deadline of Friday by which to work up local plans. As part of working up those plans, they have been meeting parents for a couple of weeks. When we received the guidance, we told head teachers to work with their communities. Highland Council has significant transport responsibilities, for example—some of our children travel 50 miles a day to get to school and need to travel on long tracks.

Our communities and schools have been working closely together on plans that were to be finalised by Friday. We have had to side-track that to consider what other buildings we can use in order to ensure that every school hits the target of hosting 50 per cent of pupils. That is fine: we will respond to that and deliver it. The challenge, however, is in how that might impact on other council services. Our estates team has to do more than have our schools open; we must also open other buildings for vulnerable families and communities.

We will get there. Families will respond. The challenge for me, as chief executive, comes from the additional costs and how they will impact other council services.

The Convener: There was a lot in what you said. I am sure that other members will want to pursue those issues.

I turn to Nick Sharpe from Scottish Renewables with a different question. In your submission, you talk about the opportunities for future-proofing the economy by putting a green economic recovery at its centre.

What do you see as being the immediate priorities in restarting the renewables sector, and how do those fit with the Scottish Government's route map?

Nick Sharpe (Scottish Renewables): In our meetings with the Scottish Government, we have set out a number of requirements for a green economic recovery. We think that it is important to follow that route and to not go back to business as usual. The coronavirus epidemic gives us an opportunity to come back better and to do things in a different, more sustainable and more resilient way that focuses on wellbeing and will help Scotland to progress towards its 2045 net zero emissions target.

We have looked at a number of areas, including shovel-ready renewables projects and how they might be facilitated to be developed. We are looking at projects that might face barriers and at how the Government could work on removing those barriers through business rates and the planning system, for example.

We have also examined the opportunity to boost exporting of renewable energy skills. Many of you

will know that Scotland started the journey towards decarbonisation 20 years ago. We have done a lot of the heavy lifting for the rest of the world and have built up a great skills base in renewable energy. There is an opportunity to export that to countries that have said that they want a green economic recovery.

We met the Minister for Energy, Connectivity and the Islands and the Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Fair Work and Culture to put ideas forward, the third of which is that there is a real opportunity in the energy transition, as we move away from high-carbon fuels and heating and gas-powered electricity generation, towards use of renewables. There is an opportunity in that skills transfer to bring people with us in a just and inclusive way. We have called on the Scottish Government to use its skills powers to set up a renewables transition training fund to develop those skills.

The Convener: Thank you. I am sure that members will want to pursue some of those issues further.

I turn next to Clare Slipper of the NFUS. Agriculture is one of the industries whose core business has continued relatively unaffected by lockdown, but other aspects of farm businesses have been affected. The NFUS submission mentions the impact of the lockdown restrictions on agri-tourism—in particular on self-catering accommodation businesses on farms. What guidance do you want from the Scottish Government that might provide some certainty to enable farm businesses that have an interest in agri-tourism to reopen?

We cannot hear Clare Slipper. Can we have her microphone on?

Clare Slipper (NFU Scotland): Thank you, convener, and thank you very much for having me.

As you said, a large part of the agriculture sector has been able to continue relatively unscathed, as part of the critical national infrastructure. We received clarity on that early in the lockdown, which we very much appreciated. However, businesses that have diversified into alternative activities, whether agri-tourism or food tourism, have had to make the difficult but necessary decision to cease operations over the past couple of months.

We very much welcomed the statement last week in which it was indicated that businesses can prepare to reopen from 15 July. Uncertainty about the date on which businesses can restart has been difficult for the sector. The majority of agri-tourism ventures are, by their nature, located in remote parts of the country where there are dispersed populations, so we have always said that there is a case for those businesses restarting

their operations sooner than the indicative stage 3 timing that was set out in “Coronavirus (COVID-19): framework for decision making”.

Notwithstanding that, we very much welcome the clarity on a date. We are working with the Scottish Government, through our members who are involved in agri-tourism ventures, to develop guidance that will cover things such as cleaning, sanitation and gaps between stays, which we think will be very instructive and will ensure that activities can get back up and running as soon as possible. The Scottish Government’s decision has been welcomed by our members because it provides certainty and a pathway ahead.

The Convener: I have one brief follow-up question, then I will bring in Annabelle Ewing.

As you said, we were given the indicative date of 15 July. Are your members clear on what they will need to do in providing self-catering accommodation? I am thinking about the standard of cleaning that will be required between stays.

Clare Slipper: We anticipate that further guidance to that effect will be published in the next few days. The discussion is very live and we are working with Government officials. That work is being steered mainly through tourism trade organisations. We believe that there will be more detailed guidance available to operators.

In the event that guidance does not appear in enough time, we will certainly make the case for ensuring that we have clear and detailed guidelines to provide confidence and certainty not just for the operators of agri-tourism ventures, but for people who want to book time in self-catering accommodation.

Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): Good morning, colleagues and panel members.

I have two questions. One is for Donna Manson and the other is for Clare Slipper. Nick Sharpe can stand down on this one, unless he wants to contribute.

I will start with Donna Manson. Highland Council’s submission to the committee aired the interesting question whether, in easing the lockdown, there should be a national Scotland-wide approach or a differentiated approach. It is interesting that the Highland Council appears to favour a national approach, because some people might find that to be counterintuitive. It would be interesting to hear more about the thinking behind that conclusion.

09:15

Donna Manson: The Highland Council has been holding member briefings every week, at which all our local members share information with

us. They have been vital for hearing views from across the different localities in the Highlands.

Throughout this period, very different issues have been raised. You can imagine that there have been different anxieties in Caithness and Sutherland from those on Skye or in Badenoch and Strathspey, for example. However, positivity about the simple daily messaging is a common theme that has, in every briefing, been expressed by local members who are representing their constituents. Everyone has different views on tourism and people visiting second homes—there was huge anxiety about that—and wants to understand the contagion level of the virus and the levels of safety, so those simple national messages have kept the Highlands together.

There was a strong feeling that if we were to divert from national messaging, we would experience some of the more unpleasant aspects of the situation—for example, people not welcoming tourism and tourists. Many people in the Highlands are from European countries and have been in our communities for a long time. We have experienced some unpleasant incidents; individuals have had comments directed at them about going home, for example. Because we have focused on community cohesion and inclusion, we feel that an inclusive message is really important for our long-term future. Posters have been put up saying “Stay away” and giving other unpleasant messages.

That is why we came to our conclusion about the importance of national messaging. It has also kept everyone in our community feeling safe and together. The possibility of causing disparateness within our communities was a real concern. Our view evolved from such concerns about the need to keep our communities together.

For the longer term, tourism is a vital part of our infrastructure and is vital for employment in remote and rural areas. We need to welcome back many people whom we have lost over the past year, or the reality will be that many small enterprises in the Highlands will not be able to function because they will not have the staff—for example, adult social care and small hotels. We want to be as inclusive as possible and do not want to be seen to be different.

Annabelle Ewing: Thank you for explaining the Highlands’ interesting approach, which is based on the overall interest in cohesion. That was well explained.

I appreciate that colleagues have lots of questions to ask, so I will ask only one more question of Clare Slipper. I noted that Brexit was raised in the last paragraph of NFU Scotland’s submission. Concern was expressed about whether there is capacity within the United

Kingdom Government to deliver an orderly departure by 31 December 2020 and an end to the transition period—full stop. If the concern is that we are looking at no deal, or a very poor deal, by the end of December, would NFUS members prefer an extension to the transition period?

Clare Slipper: On Brexit, NFUS has always taken the view that we need to secure the best possible deal for Scottish agriculture. Our sector is challenged not just by our geography but in relation to profitability. We feel very exposed to future policies on trade and immigration and to future support policies.

For the past four years—since 2016—we have set out six key challenges for any negotiation on our future relationship with Europe. Those are: avoiding a no-deal outcome; ensuring as smooth a trade in agri-food goods as possible; gaining back greater regulatory control; having decent immigration policies that ensure that we can employ people in the sector; having a favourable international trade policy that aligns with domestic production standards; and having the ability to implement a new domestic agricultural policy framework that supports farmers as food producers and custodians of the environment.

We read with great interest the document that was published by the Scottish Government two weeks ago, and we are working really closely with the negotiators in both the United Kingdom and Europe, as well as with the Government here, in Scotland. At the moment, we feel that it is best to measure the process of the negotiations against the six key tests that I have set out. The timeline is undoubtedly extremely challenging, but it certainly looks as though it is very much the preference of the UK Government not to request an extension just now.

We would focus all our efforts on campaigning for the best possible negotiation for our sector, and we will continue to make our arguments as we progress. It is very much a moving feast.

Annabelle Ewing: Yes, indeed—it is certainly fair to say that it is a moveable feast.

You referred to an international agreement based on domestic production standards. How concerned is NFUS about developments regarding legislation at Westminster that would lower food standards in international trade deals?

The Convener: That is a little bit tangential to the questions about easing lockdown restrictions. If you could make your response brief, Clare, that would be helpful.

Clare Slipper: That is a hugely important issue for us, and I would link it back to our ability to recover economically from the Covid-19 situation. Our position has always been that we are very

proud of our world-leading standards of production. That goes without saying. Covid-19 has created some challenges for agricultural commodities, but we have shown resilience in being able to overcome those.

Far greater than the risk of Covid-19 is the potential capacity of future trading arrangements to undercut our domestic standards of production if we strike deals whereby produce that has been produced more cheaply and to an alternative standard is allowed into the country. That remains a greater threat, perhaps, than the vast economic recovery effort that we are now contemplating in the light of Covid-19.

Adam Tomkins (Glasgow) (Con): I want to bring us back to the topic that we are here to discuss today, which is the easing of lockdown restrictions. I have two questions about one of the critical elements of that: the 2m rule. My first question is for Donna Manson, and my second question is for both Clare Slipper and Nick Sharpe.

Donna, the convener asked you about the extent to which there has been adequate consultation between the Scottish Government and local authorities, including Highland Council, regarding lockdown and the easing of lockdown. I want to ask you not about consultation but about the related subject of transparency. You, as the chief executive of a major local authority, are right on the front line in delivering services and making rules and regulations that will materially affect all sorts of aspects of people's lives—ranging from schools to trading, business and so on—as we emerge from lockdown.

One of the critical elements that will determine how much and how quickly we can return to what might resemble normal life is the 2m rule. We know that schools and campuses will find it much easier to open if we have a 1m rule or even a 1.5m rule, as will businesses, particularly in the hospitality sector. How transparent can we be with regard to our understanding of how we go about setting the rule and of whether 2m is the right distance or whether we need to change it?

Donna Manson: One of the main interfaces between councils and decision making is the Scottish Government resilience room set-up and the many directorates across the Government.

I will take as an example adult social care, which is an area where we have all faced many challenges. One of the excellent things to have happened in that area is the development of relationships—the relationships between councils and senior civil servants and ministers have, in many ways, changed enormously. When issues have become very complex, there have been many discussions. Those have taken place daily, in the evenings and at the weekends. Out of a

national emergency, our relationships have changed into something much more fluid and agile. In many ways, there has been much more sharing of the complexities that we face.

I am sent complex information daily, and following that up with many directorate meetings involving many senior staff has enabled local and national Government to see the challenges that we face. I have worked in local government for more than 30 years, across a range of councils. The process of engagement has changed dramatically and is one of the positives of the past three months. We must not lose the relationships that have developed during the national emergency.

In a number of areas, we have shared many problems in order to get solutions. On the 2m rule, we all understand the complexity, and we are looking at the situation in education. Everyone locally and nationally is looking at what is happening in school systems across the world. Information comes daily, and the scientific evidence and data are developing. Local government is developing the data that it gets. It has been a great opportunity for us to develop localised data about our care homes, our elderly population and our vulnerable population.

Because the process has changed so much, there is an opportunity for greater transparency. The learning on how we collect data locally and nationally must be much more recognised in policy, as that will lead to improved transparency.

There are a range of views on the 2m rule locally and nationally. At one point, the Scottish Government's guidance stated that no conclusion had been reached about it. That was an honest statement, and it is representative of the work that is being developed.

We need to keep developing our approach, including through the use of local and national data and by having more complex and agile conversations. We are working differently together. We are also not having to wait a month to get a meeting between senior staff at local or national level; we can pick up the phone or have virtual meetings like this one. We have a real opportunity to get to a much better space.

Reaching a decision on the 2m rule will be complex, because we know that there are many different views on it. As the Government said in the guidance that went out to all schools two weeks ago, there is no conclusive evidence at this time. That is also the position internationally. Locally, we have to respond with agility to the situation. Even in recent days, there has been new information about vaccines, medication and so on. Locally and nationally, we need to recognise that we are in an unknown situation—a learning

situation. If we can go forward with that ethos, we have a real opportunity to be much more transparent.

09:30

Adam Tomkins: Thank you, Donna. That was a very full and helpful answer.

Turning to Clare Slipper and Nick Sharpe, I will put the same question to both of you, if I may. As we have just heard Donna Manson say, there are many views about the 2m rule, and there is no conclusive evidence about the rule. I think that we all agree—at least, I hope that we all agree—that we need to find a balanced and proportionate approach to the management of the risk of Covid, on the one hand, and the risk of lockdown, on the other—the health harms that are posed by lockdown as well as the economic harms. We need to find a proportionate way through this, and we can do that only if we understand exactly where the risks lie.

My question—to Clare, first, then to Nick—is this: what are the risks in your field of having a 2m rule rather than a 1m rule? What benefits, if any, would reducing the distance from 2m to 1m have in your field? I want to understand what is at stake, in your fields, in the debate about 2m versus 1m.

Clare Slipper: That is a really interesting question, because agriculture, by its very nature, is an industry in which people work outside, often in a family unit that would be deemed a cohort. The 2m social distancing rule has not been such a focus for us, with the exception of those businesses that employ staff. In all honesty, we have not received any representations from our members about whether reducing the 2m rule to a 1m rule would make any tangible difference to their business operations.

There have been particular challenges for businesses that employ a large number of seasonal workers, and we have overcome those challenges by working with the Government to develop guidance. In the horticulture sector and in the soft fruit and vegetable sector, there can be a large number of staff working in a polytunnel or an enclosed space—for example, in a pack house—at any one time. Those issues were identified very early on, and, although there were challenges at the start, we have developed acceptable social distancing protocols for those businesses. Such protocols involve all manner of things, from transport to the farm to the work that people do while they are on the farm and the issue of how people can stay safe and sanitised while undertaking their work. There are also accommodation protocols for workers who are accommodated on site.

We would need to look at any conclusive evidence, as was mentioned earlier, to see whether there would be a tangible or material difference to operations. In truth, though, as we are an industry that works largely outside, the 2m rule has not been as challenging for our sector as it might have been for other sectors.

Nick Sharpe: My answer reflects Clare Slipper's response a bit, as we have not received any direct representations from members on that specific issue and, in some ways, our industry is in a similar place to agriculture.

Ninety per cent of the equivalent of Scotland's electricity consumption is now provided by renewables. The nature of renewable energy means that we need to go where the resource—the wind and the rain—is, and much of our work is carried out in rural areas. It is done out on the hills, which means that it is socially distanced naturally, almost by design.

We have seen some issues resulting from the Covid-19 response because of the time of year in which it has fallen. Spring and summer are really important times of year for the maintenance of our electricity generation equipment. They are the times of year when you would normally see maintenance teams out on site, refurbishing and maintaining equipment, changing lubricants, maintaining gearboxes and so on, simply because the weather is better and it is difficult to do that work during the autumn and winter.

Very early in the pandemic response, the onshore wind safety organisation produced at UK level guidance on how the sector might maintain its infrastructure safely. Both Governments were very open and set out very early that energy generation infrastructure was deemed essential and that, therefore, its maintenance could go ahead. The industry reacted to that in different ways. All the companies that we have spoken to in our membership spent a lot of time drawing up specific health and safety guidance for their teams on distancing and the sanitisation of the spaces in which they work. There was even guidance on cleaning gates and stiles that people might have to walk over during their trips to site and back.

Maintenance was covered very early in the response and, to a large extent, that work has proceeded as it should have done. Some of the maintenance that was not quite so essential has been put on hold. For example, SSE told us that a number of hydro power stations that required maintenance this season have been kept in operation, with the maintenance being done later, because it was able to do that.

Social distancing has become a real issue in very confined spaces, such as inside the cell of a turbine, which is the place behind the blades that

houses the generator. Two people need to be in there to do the work, but it is a very enclosed space. The onshore wind safety organisation looked at that issue very early on and came to the conclusion that that work could be carried out safely as long as the period of exposure was minimised and the correct personal protective equipment was worn. Therefore, in certain circumstances, the 2m rule has already been tested by our industry.

As I said, we have not had any representations about reducing the distance to 1m, and the nature of those spaces means that people are probably closer together than even 1m. A minority of our work is done in such spaces; the majority of the work that our industry does is outside and more exposed. An example of that is the environmental monitoring of sites, which includes monitoring wildlife around wind turbines and checking sites under planning conditions. That work can continue.

We have had no specific representations on the change from 2m to 1m, but a lot of work has already gone on behind the scenes to ensure that our people are safe when they are working on site.

The Convener: Stewart Stevenson has a brief supplementary question.

Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): Is Highland Council tracking what is said about the science of 1m versus 2m? This week, *Nature* said that, indoors, the risk of people staying 1m apart for 7 seconds is equivalent to that of their staying 2m apart for 1 minute. There is no consensus on the numbers, but there is a difference. More fundamentally, is the council tracking sentiment among parents? If we go to a 1m rule in enclosed spaces such as schools, will parents be willing to send children back? It is not just about science or even Government policy; it is about individual decisions.

Donna Manson: Parents are anxious anyway. In the Highlands, we have a system that involves a great deal of information and communications technology provision, and because parents are so involved in the home learning programme, we are touching base with parents. For example, one evening last week, we had 171 parent councils involved in a team Skype meeting, which gave us a few hours to engage with parents on the return of pupils to school.

At local level, our headteachers have continued to have parent council meetings—those meetings have not stopped during lockdown. Our local communities trust our headteachers, who live and work in their communities. The confidence of our professionals will very much guide our schools through this.

In particular, parents of children with additional support needs are extremely anxious. However, a couple of weeks ago, our additional support needs headteachers got together and we opened up one of our ASN schools. We carried out extensive planning and took an individualised approach with every child, and that has been very successful. Our headteachers have continued to have regular meetings with parents, which is where the trust and confidence will come from.

A key aspect is how our young people are feeling, and they are feeling confident. We have a process that involves guidance staff and teachers phoning children every day, and there is a lot of interaction with our children on screen. Through those processes, we are getting a sense of where the children and their parents are at.

You are right to point out that there is anxiety about the fact that, if things change, parents might choose to do things differently. Our approach will be to continue to support home school learning. If we have dips in confidence, we will just have to put into effect the blended model. If families do not feel ready to send their children back to face-to-face schooling, it is our responsibility to provide more learning at home, as happened when some parents withdrew their children from schools early. We will balance that out until we have the confidence of everyone.

The key aspect is the engagement between our front-line staff and their communities. We have observed that some school communities are more anxious than others, so it is our job as a council to put in more support around those schools. With more people engaging with and supporting one another and our continued tweaking of the blended approach until the system fully recovers, I am confident that we will fully recover and that everyone will get a good experience. It will take time and a phased approach. Things might happen very quickly in one community, but in another community confidence levels might look very different. We just have to accept that, because our communities are very different.

The Convener: Thank you. We will need to move on. I remind colleagues and witnesses that we have a lot to get through in quite a short space of time, so it would be very helpful if we can have short responses.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): My first question is to follow up with Donna Manson the convener's questions about schools.

You said that one of your major concerns is about the financial implications of the current situation and the impact on your services. Obviously, there will be significant additional costs from the significant number of additional staff that will be required, the use of extra facilities—the

council might have to rent facilities that it does not own—the upgrading of facilities to make them secure and so on.

In essence, you are saying that, without additional funding from the Government, delivering the most effective reopening of schools would require cutting back in other service areas and moving resources from those areas, because at the moment you do not have the financial flexibility to do anything else unless the Government comes up with additional money. Is that right?

Donna Manson: Highland Council's public resources committee has set out the different levels of funding gaps that we face. We have said that, given the size of the challenge that we face, we will not be able to solve the problem without additional funding or our borrowing powers being changed so that we can undertake further borrowing.

That means that we face a dilemma. In the Highland Council area, we have more than 9,500 jobs that are important to the local economy. Our staff spend money in their local communities, so the last thing that we want in the response to the crisis is to lose jobs; we want to maintain jobs. We are saying—this argument is well rehearsed across all councils—that, without additional support or additional borrowing powers, we will lose jobs. Clearly, we do not want that, because of the effect that it would have on the economy.

09:45

Ross Greer: Thank you—that was useful.

I turn next to Clare Slipper. The timetable for easing lockdown measures is dictated primarily by public health evidence, as it should be. However, the agricultural calendar is pretty fixed: certain things need done at certain times of the year, regardless of where we are in easing lockdown. A couple of weeks ago, the NFU and others made a major point about the potential for significant labour shortages over the summer, and a shortage of seasonal labour in particular.

Where are you with that? Are there still significant concerns about whether the workforce will be there to do the work that is required this summer, regardless of where we are in easing lockdown?

Clare Slipper: Notwithstanding the situation that we have faced this year with Covid-19, labour supplies for seasonal horticulture are always a concern for our members. On average, we employ around 10,000 workers from outside the United Kingdom in a period that starts roughly in March, peaks through the summer months of June, July and August and slows down towards the end of the year. Labour supply has always been a

challenge for our sector, and we have always maintained that there is a strong case for having a seasonal agricultural workers scheme.

This year, given the travel restrictions that are in place, we immediately foresaw significant issues arising with workers who had been contracted to come over to work. For that reason, early on—before the lockdown—we started a domestic labour-matching service to match individuals who might have found themselves out of work or on furlough, or who were around to give a helping hand, with farmers who were projecting a labour shortage.

Encouragingly, we were overwhelmed with interest in the scheme. That was fantastic—our website had tens of thousands of hits. Unfortunately, however, the final cut-through was fairly indicative of what we have known for a long time: it is difficult to keep folk from the domestic population in those jobs. For one reason or another, it just does not seem to stick. The success rate has been around 10 per cent. I do not want it to sound as though there have been no successful placements, because there have been some, but the scheme has not been taken up as widely as we would have liked.

For that reason, we have been working closely with growers' groups to ensure that they can get assistance in chartering flights from countries where travel restrictions are not as strict. A few such flights have already arrived in Scotland, and the arrival process has involved some of the safest and most remarkable specifications that I have ever seen. We have workers coming into the country from within and outside the European Union, including workers who had previously been contracted through the seasonal agricultural workers scheme pilot that is currently in place.

At the moment, things are looking steady, but we are now heading into the peak production season. Luckily, it looks as though some countries are beginning to unlock their travel restrictions, and visa offices are reopening in some countries outside the EU, which will make the processing of work permits easier and faster. It is very much a case of keeping a watching brief.

There have obviously been huge challenges this year, but we have really valued the dialogue that we have had with the Scottish and UK Governments, and with the labour providers, to ensure that we have a steady stream of workers coming into the country.

In the longer term, our experience only underlines the major issue that we will come to next year, once free movement ends. This year has, if anything, been an opportune moment to underline the fact that the agricultural sector relies heavily on workers from outside the UK. We now

need a strong steer from the UK Government on what it will do to put in place a more enduring seasonal workers scheme from 2021 onwards.

The Convener: We move to questions from Willie Coffey.

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): Good morning, everybody. I have only two questions: one for Clare Slipper and one for Nick Sharpe.

The NFUS submission talks about the positive legacies of the current health emergency, in particular the growth of public support for local food and drink initiatives. In Ayrshire, farmers have been particularly innovative, and really successful, in bringing the public safely—I emphasise that word—to farms to pick up food and other products.

As we come out of the lockdown gradually, how can we capitalise on that and make it more of a norm and a thing that people wish to continue to do, in order to support local food producers?

Clare Slipper: As Willie Coffey said, we have been overwhelmed and delighted by the level of public interest that has been shown in local food production. There has been a huge amount of support for local food producers, which seems to have endured even beyond the initial situation, in which we saw long queues at supermarkets and shortages on supermarket shelves. There has been a vast increase in things such as doorstep deliveries and farm shops doing deliveries, which is really useful, as we have wanted to highlight those things for a very long time. That is the positive side of what has otherwise been an absolutely dreadful situation.

In the longer term, we would like to capitalise on that by scaling up work in two areas—education and procurement policy—that we have been calling for for a very long time. We think that we have a key opportunity to do much more to educate kids and the general public about food production in Scotland, including about things such as seasonality and the science behind farming. We can do a lot more to tell the story of what Scottish agriculture does in making us a good food nation.

We would also like to look again at procurement policy. At the moment, under current EU stipulations, we are unable to account for country-of-origin labelling on procurement tenders. Leaving the EU could be a good opportunity to look again at procurement and at how we better prioritise local sourcing.

Those are two things that we have been calling for for a long time, and which we were keen to steer through the Scottish Government's good food nation agenda. Although that has obviously been thrown slightly off course, the wider situation

with Covid-19 has underlined how important those policies could be in reconnecting the domestic food producer with the consumer.

Willie Coffey: Thank you for that helpful response.

My other question is for Nick Sharpe. You said in your initial answer to the convener that it is not business as usual, that it cannot be business as usual when we come out of the health emergency, and that Scotland is particularly well placed from the point of view of the skills and abilities that we have. You said that 20 years of heavy lifting has been done in the renewables sector.

What is needed for us to capitalise on the new opportunities that present themselves to us? Does the Government need to reshape its thinking and its policy development? The messages that you are giving us have been warmly welcomed across all the parties and all the sectors, but how do we capitalise on the opportunities that exist and make it happen?

Nick Sharpe: We are very focused on avoiding a fossil fuel lock-in after the Covid-19 situation. That has happened when the economy has gone through similar shocks in the past, when we have rushed to invest in fossil fuel extraction as a way of boosting the economy quickly. That is the wrong thing to do this time.

We have an opportunity to use the progress that we have already made in decarbonising our economy to allow investments that do not harm our planet or human health on a local level. Things such as electric vehicles are obviously important, and there is also a role for green hydrogen, which is produced from renewable electricity. Gas boilers are one of the most prevalent forms of particulate pollution in urban areas. We really want to avoid that fossil fuel lock-in and bounce back better.

The Committee on Climate Change said that the UK needs to quadruple the amount of renewable electricity that it generates by 2050 to meet our net zero targets. We can do that in Scotland. We have the resources of wind, rainfall, tides, waves and long daylight hours, all of which come together to give us that opportunity.

The Government's response to the oil and gas sector at the end of last week included the announcement of £62 million for an energy transition fund. We have been pleased by the Government's focus on the need for that sector to make changes and not simply to continue with the business that it was pursuing before. Much of that money is rightly predicated on decarbonisation of that sector, which is the way it should be.

Of course, we have 40 years of offshore energy subsea expertise in Scotland, and we can tap into that, as well as the skills that we have built up in

renewables. The people with that expertise will be part of the transition. We do not want to leave people behind. As we build up the renewable electricity and renewable heat offering, we have an opportunity to bring those people with us.

There are many opportunities, but the Government needs to find ways of avoiding a fossil fuel lock-in; we are particularly passionate about that at the moment.

The Convener: Beatrice Wishart will ask the next question.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): Good morning. I had two questions for Clare Slipper, but Willie Coffey has just asked one of them. Because I am conscious of time and the fact that other colleagues want to come in, I will ask her only one question.

We know that the farming and crofting communities are innovative and resilient. One of the longer-term aims that the NFUS highlighted in its briefing paper was that of improving connectivity and digital requirements. Is there anything that could be done in the short term that would assist the rural community? I am thinking of the innovations in milking processes, for example, which require the latest digital connectivity. Is there anything that could be done in the immediate future that would help in that regard?

Clare Slipper: I cannot identify anything that would immediately solve the problem. What I would say is that the extent to which the NFUS has been able to move its engagement with members online has been fantastic, and many members have been able to participate in that way. However, such interactions are almost a source of amusement, because they usually involve a farmer dialling into a Zoom call from a tractor in some remote field, where they can get a spot of 4G. We have a long way to go, and a lack of digital connectivity is probably holding back the sector from being innovative and moving online in whatever capacity it can.

We have considered various community broadband schemes and satellite broadband partnerships. However, rural connectivity remains a postcode lottery. We have close engagement with the Scottish Government and have raised with it the concerns of our members, but we know that this is not a problem that can be fixed overnight. However, we are keen to focus on the issue to an even greater extent than before, because it is an important issue for rural life, as it is for urban life.

The Convener: Gillian Martin will ask the next question.

Gillian Martin: Nick Sharpe mentioned the £62 million energy transition fund, which, as a north-

easter, I am obviously pleased about. There are some issues in making the leap to renewable energy. A lot of issues need to be sorted out in order for us to achieve the goals of the green recovery and the green transition, such as those around contracts for difference and the decarbonisation of the gas grid.

You mentioned a renewables transition training fund, which I fully support. What else needs to happen quickly in order for all the jigsaw pieces to fall into place to ensure that we have a green recovery and that green energy sources are the number 1 source of our energy?

Nick Sharpe: We should not overstate the problems. Scotland and the UK have already done a tremendous amount to put in place the mechanisms and the regulation that we need in order to deliver net zero. In recent years, we have moved some way along the path.

One issue that I would point to is the contracts for difference mechanism. Our problem from 2015 was that onshore wind and large-scale solar were locked out of the contracts for difference mechanism. That situation has now ended, so we are calling on the UK Government to bring forward the auctions as quickly as possible.

10:00

In the Scottish context, planning is absolutely central, and our members have challenges with it daily. We are now starting the development of national planning framework 4, and we are obviously engaging closely with that. The NPF process has been extended because of Covid-19, so there will be a period during which the changes that will take place under NPF 4 are not in place. We would like the planning system to be focused on sustainability, resilience, security of energy supply and net zero. Our industry can deliver those things.

We have had great conversations with the chief planner and his office during this situation. They have been responsive and flexible, but guidance from Government to planners that sustainability is a key criterion in the planning process would really shift the dial on the deployment of renewable energy.

Gillian Martin: Thank you—it is now a question of doing things very quickly as we start a green recovery.

You have mentioned the renewables transition training fund. We had a transition training fund previously, but it was not particularly focused on renewables; it was more focused on redeploying people into a job of any kind.

The idea is a good one but, in the past, one issue with transferring highly-skilled people from

oil and gas into renewables was a recognition of their skills and certificates as oil and gas workers. Is that still an issue? It has clearly been a barrier to people from the north-east who have got in contact with me during the past three or four years.

Nick Sharpe: Yes, we are aware that there are differences in requirements. Ours is a very different industry, especially in relation to health and safety, and things are done differently. Renewables is a safe industry, and people who have transitioned from oil and gas have perhaps recognised that that was not necessarily the case in the industry that they were coming from.

We would like the Government to address that as part of the renewables transition training fund. We already work with organisations such as the energy skills partnership and the energy technology partnership. The Oil & Gas Technology Centre is also closely involved in the transition, and it also has a role to play in shaping the regulations for people who move from oil and gas into renewables.

Last year, Scottish Renewables did some research that showed that 13,000 people in Scotland are studying courses that involve renewable energy. Those people will be coming through at the very start of their careers. They will obviously have a role to play, and a number of them will join our industry.

I agree that regulation is something to be looked at as part of the renewables transition training fund. I am also keen to point out that we believe that the destination jobs for those people should be led by industry. Industry knows what skills are required and which roles need to be filled. Where we have heard criticism of the previous transition training fund, it was that people were reskilled for jobs that perhaps did not exist at that moment in time. We are keen for the Government to work with industry and ask us what our members need so that the people who are transitioning across have jobs to go to.

Gillian Martin: Thank you for that.

I have a quick question for Donna Manson about some of the issues that she raised in her submission. Three key local government bodies—the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers and the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland—were involved in the education group that was working with Government on the plans for reopening schools. However, you say that you were only given overnight notice of those plans, even though those three bodies had signed up to them and were closely involved in making them up.

I am interested to know just how you were kept out of the loop given that those three bodies represent all the local authorities.

Donna Manson: For clarification, the guidance was produced over a period of time and came out about two weeks ago. Since its publication, local authorities have been working on the issue. Because of the response to those plans in the past few days, there is now an expectation of 50 per cent of attendance in schools, face-to-face, in the first week back in August. That was not stipulated in the guidance, so, in many ways, local authorities are surprised at the interpretation.

It was a response to City of Edinburgh Council's plans that resulted in the change. It has now been made clear that the expectation is for schools to be at 50 per cent at the start, whereas we had hoped that we would be able to progress towards that within the first few weeks.

Schools and local authorities are working to deliver 50 per cent attendance. That will require the use of additional buildings, which will bring additional pressures on councils—not only in the return to education, but for the return of other council services. We need to get our service points up and running for our vulnerable communities. There are expectations for the return of a range of council services. A large number of our workforce are still at home. The challenge to our estates team is to deliver both the return to education and the return of other services.

It is only in the past few days that the expectation has changed, with the switch to 50 per cent attendance being required on 11 August.

Gillian Martin: My last question is about the 1,140 hours money. How are you redeploying that funding to assist with your situation?

Donna Manson: Our council has not yet made a decision on that. We have been responding to all that has been asked: with, for example, key worker hubs, vulnerable hubs, meals provision and humanitarian assistance centres. We have responded to all those requirements, along with shielding support and support for families who have come through the national helpline. There has been a significant increase in food poverty and welfare issues. In many ways, we are still in response mode—we are not out of lockdown and into recovery yet. Our focus has been on responding.

On the reallocation of funding, we are currently assessing impacts. We will have a full council meeting next week, at which that first stage of financial impact assessment will begin to be unpacked. Over the next few months, members will start to make decisions about the funding.

When members left on 12 March, they had a budget for the year. They will return to full council meetings just next week to begin to consider the impact of the past few months. No decisions have been made as yet.

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): Good morning. I have two questions for the panel.

The first question is aimed primarily at Donna Manson and Nick Sharpe, but Clare Slipper is also welcome to respond, if that would be appropriate.

At the start of your evidence, Donna, you stressed the importance of community cohesion. You gave examples of anxieties that had led to conflict and unpleasantness in the community. You mentioned tensions concerning second homes, and some people's worries about restarting tourism.

I noticed in its written submission that Scottish Renewables has had concerns about key workers—that people at work had been approached by, and faced questions from, the police and members of the public.

As we continue with lockdown, do we need further clarity in legislation and guidance? What more can be done in national messaging? What would be your ask to the Parliament and to Government about how we could improve on that, so that we can avoid wasting police time, as Nick Sharpe said in his written submission, and make sure that communities are as cohesive as possible?

Donna Manson: I am glad that you said that the issue is not one of enforcement, because I know how busy our local police are in the Highlands. I am working with the local police and I do not think that enforcement is the right response. They have very positive, constructive relationships. In the Highlands, it is a question of key messaging on Scotland and the Highlands being open, and how we can manage the situation safely and well.

I genuinely feel that, as a national group of leaders, people at every level have been outstanding in the way that they have responded. We have worked together and have achieved super outcomes. There is a lot of positivity that we should share across the nation. We should share how safe and compliant our country is and how everybody has responded positively.

We are used to having thousands of people in the Highlands every year who come for our environment. However, we should now be giving out another message about how well our country can respond to things and how safe it is.

The answer is in messaging, rather than enforcement or guidance. It is more likely that messaging will bring the people who we need to come to the Highlands for employment, visits or

staycations—which is a new saying. It is about how we all message at every level, both in our communities and nationally. We have had discussions with our MSPs, MPs and ministers about that, and we feel that it is the best approach for the Highlands.

Nick Sharpe: I echo the point that messaging is very important.

I mentioned that both the UK and Scottish Governments recognise energy as an essential part of society, and that workers who are maintaining energy infrastructure are key workers. Keeping the lights on is a fundamental part of tackling the Covid-19 situation. We have not seen messaging to reassure the public and law enforcement that the workers who are doing those jobs are doing essential work as part of the response to the coronavirus pandemic, from either Government, and we have asked for it.

There is an issue with that, not only because of the stress that is placed on workers in the renewable energy industry who might have to face questioning from members of the public or the police, but because members of the public see those workers carrying out their duties and believe that they are breaking lockdown and, therefore, that they can break the lockdown too.

We felt that it was really important that both Governments should make a public statement along the lines that energy is a key service and energy workers are key workers. We have not seen that from either Government, and it would have made a difference earlier in the lockdown. We are now starting to come out of lockdown; construction activity is restarting in our sector and the companies who are restarting that construction activity are engaging with communities very thoroughly.

Scottish Renewables, as a trade body, has made the point that it is absolutely crucial that communities are comfortable when people are going in for work. The industry has been very focused on that, and we have joined with other trade bodies, at national level, to launch a campaign to make that point. However, both Governments could have done that as part of their messaging. We think there was a missed opportunity.

Monica Lennon: Thank you to you both. It was really helpful to get your comments. Those were constructive answers, and we will ensure that we feed them back.

A couple of my colleagues have touched on the challenges around education and trying to return our schools to some kind of normality. To what extent are we fully exploring all of the opportunities to be innovative and see collaboration in our communities?

I hope that we can also bring in Clare Slipper to give an answer to these questions. Donna, we have huge natural assets in the Highlands and, Nick, you have spoken about a lot of your key workers working in remote and rural areas. Clare, NFUS knows that territory well.

Do you have good ideas about how to transition young people back to school and learners to college and university? With regard to outdoor learning and how business and industry can become more involved in online learning, NFUS included education about food production in its written submission.

I will open up the issue to the panel. We saw in the past week's media the anxiety of parents and how young people feel about their future. As a country, we have to get this right.

10:15

Nick Sharpe: A restatement of the climate emergency is important, and we have asked both Governments to do that. It is obvious that there is a pathway for people in education and in other industries to come into our industry to gain employment and carry out the green economic recovery.

Before coronavirus struck at the start of the year, the focus was very much on the climate emergency—the school climate strikes, Greta Thunberg, the enormous march in Glasgow last summer—but that has now drifted away. Both Governments have a role to play in restating that they want to pursue a green economic recovery from coronavirus and to work with industry to help people to transition into our sector, because it provides huge opportunity for the future. For us, restating the reasons behind the energy transition is really important.

Clare Slipper: Our members have an abundance of outdoor green space and land, with opportunities to provide educational opportunities to kids and whoever else. For many years, we have worked closely with the Royal Highland Education Trust, or RHET, which provides hugely successful farm visits for school kids. Due to the lockdown, a large number of RHET co-ordinators have been temporarily stood down, which is unfortunate but is a consequence of the situation that we are in.

We would love to do what we can to reconnect education providers with folk who work on the land. A huge number of our farmer members are very enthusiastic about providing those opportunities. We are keen to play our part, and I suppose the issue is about finding the linkage, whether through RHET or local authorities. Perhaps that could be a positive legacy from the situation.

With regard to the earlier discussion about community cohesion and messaging, I reiterate the points that were made about cohesion in the messaging that advertises Scotland as an open place to come to that is safe for communities and visitors. Our members have reported a huge number of instances of irresponsible access taking on agricultural land. We are members of the national access forum and we are keen supporters of the Scottish outdoor access code, but unfortunately, when we went into lockdown and more people travelled to the countryside to take their exercise, there was a high rise in instances of gates being left open, livestock worrying by dogs, dog fouling and unfortunate and aggressive encounters between farmers and members of the public.

Any opportunity by the committee or the Scottish Government to restate the responsibilities of access takers when exercising in the countryside would be hugely appreciated.

Monica Lennon: Those points are great. I think that Donna Manson wanted to come in on that question.

Donna Manson: Thank you. The key to the issue is impact assessment.

Huge and fantastic things have happened in a positive way for the health of our young people during this process. I know that people have a lot of anxieties but, when I listen to what our heads of nursing, social work and education in the Highlands tell me about what they are hearing from children, parents and staff in various forums in terms of their lifestyles and how they have been affected, it strikes me that we need to assess the positive impact that there has been. For example, people are growing food, cooking more and starting to cycle.

A lot of hugely positive wellbeing gains have taken place during this crisis for many people. It is important that, as a nation, we pull those experiences together, learn from them and build on that learning. As you know, I am an educationist to trade, and I would gently say that food and nutrition is a significant gap in the curriculum. I think that we have an opportunity now to embed that in our curriculum, with a link to how everyone is feeling. Further, as you know, Highland Council has declared a climate emergency. Also, we are hearing great things from our staff with regard to the way in which they have changed the way that they work during the day—for example, people are taking time for a family meal.

We need to ensure that we capture the benefits of what has happened during lockdown. The idea that we can build on that learning is as important as the anxieties that we are dealing with.

The Convener: Stewart Stevenson will ask the final question.

Stewart Stevenson: I am left with a tiny question, as all the other issues have been covered by the panel.

One of the surprising issues that was raised at a recent meeting of the NFUS in the north-east was the non-availability of egg boxes. Indeed, we are now being asked to return our egg boxes after use. Has that situation been resolved? Is there anything that Government can do to assist in that regard? More broadly, is packaging an issue?

Clare Slipper: I can give a short answer to that quick question. No, the issue has not yet been resolved. We are still experiencing shortages of egg boxes. The issue with packaging has been most pronounced with regard to eggs, although other issues have been reported.

The issue is indicative of a wider one that we might see with regard to haulage as we unlock further. We must ensure that everyone plans ahead and that we are able to do things such as backloads to take packaging where it is required. We are in discussions with the Scottish Government about that. I can get back to the committee with more information, if needed.

The Convener: Thank you. That is a piece of information that I was not expecting to learn this morning. I put an egg box in the recycling yesterday, but I would have kept it if I had known that there is a national shortage.

That brings us to the end of questions. I thank our witnesses for their time this morning. We will have a brief suspension and reconvene at about 10:28.

10:23

Meeting suspended.

10:28

On resuming—

The Convener: We now come to our second evidence session on easing coronavirus lockdown restrictions. On our second panel are Helen Martin, who is the assistant general secretary of the Scottish Trades Union Congress; and David Lonsdale, who is the director of the Scottish Retail Consortium.

I remind members to keep to keep their questions as short and to the point as possible, and I ask for similar answers. Also, members should state at which witness their question is directed.

I will start by asking a question of David Lonsdale. This morning, we saw the retail figures

for the most recent month, which were pretty depressing reading for everybody in the non-food sector. What would your members want the First Minister to say in the announcement that she is due to make tomorrow about further relaxing restrictions? What discussions have there been between the Scottish Government and the Scottish Retail Consortium about how the route map will be developed and how it will impact on your members?

We cannot hear David Lonsdale due to a technical issue. He might need to leave the meeting and rejoin in order to get his microphone to work.

I will move on to a question for Helen Martin. I hope that, by the time she has spoken, we will have David back.

10:30

Along with various other organisations including Inclusion Scotland and Citizens Advice Scotland, the STUC has highlighted concerns that the Covid-19 pandemic will have a disproportionate impact on low-paid workers and those who are in more vulnerable employment. What needs to be done in relation to the Scottish Government's route map and phased approach in order to prioritise work to address the impact on such workers?

Helen Martin (Scottish Trades Union Congress): That is a complicated matter. We are flagging up that workers in low-paid sectors are much less likely to be able to work from home, to have access to sick pay and to be on standardised contracts, so they are more vulnerable to redundancy and less likely to be eligible for the UK Government's coronavirus job retention scheme.

Throughout the crisis, we have highlighted that a range of measures need to be taken to support workers and to maintain jobs. The schemes that the UK Government put in place were very welcome and have supported a range of low-paid workers in a range of sectors, but there are still gaps that need to be addressed.

We are very worried about the creative sector, which is—not unreasonably—unlikely to reopen until phase 4. There are similar issues in tourism and, potentially, in hospitality. A sector-led approach to support, in the job retention and self-employment schemes, might be necessary. It might even be appropriate to consider a transition in the schemes away from employers towards workers.

In the UK context, it is unusual for unemployment benefit to be tied to wages, but in other parts of Europe that is a normal practice. In some parts of Europe, it is not unusual for 80 per

cent of wages to be maintained in an unemployment scheme for as long as four years. It is possible to think slightly differently about how we will support workers.

Some of those points are for the UK Government more than for the Scottish Government. The Scottish Government should think about how it can use its route map to ensure that lower-paid workers get access to work. That will involve thinking about high density and low paid female-worker dominated sectors, such as retail. What can we do about childcare for that workforce, which particularly needs it? Can we expand the hub model, for example? That could ensure that particular groups of low-paid workers who cannot work from home have childcare and, therefore, can work.

We have seen an economy-wide approach to support schemes. Going forward, we might need more sectoral analysis within that to consider the barriers to work for some workers. Measures that support access to sick pay will also be really important.

The Convener: Thank you very much. I am sure that other members will want to come in and explore with you some of the issues in more detail.

I hope that we now have David Lonsdale back with us—and that we can hear you. I will repeat my questions. What are you hoping to hear from the First Minister in her statement tomorrow? What discussions have there been with the Government about the measures that can be taken to reopen non-food retail?

David Lonsdale (Scottish Retail Consortium): I apologise for the technical issues. I did not quite hear all of Helen Martin's reply, but that can be addressed as we discuss the issues.

On the First Minister's three-week statutory review announcement tomorrow, our ideal scenario is that she will move to swift reopening of retail in full. However, I suspect that, in reality, the best that we can hope for is a firm date for moving to phase 2 reopening of retail. In addition, we would like to get an indicative date for the move to phase 3 for retail. Other sectors—tourism and hospitality, for example—have an indicative date for phase 3.

We have a couple of other requests. First, I know that the Government is working on guidance on public spaces. Our interest is to do with management of queues in town centres and high streets, so it would be good to see that guidance being published. Secondly, if we move to shops being permitted to reopen, we want the Government to give a very clear expression of support for people to go shopping: to say that is safe to do so, and that it is good for the economy, given the data that was mentioned earlier—we

have today published data on Scottish retail sales—and the impact on the economy in the first few months of the year.

On consultation and engagement, engagement with the Government has been very strong during the past three months. I noticed in the previous evidence session that there were questions about consultation. A lot of the consultation has been done at pace, with views being asked for later the same day or within 24 hours. We have responded as best we could.

We have been involved in the Government's group on retail sector guidance, so we have had insight into the early thinking on the phased approach to retail. Our starting position has always been that if a retailer is safe and is confident that they can open and trade safely, they should be allowed to do so.

The Convener: I will pick up on a point that Helen Martin covered. What measures are being put in place by your member companies to protect retail workers, should we move to a more comprehensive reopening of retail stores?

David Lonsdale: Before the crisis, 240,000 people were working in the retail industry. The shops that were able to remain open—pharmacies, food retailers, groceries and supermarkets—moved very quickly to get personal protective equipment and other types of protection for staff. They have also invested significantly in the broader social distancing infrastructure that is needed—for example, one food retailer has bought 10,000 Perspex screens for its stores across the UK.

There is a myriad of aspects to protecting staff and customers. We have had announcements from the First Minister; for example, recommending that people wear face coverings when they go into shops. There have been announcements down south about wearing face coverings on public transport. Retailers have tried their best to source the equipment and to offer it to their staff colleagues. Whether staff wear the PPE is a separate question.

The Convener: Thank you. Gillian Martin has a brief supplementary.

Gillian Martin: I was going to ask David Lonsdale about face coverings in my main question, but since he has brought up the issue I will follow up on that. Food retailers are making record profits at the moment, but when I go into supermarkets not many people are wearing face coverings to protect the staff who work there. Do supermarkets have a duty to provide their customers with face coverings and to insist that they wear them? Leaving it voluntary is not really working.

David Lonsdale: Do you mean that supermarkets should provide PPE for customers or their staff? I did not quite hear.

Gillian Martin: I mean for their customers.

David Lonsdale: Do supermarkets have a duty to ensure that their customers wear face coverings? At the end of the day, it is up to the Government to decide who wears face coverings in different types of business or places of work. Many retailers have made face coverings available for customers and have invested a lot in hand sanitiser and other aspects of hygiene as people enter stores. As I said earlier, staff have, in the main, been provided with face coverings or visors.

I take issue with the suggestion that supermarkets and grocery retailers have made stupendous—I cannot remember your exact word—profits during the crisis. Our figures for retail sales in food and grocery were published today; they are up on last year by about 5 per cent over the three months. There was an instant surge at the beginning of the crisis, with about three weeks of panic buying, but once people had stockpiled, grocery sales fell in subsequent weeks, in a year-on-year comparison.

Obviously, because there are there are no cafes, restaurants, outside catering, school meals or other food that people would have at their places of work, we would expect an uplift in grocery sales, but the uplift has been reasonably modest in the broad scheme of things.

Beatrice Wishart: Good morning, panel. The convener has already touched on the issue that I want to raise, which is the disproportionate impact of the crisis on women in the workforce. We know that people are to work at home where possible. I have raised with the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills concerns about getting young people back to school. Will you expand on what difficulties you see with childcare for parents who cannot work from home, particularly in the retail sector, and how that will affect women?

Helen Martin: Is that question for me?

Beatrice Wishart: It is for both of you.

Helen Martin: The STUC is very concerned about that. We are aware that there will be a blended-learning approach to education, and nothing in my answer is intended to suggest that that is inappropriate. It is being done for health and safety reasons and has been negotiated with the unions, so we support the approach.

However, the approach creates a lot of challenges for working parents—especially those who cannot work at home. There are certain groups of key workers and female-dominated workforces for whom that is a particular issue. My

understanding is that the hub schools will continue for key workers, which is very important.

However, more widely there are low-paid female-dominated workforces who might be adversely affected, including in non-essential retail. It might be appropriate for us to think about how we can support those workers with childcare and blended-learning models. We might need to prioritise people who have no choice but to go out to work and cannot work from home, at least to provide some support to allow people to be with their children.

10:45

There is also a question for employers. There is a strong requirement for employers to be flexible and to allow their workers time to be at home to look after children and support their education. It must be recognised that, for blended learning to work effectively, especially with regard to younger children, parents need to play a role in education.

Everyone across the economy faces the challenge to think differently about how work is organised, what our priorities are and how we can balance the needs of parents, children and employers while observing public health requirements. That will require sector-by-sector discussions between employers and unions, facilitated by the Government, and it will require a focus on the fair-work approach that puts workers at the heart of the process, rather than a focus on the narrow concept of growth.

David Lonsdale: Over the years, our surveys of the retail workforce have shown that people's key reasons for working in retail include flexibility and the ability to work quite close to home. Obviously, a lot of the people in the retail workforce have caring responsibilities.

During the crisis, a number of retailers have been trying to accommodate colleagues who are shielding, who live with people who are shielding or who have other caring and family responsibilities, and they are keen to continue with that approach as best they can.

If and when shops are permitted to reopen, the social distancing measures that are in place and the expectation that demand will be weaker than it was previously will have implications for the number of people who are required—fewer people will be required to work in shops. We must be cognisant of that.

Monica Lennon: I want to return to the issue of face coverings. The previous panel talked about the need for public confidence, with safety being at the heart of that. As David Lonsdale noted, wearing face coverings is voluntary at the moment, so I take the point that he made about it

not being up to people who work in shops to enforce that.

Do your organisations support the argument for the wearing of face coverings to be mandatory, with appropriate exemptions? What do you think that some of those exemptions might be? If you are not in favour of the wearing of face coverings being mandatory, what guidance and messaging would you like to see at a national level in that regard?

Helen Martin: We are in favour of mandatory face coverings, because we have a feeling that that would improve the safety of the workforce. However, to be clear, we do not see face coverings as PPE, and it must be absolutely established that face coverings are not a replacement for PPE for the workforce. If a risk assessment finds that staff need masks, PPE-level masks should be used, not face coverings. There is a difference between the general public and the workforce in that regard.

We are also concerned about the messaging around exemptions and the enforcement of a mandatory system. You are right to say that there would need to be exemptions, because not everyone can wear a face covering. For example, it would be counterproductive for people with asthma to wear face coverings, and it could be detrimental to their health. It is also potentially inappropriate for small children to wear face coverings, because it could encourage them to touch their face and so assist the spread of the virus.

Some people, including adults, will move around in society not wearing face coverings. We are worried that, if that is not well understood, it could create disputes between members of the general public, for example about why a person is on a bus or train without wearing a face covering. That in itself is a bad thing, but we are also concerned that, in such situations, it would fall to the staff to handle those disputes. We are clear that that is not an appropriate role for staff and that it needs to be clear that Police Scotland or the British Transport Police is the enforcement agency in that regard.

At Christmas time, we have messaging that makes it clear that abuse of staff on public transport will not be tolerated. We need similar public health messaging that says that face coverings are mandatory, but that not everybody will be wearing them. The message also needs to be sent that that will be enforced by Police Scotland and the British Transport Police, so people should not expect retail workers or transport workers to intervene in issues about who is or is not wearing a face covering. That is a nuanced message, but it is important to set

expectations correctly in order to avoid disputes in public places.

David Lonsdale: From our perspective, if the guidance changes and it is mandatory to wear a face covering either as a shopper or as a member of staff, the retail industry will follow that.

It is worth picking up on the enforcement aspects. We are great supporters of the Protection of Workers (Retail and Age-restricted Goods and Services) (Scotland) Bill, which your MSP colleague Daniel Johnson has introduced. Shop workers have had an exponential increase in their statutory duties in recent years in relation to alcohol, knives and various other products. There has been a growth in staff responsibilities and the number of issues that they have to enforce.

In the early part of the crisis, retail staff had significant concerns about the behaviour of a very small number of customers. Since then, the 2m distancing rule has been enshrined in legislation, and retail staff have to implement that. If we are asking staff to enforce more issues and take on more statutory responsibilities, that potentially creates conflict. We would not expect a tremendous number of customers to be upset about that but, given the experience in the early part of the crisis, we might find that some are. We need to be alive to that issue if we are exposing staff to those potential areas of conflict.

I question whether there is sufficient statutory support behind shop workers on that front, which is why we back Daniel Johnson's bill. In saying that, the Scottish Government has made it clear that it is not only up to retailers and their staff to implement social distancing and that customers have a responsibility to behave appropriately when they are in stores or are queueing outside. We have published guidance for shoppers as well.

There is a lot to take into account. It is not just about authorities such as the police and local councils.

Monica Lennon: My next question is on the timing of announcements as we move into different phases or if things change within a phase. On Helen Martin's side, that clearly has huge implications for workers, as they need training and must be able to absorb the issues and know what is expected. There are also implications for David Lonsdale's members, as there is a lot to think about for businesses in considering how to cascade the information to employees. I ask for our witnesses' feedback on that. Collectively, as members of the public, we are all anxious and eager to get information and daily updates from the First Minister, but what does that mean in real time for workers and employers?

David Lonsdale: One of the great strengths is that we know that the First Minister will make an announcement on Thursday, although we do not know what will be in that announcement. As I said at the outset, we are looking for firm timetables from her. She has been admirably clear on a whole range of things during the crisis. Even where we have not necessarily seen eye to eye, we have got the message—it has been nice and clear.

Companies and retailers that are trying to prepare need dates and clarity on when they should work towards. Our evidence is that the majority of staff at non-essential, non-food retailers have been furloughed. If we are going to bring staff back off furlough, we need to know when to do that—we need to know the timing. We obviously need to schedule the training that staff require in relation to not just PPE but social distancing, dealing with customers and so on.

There is a range of other aspects. As well as the need for investment in social distancing and having the right equipment, consideration needs to be given to all the other things that go into making a retail business work. Is the stock in the right place? Is it in the warehouse? Does it need to be in the store? Has the broader health and safety work been done?

Shops have now been closed for 13 weeks or so, and we need to consider pricing, given where we are in the economy and what the situation is as regards different types of products and their supply and demand. A myriad of factors go into that, which is why we are asking for clarity around timescales. Ideally, shops would be eligible to open from Friday, but not all of them will be. They will open according to their own timescales, depending on staffing, supplies and various other factors.

I recall some of the newspaper headlines that we saw last weekend ahead of England moving to open stores on Monday. One was about "Manic Monday". That was a complete and utter misreading of what was likely to happen, as many stores in England did not open on Monday, and many stores down south have yet to open. The same is true in Northern Ireland. Lots of factors have to be taken into account.

Monica Lennon: Thank you for that. Helen?

The Convener: Thank you, Monica. We now move on to Annabelle Ewing.

Annabelle Ewing: Thank you, convener, but I think that Helen Martin had been hoping to respond to Monica Lennon's second question.

The Convener: I apologise—I did not pick that up. I invite Helen Martin to come back in.

Helen Martin: Basically, the STUC has a similar perspective to the one that David Lonsdale has just set out. We appreciate that it is very difficult to give firm dates, because the issue relates to the progress of the R number and the level of cases more broadly. We understand that it is very hard to know exactly what will happen and when. The challenge is to keep us going in a linear way through the route map, and the worst thing that we could see would be any regression on that.

We are clear that the key is to have time to prepare, to conduct risk assessments and to build in an approach whereby staff know exactly what is required of them, understand how they are going to get to work and are confident about the approach. Much of that is a question of messaging and continuous conversations taking place between employers and unions. It is also necessary for the wider public health strategy to fit together. It is not simply a question of which workplaces open up when; it is also a case of ensuring that we have a reasonable plan for public transport that works. We need to understand how everything fits together, given the expectations around childcare. Those are the more complex questions that need a bit more attention. Each individual workplace can open up relatively easily, but it is a question of taking a systems-based approach; it is about how everything fits together.

We have seen good phasing being done in some sectors. Construction stands out in that regard, as that sector has built in quite high levels of phasing between essential and non-essential construction, and we are still working through that. As frustrating as that might be for some employers in the industry, it provides a good foundation for bringing people back in a controlled way. That is potentially a model that could be considered for other places that need to manage a gradual building up to where we need to be.

11:00

Annabelle Ewing: I have two questions, both of which are for Helen Martin and David Lonsdale.

Earlier, Helen Martin referred to the UK Government's furlough scheme. What is the position of the STUC on that scheme? Does it support the extension of the scheme, whether on a general or a sectoral basis?

Helen Martin: At present, we support its extension. We think that it is a useful scheme and we would like it to be maintained. If a sector continues to be closed, such schemes need to continue to be in place.

The point that I was trying to make was that, in the medium term—that is, towards the back end of the year—if there is going to be a need for long-term support, it might be appropriate to start

thinking of that support more in terms of workers than employers. Unfortunately, as time goes on, some employers might simply become less and less viable, and we want to ensure that people are supported to reskill or retrain, if necessary. That would be a potential tool in our armoury, which is important because we have not yet started to think about how we can continue to maintain people's incomes in a situation in which the employer is no longer sustainable. As I said before, that approach is not as revolutionary as it sounds, because it is quite common in other European countries for previous earnings to be used as an index for unemployment support.

I am not attacking the job retention scheme or saying that it is not working—it is working and is a good scheme that we want to be maintained. However, we need to think about how it can be made more flexible, how employers can be enabled to furlough employees and then take them out of furlough again, how we enable people to be furloughed part time and work part time, how we can maintain it for certain sectors and what we can do with regard to putting in place support that is less linked to employers and is more about maintaining workers' incomes.

Annabelle Ewing: Thank you for that comprehensive answer. There are certainly interesting discussions to be had about the issue of protecting workers' incomes in what I think will be, sadly, the extremely difficult months ahead.

David Lonsdale, does the Scottish Retail Consortium have a position on the extension of the UK furlough scheme?

David Lonsdale: We have been extremely supportive of the job retention scheme and have made a number of suggestions about it, which can be seen in some of the recent announcements about part-time working.

A high-level point to make is that the UK Government and the Scottish Government have been generous with various financial and funding schemes, including rates relief, the furlough scheme and various loan schemes for businesses. We are conscious that there is no magic money tree—actually, maybe there has been one over the past three months, but we are conscious that there will be an end to that generosity. The sooner we can get retail and other bits of the economy back up and running, the sooner the demands on those pots of cash will lessen. If that happens more quickly, that might free up a little bit of money for extending or nuancing some of those programmes.

If, heaven forbid, there is some sort of second wave of virus, there will presumably be some sort of lockdown. At that point, we might need to revisit some of the support mechanisms that have been

in place to see whether they are appropriate. Keeping an open mind on many of those issues is a sensible approach.

Annabelle Ewing: My next question, which is for both witnesses again, is about the preparedness of the retail sector to get going again. I take David Lonsdale's practical points—and, indeed Helen Martin's—about all the things that need to be done and the various issues that we, the consumer public, do not think about. Equally, however, we have known the parameters of the physical layout issues for some weeks now. Indeed, I was listening to the radio yesterday and heard a very interesting discussion on the “Call Kate Adie” programme about shops reopening. The proprietor of a children's shoe shop in Dunblane, I think, had already taken steps, with the help of a local joiner, to design a new layout for the shop in order to protect staff and customers, which was ready to go.

What level of preparedness is there for people to return to shops rather than shop online, taking into account the need to protect staff and customers and inspire confidence? Countries such as Canada and Spain have 2m social distancing and they have been slowly reopening non-essential shops for some weeks now. What can be learned from their approach to the retail sector, given that those countries also have 2m social distancing?

David Lonsdale: A large slice of the retail industry has been trading throughout the crisis—for example, pharmacies, pet food retailers, grocers and supermarkets—but the broader sector is well placed to reopen quickly. We worked jointly with the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers to publish at the end of April a guide on implementing social distancing that drew on the often challenging experience of those essential retailers in the early part of the crisis. We published that guide six or seven weeks ago and submitted it to the Scottish Government. At the tail end of last month, the Scottish Government published guidance for retail specifically on safe working.

We have run workshops and have constant engagements with our members on safe working and they have been working hard to put in place and source Plexiglas, floor markings, signage, PPE and all the equipment and training materials that they need. The retail industry is therefore well placed to open up as and when the Scottish Government allows it.

On the issue of 2m versus 1m distancing—I think that in other countries it is somewhere in between—we will follow whatever guidance comes out, but my understanding is that the Prime Minister has said that the UK Government is officially reviewing that issue. We talked to the

Scottish economy secretary, who made it clear that such matters are always under review. As and when the guidance changes, we will respond to that.

The economic case is self-explanatory and has been made, and we have mentioned it as well. If fewer people are eligible to go into your shop or hospitality business, you will have less income but probably the same fixed costs, so you will make less money or even a loss. The economic case has been made, but public health considerations are the major factor in all of this.

Annabelle Ewing: Helen, from the perspective of the shopworkers, are your member unions happy that the preparation has been done? Are the shopworkers ready to go, feeling safe and secure in the workplace?

Helen Martin: As David Lonsdale said, the Scottish Retail Consortium and USDAW have been working closely together and they produced a safe working guide very early on. That is an example of a sector and a union working well together to build the confidence of the workforce. That was partly because essential retailing was continuing and it was necessary to build confidence very quickly. At the beginning, there were, perhaps, some prickly discussions about how to protect staff and how to put Perspex screens at tills for example. Those issues have been worked through, and the sector is relatively well prepared to move through the crisis.

Where difficulties might start to arise is more about the public space—the queueing to get into stores and high streets might become more problematic to manage as more shop fronts open when greater numbers of people are circulating. Some of our disabled workers committees have expressed anxiety about how disabled people move around space when there might be queues on the street, they cannot see the signage and there is a high level of social expectation that people maintain distancing.

There are challenges that still need to be worked through, but the sector is in a reasonably good place.

On the issue of 2m versus 1m, the union's perspective is that 2m is safe. There seems to be good evidence to suggest that 2m is significantly safer than 1m, so our desire would be for the Government to maintain the 2m rule.

When it comes to confidence, it is important to proceed with the 2m rule at this point. We have been telling people for a long time that that is what is safe. Unfortunately, the tone of the debate during the past couple of weeks has very much been about the economic case for making it 1m, which creates the idea that health and safety are being traded off for economic reasons. I do not

think that that is a sensible approach. It is much better to think about how we get people confident about going back to work and moving around in their community, and how we ensure that they can abide by the expectations. We need to continue to see the R number and the case numbers fall. If we need to review issues through a phased approach, perhaps that would be appropriate, but it would not be appropriate to make a sudden change because of economic considerations about the number of people who can go into shops and restaurants.

Fundamentally, people will not go to those places if they do not feel that they are safe. In some ways, it is a self-defeating argument. Ultimately, the most important thing is to try to do what is safest, gets the virus under control and brings our economy slowly back to where it needs to be.

Annabelle Ewing: Thank you for that full answer. Public confidence about retail shopping is key. We must get the customers through the door, and a lot of issues are connected with that, as you have outlined.

The Convener: I remind colleagues and witnesses of the need for brevity when asking and answering questions, given that the clock is ticking.

Adam Tomkins: In response to Helen Martin's comments, my focus is very much on public health, and that focus is on understanding the public health harms not only of Covid but of lockdown. We know that maintaining 2m indefinitely will cost hundreds of thousands of jobs. That would be not just an economic problem but a massive public health problem. The idea that there is any crude trade-off between the economy on the one hand and public health on the other is an unfair reflection of the debate in Scotland.

I want to follow-up Annabelle Ewing's questions about the debate on 2m versus a shorter distance, whether that be 1m or 1.5m. My first question is for David Lonsdale, who said a few moments ago that, before the beginning of lockdown, there were 240,000 workers in retail in Scotland. How many of those jobs will be lost if we stick at 2m and how many could be saved if we were to reduce the indoor social distancing rule from 2m to 1m?

11:15

David Lonsdale: Thank you for that tough question. We simply have not done any analysis on that front, so the short answer is that I cannot give you an answer.

However, I can say that, prior to the crisis, 240,000 people were working in retail in Scotland and that the figures that we have published today for the second full month of retail sales under

lockdown show that sales have collapsed over the past two months. Sales were down by almost 30 per cent overall last month, and they were even worse the month before. In the non-food space, sales were down by around 40 to 50 per cent last month. That cannot continue without there being a real impact on jobs, and not just jobs in retail; it affects jobs in the supply chain. Obviously, the retail sector is represented right across Scotland, in every constituency and local authority area. We are talking about people's families right across the country. It is not some remote sector that is being affected.

That is a long-winded way of not answering your question. We simply have not done that analysis. Clearly, if fewer people go into shops, there will be less income and revenue and therefore, ultimately, fewer people will be employed.

Adam Tomkins: Thank you, but I gently suggest that it would be extremely helpful if you did that analysis. In the hospitality sector, for example, we know that 75 per cent of pubs, bars, cafes and restaurants cannot operate profitably and cannot even make ends meet if social distancing is maintained at 2m, and that the number would drop significantly if social distancing was reduced to 1m. We know that tens of thousands of jobs in the hospitality industry, if not hundreds of thousands, will be saved if we change the rule.

It would be helpful to know what proportion of jobs could be saved in the retail sector if the same move was made. Right across the political spectrum in the Government and Opposition alike, we are all trying to find a balanced and proportionate approach to the emergence from lockdown. The more we know about the scale of the numbers of jobs that could be saved if we were to take various measures, the better we will be able to do our jobs and try to get that balance right and achieve proportionality.

I have a question for Helen Martin. In response to Murdo Fraser's opening question, you said that measures need to be put in place to protect jobs. Why is one of those measures not a reduction in social distancing from 2m to 1m? As a follow-up, can you advise us whether the impact of the 2m rule is uniform across the workforce or whether it has a particularly adverse impact on lower-paid workers and/or women workers?

Helen Martin: The point that I am trying to make is that, for the past three months, the UK Government has told us that what is safe is staying 2m apart—that is what we have been told "safe" looks like. For many workers across society, staying safe through the pandemic is their number 1 priority. It is very odd for unions' position not to be to save jobs at all costs. It is a departure for me not to make the argument that we should do

everything possible to save jobs. However, my members are telling me that, first and foremost, they want to save lives. They want to know that, when they go to work, they do not have to trade off their health against economic reasons. They want to know that they are not bringing home a potentially fatal disease to their families or potentially vulnerable or shielding people in their households. It is crucial that people feel safe in their workplaces and in moving around in society.

The UK Government chose a distance of 2m at the beginning of the crisis because that was the advice coming from SAGE—the scientific advisory group for emergencies. It is my understanding that SAGE is still saying that there is a difference in safety levels between 2m and 1m, and that 2m might actually be up to 10 times safer than 1m. There are also potential differences based on whether people are inside or outside that need to be taken into account. Our question is this: why would we suddenly move from 2m to 1m in the middle of the crisis, given that we set out with a 2m distancing approach on the basis that that was judged to be the safest way to work?

I totally appreciate the anxiety in certain sectors. It might be that we simply need to support those sectors, and continue to support workers, through the crisis until we have the virus sufficiently under control to enable us to take different action. It is notable that New Zealand has now opened its economy without restriction because the number of coronavirus cases has been at zero for a number of weeks.

It is possible for us to get to a position where we do not need social distancing. The issue that we have at the minute is that we are simply not there yet. To try to rush a change from 2m to 1m would simply create further difficulties, because it would remove workers' confidence and faith that their jobs are safe.

Adam Tomkins talked about the impact on low-paid female workers in particular. He is absolutely right on that—they are the people who are most exposed to hardship in society, so we have a duty to continue to support them. That is why I have talked about the job retention scheme and potentially moving support from employers to workers over this period. It is a difficult challenge, but we have to prioritise the safety messages.

David Lonsdale: We will take Adam Tomkins's point away and have a look at it, but the substantive point—to go right back to the beginning—is about getting shops open and starting to trade, and ensuring that they can do so safely while still generating an income. The question of 2m versus 1m is a big issue, but it is secondary to the need to get shops up and running again and to allow them to do so safely.

The Convener: We will move on. I call Ross Greer.

Ross Greer: Thank you, convener—I apologise for missing the first few minutes of the session; I had to drop out to attend another meeting. I might have missed some substantive aspects of the answers to my questions.

I will start with a question to Helen Martin. Workplace health and safety union representatives will be essential to ensuring that workers are protected as we ease lockdown and reopen businesses and other workplaces. However, the prevalence of such representatives is incredibly patchy. I am used to working with sectors such as education—I know that college lecturers, for example, are very organised around such issues and there is a high density of union membership in that sector. However, in other workplaces, there is no union recognition at all, never mind a union health and safety rep. What can Government do to ensure that the prevalence and density of health and safety reps is maximised as we ease lockdown and get workplaces going again?

Helen Martin: We are already looking at that issue, and we are creating a roving health and safety rep model. The model is not new—we have previously used it in agriculture and attempted to use it in construction. It allows trained health and safety reps to support risk assessment and carry out inspections in workplaces within their sector.

The joint enforcement statement by the Health and Safety Executive, local authorities and the Scottish Government highlighted that employers or members of the workforce in a non-unionised sector could request support from union health and safety representatives, who would help them to conduct risk assessments.

We have seen that being used by the construction sector as it starts to go through its phases. Union health and safety inspectors have been going on to sites across Scotland to check the safety measures that are in place and to discuss with employers what best practice looks like on their sites. That has been successful and there has been good feedback from the union and the employers on that.

The STUC has been training health and safety representatives. We had a seminar with more than 300 representatives last night and we will be doing several more. We have also set up a specific mailbox so that employers or workers can request support from health and safety representatives. We are trying our best to deal with that issue and to use union health and safety representatives as a resource through this crisis. Obviously environmental health officers and the Health and Safety Executive have seen a reduction in the number of inspectors during the past 10 years

because of austerity, so the chances of a workplace being inspected by those enforcement agencies is much lower than it has been at any time in the past.

Ross Greer: Thank you. It is really good to hear that about the construction sector. Are there any other sectors that you are more concerned about, where there is much less knowledge that support can be requested by the employer or by the workers? Will any sectors need a deliberate communication effort to make sure that such support is available to them?

Helen Martin: Hospitality is a difficult sector. On the whole, it is not used to doing risk assessments. Obviously, the construction sector has high safety requirements, and it is used to working within a health and safety model. The hospitality sector has less workforce engagement, and there is much less density in that sector. It could particularly benefit from that way of working, especially given that there will be real challenges around managing Covid and social distancing in it.

Ross Greer: I have a final question for David Lonsdale. We are coming out of the public health crisis that we have been going through, but the wider economic crisis will go on for much longer, and the poverty and other challenges that will come with that will have long-term effects. A period of acute crisis is certainly coming up over the summer, and many of your members—particularly smaller businesses—will need significant Government assistance for some time simply to survive and protect jobs. At the other end of the spectrum—most obviously for supermarkets—this has not been the worst period. There was an initial period of a couple of weeks of record-breaking profits and, since then, those businesses have done not too badly.

At the start of the crisis, pretty much every major supermarket put significant amounts of money into food poverty relief efforts through donations to FareShare and the like, and that was welcome. Tesco gave something like £12 million to £15 million over the course of 12 weeks, but that 12-week period is now at an end. Have you had a conversation with your larger members—those that are not in a state of profound crisis—about what more they can do during the summer to help with the relief effort that will be required, particularly around issues such as food poverty?

David Lonsdale: We published a report in January, I think, on charitable giving in the sector in Scotland during the previous 12 months. The figure that we had was just shy of £16 million. Because the retail sector is consumer facing and is in every part of Scotland, it really knows its responsibilities, and it is an active player in local communities.

Your turn of phrase was astute when you talked about the past three months and grocery and supermarket retailers. The idea that things have been going great guns for them, and that it has all been plain sailing with no costs and low hassle in terms of profit is simply not true. As I said earlier, grocery sales are up, but there has been a lot of work behind that to deal with high absenteeism, recruit additional people and so on.

11:30

Retailers have been ensuring that online deliveries are ramped up, for vulnerable and shielding individuals in particular. There has been a tonne of investment in social distancing, personal protective equipment and associated issues. A lot has been going in during the past three months in particular.

I expect that, as long as the industry continues to survive and thrive, supermarkets and grocers will continue to play a part in their local communities and try every day to earn their trust. Their support for food banks and for people who are less well off or in need does not simply reflect what has happened in the past few months; it has been on-going for a number of years. I have always found supermarkets and grocers to be open to new ideas and suggestions, whether in public or private, and I am sure that that support will continue.

Stewart Stevenson: I want to ask David Lonsdale about the impact of Covid on an aspect of the retail market that has already been changing, with the move from footfall in stores to clicks on keyboards—to online purchasing, in other words.

My question to Helen Martin also relates to my interest in that area. To what extent are stores that might be experiencing a downturn in footfall sales helping members of staff to become part of the new workforce that will service the online world? Broadly speaking, it is quite likely that they might end up working at home.

Perhaps David Lonsdale can go first, convenor, and then you might choose to bring in Helen Martin.

David Lonsdale: For non-essential retailers, online sales have really been the only source of income for the past 13 weeks or so. After today's meeting, I can share with the committee our up-to-date figures on all that.

Essentially, over the past three months, online sales for food retailers have gone from somewhere in the region of 7 per cent of total food sales to about 13 per cent, so that capacity has effectively doubled. That has been well documented, and a number of MSPs and others

were in touch with us about that during the first couple of months of the crisis. In the broader non-food retail sector, there was quite a high penetration of online sales before the crisis. Somewhere in the region of 25 per cent of non-food retail sales were done online, and that figure has grown exponentially over the past 12 weeks or so.

Notwithstanding that, at the end of the day the figures are still bad, as the vast majority of retail sales come from physical premises. I would say that the crisis has accelerated some of the trends that we saw beforehand, such as the structural change in the industry, the question mark over our town and city centres and retail destinations, and the whole issue of the cost base.

One of the lessons that I draw from all that is that we need not only to consider the issues around getting shops to reopen and how we can manage queues for different shops where there is potential for dispute or conflict—Helen Martin mentioned that earlier—but to develop a substantive plan to rejuvenate our town centres and retail destinations over the next year or so. That is partly about giving shoppers, consumers and others the confidence to come back to our town centres and shop safely, but we also need to give them a more compelling reason to do so. Some town centres are not in a great state, and there will simply not be the footfall and the custom that shops need over the coming months.

Collectively, the Government, councils, business improvement districts, retailers and others need to come together on that and have a plan of action. In Wales, a ministerial task force to rejuvenate town centres has just been set up. We are quite attracted to that model, and I think that that should happen here.

Helen Martin: I absolutely agree with David Lonsdale's plea for a high street task force. That is absolutely essential. There is a real need to think about how we can rejuvenate high streets and use that community space.

On the shift in workforce profile, it is interesting to note that the types of jobs in traditional bricks-and-mortar retail and more online retail are quite different. Online retail is built on warehousing and delivery, and its workforce is often very different. It tends to be a male workforce, and delivery drivers tend to be self-employed, so they have no access to annual leave or sick pay. The quality of warehouse and delivery driver jobs is potentially lower than that of the high street retail jobs that they are replacing. Although retail is traditionally quite a low-paid sector, it has reasonable fair-work outcomes with regard to security, flexibility and voice, because a lot of the shops are unionised.

The change will potentially create more insecure work in society and reduce wellbeing aspects because of how the jobs work. The jobs are much less flexible than those that they are replacing in the traditional retail sector. Quite a lot needs to be looked at to ensure that we maintain good fair work outcomes if the change continues. *[Interruption.]*

Gillian Martin: I will give Helen Martin a chance to deal with the situation, which we all have to deal in these virtual meetings, and wait until she is ready.

The Convener: We will pause for a moment.

Gillian Martin: I say to Helen that she should not panic. While I was convening my Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee meeting on Monday, I had a situation with two dogs fighting. We all have such trials and tribulations at the moment.

Helen is back with us. What are the STUC's feelings on a universal basic income? You mentioned that the so-called precariat has been exposed as never before, and the pandemic has particularly affected the vast numbers of people who work in the creative industries, the majority of whom are freelancers and are ill-served by the current income protection measures. Those measures have largely been welcomed, but there have been gaps, and elected representatives are hearing more and more from people who are in precarious or freelance work and have fallen through the gaps.

Does the STUC support a universal basic income, given what you said about supporting people, providing a fallback and having more of a wellbeing economy?

The Convener: We are a little bit off topic, but it is fine for Helen Martin to answer briefly.

Helen Martin: That is a really good question. We are interested in the concept of a universal basic income. We completely recognise the issues that Gillian Martin has identified, but our worry is that such an income would potentially be set far too low and therefore undermine other workers' rights. We would not want a universal basic income to take away the right to a minimum wage that is consistently uplifted and that keeps people out of poverty, and we would not want it to impact on maternity or sick pay.

We are interested in looking at the concept, but we would have to be really careful about how a universal basic income was designed. It would have to be set at a relatively high level if it was to have a positive impact.

Willie Coffey: At the start of the lockdown, I had a number of representations from workers who were really worried about their safety. Many

people were being required by their employers to go into work despite their having expressed concern about their safety. Has that been dealt with, by and large, or are workers still expressing concern about the safety arrangements in their workplaces?

Helen Martin: I know what you are talking about, because at that time we were inundated with concerns about safety and the continuation of non-essential work—we had to work through that for weeks and weeks. As we move forward, we must reflect on the need for better definitions of “essential” and “non-essential”. We should know who is in our NHS supply chain, for example.

In unionised workplaces, unions have agreed ways of working with employers, and home working policies and workplace risk assessments have been put in place. On the whole, most issues have been worked through. However, I am certain that things have not changed in other sectors—particularly ones that are not unionised—and workers have simply had to accept the situation with which they were presented.

I would not want to paint a picture in which everything was perfect in the economy. However, for the affiliates that I deal with, a huge number of issues were slowly worked through in the normal industrial relations processes.

Willie Coffey: Things certainly seem to have calmed down a bit since the early days of the lockdown—I get that impression from my case load and constituents. However, I do not know whether that is because there are more satisfactory arrangements or because people have just given up and are resigned to going back to work in the conditions in which they are asked to work. Are you monitoring the situation? Can you provide data to help us in that regard?

Helen Martin: We do not have data as such, but we know that, to begin with, there were a huge number of safety concerns in many workplaces where work continued, such as in essential food manufacturing. Employers felt that social distancing measures could not be applied. However, all those issues were dealt with, usually by employers buying in PPE, putting in Perspex screens and making other adaptations to the workplace. We have examples of how sectors went through the process of changing workplaces to make them safe.

My feedback from the workplace is that, in general, the arrangements for the tasks that workers are undertaking are working quite well, but work is still needed on social interactions. It is about what happens when people go for smoke breaks or for their lunch. Those aspects are still potentially causing problems.

It is interesting that the HSE has fed back to us that it thinks that the biggest failing in workplaces is in hygiene measures. That is probably true. There has been a huge focus on social distancing and I think that employers understand that, but the need to clean continually and provide hand sanitiser is probably less high in employers’ minds. We might need to work on that.

Willie Coffey: On a related matter, I want to ask David Lonsdale about the supply chain for the textiles industry, which we rely on for clothing retail in particular. Are we concerned at all about the conditions in which workers are asked to work in third-world countries or in China or Malaysia, which supply a heck of a lot of the clothes that are bought online and in shops? Is there any innovation, particularly in the clothing retail sector, to create a more localised industry that can respond to demand in Scotland and the rest of the UK?

11:45

The Convener: That question is a bit off topic, but if David Lonsdale wants to respond briefly, that is fine.

David Lonsdale: I am not sure whether the first part of the question was asked in the context of the coronavirus, but I am happy to write to the member or the committee to provide a fuller briefing. Most retailers are reflecting on their supply chains as a result of the crisis. Retailers cannot operate unless they have a good relationship with their suppliers, but those relationships have been tested in many quarters during the crisis. I am happy to respond in more detail in writing.

Forgive me—I cannot remember the second part of the question, but I want to pick up on a question that was put to Helen Martin of the STUC. In our joint publication with USDAW on implementing social distancing, which we produced at the end of April, there are sections on what to do in staff canteens, what to do if people have smoke breaks in shared areas and things like that. We have worked closely with USDAW in particular, and it and the GMB have been on the Scottish Government’s advisory group on opening up the retail sector and putting in place safe working guidance, which has also been really valuable.

The Convener: Monica Lennon wants to come back in. I ask her to be brief.

Monica Lennon: I have a question about testing. A paper by the STUC on principles for relaxing lockdown says:

“Testing has a key role to play in ensuring that the economy can safely function going forward.”

However, it expresses concern that

“At present testing is not fit for purpose with key workers struggling to access tests”.

It goes on, but Helen Martin will be familiar with what it says. I ask her to expand on that, given that the committee’s focus is on how we ease lockdown. Has the experience improved?

I also ask David Lonsdale to comment on the test and protect approach from the perspective of the Scottish Retail Consortium, although only if he feels that he needs to do so.

Helen Martin: That paper was written several weeks ago when we were extremely concerned about social care workers getting access to testing. At that point, there was no routine testing for social care workers. They were eligible for testing if they were symptomatic, but they often had to go to out-of-town testing centres at airports and places like that. People in the social care workforce often do not drive, so many workers simply could not access a test. We raised that issue with the Scottish Government repeatedly.

There has been movement on that. I think that people can now get at-home testing and there is much more access to testing through health boards and the UK Government’s testing regime. There is now routine testing at social care workplaces, although there are still issues about the roll-out of that. We need to make sure that all social care workers get access to those tests.

There are also still issues on decisions about routine key worker testing, and there is potentially more that we could do in that area. The Fire Brigades Union flagged up an issue the other day. It said that, although there is asymptomatic testing for firefighters, it can be done only at national testing centres, which are in specific locations. The FBU is worried about its workers’ ability to access those tests in reality. There are still issues in the testing regime.

What we are most concerned about at present is employers’ understanding of the regime and the contact tracing elements. We want to make sure that proper contact tracing is being done and that workers feel confident enough to self-isolate and know that they will have an income if they do so.

There is still an issue with how low sick pay is, particularly statutory sick pay, and how many workers are carved out of that entitlement entirely. That creates a public health challenge, because there is a disincentive for people to get tested or to report certain contacts if they know that people’s incomes will be put at risk. Those issues still need to be worked through.

David Lonsdale: We are monitoring the test and protect approach. Last week, we had an example of a grocery retailer whose shift was

taken out of the online deliveries at a particular store because of the new regime that has been in put in place.

The Convener: That brings our evidence session to a close. I thank Helen Martin and David Lonsdale for their time and for answering our questions, and I thank all my fellow committee members for their questions.

Meeting closed at 11:51.

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