



**OFFICIAL REPORT**  
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

# Members' Virtual Question Time

**Friday 17 April 2020**

**Session 5**



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This virtual question time was agreed to by the Parliamentary Bureau but was not formally agreed to by the Scottish Parliament through a business motion under rule 5.4 of standing orders. It was therefore not a meeting of the Parliament and this transcript is not a Scottish Parliament *Official Report* under rule 16.2 of standing orders. For the completeness of the record of parliamentary scrutiny, the transcript is nevertheless being included as part of the Scottish Parliament *Official Report* archive and has been sent for legal deposit.



# Scottish Parliament

Friday 17 April 2020

*[The Presiding Officer opened the meeting at 14:30]*

## Members' Virtual Question Time

**The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh):** Hello and welcome to the Scottish Parliament's virtual question time. I am joined today by more than 20 members from their homes and constituencies around the country and by four Cabinet ministers who are responsible for the Scottish Government's response to the coronavirus outbreak. We will go straight to questions.

### Covid-19 (Personal Protective Equipment)

**Bruce Crawford (Stirling) (SNP):** The provision of personal protective equipment for our fantastic staff in the national health service and the care sector is of vital importance. Will the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport provide an update on the availability and distribution of the necessary PPE for the emergency services, health and social care workers, and third sector partners who are working with vulnerable people?

I take the opportunity to note what a remarkable job the cabinet secretary is doing in such trying circumstances.

**The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Jeane Freeman):** Thank you, Bruce—that is kind.

I will deal with the two points separately. On availability, there are primarily two routes to our national PPE stockpile for the NHS in Scotland. There are the orders that we place with suppliers for a range of PPE items, which produces the bulk of our stockpile. To supplement that, we are part of a United Kingdom-wide procurement exercise with our colleagues in Wales, Northern Ireland and England. The social care sector procures its own PPE, but we have agreed to top that up, given that the sector has additional demand to meet in this emergency situation.

Notwithstanding the global challenge with PPE due to many countries chasing the same items, our stock remains viable at this point across all PPE items. Our staff work constantly to check that the orders that we have made will be delivered on time and in the volume that we have ordered. We also have a mutual aid arrangement around the UK for when it is possible to help each other out.

We have improved distribution to ensure that we can cope with the demand in primary and social care, and we now have four direct distribution routes. The first route is to NHS health boards,

where there is a single point of contact to ensure that the PPE that each board has ordered and received is distributed around its hospital settings.

The second route is direct to primary care—to general practices in particular, but also to district and community nurses and other family practitioners, whom I have spoken about before.

The third distribution route is to the hubs that are largely assisting local authorities and care-at-home staff and that were delivering to care homes up until today. The final route is through the direct deliveries of additional PPE supplies that, from today, we are making to each individual care home.

This is a work in progress, and we continue to try to improve it. We have a dedicated email address for people who work in health and social care to tell us about any problems that they encounter, and those emails are monitored by ministers so that we can act on them straight away.

**The Presiding Officer:** Thank you very much, cabinet secretary. It is early on in the session, but I encourage the provision of slightly more concise answers, because we have a lot of members to get through in the time available.

### Covid-19 (Personal Protective Equipment)

**Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con):** Today, the Scottish Government made a further change to the distribution of personal protective equipment in Scotland; it is the third change in as many weeks. Further to that response, how many pieces of PPE will be distributed to care homes in the coming weeks? Will sheltered housing and housing associations be included?

**The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Jeane Freeman):** The change that we have made today has been made in direct response to a request from Scottish Care and the third sector providers—the suppliers of care homes, if you like. The Scottish Government is a Government that is reacting to issues and concerns as they arise.

I do not have the numbers to hand, but I would be happy to supply them to Mr Briggs after this session. The other areas that he mentioned are the responsibility of local authorities. National health service staff will be supplied with PPE for the work that they have to do in such areas, but where a sheltered home complex is run by a local authority or a private provider, that authority or provider is of course responsible for ensuring that its staff are given the PPE that they need.

### Covid-19 (Business Support)

**Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP):** I very much welcome the

support that has so far been provided to businesses by the United Kingdom and Scottish Governments, but there are still businesses, including some in my constituency of Clackmannanshire and Dunblane, that are in danger of falling through the cracks. How will the additional support for business that the Cabinet Secretary for Finance announced earlier this week help to support those businesses that are currently facing challenges while they are waiting for other funding streams to become available?

**The Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Kate Forbes):** I am acutely aware of the pressures on businesses not just in Keith Brown's constituency but across the country.

We have now exceeded the consequential funding that we received from the UK Government for business support, taking overall support to £2.3 billion. The announcement this week of an additional phase of funding will involve the provision of £120 million to extend the small business grant scheme and—this is critical in the context of Keith Brown's question—£100 million to support businesses that have fallen through the cracks. In particular, self-employed people who became self-employed more recently will not gain from the UK Government's scheme for the self-employed.

We have tailored our support package to the Scottish economy, where most local economies are dependent on small businesses. That funding, which will be delivered through local authorities and our enterprise agencies, will be available in May at the latest, ahead of the UK Government's June deadline for support for the self-employed.

#### **Covid-19 (Personal Protective Equipment)**

**Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab):** My question is personal protective equipment. I hear what the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport said about this being a work in progress, but care homes are at the epicentre of the crisis. One in four Covid-19 deaths has happened in a care home, and I was extremely concerned to hear Theresa Fyffe, the director of the Royal College of Nursing Scotland, say just two days ago that nursing staff in care homes do not have adequate supplies of PPE. At this stage in the crisis, surely just one care worker not having enough PPE is one too many.

**The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Jeane Freeman):** I am a little surprised at that because, yesterday, when I spoke to Theresa Fyffe of the RCN, along with the British Medical Association, neither organisation had particular issues to raise with me with respect to PPE, but I will, of course, follow up on that.

I again make the point about the way in which PPE is supplied to care homes. Monica Lennon will know that the majority of our care home sector consists of private providers. Under their Care Inspectorate registration, they have the responsibility for ensuring that they supply their staff with the right PPE and training to ensure that they can do the job that they are asked to do. In the context of the current emergency, we have agreed to supplement that provision. We have been in weekly contact with Donald Macaskill of Scottish Care and have responded in the context of the distribution route that I just mentioned—the direct supply—and by picking up where there are particular issues around PPE.

We are now in day 108 of this virus, so it is reasonable to say that it is not so much a work in progress as constant improvement in what we do, in order to ensure that we continue to deliver what staff need, and that, where there are particular issues, we pick up on them straight away. Therefore, if the RCN has an issue, I will speak to it again this afternoon, and make sure that we act on that as quickly as we can.

#### **Covid-19 (Domestic Abuse)**

**Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP):** Will the Cabinet Secretary for Justice outline what support the Scottish Government is providing for those who are at heightened risk of domestic abuse while lockdown restrictions are in place?

**The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Humza Yousaf):** I thank Rona Mackay for an extremely important question.

The Government is providing financial support to organisations such as Scottish Women's Aid and Rape Crisis Scotland, but we know that it is about more than just financial support. The message from the Government, from support organisations, and from Police Scotland, which has been extremely proactive in this matter, is aligned and unequivocal: regardless of how busy Police Scotland or other services may be, if someone is feeling under threat or being harmed by domestic abuse in any of its forms, they must call the police, and the police will not only treat it as a priority but take a zero-tolerance approach to domestic abuse.

Concerns do however continue. We know for example that, because of the lockdown measures, perpetrators of domestic abuse will be in the house 24/7, other than when they go out for necessities or their daily exercise, and that may leave little room for victims—including children—to be able to access support services. A lot more work is being done with our third sector partners, and with Police Scotland, to see what more we can do. However, let the message be absolutely

unequivocal: there will be a zero-tolerance approach, whether there be a lockdown or not, to domestic abuse.

### **Covid-19 (Second Homes)**

#### **John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Green):**

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice will be aware that there are a number of second homes in the Highlands. My constituents are deeply concerned that the owners of those properties are ignoring all advice and are continuing to travel to the Highlands. Will the cabinet secretary outline what the Scottish Government has done about that, and what Police Scotland is doing about it, and will he consider what additional measures could be put in place to protect my constituents from those selfish individuals?

#### **The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Humza Yousaf):**

John Finnie is correct to say that that activity is selfish. The Government has been very robust, not just in our guidance but in the whole of our messaging, and Police Scotland has been equally robust in its guidance and approach. I will be happy to speak to John Finnie offline to get the details of that breach of the guidance. I speak to the chief constable and Police Scotland on almost a daily basis. John Finnie is absolutely right, and I echo his comments. Ignoring the guidance is not just selfish, as the people who are doing so are putting themselves at potential harm. They are putting local services—in the Highlands in this case—under undue strain, and action will be taken against them. I am more than happy to take details from John Finnie offline and relay them to Police Scotland, and I am sure that action will be taken.

### **Covid-19 (Personal Protective Equipment for Police Officers)**

**Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con):** Police officers are on the front line and they must have the correct kit. I understand that officers have been issued with single-use surgical masks, with a promise that those will protect them. However, the Scottish Police Federation is clear in its view that those masks do not offer that protection. What is the evidence referred to in Police Scotland's press release yesterday, and will the Cabinet Secretary for Justice publish that evidence?

**The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Humza Yousaf):** First and foremost, the full, enhanced personal protective equipment includes filtering face-piece masks. Police Scotland have sufficient levels of stock. That type of mask is used when police officers have a high risk of being in contact with someone who displays potential Covid-19 symptoms. For all other situations, in which for example it may not be possible to apply social distancing measures, because of the activities that

the police carry out, surgical masks of the type that Liam Kerr refers to will be made available.

That is very much based on and aligned with the public health guidance that has been issued not only here in Scotland but by Public Health England. Therefore the guidance that applies United Kingdom-wide, or four nations-wide, is also being applied here; it is also no different from the guidance that has been issued to police forces in England and Wales.

I saw the Scottish Police Federation's concerns in the press. I understand that those were based on advice that it had received from the expert panels that it had put together. I have not seen that advice, but I note that the federation has said that it will make it public shortly. I look forward to receiving that, at which point I will be more than happy to feed it into Health Protection Scotland for it to take a view on.

Let me absolutely clear that, having spoken to the chief constable almost daily, I know that the safety of his officers and staff and, of course, of the public is paramount in his mind.

### **Covid-19 (Shielded and Vulnerable People)**

#### **Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP):**

I welcome the prioritising of online access to supermarket deliveries for people who have received shielding letters, but could that be extended to those in vulnerable groups? People in their 70s, 80s and 90s do not qualify for such priority, and those with underlying conditions are finding it next to impossible to get delivery slots from any of the major supermarkets.

#### **The Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government (Aileen Campbell):**

The Scottish Government is constantly working to support people who are among the most vulnerable but who are not on the shielded list, to ensure that they have access to food. Alongside the work and effort that have been going into engaging with supermarkets, and the pleas that have been made to the public not to use online facilities if they are able to get to supermarkets themselves so that such facilities can be freed up for vulnerable people, we have been constantly engaging with supermarkets to see what more we can do to support the work that Christine Grahame has described as being so necessary.

That is also why we have established a national phone line—the 0800 111 4000 helpline—to support people who perhaps do not have their usual social networks around them but who also do not want to go out into public places because of their vulnerability. They now have a phone line on which they can be directed to their local authority

for access to the support that is on offer in their area.

I should point out that we have also funded a number of organisations, one of which—the Food Train—operates in Christine Grahame's area in the Borders and provides support to 3,000 older people across nine local authority areas. We are therefore working not only with supermarkets and local authorities but with third sector and community organisations to ensure that a package of support is there to plug the gaps that Christine Grahame has described, and so that people will feel that, somewhere, someone is listening and will help them to have access to food.

I reiterate that we are always keen to ensure that we make such services as good as they can be. If members have details of problems I ask them to let us know so that we can work out what more we can do to ensure that organisations such as those that we have either funded or supported are able to provide them and their constituents with the support that they need at what is a distressing time for so many people.

#### **Covid-19 (Business Support)**

**Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD):** I thank the Cabinet Secretary for Finance for the change of heart that she showed earlier this week by allowing businesses that operate from multiple premises to make more than a single application for grant support. I encourage her to go further in that process by addressing the remaining gaps: businesses that operate from people's homes or are not registered for business rates are still falling through the cracks. I appreciate that that is a broad category. In my Orkney constituency it ranges from bed and breakfasts to boat charterers and from businesses making small models to those operating surveying services. I commend Kate Forbes for the effort that she has put in over recent weeks, but what reassurances can she offer that businesses in that group will not be left high and dry?

**The Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Kate Forbes):** I hope that that shows that I am always keen to listen. I certainly know that that issue, which Liam McArthur has raised a number of times, was a key driver in changing the eligibility criteria on Wednesday.

I can confirm that £215 million-worth of grants have been distributed through the non-domestic rates system. I hope that that will have benefited Liam McArthur's constituents. However, it is important to note that our support goes beyond the grants and non-domestic rates relief. For example, I know that today's announcement on further support for the fishing industry, which takes overall support for the seafood industry to almost £23

million, will be of immense value to his constituents.

On those who are falling through the cracks, although we have lobbied the United Kingdom Government hard to expand support for the self-employed, we have announced this week a further £100 million fund to support self-employed people and viable microbusinesses and small and medium-sized enterprises that have not been getting the support that they need to date. That fund will be channelled through local authorities and our enterprise agencies to target in particular newly self-employed people and businesses that are ineligible for other forms of support. I have in mind the tourism industry in particular with the fund. Applications to the fund will open by the end of the month in the hope that payments can be made over the course of June, because I am mindful of how critical cash flow is at the moment, particularly in rural areas, where people often have more than one job.

I am happy to keep colleagues updated on progress on that funding.

#### **Covid-19 (Investigation and Enforcement Powers)**

**Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP):** At this time, when we are all having to make changes to the way in which we live our lives to save lives, what investigation and enforcement powers do Police Scotland and its partners have to deal with businesses and employers who put their workforce in harm's way by not fully implementing social distancing measures?

**The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Humza Yousaf):** First and foremost, the guidance and the law [*Temporary Loss of Sound.*] is essential business in helping us in our fight against the covid-19 pandemic, it should, of course, be closed. A precautionary approach should be taken. Businesses that remain open should, of course, apply social distancing measures where that is possible, and every effort should be made to allow people to work from home.

On the specific question, Police Scotland has the power to issue prohibition notices where there is not compliance. There is also the power to fine if prohibition notices are not followed, if that is necessary. [*Temporary Loss of Sound.*] If fines are not paid, people could, of course, be taken to court, and there are potentially unlimited fines in that action. A number of business premises have already been closed and given prohibition notices by Police Scotland, although I am afraid that I do not have the exact number of those in front of me.

I encourage anybody who has concerns about local businesses first and foremost to speak to their local authority and to engage with the

business directly. However, we should be in no doubt at all that, where the police need to take enforcement action [*Temporary Loss of Sound.*] against the law and what is in the guidance, they will do that.

### **Covid-19 (Business Support)**

**Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):** In England, a business that is eligible for grant funding can receive the same support for each business premises that it owns. In spite of the improvements that have been made in Scotland, a business will receive a 100 per cent grant for only one property and a 75 per cent grant for additional properties. Will the Scottish Government now replicate the United Kingdom grant funding, as promised, in order that we can support Scottish businesses during the pandemic?

**The Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Kate Forbes):** We are going further than the UK Government scheme. That is why we have exceeded the Barnett consequentialities that are available to support businesses. The announcement this week reflected the comments that have been made by businesses, to ensure that more businesses get support.

Rhoda Grant will know that the Scottish economy, particularly in the region that she represents, is far more dependent on small businesses. Our scheme in Scotland ensures that far more small businesses get support because our cut-off threshold is much higher in Scotland than in the rest of the United Kingdom, and eligible businesses with multiple properties will now get further grant funding.

Rhoda Grant will also know that the grants are based on the small business bonus scheme; by design, the scheme in England is essentially restricted to one property. In relation to the £10,000 grants, we are now giving far more money to multiple properties in Scotland than businesses would get south of the border.

It is important—whether it is now or through the recovery period—to tailor our support to the Scottish economy and to ensure that we provide support to particular sectors, as we have done again today for the fishing sector. It is critically important that we push that funding as far as possible at a time when businesses are all struggling; money should be distributed widely rather than being centred in a few hands.

### **Covid-19 (Rent Issues)**

**Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP):** Many families are struggling and feeling concerned at the moment; some will be struggling to meet their rent payments. What support is there for tenants who find themselves in that position

and where should they go for the help and advice that they need at this time?

**The Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government (Aileen Campbell):** The Government immediately realised that rent would become quite a challenge for many people if they were plunged into financial hardship as a result of the pandemic. That is why rent provisions and provisions to avoid evictions due to rent arrears form part of the emergency legislation that we passed.

We understood from the get-go that rent was an issue that we needed to look at to ensure that we could give people reassurance that, among the things that they are having to cope with, losing their home through rent arrears would not be one of them.

There is lots of good advice on the mygov.scot website, including advice for tenants about some of the new legal provisions. People should also be signposted to advice on discretionary housing payments or to the Scottish welfare fund for other financial support.

Forby what we as a Government are doing in terms of action and financial support, I also point to the vibrant third sector—organisations in that sector, such as Shelter, are also good sources of support for tenants. However, mygov.scot certainly has advice for tenants, and there should also be good signposting on that website towards advice on discretionary housing payments and on accessing the Scottish welfare fund through their local authority if people need additional support in a crisis situation.

### **Covid-19 (Business Support)**

**Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** This week's partial U-turn on business support still sees firms in Scotland getting only 75 per cent of a grant following the grant for their first property, rather than 100 per cent, as in the rest of the United Kingdom.

Given that the Scottish Government has decided to delay various policy initiatives, such as aspects of social security devolution and early years nursery expansion, as a result of coronavirus, surely the Cabinet Secretary for Finance could reallocate funding from within the Scottish Government's own budget to improve support for business?

**The Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Kate Forbes):** If Donald Cameron could identify either where he believes I should remove money from in terms of businesses that have received money here that would not have not received money under the approach that is in operation in the rest of the UK or how he believes I should divert

funding from front-line services, I would be intrigued to hear his answer.

We have exceeded the funding consequentials for business—we have topped that up with our own support—but we have got to cater for the unique challenges in the Scottish economy. More than three quarters of non-domestic rate payers in Scotland are within the small business bonus threshold. That is higher than the situation in the rest of the UK. That means that that funding is going further and is helping more businesses. With the limited resources that we have, we have tried to ensure that support goes as far as possible.

This week's announcement about providing funding for multiple properties is a result of my listening to concerns that have been raised and our desire to ensure that businesses that are falling through the cracks in the UK Government schemes are also getting help.

In a time of extreme difficulty—and I am acutely aware of the pressures on every sector, every industry and every part of the economy—it is important that that funding helps as many businesses as possible and ensures that, when it comes to recovery and we reach the point at which we are trying to get the economy back to normal, there are businesses that have managed to weather these challenging circumstances, with Scottish Government help. We have already removed the rates bill from a huge number of businesses and have delivered £215 million in grant funding to businesses. We will continue to keep the situation under review, but I think that this week's announcement proves that the Scottish scheme is one of the most generous in the UK.

#### **Covid-19 (Testing in Care Homes)**

**Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP):** The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport will be aware of the reports that Sir Kenny Dalglish tested positive with no symptoms showing. Would she consider testing all staff and residents in our care homes to enable us to pick up any similar positive cases earlier, and, therefore, to take action to protect everyone sooner?

**The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Jeane Freeman):** There is a degree of debate still going on in the scientific and medical community about whether there is viability and robustness in testing people who are asymptomatic. What is absolutely robust, though, is the fact that the tests work best and with most reliability when they are used to test people who are symptomatic of Covid-19.

We need to remember that the point of testing—in a care home setting or, indeed, in any setting—

is to determine the clinical management of the individual who tests positive. In the middle of March, we introduced clear guidance that removed any communal activity from care homes. It is harsh guidance for the residents—I completely understand that—but, essentially, it says that there should be no communal dining, socialising or activities. That guidance was designed to protect the residents in their own rooms, with staff having the appropriate personal protective equipment, so that we could protect against the transmission of the virus.

We are now testing all residents who are symptomatic and, when they test positive, that gives us additional information to ensure that clinical management is appropriate. However, testing everyone really would not tell us any more than we currently know. The point of testing is to guide our clinical management of the individual and to ensure that we have effective infection prevention and control. If the guidance that was issued in March is followed in every care home—the work that we are now introducing across our care homes will provide us with additional reassurance in that regard—and staff have the training and the PPE that they need, we will effectively be protecting the residents as best we can.

Of course, we acknowledge that the residents are in a difficult situation and that it is made more difficult by the fact that visitors are not allowed. I know that that is also a hard thing for family and friends to come to terms with, but our approach is all about protecting our residents in care homes.

#### **Covid-19 (Bereavement Support)**

**Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab):** Does the Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government agree that the current situation is extremely traumatic for people who are unable to say goodbye to their loved ones, who might die alone in hospital due to Covid-19? Does she agree that we need much better on-going bereavement support for people such as my constituents who were denied the usual ability to be by their loved one's side during their sickness and after they had passed?

**The Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government (Aileen Campbell):** I thank Pauline McNeill for raising an incredibly important issue.

One of the harshest consequences of what is having to be done as a result of this pandemic and the social distancing rules is that people beyond the immediate family cannot also say their goodbyes, or feel that they cannot say goodbye in the way that they ordinarily could. We absolutely understand the importance of visiting loved ones in care settings and guidance has been issued

that, in exceptional circumstances, relatives should be able to sit with their loved ones in end-of-life situations. Some of that guidance has been worked through with Scottish Care.

I know that, today, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport has published and publicised the bereavement charter that has been developed with Scottish Care and a number of other organisations that have an interest in making sure that there is support for people at this desperate time.

I also know that officials are working with Cruse Bereavement Care on its online offering, to make sure that that online support is there for people who require it, because grief and bereavement do not end at the moment of passing or at the funeral. Therefore, the on-going digital support and phone line from Cruse Bereavement Care will be important.

Pauline McNeill has written to me but if she would like to get in touch again about her constituents' issues, to which she specifically referred, or other improvements that we can make, we would like to hear from her, so that we can offer the right and appropriate support in a safe way to people who will, unfortunately, lose loved ones as a result of the pandemic.

#### **Covid-19 (Prisons)**

**Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP):** In view of the institutional nature of prisons, what special measures is the Scottish Prison Service taking to protect staff and prisoners from the effects of Covid-19?

**The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Humza Yousaf):** The Scottish Prison Service is taking a range of measures. First, we and the Scottish Prison Service are making sure that there are adequate stocks of personal protective equipment for its staff, and that, following public health guidance, all staff and prisoners are self-isolating if they are symptomatic or, in the case of staff, if somebody in their household is symptomatic.

Difficult decisions have had to be made within our prison establishments, probably the most difficult of which has been to suspend visits. That is challenging for those in our care and for their families, but it is necessary to help us to contain the virus. To help with some of those difficulties and challenges, we will explore technologies that allow family contact.

It is a challenging environment, and I make no apologies for thinking that, to help us reduce the prison population, we should increase the numbers of people who are on home intervention curfew. If we reduce the prison population, we can loosen the prison regime.

The legislation that the Parliament passed on 1 April gives the Government powers for emergency release, which I am actively considering in a positive manner. Reducing the prison population would help us to get down to single cell occupancy, which would help us to contain the spread of the virus within our prisons.

#### **Covid-19 (Personal Protective Equipment)**

**Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con):** I will return to the personal protective equipment shortage that is continually reported from front-line hospitals, general practice surgeries and care homes. Why is it taking up to three weeks for the Scottish Government to reply to Scottish companies that offer to manufacture and supply that equipment? Does that indicate a procurement and distribution issue for companies outside a national health service preferred suppliers list?

**The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Jeane Freeman):** No, it does not indicate that. My colleague, Ivan McKee, is leading a parallel stream of work in relation to companies that are offering to become part of the supply list, either by reconfiguring what they currently do or by offering additional supplies. In those instances, three important things need to happen. First, we need to ensure quickly that the offer is legitimate and not a scam—I say that with no disrespect to the legitimate offers that are made. Secondly, we need to undertake due diligence on the company, to ensure that it can supply what it is offering; thirdly, we need to check that what is offered meets the required quality for health and social care PPE. Mr McKee is leading all that work with support from Scottish Enterprise and other colleagues; they are pursuing that as quickly as they can.

Indeed, one example that I am happy to give of a successful effort is the company that I believe is called Alpha Solway. It had been a supplier to NHS Scotland under its previous business model, had stepped away from that and turned its production to other areas, and has now returned to supplying masks. We have just agreed a degree of support for the company to re-provision its manufacturing capacity as well as the supply line that it will deliver, not only now, but as we go through the pandemic. That is important, because it produces not only a supply of PPE, but new jobs in Scotland that are much to be welcomed.

#### **Covid-19 (Oil and Gas Sector)**

**Maureen Watt (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP):** The substantial impact of Covid-19 is being further compounded by the substantial fall in the oil price. What help can the Scottish Government, or indeed, as energy is still a reserved issue, the Westminster Government,

give to companies in the oil and gas sector whose first preference is to make people redundant rather than to furlough them?

**The Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Kate Forbes):** I am very aware of the issue that Maureen Watt flags. Not only does oil and gas production make up a considerable amount of Scotland's gross domestic product, but the fall in oil price is exacerbating the challenges to our economy.

I am aware that Oil & Gas UK has identified a number of specific gaps in the coronavirus job retention scheme that complement some of the points that we have raised regularly with the Treasury and that I have raised in phone calls with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury.

Oil & Gas UK and we have been asking the United Kingdom Government to consider three particular requests in relation to the job retention scheme in order to mitigate potential redundancies. Our strong steer is that we expect employees to be furloughed, not made redundant—that is why that support exists. Briefly, the three asks are an extension to the scheme, a clearly defined end date to the scheme and an assurance that oil and gas operators and service companies will be able to access the scheme.

We will continue to work very closely with the UK Government and the other devolved Governments to ensure that those changes are made and to ensure that, where there clearly are issues with a UK Government scheme, it is willing to adapt that scheme in response to points that are raised about it.

### **Covid-19 (Barnett Consequentials and Business Support)**

**Michelle Ballantyne (South Scotland) (Con):** As the Cabinet Secretary for Finance is aware, businesses are still questioning the level of support that they are getting to handle the crisis. On Monday, the cabinet secretary tweeted that she

“could do a lot more if consequential funding from the UK Gov was based on business need rather than population share.”

Could she explain why she believes that and what impact that would have on the economy?

**The Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Kate Forbes):** I appreciate the question, because it is on a point that is regularly raised by my counterparts in the Welsh Government and the Northern Irish Administration in our quadrilateral meetings with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury.

As the member will know, Barnett consequentials are based on population share, and in each nation of the United Kingdom there is

a slightly different economic need. As I have already mentioned, in Scotland considerably more than three quarters of non-domestic rate payers are in the small business bonus bracket, which means that there are more of them. Our rateable value cut-off for the small business bonus scheme is £18,000, rather than £15,000 in England or £12,000 in Wales. That means that more small businesses here are getting a £10,000 grant, and that the changes this week will make them eligible for multiple grants if their properties are all within small business bonus scheme requirements. In England, by design, the small business bonus scheme is essentially restricted to one property.

That means that we are trying to push that funding as far as possible. I have a responsibility to ensure that businesses are getting the support that they need, but there is a gap between what Barnett consequentials can do in Scotland and what we know the need is in Scotland. That is why taking a sectoral approach—ensuring that we provide funding to particular sectors—is important.

I will give one last example. The UK Government's announcement today on fishing will see approximately £450,000 of consequentials come to Scotland. In contrast, our funding for the seafood industry now amounts to almost £23 million—£450,000 does not go terribly far, so we have had to top up the funding to £23 million. That is an example of where we have had to take different decisions because of the need in Scotland, recognising that Barnett does not cover Scotland's unique needs.

**The Presiding Officer:** Michelle Ballantyne would like to ask a supplementary question.

**Michelle Ballantyne:** The Barnett formula will be reviewed next year and the cabinet secretary's thinking on the issue will be very important with regard to the recovery of the economy, which, if the predictions are correct, will need to be significant. I would like to understand whether, as we come out of the crisis, she will be looking for the Barnett formula to change to a business need-led model as opposed to a population share model.

**Kate Forbes:** I have had a lot of constructive conversations with the Treasury. In the emergency, there have been questions about how quickly we can access funding and how funding will be allocated. Michelle Ballantyne might be aware that Barnett consequentials are done on estimates, so they can still be clawed back at the end of the year, as they were last year. All those issues have formed the substance of our conversation.

I have appreciated the constructive way in which the UK Government has, for example, ensured that we can have the funding up front, so that we

do not have to wait for it to become available. The UK Government has given us an estimate that it believes is as robust as possible, but that might still move later in the year.

I have made the point to the Treasury that, at a time of emergency, we have to park business as usual and look at the best means of supporting the economy. That applies even more so to our health system. In order to ensure that businesses get the right support in an emergency crisis such as this, we might need to do things differently. Barnett will never cover business need, because it is based on population share. We have more rural areas in Scotland. We have more small businesses. We have particular sectors that are disproportionately more important in Scotland. Those are all facts that are regularly acknowledged by my Welsh and Northern Irish counterparts and which are understood by the Treasury.

### **Covid-19 (Business Support)**

**Mark McDonald (Aberdeen Donside) (Ind):** Much of the very welcome financial support that the Scottish Government has announced is being channelled through local authorities. Yesterday, I was contacted by a business in my constituency that applied for grant support on 24 March but has not, to date, received a determination on its application. It was advised by the local authority that the team that is dealing with the applications is very small and is, as we might have anticipated, being overwhelmed by the number of applications that are being made.

Is the cabinet secretary aware of that issue? Has it been brought up in discussions with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities? Are there plans to look at potential redeployments and secondments in order to increase capacity and to have determinations made on applications more quickly, so that businesses can get that much-needed support?

**The Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government (Aileen Campbell):** I am glad that my colleague Kate Forbes is online and will hear this, because I know that she has been working incredibly hard with local authorities to ensure that support for businesses gets to those that require it. We know that local authorities are working incredibly hard to ensure that the support gets out the door in a reasonable timeframe. Of course, there are lots of checks that they have to do in doing that.

If we can get the details of the companies that have not had their payments, we can use that as we continue to engage with COSLA and with the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers, in order that we can pinpoint where there might be issues around capacity. We can explore that with our local authority partners

and ensure that where there is a need to enhance capacity, that can be provided, so that local authorities can get the money to those who need it as quickly as possible.

Both local government and national Government share the desire to ensure that the money gets to those who need it as quickly as possible, and I know that local authorities are working incredibly hard to do that. Of course, there will be some bumps along the way, but we do not want that to prolong the agony of businesses that need help as quickly as possible.

If Mark McDonald wants to share details with me, I can endeavour to make sure that those conversations are happening with COSLA in a strategic way, so that we can pinpoint geographically where there might be a need for a bit more capacity, and so that we can think about how we might address that.

### **Covid-19 (Testing)**

**Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab):** The Scottish Government appears to have been a Covid-19 test sceptic from day 1 and, in the light of Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport Jeane Freeman's answer to Willie Coffey, it seems that it remains so. Does the cabinet secretary stand by the Scottish Government's decision not to follow World Health Organization advice to carry out widespread community testing, and will she give a clear and unequivocal commitment to publish immediately the advice of her advisors that informed that decision?

**The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Jeane Freeman):** We have been through this many times. I would not describe the Scottish Government as a "sceptic" on testing, at all. We are busy ramping up our testing capacity.

The advice that we have had has always been about the purpose of testing, which is threefold. Initially, as Neil Findlay will recall, the purpose of testing related to the test, trace and isolate approach. At this stage of the path through the pandemic, we have moved to the three purposes of testing. One relates to clinical treatment of patients in hospital. Initially, it also related to clinical treatment of residents of care homes, but we are now widening testing out to all symptomatic residents of care homes.

Another purpose of testing is community surveillance, which is based on the surveillance measures that are well in place for flu that we have used for years. The third purpose is to assist key workers to get back to work. That remains the case.

I am sure that members will have heard the First Minister talk yesterday and again today about the matter. The numbers that are coming through

seem to suggest that all the sacrifices and efforts that people have made in following public health guidance—on staying at home and going out only for very restricted purposes, on social distancing of 2m, and on people from different households not meeting—are being successful, at this point, in suppressing prevalence of the virus in the community. That is fragile, at this point: we need to do a bit more. Hence, there will be continuation of the measures for another three weeks.

However, we are planning how we might use testing in any situation in which we begin to lift one or other of the restrictions. The testing capacity will be significantly increased by then, in order to ensure that we can bring into our toolbox—if you like—a much-enhanced test, trace and isolate approach. We would be going back to containment, but on a much bigger scale.

From the evidence that we have seen and the advice that we have been given by our scientific and medical advisors, not just here in Scotland but across the United Kingdom, I believe that all that complies with the advice of the World Health Organization, which is content with the approach that we are taking.

Of course, there is always more to learn, and we are very open to that learning, but that is the approach that we are taking now. We are doing that planning in order to help with the decisions that will come down the line about how we rebalance suppression and containment of the virus, so that our health service can cope with it, while we try to take greater steps towards normalisation of how we live our lives.

**Neil Findlay:** I specifically asked the health secretary whether she will immediately publish the advice that her advisors have given to her—or, indeed, whatever advice she has been given—on the WHO advice on testing, which we have not followed. Will she publish that advice?

**Jeane Freeman:** The advice of the scientific advisory group for emergencies is made public. I am quite happy to send Neil Findlay the name of the website where he can find it.

**The Presiding Officer:** I thank all the cabinet secretaries and members for their participation this afternoon.

Parliament will resume at Holyrood at 2 pm on Tuesday 21 April. Until then, I thank you very much for joining us.

*Meeting closed at 15:25.*

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