



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Health and Sport Committee

Tuesday 12 January 2021

Session 5



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HEALTH AND SPORT COMMITTEE

1st Meeting 2021, Session 5

CONVENER

*Lewis Macdonald (North East Scotland) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*George Adam (Paisley) (SNP)

Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD)

*David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)

*David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)

Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)

*Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Kevin Bonarius (Garioch Sports Centre)

Tom Brown

Lucy Bryden

Eleanor Carnell

Linzi Connelly

David Denholm (Dumfries and Galloway Disability Sport)

Colin Hutchison (Scottish Athletics)

Martin Kenny (Bannockburn and Eastern Villages Community Hub)

Euan Lowe (Scottish Swimming)

Annabel Mansell

Michael Matheson (Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity)

Claire Nelson (Netball Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

David Cullum

LOCATION

Virtual Meeting

Scottish Parliament

Health and Sport Committee

Tuesday 12 January 2021

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:00]

Covid-19 (Impact on Sports Clubs and other Local Recreational Facilities)

The Convener (Lewis Macdonald): Good morning and welcome to the first meeting in 2021 of the Health and Sport Committee. We have received apologies from Donald Cameron, Alex Cole-Hamilton and Sandra White. I ask members and witnesses to ensure that mobile phones are in silent mode and that notifications are turned off.

Agenda item 1 is an evidence session as part of our short inquiry into the impact of Covid-19 restrictions on sports clubs and sport and leisure venues. Our inquiry has a particular focus on the impacts on community-based activities that are undertaken by sporting organisations, including the mental and physical health impacts on individuals.

In November last year, we ran two online surveys to capture information about the impact on community sports clubs and organisations and sporting venues and the effects on users. Today, we will hear from two panels of witnesses to gain further insight to inform our inquiry. We will hear first from individuals whose access to sport has been impacted, followed by a second panel of witnesses representing sports clubs and venues.

I welcome our first panel of witnesses, who are Tom Brown, Lucy Bryden, Eleanor Carnell, Linzi Connelly and Annabel Mansell. I ask each of you to say a few words of introduction, starting with Tom Brown.

Tom Brown: Good morning and thank you for inviting me. I do a bit of swimming and I am a rambler, but I completed the survey as a bowler because I feel that that has been most impacted by Covid-19.

Lucy Bryden: I am chair of a small tennis club in East Lothian. I am also a keen walker and cyclist, and I enjoy most sport.

Eleanor Carnell: I used to do an awful lot of sport such as cycling, swimming, walking, kayaking and running—you name it—but I broke my ankle very badly 13 months ago, so I am coming from the perspective of swimming, which is my particular love, and how that has been affected for me by the pandemic.

Linzi Connelly: I play women's football in the new championship league. I have been playing for several years, but I have not played much in the league because of Covid. That is why I am here.

Annabel Mansell: I am an engineer living in Edinburgh and I took up ice skating as a hobby. I am here to represent ice skaters across Scotland.

The Convener: That is excellent. You have all touched on this but, to set the scene, will you say how the coronavirus restrictions have affected your ability to participate in the sports that you mentioned?

Tom Brown: There was no bowling in the summer of 2020 and we have grave concerns about bowling in 2021. The sport is predominantly played by older people, who have been more wary of getting the virus. All club, county and national competitions were cancelled and clubhouses were closed. The impact on the sport has been quite severe.

Lucy Bryden: Relatively speaking, outdoor tennis has probably been luckier than an awful lot of sports because it is one sport that has been able to continue. However, the situation is similar to what Tom Brown described on the social side. In relation to certain demographics, it has been difficult. The social side is important for a sport, and the older people who play tennis, as well as teenagers and the younger age group, have been particularly affected by the restrictions, especially now.

For the 11 to 18-year-olds, not being able to play in a group format is really hard, and the danger is that we have a pandemic waiting to happen with people not taking part in physical activity and that becoming entrenched in their behaviour as they get older. As a sport, we have been relatively lucky compared with other sports, but I think that, across the board, the reduction in participation will have a huge impact.

Eleanor Carnell: I broke my ankle 13 months ago and I have not had any physio because Covid and the lockdowns came in. I managed to get a couple of swimming sessions in before the pools were closed, and then the swimming pool at Duns opened in September and I got to swim from September to December. It was absolutely amazing, because I am in pain all the time, but when I was in the swimming pool was the one time that I had no pain.

At the session that I went to, there were a lot of people who had arthritis, and we were all saying the same thing—socially distanced, of course. The swimming pool was a safe environment, with all the chlorine, and it was just wonderful to get back into the pool to help with our injuries and our aches and pains. There were a lot of older people there.

Now that we are all back to lockdown again and I have not been swimming, I have no other form of exercise that I can do, because my ankle is too painful—apart from getting on my bike, which is how I broke my ankle in the first place, but the weather is too inclement for that. I see the swimming pool as a place for people to recuperate.

The Convener: Absolutely—that is understood.

Linzi Connelly: During the first lockdown in 2020, non-contact was completely cancelled, so I had no football for months. As the restrictions eased, maybe a few months in, I was able to do non-contact for about a month and I was able to do a couple of friendlies, but as the number of cases rose, football was cancelled, especially for over-18s, and the stadium was closed. However, men's football at my level was able to continue, which was not fair, as we were on the same level of testing. It has impacted on the whole of women's football, but the men's teams are still able to compete.

Annabel Mansell: During the first lockdown, it was much as everyone else has said. Access to ice rinks was completely removed and all ice rinks were closed. Some ice rinks in Scotland reopened when the restrictions were lifted slightly, but not all of them did so.

One of the problems with ice skating, which is perhaps not the same for other sports, is the cost of reopening an ice rink. The cost of laying the ice, which people do not think about, is around £60,000. That is just to lay the ice in the rink. There are also on-going costs week on week for the plant room to keep the rink cold. There are huge costs that individual rinks have to weigh up when thinking about opening.

On how not being able to skate has affected me, I think that most people agree that 2020 was quite a stressful year. I was planning on skating in competitions in the United Kingdom and abroad, all of which were cancelled. My training, which I normally do four to five times a week before work, at 5 or 6 in the morning, was all cancelled. My main form of exercise, which is important for my physical and mental health because I have that break from work, was taken away from me and from other skaters—from figure skaters, recreational skaters and professional ice hockey players across Scotland, as well as curlers. Many ice sports are seen as team sports, and they are enjoyed by adults and young people, so, depending on the ruling, it can be difficult to get access.

Another thing that did not help, which has not been an issue for other sports, is that the Westminster Government classified ice sports as entertainment, which meant that, when it reopened

sports facilities, ice rinks were at the end of the queue along with bingo and casinos. That does not seem right for a sport in which team GB does reasonably well. We have had Olympic medals in figure skating and curling, especially in Scotland, and we have ice hockey teams, so it seems disproportionate and unfair for our sports to be classified as entertainment.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I thank the witnesses for being here. I declare that I am a coach at an athletics club.

How have you or your clubs managed to mitigate some of the issues that you have highlighted? What solutions have you come up with? What have your clubs done to help you? When we were training at my club at Whitemoss in East Kilbride, it was like an SAS operation. We were limited to one session of 50 minutes on an outdoor track, which certainly had an impact on us. What have you and your clubs done to try to create some normality in your exercise regimes?

Tom Brown: One thing that I did not say earlier is that, although bowling is a summer sport, it is during the winter that we raise revenue to cover the cost of running the bowling club. It costs about £25,000 a year to run our club, and there are lots of social events in the clubhouse in the winter. None of that has been able to take place either, so we have been very grateful for the Government support that we have received. Without it, the club would not have been sustainable.

Lucy Bryden: Once the courts were allowed to reopen, we made them publicly available to anybody and everybody for free for the first month. Only singles play was allowed. It was amazing, because tennis was one of the few sports that was able to get going again. We had a lot of younger people starting to play, many of whom had been furloughed. The profile of our players was 18 to 25-year-olds, the majority of whom previously played other sports such as football or perhaps went to the gym, which was not allowed.

We decided to do that because we wanted to make the courts as accessible as possible. From a financial point of view, once things started to reopen, we went back to our normal membership and pay-and-play processes. The encouraging thing is that we have kept a number of the people who played in that first month, and they have really appreciated that they have been able to continue to play. As things have become more restrictive, we have noticed that those people have come back to play again.

We are lucky in that the courts are right in the centre of the village so we can open them to the public and provide that option to people. Use of the courts has been incredibly high, which is great, but it would be lovely to see other sports being

able to start again and be open to all age groups. There is the social side of it as well.

Eleanor Carnell: The swimming pools have been closed during each lockdown, and between the lockdowns they have restricted the number of people who go in. Our pool had a safe process for people going in and coming out and for being pool ready: they just went into the water, did their swim and came out, and then they would have showers at home. I felt that lots had been done to make it safe for us.

As I said, at the moment there is no access to our pool at all. However, in the intervening time, it felt really great that we could go there and that the manager was ensuring that we all felt safe and were safe.

10:15

Brian Whittle: I have a quick follow-up question. What impact has the lack of competition had on your approach—[*Inaudible.*—]to the sport?

The Convener: Linzi, that might be a good cue for you to talk about that from the perspective of football.

Linzi Connelly: Obviously, we have not had a lot of competitions. In 2020, the only ones that we got to take part in were friendlies, because the league was unable to start. That impacted quite a lot of us. There were no goals for us to aim towards, so we were not training for anything. Having competitions to look forward to is a good thing both mentally and physically, because it boosts our motivation.

Annabel Mansell: Much as Linzi Connelly said, having competitions really helps to focus skaters' training. As an adult, it is fun for me to enter competitions, and if I win, that is great. However, for younger skaters and for people who are at the beginning of their careers and who want to skate either competitively, perhaps aiming to be in team GB, or even professionally, doing competitions is part of how they gain gradings. They can take tests, but they also need to do competitions. A generation of skaters is now a year behind. For a competitive figure skater, age is very important. It is a sport that favours youth if people want to do it competitively, up to team GB or Olympic standards.

There are still opportunities for older people to skate, as I am proving. We have skaters who are 90 and who come to the club every Sunday, so the impact is not restricted to younger people. I agree that the lack of competitions is not great for the careers of younger skaters. For older skaters such as me, it is just sad that we are not having the usual social opportunities. In 2019, I competed all over Europe, but mostly in the UK—for example,

in Berlin, Sheffield and Tyneside. Having such opportunities taken away has meant that I have missed out on meeting my skating friends and family, which has been bad.

The Convener: I will call Emma Harper in a moment. When any witness wants to come back in or make a particular point, I ask them to put an "R" in the chat box and I will try to call them.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): Good morning, everyone. I am interested in whether any witness has thought about cancelling or changing their membership for facilities or activities. Tom Brown said that the cost of running the bowling club for a year was £60,000. However, its running costs will depend on its members participating and supporting it.

Eleanor Carnell: No, I did not think at all about cancelling my membership to Duns swimming pool. It is run by a trust that has to get all its money from charity and whatever else it can gather. The pool is so important to me that I continued to pay right through the lockdowns, when it was closed to the public.

That facility is amazing for disabled people—I was one last year, when I was on crutches—as it has a hoist for people to get into and out of the pool, for example. It also serves a much wider community in Duns, having a mums and tots session, a swimming club, and activities for those of us who are more elderly and for people with injuries. It is such an important facility that I would not even consider not continuing my membership.

When the swimming pools were open in England and we were allowed to travel, I went to a pool there, because I was desperate and our pools were not open. However, I did not stop paying my money to the Duns pool, because it is so important to me.

Tom Brown: It does not cost £60,000 to run my club—the figure is nearer £25,000—but membership has been impacted. Some members have left and some have gone to play golf, because it has been much less affected than other sports. When the new season starts in April, I fear that many more members will not come back to the club.

The Convener: If any other witnesses want to respond, I ask them to please indicate that now.

Emma Harper: It is interesting that Tom Brown says that some members of his club have moved from bowling to golf. Has anybody else had a similar experience? Sports such as tennis have been less affected because they can take place outdoors as much as possible. Has anybody joined an alternative club or looked at alternative methods of accessing sport or outdoor exercise?

Annabel Mansell: I will go back to the question about paying clubs. Somebody who skates and wants to compete needs to be a member of a national body, and that cost was not reimbursed or offered as a reimbursement last year. However, the national body provided a huge number of online seminars and fitness classes. Whatever type of skating people do—such as figure skating or ice hockey—they do off-ice fitness work, much as with other sports. We do sports for cross training, which can be done off the ice.

A lot of skaters bought in-line roller skates, so that we could skate outdoors. However, we live in Scotland, so although that is just about acceptable in the summer, we will not want to do it in icy weather in the winter. Finding somewhere that is flat, smooth and not covered in drain holes and stones is also quite tricky. However, there were options.

We were offered reimbursement of our club memberships. I did not ask for my money to be reimbursed and I think that it went to the coaches, who are all self-employed. That was a good thing.

Lucy Bryden: I will return to Emma Harper's earlier question. As a club, we had two months when people could not play and a month when we opened the courts for free, as I said, so we decided to reduce our membership fees by a quarter. Our membership income for the past year has probably exceeded what we normally get, because more people have joined the club. We have a positive story; we have had a lot of community support, because people have appreciated the fact that they can do something locally.

I took our local golf club's offer from of free lessons for females. I do not normally play golf, but I went because the club is on my doorstep, and I enjoyed playing. I might not take up the sport permanently, but that gave me a taste of it. Sports that have been able to continue have tried to attract other people, or just given people an outlet to take part in physical activity.

Like everybody here, probably, I have seen more people walking and cycling. I live near the beach and a lot of people have been outdoor swimming right through the winter. People have made opportunities. However, I worry that they are the ones who can do that, and that we are entrenching and reinforcing inequality. Those who can access things online and can afford to do that are doing it, but other people cannot afford it or, for whatever reason, are unable to take part in physical activity. As I said, that is a problem for the future.

Tom Brown: We also have indoor bowling in the town, and that can be played during the winter. However, I am afraid to say that the indoor

bowling rink is also closed. It has not been opened all year.

The Convener: That is an important point. George Adam has a quick supplementary question before we move on to questions from Dave Stewart.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): Good morning, everyone. Tom Brown made an important point about bowling, but it also applies to other sports. It is not just about playing the sport and keeping healthy and fit; it is also about the social side and the interaction with others. I will use my father-in-law as an example. Tom is a great bowler who loves the bowling club and is usually there all the time. I can see that there is probably a physical and mental difference from him, as an older gentleman, being unable to access bowling and to interact with people over the period of Covid. He would probably deny it, but I have noticed a difference in him.

My question is for everyone. Have many of your members really struggled due to losing their ability to participate in their sport and the social interaction?

The Convener: We will go back to Tom Brown on that, as the question relates to what he said.

Tom Brown: Mr Adam's observation is spot on. I meet members of the club in the town who are senior and many of them are alone, and their social life is bereft. They enjoy the game of bowls not just as a sport that they can play in their senior years, but also from the mental angle. Their wellbeing is greatly improved by the game because they can meet socially. That is even the case during the winter, because they can come along to the club, meet some well-kent faces and enjoy the facilities that we have and whatever events we put on. It is critical for their health and wellbeing.

The Convener: Thanks very much. I say again that, when witnesses want to add anything or respond to a question, they should indicate that by putting "R" in the chat box. We will move on first, though, to David Stewart.

David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I welcome all our witnesses. George Adam touched on my question. We have heard quite a lot about the effect of the Covid restrictions on the physical side of individuals' lives, but I am also interested in the emotional and mental health aspects of the restrictions on activities. Will you build on Tom Brown's answer to George Adam and say a little more about your experiences of the effects that the restrictions have had emotionally? There has been a huge problem in Scotland related to the deterioration in our mental health.

Eleanor Carnell: Because I cannot swim and I cannot do much else at the moment, although I have started an online drumming course, I feel that my mood is very low. I sometimes struggle to get up in the morning and think, “Gosh—I’ve got a new day”, or that I have lots of things happening, because I do not. I live in an isolated area. I am on a farm, which makes walking difficult for me anyway.

When I was able to swim, although I spent the time swimming, I was also meeting other people. We were not having long chats or anything, but it was nice to see other people who were around and about in person, rather than on Zoom or on the internet. I feel quite emotional even thinking about it. The restrictions have impacted on me hugely and I find it difficult to talk about it.

The Convener: Thank you. I will come to Annabel Mansell, and then ask Linzi Connelly about her experiences.

10:30

Annabel Mansell: The restrictions have definitely affected my mental health. I have always thought that I am quite a strong person, mentally and physically, but last year was tough. It involved incredibly long working hours, and because you are working in your home, the delineation between work life and home life is broken down. Having access to something that I love, such as ice skating, would have been incredibly helpful. I carried on doing the off-ice exercises, but they are done in your house. When everything is done in your house, you begin to feel as though it is caving in on you a little bit.

The younger skaters are not having any social interaction with their peers, whom they would have seen five or six times a week, which is how often the young skaters train, along with the hockey players. I am sure that Linzi Connelly will go into it more, but our whole team life is disappearing. How do you do your training when your pitch has been removed? It is definitely tough.

Linzi Connelly: I agree with Annabel Mansell. I thought that I was quite strong with regard to emotions and mental health, but I have struggled quite a bit during lockdown. I have not had the motivation to do anything. My club is providing online yoga classes, and is bringing in fitness instructors to help, but it is just not the same. We do not have the same space, and we are not interacting socially.

The participation rates for the online classes are decreasing in my team. People feel that they cannot do them because they have no motivation. When we are online, the instructors ask us to mute our microphones, so we are unable to talk to our

team mates. Therefore, people are starting to lose interest.

Lucy Bryden: If you look at the Covid statistics, more than 90 per cent of the hospital admissions since March have been from the over-45 age group. As the Government’s representatives, the committee has to look at the impact that the situation has had on under-45s, because reducing activity will potentially cost our health in the long term. If the committee can influence the link with physical activity, and prescribing it to help with future mental health and wellbeing, it is important that it does so. I appreciate that we are in a pandemic, and not in a good space at the moment, but the restrictions on people’s ability to meet outside and take part in physical activity are hard and damaging.

The Convener: Thank you. It is worth saying that, as a parliamentary committee, we do not represent Government, but we do talk to Government. One of the things that we often talk about is the importance of social prescribing, and prescribing health and fitness as a means to address certain issues.

Emma Harper: I will pick up on the point about the importance of social prescribing, which we have considered previously. Do any of the witnesses have access to mental health support, such as the clearyourhead.scot winter tips, Support In Mind Scotland, and Breathing Space? It is important that we connect outdoor or indoor sports and physical health with mental health and wellbeing. I am not asking you to talk about personal experience, but do any of the witnesses know of people accessing such support?

The Convener: That is a good question. Do any of the witnesses have colleagues or team mates who have been able to access those resources?

It is striking that nobody recognises that and there are a few shaking heads—perhaps that tells us something about making those resources accessible to people or making people aware that that is an issue.

Lucy Bryden: One thing that we have tried to do—unsuccessfully—is link up with local health providers to offer sporting options. We have had good success linking with community sports hubs and with our ageing well team in the council, but getting to the health providers in the Lothian region is not so easy.

The Convener: There is certainly a lesson there for us if that is a general experience.

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): Sports clubs and facilities are about more than playing a sport—they are an integral part of the community. To give an example, Raith Rovers Football Club has a fantastic walking football set-up for over-50s

and over-60s. How have the coronavirus restrictions on sports clubs and facilities had a wider impact on your community?

The Convener: Who would like to start? I will come to Tom Brown again, because of the number of folk in the community that he will know through bowling. Is there a wider impact?

Tom Brown: Yes, there is a wider impact. We are a community amateur sports club, but the clubhouse itself is a community hub and is used by a plethora of local groups and societies. The local rotary club, the town and country ladies and the Friends Of Sauchie Tower use it—lots of organisations use our clubhouse as a meeting place. Also, because we have facilities such as catering and a bar, lots of local events are held in the clubhouse such as christening parties, funeral parties, birthday parties and anniversaries, so the impact on the community is significant.

Annabel Mansell: Much like what Tom Brown described, the ice facilities at Murrayfield are used by other clubs and not just skating groups, which I am sure is the same for rinks across Scotland. That link has been lost during the lockdown because a lot of the rinks are closed. We have bars and a cafe, and we have a hockey team, so we have a network of hundreds of home and travelling fans who would come and watch a hockey game.

We also offer young people opportunities to volunteer as coaches, so opportunities such as the Duke of Edinburgh's award have been taken away from young people this year. There is inclusive skating at our rink and others across Scotland, which encourages skating for people with physical and mental impairments. In the past, Murrayfield has hosted the Scottish inclusive skating championships, which give people an opportunity to compete; the championships happened virtually this year—I am not quite sure how, but Margarita Sweeney-Baird is very inventive.

All those sort of opportunities to have a community hub—although Murrayfield is not officially a community hub—have been lost due to the rink being closed, and I am sure that that rinks across Scotland are in a similar situation.

Eleanor Carnell: Duns swimming pool offers so much to the community. We have mother and toddler groups and mother and baby groups, which are important. Because we live in quite a rural area, the facility is a central point where people can log in to classes. We have swimming for older people—for over-50s and over-60s—and we have swimming clubs. We also have early morning sessions for people who need to exercise before they go to work and we have swimming lessons for tiny tots up to 18-year-olds. Obviously, that has not been happening. During the

intervening time, from September to December, all those classes more or less went on in some form, albeit not as they would normally. Quite a bit was offered for the children and for mothers and toddlers and so on. We could not get together in any other way, and it was a good way of including the community. It is a 14-mile drive for me to get to my pool, and other people were travelling similar distances for the opportunity to get together and do something constructive.

David Torrance: Is there anything that might help you to engage in any additional or other activities while the lockdown is in progress?

Linzi Connelly: The activities that would probably help me and my teammates to engage are in-person non-contact sports. I feel that online classes are not getting the same turnout as in-person classes would. Obviously, they provide personal fitness and so on, but they are completely different from what people would do in person. In person, people can chat with their team and have a laugh. Non-contact sports will probably not be the first activities to happen during lockdown, but that should be considered, even among small groups for shorter periods of time.

Eleanor Carnell: I joined a drumming group during the lockdown period, just so that I could see people on Zoom. That was quite nice, as it was 60 women, all on Zoom. We were learning something specific, but there was a lot of chitchat going on, too. I cannot do much else because of my ankle. I can cycle when the weather is good, although it has not been good recently. I had to look elsewhere to see what I could do.

I have not mentioned this before but, before lockdown, I was teaching pilates. I send out a pilates lesson to my client group every week. I do not do that on Zoom, because most of my clients are more mature members, and they like it in their hand, printed out. I therefore send that out once a week. There are 44 of us as of this week, I think. I send them out a schedule every single week for them to complete at home, and I ensure that it is doable.

The Convener: Tom, I think that you mentioned that golf is one of the things that people took up instead. Is there anything that might help people to engage in other activities?

Tom Brown: Yes. Some of the younger members have indeed gone off to the golf course, but it would have helped if the local sports centre had reopened. I understand that it has been closed because of ventilation problems, but it has a swimming pool as well as an indoor bowling rink, a gymnasium, a snooker hall and so on. It did yoga and pilates, but all those things have stopped, too. If that sports centre had reopened,

albeit with a limited capacity, that would have helped.

The Convener: So that would make a difference.

Lucy Bryden: I would echo what Linzi Connelly said. Our risk assessment of outdoor activity and participatory sessions for limited numbers and perhaps for reduced times should be evaluated. Obviously, the lockdown that happened had to take place but, given the risk assessment that has been done, what is the evidence that outdoor exercise is contributing to a rise in Covid cases? It is an option that is open to us at the moment. We know that there is less risk outside. Such activity has been very important socially for a lot of people.

I have had a number of texts and emails from members of the club saying how important it has been for them still to be able to play in a group environment. Their contact is very limited. In fact, there is really no contact.

Annabel Mansell: For some sports, you cannot get an alternative. You can do other sports and activities that will help your fitness, flexibility and, if you are a hockey player or a curler, perhaps your reflexes. However, in the case of a lot of sport that people across Scotland play at quite high levels, you cannot just switch—for instance, from being an ice hockey player to being a tennis player.

10:45

Although those sports are equally important, I am sure that there is a reason why the individual has taken up one sport. You cannot simply say to them, “Can you perhaps do a little bit of field hockey or something like that instead?”, especially not to younger participants who have already dedicated years and whose parents have, unfortunately, dedicated thousands of pounds in training and equipment. You can maybe do that for a short period of time, but not long term.

As Lucy Bryden said, we need to look at how we can get people back into sport. In Scotland, team GB figure skaters are training in Dundee and the curlers are training at the national curling centre in Stirling. There have therefore been ways for elite sports, and we need to look at how that has been achieved and how it can be rolled out for others taking part in those sports, because there is not always an alternative, as much as we would like there to be.

George Adam: I have two questions. For my first one, I would like to talk about when the various sports that we have been talking about try to go back to normal post-Covid. Are there any concerns about whether they will be able to go back to normal and to how things were before?

Although it might be different in Edinburgh, Annabel, we have commercial ice rinks in other parts of Scotland, and there is always a fight between the various ice sports as to who gets the time and when they get the time.

Women’s football in particular is at a time in its development when this is probably the last thing that it needed. Would Lucy say that we are losing young women from the game and that they are not coming back?

Tom, will you have a problem with membership when things get back to normal, as people might have drifted away from the game?

Although it has changed now, when I was a councillor, swimming used to be subsidised to the level of £15 per person the minute that they jumped into a swimming pool. That is a discussion that local authorities can start having again about the various facilities that they run.

To sum up, will there be challenges when you go back to normal after Covid?

Linzi Connelly: It will be very challenging for women’s football. We have a men’s team that matches our club and which is a couple of levels above us. That team trains and plays games at the same home ground that we use and, obviously, it gets priority over us and we have to work around it. When we change our training days, it is sometimes to suit the men’s team.

We have had a lot of women lose interest in the past year. Our team is currently looking for more players, but it seems as if not many women are interested now, because football is a sport that is not allowed during the restrictions. I feel as if it will just get harder to find new people to join the team to make up the squad.

Annabel Mansell: We are quite lucky at Murrayfield that we have a separate curling pad, so we do not have to fight with the curlers. We have 15—I think—different ice hockey teams, ranging from the tiny tots right up to the national league side. We also have a women’s team. There is therefore a lot of competition for ice—George Adam’s point is a very good one.

I think that we will be able to access the sport okay; my worry is about certain rinks that have been used as storage spaces or which are owned by the council and have been turned into gym spaces. The ice has gone and wood has been put over the rink so that the space can be used as a socially distanced gym, just to keep people coming in. What is the incentive for those spaces to go back to being ice rinks and curling rinks? Edinburgh used to have four curling rinks, way back in the day; we now have one curling centre and one ice rink. Rinks are expensive to run, and for a lot of venues the biggest challenge will be the

lack of money coming through the door rather than competition between the venue's different users. The challenge is whether venues can afford to reopen, having been closed for so long.

Tom Brown: Mr Adam's point is the one that is most critical for us. I fear that many members will not return to the sport after more than a year out. Given that they are seniors, I am concerned about the impact on their overall health and wellbeing.

We need a decent number of members to keep clubs sustainable. When I joined the club, we had 150 gents; our membership now is approximately 84 gents and ladies. The impact over the years has been huge and Covid has exacerbated the decline in the sport. That is sad, because bowling is still an important sport for Scotland. We have elite players who can turn out to represent our country in the Commonwealth games, but they need to practise year on year to keep up momentum and their skills. That has been falling away.

Eleanor Carnell: Before the Covid lockdowns, I was swimming with quite a few people at Duns pool who were fairly elderly. Swimming was something that they could do. However, I did not see them back there during the few months in between the lockdowns when we were able to open. My mother, who is in her 90s, used to swim all the time but has not done so since March. I cannot see some of those people going back to swimming after having had such a chunk of time out of it. A lot of us, including my mother, have lost an awful lot of confidence. It will be difficult for some people to get back to the sport or activity that they used to do, because of the long gap.

George Adam: I apologise to Linzi for getting her name wrong when I asked my question. Also, I should have declared an interest: I am honorary president of Paisley Pirates ice hockey club.

Everybody has a pandemic story. David Torrance talked about football clubs and trusts that have helped out in the community over this period. Is there a Covid sports story that the witnesses would like to tell? Do you want to add to what you have said?

The Convener: I think that that was the final question, so I will bring in all the witnesses to tell us whether there is anything else that we ought to know. I will start with Lucy Bryden.

Lucy Bryden: I think that people in our club looked out for one another a bit more than we would normally do. Our members range in age from the late 80s down to tots, and at the start of the pandemic there was a lot of community spirit in the club around making sure that the older generation were able to get their shopping and so on—that was part of our wider community remit, I guess. Also, we have linked more with other sport

clubs in the area and with our local community sport hub, to see what we can offer.

Linzi Connelly: We are in the same boat as Lucy's club. We cannot do contact or non-contact training just now, but our coaches are providing a lot of online classes. If they keep doing that and encouraging teams to take part, we can keep up our fitness levels so that, when we are allowed back, we will not be starting from scratch as we were last year.

Eleanor Carnell: When everything gets back to normal, we will have to see how safe people feel it is to come back into the community and into social gatherings, at whatever levels of distancing and restriction are put forward. The confidence that people have lost, especially in the older age group, will have a huge impact.

Tom Brown: [*Inaudible.*]—through a newsletter, so that has helped. However, in winter, the normal way of keeping in touch with members would be through regular events in the clubhouse, especially at new year, and that has just not been possible. On a lighter note, the winter training trip to Dubai has just been cancelled.

The Convener: Bad luck on that one.

Annabel Mansell: Our coaches and teams have been providing us with as much as they can online.

When it was allowed in the summer, some coaches were teaching their students on rollerblades, and I know that some of the ice hockey teams were doing some practice on rollerblades in car parks where that was safe. Now that it is winter, it is very hard. We are struggling, and I think that everyone is looking forward to the end of this. However, we should be very thankful for how inventive our coaches and our national governing bodies have been in trying to help us get through it.

The Convener: I thank all the witnesses on the panel for their contributions. It has been a very informative session; as well as raising some real concerns, you have given us your perspectives on your individual experiences and the sports in which you are involved. That is much appreciated, and it will certainly help to inform our inquiry. Thank you all very much.

Our second panel consists of representatives of sporting organisations, venues and clubs. I welcome Euan Lowe, chief executive of Scottish Swimming; Martin Kenny, president of Bannockburn and Eastern Villages Community Hub; Colin Hutchison, head of development at Scottish Athletics; Kevin Bonarius, chief operating officer of Garioch Sports Centre; Claire Nelson, chief executive officer of Netball Scotland; and David Denholm, chair of Dumfries and Galloway

Disability Sport and a wheelchair athlete and coach. Thank you for joining us.

The first question comes from David Torrance.

David Torrance: Good morning. To what extent have the coronavirus restrictions affected your ability to provide your normal range of activities or initiatives?

The Convener: I ask the witnesses to indicate that they want to respond to a question by putting an “R” in the chat box. However, as David Torrance’s question is very broad ranging, I think that you will all want to answer it, so I will go round the panel. Thereafter, I ask that you volunteer to answer questions.

Euan Lowe (Scottish Swimming): Good morning, everybody. Thank you for giving us some time to talk to you about this big and important issue. That was a cracking question straight off.

In swimming, we have been fortunate to a degree, compared with other sports and activities. The session with the first panel showed some of the impacts that have been experienced. We have been able to go back into the water, to some degree and for some people, but at a very reduced capacity. Even—[Inaudible.]—for our members alone has been impacted, which has naturally had an effect on our membership. The critical area for us has been the massive impact on swimming pools. Swimming pools not being open affects youngsters’ ability to learn to swim. There has also been a reduction in the number of youngsters who are provided with opportunities to learn to swim in leisure trust and other pool provider programmes and swim schools.

11:00

The restrictions have had a huge impact on that life skill as well as on our clubs’ ability to access any water time at all. We were fortunate enough that our providers were able to open up about 60 per cent of our pools before the most recent lockdown, which was good, but the amount of activity was still severely reduced.

The critical point is that in the region of 21 of the nation’s pools were unable to open, because of financial reasons or because the restrictions meant that providers did not feel that they were able to open them. Naturally, as we have heard already, that has had a big impact on people’s mental health and wellbeing, so the fact that people’s access to local pools has been removed is a concern.

Martin Kenny (Bannockburn and Eastern Villages Community Hub): I am representing Bannockburn and Eastern Villages Community Hub, which provides for a variety of sports, including rugby, football and cricket. I am the

chairman of ClubSport Stirling, which represents 144 sports clubs across the Stirlingshire area. I sit on the board of Active Stirling, which runs the leisure facilities on behalf of Stirling Council. As you can probably see from the banner behind me, I am also the area manager for the Royal Voluntary Service, so I see the community impact of the lack of use of such facilities.

On the hub side of things, football has not been greatly affected from the point of view of participation. The effect has been on the competitive side, on sponsorship, on the financial side and on membership, because it has not been possible to offer the full experience. Given that football is a contact sport, which has been viewed as high risk, there has been a severe impact on competitiveness and participation. There are nine different sections in the club and, to be fair, they have been very proactive within their communities, which has helped them to get to where we are currently.

Luckily, with cricket being a summer sport, it was possible for there to be a bit of competitiveness through the summer, so that sport managed to avoid the full brunt of restrictions.

On the leisure side, there has been a massive impact on Active Stirling. It has had various problems with opening and closing, because it is hard to just open big facilities at the flick of a switch. The public want access as quickly as they can, but getting things up and running is like trying to turn a big ship. As the committee heard in the session with the previous panel, it takes a while to get ice rinks in place and so on.

On the community side, the number of people we support has grown massively. The not knowing and the lack of interaction in the community have had a great effect on mental health and wellbeing, as I am pretty sure we are all aware. I am positive that, when clubs and facilities have opened, the participation demand has been there, so I am very confident that when we reach the end of the tunnel—we can all see the light; hopefully, it is not a train—we will have mass participation.

My concern is about the state of the facilities. Lack of use, lack of demand and the cost of keeping facilities ticking over is where the impact will be felt.

Colin Hutchison (Scottish Athletics): I thank everyone on the committee for inviting us to the meeting. I echo some of the points that Martin Kenny and Euan Lowe made.

In the first instance, the restrictions have had a significant impact not only in a sporting context but on the finances of Scottish Athletics and athletics in Scotland. From the governing body’s perspective, the activities that have been most affected have been those in our events

programme. Between April and October every year, weekly events take place across the country. Those events are significant in engaging people with the sport and in developing the performance of our athletes and preparing them for events, which have obviously been severely limited this year. That is where clubs feel the biggest impact. They have been fantastic in that they have still managed to adapt to engage people in the sport throughout the past year.

As Euan Lowe said about swimming, we are fortunate in a sense, because the sport has been able to continue. People can still go out running and, as a governing body and a sport, we have been able to innovate to increase the number of virtual events that are open to people, which has worked really successfully for us and the clubs.

The biggest impact for clubs is that, for large chunks of the year, we have not been able to deliver club activity weekly. From last March through to May, all the sessions that clubs did were held virtually. Clubs were creative in how they did that. Some created their own television channels, which was fantastic, as they were able to share sessions with their members. That worked really well. However, the clubs have undoubtedly suffered because of their inability to deliver sessions, which has obviously had a financial impact on their income throughout the year.

I would like to touch on the subject of volunteers. Based on the living wage, volunteers are worth about £8.6 million to Scottish Athletics and athletics in Scotland. The situation has had a huge impact on our ability to engage with volunteers in the sport. We have had volunteers who have indicated that their ability to continue has changed during this period because of changes in their working situation and perhaps also the realisation that they would like to spend some time doing other things. That has had a huge impact.

The lack of events has had a significant impact on everybody involved in the sport, including people who want to compete. The effect on the ability of our performance athletes to prepare for major events is a major concern for us.

To repeat what Martin Kenny said, one of our biggest concerns is about facilities, which is an issue that we might come on to. First and foremost, we are concerned about whether they will be able to reopen, but we are also concerned about whether they will be able to reopen for the same hours as before and whether we will be able to continue to invest in them. Athletics facilities are not cheap to maintain, and they require significant investment to keep them fit for purpose. We have significant concerns about how that will look in future.

Kevin Bonarius (Garioch Sports Centre): Good morning, and thank you very much for having me.

I echo everyone else's thoughts. We are a stand-alone community leisure facility based in Aberdeenshire, and the impact that coronavirus has had on us has been widespread across every service that we deliver. Pre-Covid, we serviced around 7,500 visitors per week, and we were at close to 50 per cent of that prior to the latest closure. The difficult part for us is how to start to service 7,500 visitors again as we come out of the current situation. That will be incredibly difficult under the current restrictions. There needs to be a better understanding of how they will ease to allow us to get back to where we were pre-Covid. The position that we are currently in would not be sustainable in six to 12 months.

As a facility, we have been quite proactive in adapting our services by moving a lot of our offering online. Many of our fitness programmes and clubs have taken that stance, too, by moving all of their activity to online classes if they can.

We understand that coronavirus lockdowns and restrictions have to be in place. However, we would like to have a better understanding of many of the restrictions and the decision-making process behind them—the restrictions on outdoor activity are one such example. I think that outdoor activity is a very safe route that provides an opportunity for people to access sports and activity and the social side of it in a safe way. We understand that the requirements for indoor activities will be different, but we need to get a better understanding of how the Government plans to support our industry and similar industries as they come out of the pandemic and of how restrictions will ease and improve for us.

Claire Nelson (Netball Scotland): Good morning, everybody. I am here representing Netball Scotland as its chief executive. It is also worth noting that we own the Strathclyde Sirens, Scotland's semi-professional franchise team, which competes in Sky Sports televised UK-wide Vitality Netball Superleague. I sit on the board of the Vitality Netball Superleague. I also sit on the Government women and girls in sport advisory board, and on the executive committee of the newly formed Scottish governing bodies of sport chief executive officer forum, which represents 35 governing bodies of sport and was formed last year as a result of the impact that the pandemic was having on our sector.

My sport has been absolutely devastated by Covid. As an indoor contact team sport, we had to suspend all activity as soon as Covid hit last year. Our season runs up until June and we have not been able to restart; there are a number of reasons for that. [*Interruption.*] I apologise for the

dog barking in the background; such are the joys of working from home at the moment.

All domestic competition across 25 clubs and local authority areas, our international competition, the superleague, all our community impact programmes—including walking netball, which we deliver with Age UK, going into schools and bounce back to netball, which was Glasgow 2014's biggest legacy programme—were suspended. All that has affected our membership; we have less than 50 per cent year-on-year membership, which is really disappointing, because we put so much into trying to re-engage our members and have worked with all the other home nation chief executives—the chief executives of Netball Northern Ireland, England Netball and Welsh Netball—to put together a whole-sport campaign about why our sport needs members.

As well as that, all our commercial income streams across ticket revenue income, membership, competitions and education have gone. The biggest challenge that we have faced is that, as a “minority” indoor team contact sport—I say “minority” in quotes because a woman's sport is a minority sport—we are right at the end of the queue when it comes to even being considered able to return. We have created a modified game, which was approved for under-18s but not for over-18s. Even with all those issues, we have worked hard to get our clubs Covid ready and compliant, but our biggest challenge is facility access, because we are not asset owning. Unless we own our own venue, we do not have control over that space, so we have not been able to return to any indoor space that we can control and are reliant on what is out there.

More than 50 per cent of our clubs train in school sports halls, and the school estate is inaccessible at the moment, aside from a couple of private schools, which we have worked with. We are not an outdoor sport and there are no outdoor courts in Scotland. We launched #NetsGoOutdoors this year; we appealed to businesses with car parks and empty land and said that we would put up equipment if we could get our clubs into a safe outdoor training environment, and that allowed 18 clubs to train outdoors. As things stand, 10 per cent have returned to training, with only 10 of those clubs being able to access indoor facilities, except in Shetland, where we were able to get 15 clubs back.

However, the majority of our clubs rely on sports halls and leisure centres and, as we know, leisure centres are on their knees. They have huge restrictions and limited activity and what they are restarting is focused on gym activity, so if you go into any sports hall at the moment, it is likely that

you will find that it has been repurposed for gym activity.

Not only have we not been able to restart but, with the latest lockdown that we have come into in the new year, we are now looking at the what-ifs and the impact on us as we go into August and the start of our new season. Because we have the biggest positive impact on women's sport in terms of visibility, participation and impact, that is a huge concern, and I do not feel that it is being addressed.

David Denholm (Dumfries and Galloway Disability Sport): Good morning, and thank you for inviting me to take part. I am chair of Dumfries and Galloway Disability Sport; I am also a wheelchair athlete in wheelchair tennis and table tennis, I kayak and I am a volunteer and coach up to national level.

My perspective is on two fronts, one of which is very positive: happily, my region has a very innovative committee, which has reached out via Zoom, doing fit Fridays and virtual pentathlons through Scottish Disability Sport. In the summer, we did a huge fundraising event—the 500-mile challenge—through which we raised more than £4,000. We did Covid-secure walks with four people when households were able to mix, to get some people active—we had a coach and three household members going out on a socially distanced walk—but that has now stopped again.

11:15

We live in a very rural region, as do people in the north-east and the Highlands, and to some degree those in the Borders, although Edinburgh is a wee bit more accessible for them.

Moving forward, I have some concerns. Many of our athletes have complex needs across a range of sports, including athletics, boccia, tennis and table tennis. Some are Special Olympics athletes who have learning difficulties or some impairment on that side of things, and their cognitive understanding of the situation can be complex and not necessarily high. The Special Olympics Great Britain summer games that were planned for next year have been cancelled, and it looks as though they will not take place until the next point in the four-year cycle, so athletes have no big competition at that level to look forward to.

If I want to train in my own sport, I need to travel to the central belt. Under the tier system, it is impossible for me to make the 180-mile round trip to do a two-hour session or to coach nationally with the Scotland schools wheelchair tennis team. There have been many difficulties, but what concerns me more, looking forward, is the psychological and mental health and wellbeing of our participants. Our under-18s will be covered

through local authority funding and budgeting for the active schools programme, but 85 per cent of our participating athletes in Dumfries and Galloway are 18 plus.

Given the geography between Stranraer in the west and Langholm in the east, there is a huge amount of distance involved, and access to facilities is quite restricted as a result. There is also a huge cost to hire halls as well as coaches and other personnel. We rely hugely on volunteers, and I agree with Colin Hutchison that those in the volunteer workforce on which we depend are now volunteering in other ways. They will have experienced other activities during both periods of lockdown and through the summer, and we are fearful that we will not have them to hand again when we eventually manage to restart at some point.

We will probably not be able to restart as early as most sports and governing bodies allow, because of the complex needs of our athletes. They are currently experiencing high levels of social isolation—they look to their sport at grass-roots level for their social life; it might be the only time that they interact with other people. We live in an area that, to be honest, does not have the best broadband connectivity, so although we have done Zoom sessions and all those things online, we have managed to hit only a small percentage of our overall branch membership.

In addition, our athletes have habit-forming characters. For instance, I try to get my Special Olympics table tennis athletes to attend training every Saturday, and in some cases it has taken between two and three years for me to build up an athlete's confidence to get them to come along regularly and participate. In March, that was swept away from them. They have spent time in lockdown, followed by the summer and then a second lockdown, so they have not kept the habit. They will have formed new habits such as online gaming, if they have access to the internet, or just sitting in front of the telly or doing a bit of gardening—whatever it might be.

We are fearful that, when we restart, many of our athletes will be starting from scratch, and attendance at our clubs, which depend on people paying to come to them, will be very low. Trying to get athletes to come back will be like going back to the start and creating the thing from the very beginning again. We face a variety of complexities as we go forward.

The Convener: Absolutely. David Torrance wants to come back in briefly.

David Torrance: Volunteers are the backbone of what many organisations do—Colin Hutchison and David Denholm have already touched on that. Do you expect a big drop-off in volunteers

because of the spell out of sport? How will you try to encourage people back into volunteering in your sports?

The Convener: As David Torrance said, a couple of witnesses have already commented on that. If anybody would like to add anything in response to that question on volunteers, they should put an "R" in the chat box.

Colin Hutchison: Earlier, I spoke briefly about the impact of volunteering and its value to athletics in Scotland. We are already having conversations with clubs and volunteers in the sport. People have drifted off to do other things or have not committed to coming back because they still have concerns about the on-going situation. We have already seen that starting to happen, and the impact of it.

We have been able to assist in delivering education online. We have managed to move coach education and our officials' education online, and all our clubs' support programmes have been delivered online. That has enabled us to continue to engage with key individuals throughout the past year. We will need to continue to rely on that approach through 2021.

We are trying to make as much effort as we can to keep volunteers engaged in the sport. Ultimately, however, those people thrive on being out there weekly and through the weekends, taking part in events and assisting athletes in competitions and training. That is where their motivation comes from, and the sooner we can get back to that situation the better. In the meantime, we are making efforts through the means available to us to try to keep those people involved in the sport. I am sure that those efforts are being replicated in our clubs throughout the country. As I mentioned earlier, the clubs have been really innovative in how they support volunteers and athletes.

Claire Nelson: As we all know, volunteers are the absolute backbone of sport and our sporting infrastructure, whether that is at the community level or through the pathways. We realise from listening to the previous panel that, without those passionate people, who dedicate their time and resource on top of everything else that they do, sport would not exist.

What the volunteers who run our clubs have had to do has been hugely demanding. Club leaders, committees and volunteers are absolutely committed to underpinning the Government's efforts to protect public health. They go through Covid officer training and consider compliance protocols. Every time a new piece of information comes out, they have to read through it and adapt. That is complex for those of us who work in

governing bodies. People are trying to do that week in, week out.

In our sport, people also try to negotiate with facilities. They have talked to their local MPs and MSPs, and have tried to be creative, get outside, and wrap kids up. They have been creative and innovative, looked at how they can develop themselves through online learning and education, and—this is more important—stayed engaged with their club members, particularly young people. The majority of our members are adolescent girls. We have to talk about mental health in this session, but people have ensured that they have stayed engaged.

There are the issues of protocols, compliance, people's own education, facilities and engagement. People are doing all that work on top of navigating their own experiences of what Covid means to them, with their job and home schooling. The majority of our volunteers are women who are mothers and are juggling things in the home.

We have to ensure that we recognise that volunteers are a critical infrastructure and that, if we do not protect them or have a plan to protect them and reintroduce them into whatever the restart of sport looks like, sport will not be able to start in the first place.

Euan Lowe: Claire Nelson has covered well the additional asks that we now have to place on our volunteers, who are, as we all know, the backbone of sport across a number of different levels. We have seen a drift because of inactivity and the pattern of coaches who are usually involved. We are aware of coaches leaving the sport, and that is of huge significance for us, particularly with respect to those in head coach roles. Head coaches do not simply run sessions; they can be critical to swimming clubs. They communicate to parents and swimmers, keep them motivated and organise things with facility providers. They are key linchpins in clubs.

There will be a huge knowledge drain across the sport if we start to lose head coaches, and that is happening. That is the coaching side.

The teaching side is something else, because we have to teach people to learn to swim in a variety of environments. We have a strong teaching workforce, but they are volunteers, and, again due to inactivity, they are finding other things to do.

They are also being affected by the environment in which they are now having to work. They have to communicate in different ways and with different group sizes, and they have to wear face masks while teaching. Ideally, teachers would be able to communicate with their facial expressions when teaching this life skill. Face masks are changing the environment for those teachers, and some of

them have lost a bit of their passion and are choosing to do other things and to go back to other activities.

Our other concern, which has been highlighted previously, is that, apart from the very start of last year, up to March, we have not had any competitive opportunities over the past year. In our sports, we rely hugely on technical officials, as we call them. They are typically an older demographic, and we fear that, without activity and interest, we will lose a number of them. We do not know how many will come back, because we have not yet had the opportunity to hold any events.

The other big factor, which we often forget about, is that a huge number of parents are volunteers. They contribute to youngsters' participation in sport, and they are also the volunteers of the future. Athletics in particular does a good job in that area. If kids do not have the opportunity to go swimming, the parents are not coming along, and if kids are leaving swimming because the option to participate is not there due to the restrictions, the parents are not allowed to come along either. We forecast a significant drop in volunteers across the sport, which will have quite an impact. As always, attracting volunteers is key, and we work hard on that. A lot of the support that we have put in place is online. A lot of the additional asks have been put in place. We have articulated those by providing the guidance to volunteers in a format that is as easy to understand as possible, so that they do not have to do too much interpretation. We will continue to do that.

One positive with regard to volunteers during the pandemic has been the creation of the Covid officer role. Ensuring compliance and safe operation during activity has been a key issue, and I am certain that that role has ensured a successful, safe return to sport across a number of areas. That role has also brought in a number of volunteers who were not previously involved in the sport. If we can work closely with them, they might be interested in continuing to volunteer with the sport, so it is not necessarily all negative.

I am mindful that volunteering is only one aspect. We also have the paid coach role, which has been impacted. We might touch on that later.

The Convener: Yes, indeed. I call Brian Whittle, whose question might touch on that issue.

Brian Whittle: Thank you, convener. I thank the witnesses for their contributions so far. Again, I declare an interest in that I am an active coach in a track and field club. I highlight that a coach's responsibility includes the wellbeing and health of the people in their charge. There is also the issue of the health and wellbeing of our volunteers, and

perhaps we should consider their current inability to take part in that context.

How have the restrictions affected membership? We have touched on that. Recruitment is particularly difficult just now. We have lost a year of recruiting the younger generation, which affects their ability to commit to sport. So, what has been the impact on membership and recruitment?

The Convener: We will start with Martin Kenny.

11:30

Martin Kenny: Membership has been affected in clubs right across the board and clubs have taken various approaches. Some have reduced membership and some have extended it. Some clubs have had success and have received full membership uptake. Some clubs have commented that they have increased membership.

As much as we are all caught in this Covid paralysis, which seems to have kept all sport in a holding area where we do not know whether we have stepped forward, back or sideways, we need to be confident and tell our members and the public that we will have sport when we come out the other end. Sport will be here, and the uptake will probably be so great that the facilities might not be able to cope. I take Euan Lowe's point about volunteer drop-off. Through working with the Royal Voluntary Service, I deal with volunteers on a daily basis, and I know that volunteer uptake has grown massively. People in the community have seen at first hand the benefit that volunteers bring not only to our community but to sport. People have seen the links that the community and sport have to each other.

Therefore, please be confident that we will have volunteer uptake as we come out the other end of this situation, although things will be different from when we went into it. Our sports will all be different, but I am pretty sure that we are resilient people and that we will overcome the issues and find a way through. We will need support from Government and from governing bodies to ensure that facilities are fit for purpose and are ready. I would like us to prepare now rather than wait to go back to sport and then find that we are not ready and that the horse has bolted.

Clubs are dealing with membership issues. Sponsorship has also been affected. We need to remember that many clubs not only rely on membership but rely heavily on sponsorship. Claire Nelson touched on that issue—it is massive. Perhaps we need a survey of the financial health of clubs. We are now undertaking that for club sport in Stirling, to find out where clubs are at financially, what they need to keep their heads above water and what we need to do as we come out of the current situation.

David Denholm: I will answer the question in two stages. On the membership issue, I agree that membership across the region for all our clubs in disability sport has been affected. From an engagement perspective, that is partly due to the lack of online connectivity and accessibility to facilities and what have you. I fear that, because of the complex needs of our athletes, parents and carers have chosen to withdraw them from activity and that it will be a lot more difficult to gain people's confidence to get them back than it will be to get able-bodied people back into membership of clubs. That will have an effect on recruitment.

As a disability sport branch, we deal with a wide range of disability, from physical disability to sensory issues and learning disability—we go across the board. All of those come with complex needs. Therefore, creating new membership in a post-Covid world will, no doubt, pose us problems, although we are positive and we will rise to the challenge. I agree with the previous speaker that there will be a requirement for good support. We perhaps need a national strategy on grass-roots sport as opposed to elite sport and under-18 sport. We need a strategy to improve physical health and wellbeing, to tackle obesity and to involve disabled people in sport across the region, and across all regions of Scotland. That will require financial support.

Kevin Bonarius: We have had on-going discussions about membership. We have weekly board meetings and regularly discuss it there. We are between a rock and a hard place regarding how we grow our membership. Every person, family, sport and organisation that uses our facilities has their own story of how Covid has affected them. Everyone has changed their outlook and how they do things. We know that we will struggle to increase our membership under the current restrictions and that we will lose the majority of our previously loyal members. We also know that we must do our best to get new members.

The restrictions are the issue for us. We have not had much of a campaign to sell new memberships since we reopened because we need to serve the loyal members that we have had throughout lockdown. We have been clever in moving everything online and have managed to maintain about 40 per cent of our membership by doing that. That means that we still have some regular income from our online platform. However, even if restrictions ease and allow us to have more people coming through the door, we will not be able to increase our membership without causing stress for our existing members. We do not have the access or the space for more people to attend.

The flipside of that is that, although we are offering a reduced service and have fewer members, we still carry the same costs for instructors' wages and everything that goes with that. That is a concern for us. Unless restrictions start to ease, we will struggle to get back to where we were before Covid.

Brian Whittle: I am interested in David Denholm's reply. I work with an athlete who has a learning disability. It is important for him—*[Inaudible.]*—learning and participation is uniquely challenging. I would like to know whether the panel members have more to say about that.

The second part of my question is about participation and the lack of competition. I can just about remember when I used to compete. My drive, enthusiasm and motivation came from having that goal to work towards. That is largely missing at the moment. How has that impacted members' participation? Is that lack of competition having an impact?

Euan Lowe: I will answer your first question briefly and go on to your second.

We have an annual subscription for membership. Our most recent annual payments were made just prior to the start of the pandemic, so we had a good uptake. We have also had support throughout the year from passionate members who want to support us. We value their support.

People have continued to join throughout the year, although this has been the first year in ten in which we have seen a drop in membership: we are down by about 17 per cent. What is more alarming is that we are 73 per cent down in attracting more people to swimming. We have hung on to those who were already involved in the sport, but there is a lack of motivation to participate. As your second question highlighted, that is probably because there is no outlet. Without the opportunity for competition, there is no reason to join a club or to train.

Another impact, as Brian Whittle may be aware, is that clubs' financial modelling is based on the opportunity to provide club-level competition. There has been an 80 per cent reduction in the opportunities for clubs to run any kind of competition, which has had a massive and detrimental impact on club finances.

That has had an impact on motivation, too. We know anecdotally that things can get a little more complicated for those in the 16-to-18 age group, who typically face hard decisions and feel that they need to make life choices. They often have a choice to make about moving to the next level of competition and we know that, without that competition outlet, guys are leaving the sport now.

That is our talent for the future, so it is a bit of a shame.

There is a potential gap at the other end too, concerning the learn-to-swim opportunity. School pools are closed and learn-to-swim opportunities are hugely down, so there is a potentially a gap around those coming into the sport—the talent of the future. There is a particular gap around those aged 18, who might be the talent of the future and up-and-coming medallists. There are two pockets of motivations that are massively impacted, which will present a hindrance.

I will cover the last point quickly, as David Denholm has already touched on it. My biggest concern about membership as a whole and about motivations is the widening gap in equalities, particularly for those with disabilities. That can be because of their health conditions and the complexities, as David highlighted, or it can be to do with age. Their ability to participate at any level has been hugely affected, and that is a concern for the whole sport and its membership.

Colin Hutchison: Thank you for the question, Brian. I will pick up on the two questions together, which I hope will help.

First, I will explain that we have two membership structures in athletics: club membership and individual membership. We are about 9 per cent down on our club membership this year. That would have been more severe if it had not been for the commitment from the clubs to continue supporting the Government body, ensuring that we could continue successfully through this period, and to offer services online, so that we are able to come out of Covid in a strong position and to continue and pick up from where we were.

Similarly to what Euan Lowe said about swimming, we have had 10 years of growth in the sport, and this is the first time that we have seen any drop in membership. While there was a 9 per cent drop overall for us, 56 per cent of the clubs that affiliated this year showed a loss. On the positive side, 30 per cent of our clubs managed to show an increase in membership. As I said earlier, some of that was due to the virtual services that they provided. As I also mentioned previously, we are in a fortunate position: the sport was still able to happen through last summer, so clubs have still been able to keep many of their members engaged.

We have seen impacts beyond that on our wider community work, where clubs are operating satellite sites in smaller communities. Much of that stopped and has not been able to restart at any stage throughout the past year. To return to a point that Euan Lowe made, that work is vital for us as a sport and for clubs in addressing inequalities, as it takes our sport into people's

communities, rather than asking them to travel to participate. It is vital that some sort of recovery package is in place, not just from ourselves, as a governing body, but working with sportscotland and the Government to consider how we re-engage with people and activities.

As a governing body, we have been fortunate to be able to deliver a keep on running campaign to encourage people to keep themselves active in small groups, in twos or individually, while linking up with a club or local jogging group to give them some encouragement through this time, when they cannot get back together with other people.

We managed to keep individual membership at a higher level through last summer, as we were delivering virtual events and as clubs were able to deliver some sort of training activity. As we have moved into winter, however, that has severely dropped off, and there is a decrease in individual membership of about 30 per cent at this time.

As Brian Whittle will know, individual membership is driven by people's willingness and ability to compete. Until we can offer competition at a certain level, it is very hard to recover. While our events team has done a fantastic job in delivering a virtual service, which has given people something to aim for and has kept them engaged, it is difficult to get back to the levels that we were at previously until we have more of a standard competition structure back in place.

Claire Nelson: Sport in general and in Scotland is still a hugely unequal landscape; the previous witness, Linzi Connelly, shared some of her experiences.

11:45

Driving growth, membership and participation in women's sport is very difficult, but we had managed to drive that over recent years, largely because of the launch of Sirens, which gave us visibility. Our last Sirens game before we had to shut down in March got 2,000 paying customers in the door to watch us, which made it a bigger game than the majority of those of lower tier football teams in Scotland.

That visibility and drive had seen a real growth in membership. We knew that we would not be able to take to court quickly over the summer, so we put on a huge drive to make sure that our membership understood what they were buying into and how our governing body relies on their income and support for us to be able not only to survive but to recover and rebuild.

We managed to get only 50 per cent of our senior members. I will not go into the detail of the work and time that we put into reviewing how people affiliate online, extra benefits and

education, but it comes down to Brian Whittle's question; without competition, they just were not interested, because they want to pay to play.

Interestingly, however, 75 per cent of our junior members—adolescents aged largely between 13 and 16—reaffiliated and stayed engaged. That is hugely powerful, because we all know what the drop-off rates for adolescent girls in relation to physical activity are and that their participation levels are low. My concern is that it is really difficult to stay engaged with these guys. I already know that there will be significant drop-off and that we will not see a lot of them renew for next year.

We are therefore looking not only at damage to this season but the potential loss of an entire season of engagement. For all the reasons I mentioned at the start—opportunity, visibility, investment, facilities and access—it will be far harder if we haemorrhage young women and girls out of a sporting system. If we cannot offer those opportunities, we will have significant damage.

However, the conversation between membership and participation has been huge in our organisation. We have written a plan that uses our platform to harness the passion and power of sport to reach more people, get more people active, and look at more inclusive recreational and social impact programmes around participation.

The challenge is that we have lost commercial income streams, whereby what was coming in through sponsorship and other commercial streams was low anyway. Sportscotland therefore determines how our money is spent. Although there is flexibility at the moment, there has to be a rethink of the model of governing bodies.

If we are truly to recover and rebuild as sport, we have to look not only at an income replacement piece for what has been impacted this year. Looking at sport has been part of the solution, because sport represents the best of everybody. Every single person who partakes in a sporting or physical activity does so because of how it makes them feel, as well as all the other benefits. Sport therefore needs to be a priority. We need to remodel how we fund and support it and look at the infrastructure facility.

All that we are talking about is how we have lost things and how difficult it will be to rebuild, but we have an opportunity to prioritise sport and to make real and powerful change that aids the recovery of Scotland as a nation.

David Denholm: That was very well said, Claire—I fully agree with your sentiment with regard to taking sport forward.

I will respond to Brian Whittle's further question with regard to the unique challenges that are faced in engaging athletes with intellectual impairment.

Unlike able-bodied athletes and even people with PD—physical disability—who are able to go online and access Zoom sessions, for example, and stay connected in that way, a lot of people with intellectual impairment would not be safe online and therefore do not have their own social media accounts or access to emails. They are dependent on carers or family members to do that on their behalf.

Also, people with Down's syndrome are very tactile, in many ways. If someone is running a session with a group of young people or older people who are able bodied but have intellectual impairments, it is possible to set out guidance and rules about not touching, so that they do not high-five one another and no fist bumping goes on, whereas a group of people with Down's syndrome will want to hold, cuddle and hug one another all the time.

I agree with everything that has been said. We have an opportunity to drive things forward. My fear is that the Government is very central belt-centric and areas such as mine and the north are left out. There are particular challenges for people with intellectual impairment, which is partly why they do not engage with some of the stuff that we are doing.

The Convener: We have heard good evidence in this meeting, but I am aware of the time constraints so I ask my MSP colleagues to put their questions together and I ask the witnesses only to come in if they want to address a point that has not already been addressed.

David Stewart: I thank all the witnesses for their evidence, which I have found extremely interesting and helpful. Did the Scottish Government consult your organisations prior to implementing the Covid restrictions?

The Convener: No one is volunteering to respond. That is perhaps providing the answer. Were any of you consulted on the restrictions before they were brought in? It appears not.

David Stewart: In all good committees, silence is assent, so I will move on. Do the witnesses' organisations have confidence in the Covid restrictions? If not, do you have suggestions on how things can be improved?

The Convener: These are important questions, so the witnesses should feel free to give a brief answer now and provide any further information in writing.

Claire Nelson: I will keep my response brief—it links to my previous response. Sports clubs are compliant. They are safe, regulated environments that underpin the Government and national effort to promote public safety, physical health and mental wellbeing, while ensuring that all the

restrictions that the Government puts in place are adhered to. Do I have confidence in the restrictions? My response is that I would like consideration to be given to easing—"easing" is an interesting word—the restrictions to enable sports clubs and community sports to restart activity, even if it is delivered outdoors and in moderated or diversified ways. We have to get sport restarted, because it is essential to health and wellbeing, and community clubs are largely low-transmission areas because of their stringent and compliant approach.

Euan Lowe: We can be part of the solution, from the mental and physical health and wellbeing angle. Claire Nelson and I sit on the Scottish governing bodies of sport CEO forum and share the ambition to convey that message and work with our partners. The point about transmission rates is key.

While we have not necessarily been involved in the initial development of the restrictions that came in, as a sector we have responded well and produced strong guidance.

I have information, which you might have seen already, that says that, between July and October last year, there were 45 million visits to leisure centres across the United Kingdom, with a Covid transmission rate of 0.099 per 100,000 visits. That says quite a lot about our ability to provide safe environments and to ensure that sport can be part of the solution. That needs to be recognised.

To be specific for a moment, from the point of view of a non-contact adult sport, I am pretty certain that we can provide a safe environment through compliance. That is also the case with indoor non-contact adult sport. It is interesting that, under the current guidance, over-18s group activities are not permitted. Our clubs are groups. They operate in a controlled environment and have Covid officers who work with the same people and can impart their knowledge about the guidance. I am pretty certain that we can provide a safe environment in those places, as well as delivering physical and mental wellbeing benefits and aiding member retention and the supply of future volunteers. That is why that particular part of the guidance sticks out as slightly odd to me.

Kevin Bonarius: The restrictions have definitely worked. The feedback that we have had across the board from implementing the changes has been hugely positive. Everyone who has come through our facilities' doors since we reopened has felt safe, happy and comfortable in the environment. A lot of credit has to go to the guys who have implemented the guidance. Obviously, they are learning and thinking on their feet, as the situation is moving fast, but what they have achieved is a positive thing.

I echo what Euan Lowe and Claire Nelson said about our industry being at the forefront of the recovery from the pandemic in terms of the benefits to people's mental and physical wellbeing and alleviating issues arising from isolation. Therefore, we need to focus on how we come out of the restrictions. As I said, the restrictions have worked in that they have allowed us to operate, have kept our customers safe and have kept the levels of transmission incredibly low. However, the issue is how we come out of the restrictions, because this industry will be at the forefront of supporting this nation's recovery from Covid-19.

Colin Hutchison: I would probably just reiterate what Kevin Bonarius, Euan Lowe and Claire Nelson have just said, so I will not spend too much time on that part of the question.

In response to the first part of the question, I do not think that there was consultation around the restrictions to begin with but, as we moved forward, a process was implemented whereby governing bodies can feed back in. However, as was said earlier, it would be good to understand how certain positions in the guidance were reached. It is complicated to explain to clubs and people involved in the sport why certain restrictions are in place, because we do not have that level of understanding ourselves.

As has been said, we see sport as part of the solution. We provide safe environments for people to operate in and we have Covid officers in all our clubs and facilities. We appreciate that there is a national health emergency, but as soon as there is an opportunity for sport to take place again we will be absolutely in support of that and will be able to provide the service and respond in a way that meets the concerns around Covid.

Emma Harper: Good morning. You have provided a lot of good information so far, so I will tailor my question a wee bit. Obviously, there has been a financial impact for your organisations. I know that the Scottish Government provided £55 million of financial support, but I am interested to know whether you have applied for any support or funding in order to help keep your sports afloat.

You have mentioned the challenges of delivering your normal range of sport—David Denholm, in particular, spoke about that. Have you identified any specific issues in that regard?

Martin Kenny: The financial impact for the Bannockburn and Eastern Villages Community Hub has been massive. The facility had a zero rateable value, so it unfortunately did not meet any criteria. I spent quite a bit of time trying to find grants that could help, but a lot of grants were capital grants and not core grants. I eventually found one that has kept the facility's head above water, but time is running out quite quickly on that.

12:00

It is a struggle financially, but we have taken the view that we will all try to support the facility as best we can, which has a financial impact on all the clubs that are part of the hub. We are also trying to make the facility a better place for when we return. The use of it outwith our sporting organisations has grown massively, with the like of dog walkers and runners. That has had an impact on the facility mess-wise, as you can imagine.

On Active Stirling, the financial impact on leisure facilities is huge. That is a worry for me with regard to the clubs that hire those facilities, because leisure facilities view it as a business and will look at what will give the biggest financial return. I do not know what the impact of that on clubs will be. It has all been quite a financial hit for us.

Claire Nelson: It was reported that of the £55 million fund for spectator income loss, netball was given £100,000. We have applied for and received some of that, and we have to apply for the rest of it to a panel that will decide on it. That £100,000 is therefore not committed to us, despite it being publicly reported that it is, and it is not enough. The Strathclyde Sirens is a subsidiary company wholly owned by Netball Scotland—so I have two businesses—and it is wholly commercially funded, which is hard enough for a women's sport. It has never received a penny of public funding. Although we welcome the amount from the fund, it was reported publicly before I had even been granted it, I have to go through hoops to access it and it is still not enough. I have questions about how other sports have been allocated more money than us, which is frustrating and disappointing.

In terms of the governing body, we have welcomed flexibility in our investment from sportscotland this year. As I said earlier, despite our growth over two cycles, we have not received a single penny of an increase in our annual investment. We can apply for Covid recovery fund moneys, but the amount is small. For about nine months, I have been trying to make the point that sport is a business that enables all the things that we are talking about around physical activity, mental health and community engagement success.

In 18 months we will have a domestic Commonwealth games, and how Scotland performs will be important. As we have seen when the Scotland football team, for example, qualifies for something, the entire nation is united. Sport is therefore powerful, but when funded governing bodies are not cash rich from being backed by a successful professional game or by having good income streams, we are limited in what we can do and how we can do it.

I have mitigated certain losses, but I have huge losses in the hundreds of thousands and most of my income has gone. I do not know where any income will come from, but I have written a plan for recovery and rebuild. I want to know where the investment and backing for that plan will come from, because it is about getting more people more active more often, building an infrastructure through young people and focusing on health and wellbeing. There will be competition, events and a thriving talent pool, but it will be about driving health impacts, and I do not know where that funding will come from. At the moment, the funding plan for our next financial year is exactly the same as it is for this year.

The Convener: Thank you. Can I have brief responses from Euan Lowe, Colin Hutchison and David Denholm?

Euan Lowe: Thank you, convener, and thanks to Emma Harper for the question. We have not requested any additional support, because we have had a great offer of flexibility from the national agency to keep us going through this period, which has helped hugely and for which I thank the agency.

However, I would like to pass on a slightly more concerning point of view about our clubs. They are in a variety of different states of financial make-up and operation, so have asked for varying degrees of support, but the critical thing for me is that 72 per cent of them were saying at the end of December that, financially, their reserves were at an amber or red warning. That was before this lockdown happened. The clubs are therefore in a very vulnerable and shoochy position.

Other factors to weigh include facilities, which we have mentioned. It has been highlighted today through many discussions that pools, leisure centres and any leisure facilities are clearly quite critical to communities for health, wellbeing, fitness and so on. The ability for clubs to train and participate is critical. They are in a financial struggle at the moment and need help. That would be my one ask. As part of the solution to the pandemic, the sector and its facility providers will need some sort of financial help to get them through.

My last point is on school access and the ability to open up some of the school estate. Many of our clubs, from a variety of sports, use school facilities. We understand that we are in a health pandemic and that there are complications because of that, but our clubs rely on access to school facilities and school sites in order to provide services and opportunities for their members. If we could find one way of easing restrictions for them in that area, that would be welcome.

Colin Hutchison: As Claire Nelson and Euan Lowe have said, we are grateful for the advance from sportscotland and the investment over the past year, which has certainly helped us to navigate the early stages of recovery. We are also looking to access the Covid recovery fund that has been offered through sportscotland, both as a grant and as the loan that has been made available to us, but we have still had to survive this period and to make sure that the governing body remains in a strong financial position. We are having to draw down reserves, we have had to furlough staff, and we have had to take other steps to make sure that the sport comes out of this in as strong a position as possible. As others have said, looking ahead to the recovery involves thinking about the additional investment that is required in sport, in order to ensure that community clubs and community sporting activity can recover.

Euan Lowe touched on facilities. I will not go into that any further, as I think that what he said was absolutely spot on. However, in the past 10 years, investment in paid staffing roles in clubs has been a huge part of the growth that we have seen in athletics in Scotland, and I feel that such investment will be required in order to help our community clubs to recover, to help sport in those communities to recover, and to address some of the inequalities that we touched on earlier.

David Denholm: I thank Emma Harper for the question. I will be as brief as I can.

Many positive things are going on in the region—for example, with Solway Sailability—and I hope that they will access some form of Covid recovery moneys. As a branch, we have not accessed or applied for any moneys, because we do not operate as an independent club. We run clubs, and we try to involve mainstream clubs. Across the county, mainstream clubs—for example, in athletics, football, archery and much more—will perhaps be able to access recovery moneys. We would like more of them to include in their recovery programmes and plans inclusiveness and the introduction of disability sport to their club set-ups, with our support.

The Convener: I note some of the comments that are being made in the chat box, in particular about the next financial year and what we will need to do.

I thank members for their participation and witnesses for their evidence. We will write to witnesses with outstanding questions about plans and restrictions for later in the year; I would be very grateful if witnesses could respond to those, and also send any other thoughts that we have not been able to cover today.

Before we move to the next item of business, I briefly suspend the meeting.

12:15

On resuming—

12:09

Meeting suspended.

Subordinate Legislation

Health Protection (Coronavirus) (International Travel and Public Health Information) (Scotland) Regulations 2020 (SSI 2020/431)

The Convener: The next agenda item is consideration of a made affirmative instrument relating to the coronavirus and international travel. It is laid under section 94(1), on international travel, of the Public Health etc (Scotland) Act 2008. Its provisions are in force, and it is for the Health and Sport Committee to consider the instrument within 28 days of the date on which it was made.

We have an evidence session with the Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity and his officials on the regulations. They remove the Canary Islands from the list of exempt countries and territories, and add Botswana and Saudi Arabia to the list. They make further amendments and clarifications to other exemptions, and make provision to amend the period for which a person must remain in quarantine from 14 days to 10 days.

I welcome Michael Matheson, Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity, who is accompanied by Craig Thomson, border measures review team leader; David Pratt, policy lead for the health performance and delivery team; and Peter Brown, from the police enforcement, liaison and performance team. Thank you for joining us.

I ask the cabinet secretary to give an update on the position relating to the regulations. In particular, to what extent has the quarantine of those who have come from abroad been monitored over the Christmas period, and what are the updated numbers?

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity (Michael Matheson): Good afternoon, convener. Thank you for your invitation to join the committee.

As you have pointed out, the regulations remove the Canary Islands from the exempt list and add to the list Botswana and Saudi Arabia, which, after assessment, have moved down from red to amber.

The regulations add a further category of “elite sportsperson” to schedule 2, which allows new signings to professional sports clubs to be exempt from quarantine requirements when they travel

between locations to participate in elite sports events or training for such events.

The regulations add a new defence of leaving quarantine

“on compassionate grounds, for reasons related to the end of a person’s life”.

As the convener mentioned, the regulations also introduce a reduction in the quarantine period from 14 days to 10 days. The provision came into force from 14 December, so anyone who requires to quarantine from that date should do so for 10 days rather than 14 days.

The committee will be aware that, during the Christmas period, our test and protect colleagues and the national contact tracing facility have been presented with significant challenges, given the increase in the number of cases, particularly with the new variant of the virus. However, despite those challenges, colleagues have continued to make 2,000 contacts per week during the Christmas period, as they have done since October last year. During that period, they have continued to prioritise action that has been seen as clinically necessary. For example, given the risks associated with the new variant, individuals who have returned from South Africa have been prioritised for direct contact by the national contact tracing facility. Colleagues have maintained their performance during the Christmas and new year period, and they will continue to do so.

The Convener: Thank you. I ask colleagues to put an “R” in the chat box if they have questions for the cabinet secretary.

There has been discussion of a new requirement for people coming back into the country to have an entry certificate to show that they do not have Covid. Can you tell us a little about that?

Michael Matheson: We have been in discussions with the United Kingdom Government for some time on options for reinforcing the existing measures that we have in place at our borders. One issue that we have been exploring with the UK Government is the introduction of pre-departure testing, and we had a meeting last week at which it was agreed that we would move forward with the introduction of that. The UK Government has announced today that pre-departure testing will come into force for those travelling from abroad into England as of 4 am on Friday. That will be the same for Scotland. In a recent answer to a Government-inspired question, I outlined to Parliament that pre-departure testing will become a statutory requirement as of 4 am on Friday of this week.

That will require anyone who is travelling from abroad outwith the common travel area to have

undertaken a test equivalent to a polymerase chain reaction test, which is a much higher level of test, 72 hours before they arrive in Scotland and to demonstrate that the result was negative. Before a person is allowed to board their flight, train—if it is Eurotunnel—or vessel, the operator will be required to check that the person has a certified negative test. That statutory requirement will be placed on train and flight operators. The requirement will reinforce the existing arrangements. I emphasise that it is in addition to the quarantine arrangements and the other arrangements at our borders. It will become operational at 4 am on Friday.

The Convener: What will be the consequence of a test not being negative? What happens then?

Michael Matheson: If a person does not present with the appropriate certificate or if they present a certificate that shows a positive test result, they will not be allowed to board the flight or train. A negative test result serves as the gateway to boarding the flight or train in the first place. There will be a statutory requirement on operators to ensure that the certification is in place before they allow people to go on a flight or train.

The Convener: Brian Whittle has a question.

Brian Whittle: It might have been answered already, convener, as I missed some of the cabinet secretary’s responses to your questions.

There has been a lot of discussion of testing passengers arriving in the UK, even if that is a simple temperature test as they come through. Does the Scottish Government have any plans to introduce statutory testing of people as they arrive from abroad into the country?

Michael Matheson: I am not a clinical expert, but my understanding is that temperature testing is not a good mechanism for testing whether someone may have Covid and does not provide much in the way of an assurance.

We are in discussions on and we have been assessing the potential for introducing a test after five days in quarantine, as happens with the test to release scheme that operates in England. Just prior to the Christmas recess, we considered in a bit of detail the potential for running a pilot of test to release in Scotland. Clearly, now that pre-departure testing is being introduced, we are doing further assessment work on how any potential test to release pilot would interact with pre-departure testing. We will engage with the airports and airlines on how that scheme might operate.

We are looking at the potential for a test to release scheme. However, given that we are changing the pre-departure arrangements, such a scheme might operate differently. Any system that operates in Scotland would be piloted to test how

it operates and how effective it is before any wider implementation.

Emma Harper: I always seem to ask about travel to and from Ireland because the port of Cairnryan is in south-west Scotland. I assume that folk coming from Ireland will not require entry certificates, although we must be aware of travel back and forward.

What is the role of the Scottish Government in supporting private ferry companies such as Stena or P&O to apply the same standards and rules? Those companies are sailing between Northern Ireland and Scotland and passengers move back and forward. It would be good to hear about that support, given that the number of Covid cases in south-west Scotland has been really high in the past couple of weeks.

Michael Matheson: Pre-departure testing will be for those who come from countries outwith the common travel area. That area includes Ireland, which removes the need for pre-departure testing. Arrangements for the common travel area are kept under review and when we implement any changes we ensure that transport operators, such as those operating ferries between Scotland and Northern Ireland, are informed of any changes and how those might affect them. Information is cascaded to operators so that they are kept up-to-date with any changes in regulations for the common travel area.

The Convener: We now move to the debate on the made affirmative instrument on which we have just taken evidence. This will be a formal debate, so there is no opportunity to ask questions, although members can contribute to the debate.

I invite the cabinet secretary to move motion S5M-23720.

Motion moved,

That the Health and Sport Committee recommends that The Health Protection (Coronavirus) (International Travel and Public Health Information) (Scotland) Regulations 2020 (SSI 2020/431) be approved.—[*Michael Matheson*]

The Convener: No members wish to contribute to the debate.

Motion agreed to.

The Convener: That concludes our consideration of the instrument. We will report to Parliament accordingly. I thank the cabinet secretary and his officials for their attendance.

Official Feed and Food Controls (Miscellaneous Amendments) (Scotland) Regulations 2020 (SSI 2020/398)

The Convener: The next item of business is further consideration of subordinate legislation, this time of three negative instruments.

Does any member wish to make a comment about the first instrument?

Emma Harper: I am interested in the food and feed regulations that we are looking at because some of them are beginning to consolidate other statutory instruments. I would like some clarification of the language. The purpose of the instrument is to amend existing domestic food and feed law to provide for the execution and enforcement, in Scotland, of the delegated and implementing regulations of Commission Regulation (EU) 2017/625.

I am interested to know whether we are assuming that we are carrying forward current European Union food and feed safety regulations in order to maintain and protect our food and feed supply chains in Scotland. Are the regulations a keeping pace instrument that makes sure that our food and feed controls continue to be safe?

12:30

The Convener: That would certainly appear to be the implication of the language that you set out; therefore, I think that we are probably safe to proceed on that basis. However, I think that we have time to explore the matter further before we have to sign off the instrument. If members have no other comments or questions in relation to the instrument, and are content to do so, we could agree to make no recommendation on it at this stage, but contact the Government to ask for clarification about the point around keeping pace powers. Emma Harper, did you want to come back again?

Emma Harper: Yes, just to say that the language that is used is about wanting to create a “harmonised approach to official controls”.

We have had issues with other consolidated legislation, around the way in which the wording is formed. I am not suggesting that we write to the Government, but I am keen to make sure that the instrument is part of the process that ensures that we continue to support the best food and feed safety standards across Scotland.

The Convener: Thank you. In that case, if it is acceptable to the committee in general, and to Emma Harper in particular, given that there will be a series of other regulations in the same mode, I suggest that we ask for some advice on the matter, and make sure that the questions are answered before further items are considered.

Subject to that assurance, do members agree to make no recommendation on the instrument at this stage? I can see that members are nodding, so we are agreed.

**Public Health etc (Scotland) Act 2008
(Notifiable Organisms) Amendment
Regulations 2020 (SSI 2020/408)**

12:33

Meeting continued in private until 12:53.

The Convener: We come to the second negative instrument to consider today. Given that members have no comments to make, is the committee agreed to make no recommendation on the instrument? Members are nodding, so that is agreed.

**National Health Service (Pharmaceutical
Services) (Scotland) Amendment
Regulations 2020 (SSI 2020/420)**

The Convener: We come to the third and final negative instrument. Given that members have no comments to make, is the committee agreed to make no recommendation on the instrument? Members are nodding, so that is agreed.

That concludes the public part of the meeting. We will now move into private session.

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